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US diplomat Frederic Hof in Damascus

exclusive from Washington and Beirut: Early Friday, Oct. 8, senior US diplomat Frederic Hof landed in Damascus with a strong ultimatum from US President Barack Obama warning Syrian President Bashar Assad that he would be held personally responsible for military action Hizballah may pursue in Beirut or any other part of Lebanon; there would be consequences for the Syrian ruler's standing in Washington and that of his country.

After delivering the message, Obama's emissary was told to remain in Damascus and keep close tabs on the situation over the coming days.

Fred Hof is the deputy of US Special Middle East envoy George Mitchell with excellent connections in top Syrian circles. By keeping him in Damascus, Obama makes sure his personal emissary sits on Assad's back and sends him fast updates on any developments in Syria and Lebanon.

The Syrian ruler will be tested next week, when his great ally, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, spends two days in Lebanon on a visit that has aroused feverish tensions in the country and around the region.

President Obama had four objects in mind when he posted his exceptionally tough ultimatum:

1. The Syrian and Iranian presidents have been leaning hard on Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah to strike as soon as Ahmadinejad is gone to grab Lebanon's centers of power and burn the ground from under Saad Hariri's government.

2. This action carries the high risk of civil war or Israeli military intervention, both of which the Obama administration is intent on averting.

3. When US diplomats asked Arab League foreign ministers gathered in Sirte, Libya, Friday not to slam the door on direct Israel-Palestinian talks, they were informed by the Saudi and Egyptian ministers that this issue was inextricably bound up with the crisis in Lebanon. If Washington agreed to step in firmly to preserve the stability of the Hariri administration, they would see to it that the US is given time to overcome the impasse on the Israeli-Palestinian track over Israeli construction on the West Bank and Jerusalem.

And indeed, the Sirte meeting, while endorsing Mahmoud Abbas' position, gave Washington a month's grace for another push to bring the parties together.

4. The Damascus mission assigned to Hof and the threat it carries of direct American steps against the Assad regime, is unprecedentedly harsh in terms of Washington diplomacy vis-à-vis any Arab government.

DEBKAfile's diplomatic sources note that it is also a challenge.

It indicates that Obama is willing to respect the Syrian ruler's responsibility for Lebanon provided he respects the policy limits Washington has laid down for that country. This challenge would require him to break ranks with the Iranian president and Hizballah's leader and pull out of the trilateral plans they have drawn up for undermining the Hariri government. By doing so, Assad would prove that his influence over Nasrallah outweighs that of Iran.

The coming week will show if the US president's ultimatum has hit the mark and Lebanon and the region are saved from impending outbreaks of violence. He did not spell out the nature of the consequences to Assad for disobedience.

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