

Exclusive: Under Pressure, White House Pulls Egypt Ambassador Pick

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The Obama administration has decided to drop its initial pick for U.S. ambassador to Egypt, leaving a vitally important diplomatic post vacant during a time of unusually strong tensions between Washington and one of its most important Middle Eastern allies.

Sources familiar with the matter say that Robert Ford -- the highly-respected, Arabic-speaking career diplomat and current ambassador to Syria -- was withdrawn from consideration for the Cairo post after some representatives of Egypt's military regime quietly indicated that they didn't want him in the job because of his stated willingness to negotiate with some of Syria's Islamist militants and political groups.

Secretary of State John Kerry tapped Ford for the post this summer, and the White House had hoped to formally nominate him early next year. Instead, people familiar with the situation say the administration has decided to keep Ford in his current job in Syria -- and its primary intermediary to the country's fractious opposition groups -- and find a new pick for the high-profile Cairo slot. With the Senate out of session and mired in partisan deadlock, that could take months.

Obama administration officials confirm that Ford faced some opposition in Cairo, but said the primary reason that he won't be getting the position is the importance of his current job as the primary U.S. liaison to Syria's rebels. Ford has spent the past few months shuttling between Washington, Geneva and Istanbul as part of an effort to persuade opposition leaders to take part in peace talks scheduled for late January.

"Ambassador Ford is doing a phenomenal job working on Syria during an incredibly intensive time heading into the Geneva II conference. It's a top priority job on a top priority issue, and everyone from the president on down

has trust in Robert to handle it, and I don't think anyone's pausing to think about the future," a senior State Department official said. "The president, and the secretary, and the entire administration have enormous respect for the job he has done on Syria -- here in Washington and in Damascus -- and they feel it's vital for him to keep working on this issue."

A spokeswoman for the Egyptian embassy said she wouldn't comment on Ford because he hadn't officially been nominated as the next U.S. ambassador to her country.

The decision to drop Ford from consideration for the Egypt job illustrates the difficulties facing the White House as its relationship with Cairo continues to deteriorate in the wake of the July coup that removed Egypt's democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, from power. The previous U.S. ambassador, Anne Patterson, left Cairo under a cloud because many -- including the country's top generals -- felt that she was too close to Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood. The White House, meanwhile, has faced growing Congressional pressure to cut aid to Egypt until the country returns to civilian rule.

Ford was supposed to repair the damage and build closer ties with Egypt's de facto president, General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Instead, Ford's outreach to some of Syria's Islamist rebels set off alarm bells in Cairo and seems to have doomed his chances for the job. Egyptian leaders have long believed that the Obama administration was too quick to abandon Hosni Mubarak, a secular leader and longtime American ally, and ally itself with Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Some members of the al-Sisi government worried Ford would make a similar attempt to forge relationships with Egypt's Islamists and quietly urged the administration to find a different candidate for the Cairo job, according to people familiar with the matter.

"This is a man who is literally willing to sit across the table from Islamists who are worse than the Muslim Brotherhood, so it's baffling the White House would think he's the right person to go to Egypt," an Arab diplomat familiar with the Egyptian thinking told *The Cable*. "He is a good man, but he's absolutely the wrong person for this job, at least right now."

Others were far more charitable. An Arab diplomat who knows Ford well said he would have been a perfect fit for the Egypt job and blames the withdrawal of his name from consideration on the insecurity of the country's

new rulers. The diplomat noted that Ford, as ambassador to Syria, had visited the rebel-held city of Hama in July 2011 to attend the funeral of a dead opposition leader and routinely used the embassy's Web site to criticize Assad for the brutality of his crackdown on his own people. "How many ambassadors are brave enough to go to the front lines of a civil war?" the diplomat asked.

Ford's critics acknowledge that he is one of the administration's most energetic and skilled envoys. At the same time, Ford's supporters acknowledge that the work that derailed his chances of winning the Cairo post -- his ongoing outreach to Syria's key opposition leaders -- has no guarantee of success. Many of Syria's top opposition leaders have refused to provide a definitive answer about whether they'll attend the Geneva talks, with several saying that they will only come if Western powers promise, in advance, that the negotiations will end with Assad's departure. Assad, unsurprisingly, hasn't agreed to those conditions.

Syria's Islamists, for their part, have refused to even meet with Ford. That means, ironically, that the career diplomat may lose out on a dream job because of Egyptian fears about a relationship that has yet to materialize.