

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

U.S. Policy Towards Lebanon

Statement of

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to discuss U.S. policy towards Lebanon. Ambassador Feierstein highlighted the array of interlocking challenges that Lebanon confronts and gave an overview of our comprehensive strategy in Lebanon. My own experience in Lebanon is personal as well as professional. I lived in Lebanon for two years while attending the American University of Beirut, of which I am a proud graduate, and I returned to Lebanon for another eight months in 2008 to conduct research toward the completion of my doctoral dissertation.

If you had told me five years ago that Lebanon would be flooded with over one million refugees from a brutal, sectarian civil war in Syria but would somehow remain an oasis of relative calm in the Middle East, I would not have believed you. I would have explained – probably with no small amount of condescension – that I was an expert on Lebanon and that what you were describing to me was impossible given Lebanon’s own difficult history of sectarian conflict.

Yet I would have been wrong. I would have undervalued the drivers of stability in Lebanon – choosing to focus on the more obvious drivers of instability – and I would have, most importantly, underestimated the role the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) has played in keeping Lebanon cohesive and at peace with its neighbors and itself.

I intend to focus my comments on our military cooperation with the LAF, which is a core pillar of our policy in Lebanon and something that we can all – from our tax-payers to our special operations soldiers to our policy-makers – be proud of. Amidst all of the challenges Lebanon confronts, the LAF remains one of

the country's only highly functioning national institutions. Our support has enabled the LAF to beat back the advances of ISIL and other extremist groups such as the Nusra Front, although not without some high degree of sacrifice from our Lebanese partners. Strengthening the LAF also advances a range of U.S. interests in the Middle East that includes not only countering the spread of ISIL and other violent extremists but also stemming the influence of Iran and Hizballah in the region.

U.S. Support to the Lebanese Armed Forces

In 2006, following the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, the United States launched a security assistance program with our Lebanese partners focused on providing training and equipment designed to develop the capability of the LAF. Since that time, these efforts have constituted the backbone of U.S. policy to promote Lebanon's sovereignty and security. During my time as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy, my interactions with a range of political and military actors in Lebanon confirm that the United States' continued engagement and assistance to the LAF are more important now than ever. The brutal suicide bomb attack in the Burj al-Barajneh neighborhood of Beirut on November 12, 2015, which tragically killed 43 innocent civilians, underscores the importance of our assistance the LAF and other security services in Lebanon.

Since 2006, the United States has provided Lebanon more than \$1.2 billion in military assistance that aims to build a LAF that: 1) is capable of maintaining internal stability and security in Lebanon; 2) is capable of securing Lebanon's borders and of preventing ISIL and other foreign extremists from destabilizing the

country; and 3) is the preeminent military force in Lebanon, undermining the claims of Hizballah and other militias for maintaining their arms as well as the claim of Hizballah to be acting in defense of Lebanon's interests.

More recently, with Lebanon's increased threats from ISIL and other extremists, we have significantly increased U.S. security assistance, which totaled over \$200 million in fiscal year 2015. As you know, we have enabled Iraqi and Syria partners to make significant gains against ISIL over the past year. But our worry has always been that as we squeeze ISIL from the east and north that will create more pressure on Jordan to the south and Lebanon to the west. For that reason, we have concentrated our enhanced assistance on bolstering the capabilities that are crucial to the LAF's ability to counter groups like ISIL and Nusra. This has included providing the LAF with critically needed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms; air strike capabilities and munitions; arms and equipment for the Lebanese Special Operations Forces (LSOF); and border security enhancements. Specifically, in 2015 the Department of Defense delivered 92 Hellfire missiles, 12 Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and supported the uparming of the LAF's second Cessna aircraft, which gives the LAF the ability to strike ISIL militants with pinpoint precision.

During FY 2015, the Department of Defense provided \$59 million in Counterterrorism Partnership Funds (CTPF) support for border security. The project is intended to build the capacity of the LAF to defend the borders of Lebanon against threat from ISIL and Nusra. Under this effort, DoD anticipates delivery of equipment in late spring, including vehicles, radios, night vision devices, small arms, ammunition, and medical supplies for the LAF.

U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) advisors continue to provide training and professionalization support of the LAF. The training – which, in my estimation, is the single most effective means to improving the LAF’s capability to counter violent extremism in Lebanon – is designed to provide a full spectrum of instruction, concentrating not only on operational and tactical competencies, but also instructing the Lebanese Special Operations Forces on all the core aspects of a mission, from planning to execution.

To bolster the LAF’s status as a stable institution in Lebanon, in addition to focusing U.S. assistance on building up the LAF’s operational capability, we also seek to ensure that the LAF is trained as a highly professional military. As such, our International Military Education and Training (IMET) program – which is overseen by my colleagues at the Department of State – is the fifth largest IMET program in the world in FY 2016. IMET builds strong ties between the United States and Lebanon by bringing Lebanese military officers to the United States for professional development and to train alongside U.S. military and other international students. For example, in fiscal year 2015, the IMET program supported 119 Lebanese military students to attend education and training classes in the United States. Since 1985, the IMET program has brought more than 1,000 Lebanese military students to the United States for education and training. IMET builds relationships and good will between some of the most senior U.S. and Lebanese military officers – this program truly has a generational impact.

Finally, in October, the President announced that the United States would intensify security assistance to Lebanon as a part of the campaign to counter ISIL. To execute the President’s guidance, Lebanon will likely continue to be one of the Department of Defense’s priority countries for Counterterrorism Partnerships

Funding in fiscal year 2016 to continue to bolster the LAF capability to counter ISIL and other extremists.

Effectiveness of U.S. Policy with the LAF

This week, I had the opportunity to meet with a delegation of senior general officers from the LAF during DoD's annual U.S.-Lebanon Joint Staff Talks. Some of these general officers I have known for years dating back to when I served as the desk officer for Lebanon at DoD, and they are among our closest partners in the region. But don't take my word for it: ask any one of the hundreds of special operators who have served in Lebanon over the past five years. They will tell you the Lebanese are among the best partners we have in the region to work with. They train hard, and they fight hard. We can't ask for more.

This week's meetings underscored that our strategy in Lebanon is bearing fruit as the LAF continues to develop as a force, while simultaneously showing a strong willingness to successfully engage ISIL. Beginning in August 2014, in the first large-scale offensive inside Lebanon's border, the LAF repelled a combined force of hundreds of ISIL and Nusra fighters near the town of Aarsal along Lebanon's border with Syria.

Since this battle, the LAF has taken a variety of bold measures to maintain stability in Lebanon and counter the destabilizing effects of the Syrian conflict. The LAF has increased its operational tempo and reinforced Lebanon's borders with additional border and special operations forces. These forces have been highly active, engaging militants on a weekly basis by launching artillery and air strikes, by executing clearing operations in extremist-associated neighborhoods,

and by conducting raids and arrests. High-profile arrests by the LAF and other security services include the apprehension of radical Salafist cleric Ahmed al-Asir, ISIL operative Omar Miqati, and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing suspect Ahmed al-Mughassil. The effectiveness of U.S. assistance and the LAF's willingness to exercise its role as the sole legitimate defense force in Lebanon was further underscored on March 10, 2016, when the LAF executed the daring operation in Ras Baalbek that killed over a dozen ISIL fighters and destroyed ISIL vehicles, a command post, and a safe house.

In the face of these rising challenges, the LAF has demonstrated considerable unity, fortitude, and professionalism. The LAF has organized itself effectively to maintain a tremendously high operational tempo for many of its units, and has demonstrated the ability to make appropriate requests for and use of equipment, as well as unity and professionalism in numerous operations. Because of its continued success, the LAF now enjoys strong support across Lebanese sects with an approval rating over 90%, according to some recent polls in the open-source. This level of support is also derived from the truly multi-confessional nature of the LAF – which comprises approximately 35% Sunni, 27% Shia, 13% Maronite Christian, 6% Druze, 6% Greek Orthodox, and 4% Greek Catholic.

The High Cost of Failure

Although the LAF has prevented ISIL from destabilizing the country to date, the stakes for LAF failure are high. If the LAF falters in its fight against extremists, Hizballah or even long-demilitarized Christian militias could decide to seek to take the direct military actions to protect their communities, resulting in an outbreak of sectarian fighting that could undermine stability of Lebanon. A LAF

defeat, combined with a Hizballah victory over extremist forces, risks strengthening Hizballah and Iran inside Lebanon and therefore undermining U.S. policy efforts to bolster Lebanese state institutions' ability to exert sovereign authority throughout Lebanon.

Supporting Stability in Lebanon

As the United States faces a strategic environment in the Middle East that is the most unstable it has been in 40 years, our positive relationship with, and continued support to, Lebanon and the LAF are more important than ever. The LAF remains a critical pillar of Lebanon's stability, and its commitment to curtailing sectarian fighting and terrorism has been a significant factor in preventing Lebanon from descending into greater violence and instability.

Representative Ros-Lehtinen and Representative Deutch, I thank you and the other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for calling this hearing and drawing attention to Lebanon's security challenges and the U.S. security interest in supporting Lebanon during this critical time.