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THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN LEBANON AND SAUDI-IRANIAN PROXY TENSIONS

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify in this hearing. I was asked to share my views on the recent developments in Lebanon, the elements of a Saudi-Iranian proxy contest there, and the implications this may have for Lebanon's future and stability.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri and other like-minded leaders in Lebanon have had a long history of struggling with the presence of Hezbollah in Lebanon¹. Saad's father, Rafik Hariri, struggled with this challenge for a decade and a half, and was assassinated in 2005 for trying to stand up to the Assad regime and their ally Hezbollah in Lebanon. Numerous other political and media figures were also assassinated apparently for the same reason. Iran and the Assad regime have been building up Hezbollah as an arm of their foreign power for 37 years. Particularly since the Israeli withdrawal of 2000, the persistence of Hezbollah as an armed non state actor answerable mainly to Iran has been the primary obstacle to Lebanon achieving stability, security, and economic prosperity. The challenge that Hezbollah poses is part of a much wider Iranian empowerment in the region that has only gotten more acute after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab uprisings. The Saudi outrage at Hezbollah's apparent involvement in Yemen is real and legitimate. Hezbollah must abide by the Lebanese government's own policy of non-interference in regional affairs, and there are

¹ See Annex

some steps that Lebanese leaders can take. But these steps are limited, and policy makers must balance between the limited capacity of Lebanon to confront an Iranian proxy army, and the need to maintain stability in Lebanon and avoid another fully failed state in a region which already has too many.

Run-up to the Crisis

Hariri's current government was formed in December 2016. It contains two Hezbollah members, and a slight majority of Hezbollah political allies. This formation reflected the unfavorable balance of power that had transpired in Syria after American prevarication and decisive Russian intervention in 2015. Nevertheless, the government was formed with the formal understanding that all parties would maintain a policy of neutrality and non-interference in regional affairs (what is termed 'dissociation' in the Arabic text). Hariri was also given tacit assurances that his government would not be pushed to normalize relations with the Assad regime.

Both conditions were violated. Hezbollah not only continued its presence and interventions in Syria and Iraq, but escalated its presence in Yemen. Also, members of Hariri's government, without his approval, visited Damascus and held meetings there and elsewhere with Syrian government officials, pushing for a de facto normalization. Hariri also feared that Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah, after their 'victory' in Syria, would ratchet up the pressure on him to translate their victory there into even more sway over his government in Lebanon. Ali Akbar Velayati, the foreign affairs adviser to Iran's supreme leader, met with Hariri just hours before the latter's sudden departure, and in a public statement afterward boasted that the victories against terrorism in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq "means that the axis of resistance has achieved victory in the battles in the region." Hariri also feared that assassination could return as a tool of politics in his country. Despite the pressures, he felt that holding his ground and maintaining the power sharing government in Beirut was in the best interests of Lebanon.

The strains with Saudi Arabia began months before the events of November 4. The new leadership in Saudi had been making it clear that they did not approve of the policy of coexistence and accommodation with Hezbollah and its political

allies in Lebanon. So while the events of that fateful week were a surprise in terms of the rapidity and conditions within which they unfolded, they did not constitute a major *political* surprise. Saad Hariri has long been a citizen and ally of Saudi Arabia, and he could not maintain a policy for too long if it clashed with serious Saudi concerns.

What had intensely piqued Saudi concerns was Hezbollah's championing of the Houthi cause in Yemen and their apparent involvement in **delivering, assembling and launching missiles** from Yemen into Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, had raised the Houthi cause and the war against Saudi Arabia as a primary cause for Hezbollah in fiery speeches throughout the past year. The last of these missiles was reportedly launched at Riyadh airport on November 4, the day of Hariri's announced resignation.

Saudi Arabia legitimately fears that as Iran had built up Hezbollah's missile arsenal in Lebanon over the past two decades to threaten Israel; it was now starting, with Hezbollah's help, to build a large missile presence in Yemen to permanently and strategically threaten Saudi Arabia. It is fully understandable that the Saudi authorities could not countenance an ally of theirs sharing power in a government that included a party that was apparently involved in organizing missile attacks on their own capital. But the strategic and political alternatives and next steps were not clear.

The Resignation and Its Impacts

Hariri's sudden resignation unsettled Hezbollah and their allies. They had enjoyed relative calm in Lebanon, and Hariri's presence gave them some cover from Arab or Western pressure. They rushed to issue conciliatory statements and urged Hariri to return home and reconsider. Hariri's own followers were taken aback by the murky conditions of the sudden resignation and while they understood and sympathized with the Saudi concerns about Hezbollah, they felt that the conditions of the sudden resignation had humiliated and weakened Hariri and his movement.

American, French and Egyptian diplomacy made a difference in de-escalating the crisis. These parties all argued that while they agreed with Saudi Arabia's

concerns about Hezbollah, maintaining Lebanon's precarious stability was also a common shared interest. Instability and disintegration in Lebanon would strengthen Hezbollah, not weaken it; it would also give an opportunity for groups like ISIS and AQ, that had just been evicted from Lebanon, to come back. And it would jeopardize the condition of over 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon that might then seek shelter further west.

Hariri left Saudi Arabia to France and Egypt, and then back to Lebanon. He did not go through with his resignation, but agreed to put it on hold and to give diplomacy and mediation more time to find a resolution. Hariri is insisting that he could return to a government that includes Hezbollah, provided that Hezbollah respects the government's principal of neutrality and non-interference in regional conflicts, and most importantly, that it **stops any activities that "affect the security of our Arab brothers and their states."**

In effect, this boils down mainly to Yemen. Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has claimed that Hezbollah has no military involvement or presence in Yemen—a claim that might be negotiated into a commitment; and French President Macron is attempting to mediate with Iran to seek de-escalation in Yemen in exchange for stability in Lebanon.

Hariri might also gain commitments that normalization with the Assad regime will not be pursued and that Hezbollah could agree to restarting a National Dialogue about a national defense strategy that, at least in theory, is supposed to agree a pathway for Hezbollah to eventually integrate into the Lebanese state armed forces.

Hezbollah and Iran indeed do not want instability in Lebanon, and hence **the shock resignation might bear some limited fruit.** And that fruit might be a disengagement of Hezbollah from Yemen, and a gradual withdrawal from Iraq. **But there are limits to what further political or economic moves can produce.** Iran and Hezbollah are hard targets that soft political and economic measures cannot greatly impact. Even in a military escalation, Lebanon would be easily devastated while Hezbollah would survive and thrive.

While Riyadh is clearly giving diplomacy a chance, it is not clear what the Saudi decision will eventually be. Yemen is indeed a main national security concern for Riyadh. They would welcome a full Hezbollah disengagement from Yemen; and

that might be enough to at least resolve this current Lebanese crisis. But if Iran just replaces Hezbollah operatives with others from the Quds or other allied forces, and continues to build up a missile presence in Yemen, Riyadh might still want to react in Lebanon. It might feel that punishing an Iranian asset in Lebanon, even if that asset is not itself involved, is one of the means to raise the cost for Iran of its involvement in Yemen. Obviously, a more lasting resolution to the current Iran-Saudi clash in Lebanon, is to find a negotiated end to the Yemen conflict, and for Iran to use its influence to stop all missile attacks on Saudi from Yemen.

Riyadh certainly has great economic leverage over Lebanon. And economic concerns have already galvanized intensified political bargaining in Lebanon. Hezbollah and their allies certainly don't want an economic disaster on their hands. But if it came to that, Hezbollah and its Iranian backers, would be better able to ride it out, than any other sectors of the country.

Hariri's options are limited. He can go ahead with his resignation and go into opposition from outside the government. But that will not weaken Hezbollah or its allies, nor will it block the formation of a new government that might be more under their sway. Or he can use the threat of resignation to get a better deal, especially over Hezbollah's interventions against other Arab countries, which he is trying to do now. Other more extreme options are dead ends; attempting to move into some form of armed opposition would be both a losing battle and ruinous for the country.

Weighing Interests and Policy Options

As Acting DAS NEA Michael Ratney said in this venue just last month, **"A Lebanon that is stable, tolerant, moderate and prosperous" is in the US national interest.** Lebanon, and the LAF, have been critical partners in the war against ISIS and AQ affiliates. Lebanon hosts over one million Syrian refugees who otherwise might be desperately making their way to allies in Europe. And Lebanon is an example of communal coexistence, tolerance, and democracy—even if flawed—that undermines extremism, and that Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya can learn from.

It is important to note that Hezbollah, Iran and the Assad regime do not want the Lebanese government or the Lebanese army to have strong relations with the US or with Saudi Arabia. They assess correctly that those relations weaken their hold on the country. When Prime Minister Hariri met with President Trump this past July, Hezbollah undermined him and the army by launching a unilateral attack against an AQ affiliate and preempting the army's own attack. When he met with President Obama in January 2011, Hezbollah waited until he was seated in the Oval office to bring down his government in Beirut. Hezbollah and its backers were also relieved when Saudi Arabia cancelled its \$4 billion aid package to the Army and internal security forces in February 2016.

Saudi Arabia is correct to insist that Hezbollah's involvement in regional wars is intolerable. And if the latest crisis serves to stop Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen, then it would have not been in vain. But shoring up Lebanon's precarious stability should also be an important priority. The region can ill afford another failed state.

For the US and other friends of Lebanon, that means continued support to Lebanese state institutions and the constitutional order, precarious as it is, as well as economic engagement and refugee aid. It should also mean continued support to the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces. They have fought and defeated ISIS and AQ-affiliated groups and have managed to maintain stability and security in Lebanon while war raged next door; and they play an important role, along with UNIFIL, in maintaining stability across the southern border and working to avoid another Hezbollah-Israel war.

But the LAF should do more to enforce the government's own policy of non-interference in regional conflicts. This means that the LAF and Lebanon's internal security forces should be pressed to play a more effective role in monitoring border crossings, ports and airport. Also there had been some coordination, dictated by the geography of the fight, in the recent battle against ISIS and AQ in the Eastern Bekaa; but it should be made clear that this coordination must end.

At a higher level, one of the weaknesses of the UNSCR 1701 that ended the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war is that it mandated international forces in the south, but not along the eastern border with Syria. If the international community wishes to

truly prevent Hezbollah from acting as a proxy for Iran and a regional army, then the UNSC could take up the matter under Chapter VII.

Saudi Arabia and other friends of Lebanon who are concerned about Hezbollah, could also **work more closely together to enact targeted sanctions** that would impact Hezbollah without simultaneously threatening the Lebanese economy.

On a more general political level. **Opponents of Hezbollah in Lebanon have had to tread a difficult path;** facing a formidable Iranian-armed and Syrian-backed force, under constant threat of assassination, and struggling to maintain a nationalist line against long odds. It is understandable that friends and allies are occasionally **frustrated** that they can't achieve more; and indeed, they should always be pressed to at least try to do more. But friends and allies should also appreciate the enormous challenges under which they operate, and the risks they and their country takes. These political forces require continued backing. If they are cut off, this will only weaken them further, strengthen their opponents, and make the challenges ever more difficult.

Engagement is preferable to disengagement. And building influence is preferable to ceding further influence to Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. In this vein, support to the Lebanese armed forces and Lebanese state—with their imperfections—is preferable to disengagement; and providing political and other forms of support to those in Lebanon trying to counterbalance or stand up to Hezbollah and its political allies is preferable to cutting them off.

Broader Considerations

Lebanon is a victim and a symptom of Iran's empowerment in the region. Limited change and pushback on Hezbollah can be realistically asked of Lebanon without jeopardizing the country's broader stability. But rolling back Iranian influence and/or stabilizing the Middle East requires a much broader and sustained strategy. Among considerations for a wider strategy should be the following.

First, it must be recognized that armed non state actors, whether ISIS and AQ or Iranian proxies, essentially **thrive in the context of failed states and unresolved civil wars**. Hence, one way to gradually undermine armed non state actors and

regional proxies is to end civil wars and work with reformed state institutions to rebuild nation-state capacities.

- **In Iraq**, this means working with the Iraqi government while pressing it to continue along the path of national reconciliation with the Kurds and Arab Sunnis and to reform and clean up state institutions.
- **In Lebanon**, it means working with the state institutions on maintaining stability and security, while pressing them to do what they can to limit Hezbollah's extra constitutional behavior, both inside and outside the country.
- **In Yemen**, it means focusing intensely on trying to find a negotiated end to the civil war, withdrawing all foreign forces, and encouraging partners to help rebuild Yemeni state capacities.
- **In Syria**, it means not giving in to the Russian-Iranian supposed victory, but rather keeping the pressure on for some meaningful political resolution to the conflict that could create the possibility of rebuilding some measure of legitimate and effective national governance in Syria.

Second, it means **an effective and multi-tiered strategy vis a vis Iran**. This means *serious pushback* on Iran in areas where it is clearly violating international agreements and regional stability, but also a *robust negotiating track*—whether direct or indirect—that proposes to Iran a secure way forward if it plays by the rules of international order.

The grave concern of the Saudi leadership regarding Iran's extended reach in the Middle East is not new. Previous Saudi leaders bemoaned the fact that the US-led invasion of Iraq ended up empowering Iran, and that the Obama administration's fixation on the nuclear deal only led to further Iranian involvement in the Middle East.

The focus on Iran is shared with the new US administration, but although the US administration announced a **new Iran policy**, that policy is **short on details or teeth**.

- **In Syria**, although US forces are likely to stay for the medium term, the US has stopped support to the anti-Assad anti-Iranian opposition, and appears to be leaning toward a Russian-managed outcome there.
- **In Iraq**, the US plans to keep forces there and to support the central government, but the Baghdad government will likely remain quite close to Tehran.
- **On Qatar and Lebanon**, the two capitals seem to have not been on the same page.
- **And on Yemen**, there is still no pathway to ending the crisis despite a horrific humanitarian crisis.

The US is also weakening its diplomatic arm, the state department, at a time when able and tough diplomats are needed most. And on the nuclear deal, the policy has been confusing at best, and currently idling somewhere between decertification and actual abrogation.

Saudi Arabia has an intense interest in a stable Middle East. The new leadership, in particular, wants to move along with the ambitious *domestic* priorities of economic, social and cultural reform. It can be a partner in the attempt at regional stabilization. But until the US has a more comprehensive strategy that combines pushing back on Iran with working toward ending civil wars and stabilizing failed states in a conflicted region, the responses to crises that erupt will remain episodic.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share some of my views about Lebanon and the region, and I look forward to your questions and comments.

Annex

Background: Lebanon and Hezbollah

Lebanon has been deeply split over the presence of Hezbollah for many years. At the end of the 15 year civil war in 1990, all Lebanese militias agreed to disband and hand in their heavy weapons; but the Syrian regime of Hafez Assad, which held sway over the country, rammed in a provision that Hezbollah would be allowed to keep its weapons as the nucleus of armed popular resistance against the Israeli occupation of part of south Lebanon that had started in 1978. Lebanon and Israel, under American mediation, negotiated an Israeli withdrawal agreement in 1983. Syria opposed the agreement because they felt that if Lebanon got its occupied territory back unilaterally, that would weaken their leverage with Israel to get their own Syrian Golan back. The Soviets backed the Syrians in this opposition, because they did not want another Arab country to drift closer into the pro-Western orbit. Syria scuttled the agreement and encouraged Iran to ramp up its support for a nascent Hezbollah. This ushered in 17 years of resistance activity led by Hezbollah that eventually resulted in the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. The withdrawal was a great victory for Hezbollah and was welcomed nationally. But Syria was disconcerted by the unilateral withdrawal, as it again left them with less leverage regarding the return of the Golan.

In Lebanon the Israeli withdrawal of 2000 reignited calls for the armed group to disband; but Syrian dominance once again protected the group. In 2004, the current prime minister's father, Rafik Hariri, began assembling a political coalition to attempt to stand up to the Syrian diktat and to Hezbollah's free hand in Lebanon. Likely for doing just that, he was assassinated in February of 2005. The international tribunal for Lebanon has charged what many suspected, that the Assad regime and Hezbollah operatives were involved in the assassination. The assassination further deepened the political divisions in Lebanon between opponents and supporters of the Assad regime and Hezbollah—what came to be known as the March 14 and March 8 coalitions, respectively.

The Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005 ended a military presence that had started in 1976, and indicated to some that their withdrawal would leave Hezbollah weak and vulnerable. But Hezbollah adapted quickly to the new conditions. It consolidated its political coalition and secured a Christian ally in Gen. Michel Aoun, and built a strong presence in parliament and government. Even so, the government in May 2008 issued a decision to shut down Hezbollah's telecoms networks and to replace the head of airport security who was thought to be close to Hezbollah. The group reacted by sending their fighters onto the streets where they clashed with, and quickly defeated, armed men loyal to current Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Eighteen years after 1990, the capital was once gain on the brink of civil war. The national army did not intervene in that fight, and came under great criticism; but the army command feared that the multi-confessional army would disintegrate if it was used in an internal battle in which battle lines were drawn up on confessional lines.

Israel too had hoped that the Syrian withdrawal in 2005 would leave Hezbollah more vulnerable. In 2006 Israel reacted to a Hezbollah cross border attack with a full scale war. The two sides effectively fought each other to a draw. Although Hezbollah and Lebanon took heavy losses, Iran, through Syria, quickly re-equipped and reinforced Hezbollah after the war and rendered it stronger than before the war.

The uprising in Syria in 2011 was another turning point. Opponents of Hezbollah hoped that the uprising would succeed in removing Assad, and thus weaken Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah apparently had the same assessment of risk; and although the Lebanese government of which they were a part had a declared policy of 'non-interference', Hezbollah fully entered into the war in Syria on the side of Assad, and in alliance with Iran and, eventually, Russia. American prevarication on Syria, and the Russian military intervention in 2015 finally tipped the scales in Syria in the decisive favor of the Assad coalition.

In Lebanon, this result in Syria dismayed anti-Hezbollah parties and convinced them, grudgingly, that they were going to have to continue to coexist with Hezbollah and its allies for the near future. By this time, the country had entered into a constitutional crisis after the term of president Michel Suleiman had come to an end. To break the crisis, Hariri nominated a member of the Hezbollah coalition, Suleiman Frangieh, to the presidency, apparently at the time with Saudi backing. Hariri's Christian allies, the Lebanese Forces, rejected this nomination, and nominated another Hezbollah ally, Michel Aoun, instead. Aoun was elected to the presidency in June of 2016, and Hariri was subsequently named prime minister.