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**Written Statement
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**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
“Lebanon’s Security Challenges and U.S. Interests”
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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the evolving security situation in Lebanon and the importance of our partnership with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

The impact of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon is stark. I visited Lebanon in January to discuss the deteriorating security situation with Lebanese officials and members of the Lebanese Armed Forces, and it is clear to me now, more than ever, that U.S. security cooperation is essential to helping to maintain Lebanon’s stability. As reported by the UN last week, there are now more than one million refugees in Lebanon from Syria, equal to approximately 20 percent of the current population in Lebanon. Despite Lebanon’s official disassociation policy regarding the Syrian conflict, Hizballah is militarily involved in Syria, and sectarian tensions are increasingly spilling over the Syria-Lebanon border. Lebanese towns and villages near the border with Syria regularly experience shelling from Syria – both by the Syrian regime and Syrian opposition forces and terrorists – due to regime allegations that opposition fighters use Sunni-dominated areas as safe havens, as well as opposition retaliation against Hizballah for fighting on behalf of the Syrian regime.

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The Syrian conflict is an incubator of extremism – on both sides of the sectarian divide. One of the most concerning aspects of the Syrian conflict from a U.S. security perspective is that it is attracting foreign fighters from across the region and around the world. We assess that there are now significantly more foreign fighters in Syria than there were foreign fighters in Iraq at the height of the Iraq war. The Asad regime is receiving active support from Iran and Hizballah. Many other fighters are finding their way to a variety of fighting units, including terrorist groups such as the al Nusrah Front, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. These foreign fighters are becoming battle-hardened and gaining experience that could have destabilizing effects in the years to come. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, in particular, has exploited the governing vacuum in eastern Syria to carve out territory to train its fighters, recruit more of them, and plan attacks. Both the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and al Nusrah Front have established a presence in Lebanon and are seeking to increase their cooperation with Sunni violent extremist groups already operating there. These Lebanon-based groups have claimed a number of recent suicide attacks in Lebanon.

Sunni terrorist attacks in Lebanon are on the rise. Since the beginning of 2014 alone, nine suicide attacks have hit Shia population centers and LAF targets. But those are not the only attacks. Last year two Sunni mosques in Lebanon's second biggest city, Tripoli, were targeted by car bombs and a leading Sunni politician and former Ambassador to the United States, Mohammad Chatah, was assassinated in Beirut. Leaders from across Lebanon's political spectrum have condemned these attacks and have called for unity and cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces.

The Lebanese Armed Forces and Stability

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The Lebanese Armed Forces have taken a variety of bold measures to maintain stability in Lebanon and counter the destabilizing effects that the Syrian conflict risks to Lebanon's security. The increased operational tempo of Lebanese Armed Forces deployments over the past few months reflects the LAF's commitment to Lebanon's security. In the last seven months, we have seen our partners in the Lebanese Special Forces deploy to Sidon for counterterrorism operations, to Tripoli to conduct stability operations, and to Aarsal to provide security for the populations affected by Syria's instability. In the past few days, the LAF and Internal Security Forces (ISF) have successfully conducted large-scale operations in Tripoli based on the new government's Tripoli security plan to stem the spiraling sectarian violence in the city. Throughout this period, the 2nd Intervention Regiment conducted stability operations and supported counterterrorism and counternarcotics efforts in the Bekaa Valley.

The LAF's willingness and commitment to exercise its role as the sole legitimate defense force in Lebanon has made it a target as well. Just over a week ago, three Lebanese Armed Forces personnel were killed when a suicide bomber detonated his vehicle at an LAF checkpoint on the outskirts of Aarsal, a city near the border with Syria.

In the face of these rising challenges, the LAF has demonstrated considerable unity, fortitude, and professionalism. The Lebanese Armed Forces have organized themselves effectively to maintain a tremendously high operational tempo for many of its units, and have demonstrated the ability to make appropriate requests for and use of equipment, as well as unity and professionalism in numerous operations. The LAF's professionalism and commitment are evident in their multiple counter-terrorism successes. As reported in the press, the LAF has disrupted several terrorist plots in recent weeks. In February, the Lebanese Armed Forces arrested a terrorist attack facilitator, which led to the discovery and dismantling of multiple car

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bombs and the disruption of on-going attack plans. On March 27, the LAF conducted an operation that removed a key bomb-maker for al Nusra Front in the Sunni stronghold of Aarsal. These operations have not been without their costs; seven LAF soldiers have been killed in Sunni terrorist attacks targeting the LAF since last summer. However, to fight successfully and win against terrorism, an army must be properly equipped, trained, and supported by its partners.

U.S. Support to the Lebanese Armed Forces

As my interactions in Lebanon with a variety of political and military actors confirmed, our continued engagement and assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces are all the more important in this time of increased challenges to Lebanon's stability. U.S. and international assistance builds the capacity of the Lebanese Armed Forces to serve the democratic government and people of Lebanon. The Lebanese Armed Forces are an effective, non-sectarian institution with widespread national support, which is essential at a time when the sectarian tensions in Lebanon are increasing due to the Syrian conflict.

Supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces as Lebanon's sole legitimate defense force is a critical component of Lebanon's long-term stability and development. Strengthening the LAF will help undermine Hizballah's justification for maintaining its arms as well as its claim to be acting in defense of Lebanon's interests. Our assistance has also enabled the LAF to combat al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists seeking to establish a foothold in Lebanon.

U.S. assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces -- approximately \$71 million in fiscal year 2013 Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds -- helps strengthen the capacity of the Lebanese Armed Forces and support its mission to secure Lebanon's borders, defend the sovereignty of the State, and implement UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701. Since FY 2006, the

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United States has allocated more than \$1 billion in security assistance to support the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces. U.S. security cooperation is a key pillar of our bilateral relationship.

In December 2013, President Sleiman announced that Saudi Arabia will grant Lebanon \$3 billion to purchase defense equipment from the French. In concert with international partners such as the French and Saudis, and in line with the International Support Group for Lebanon, we fully support strengthening the Lebanese Armed Forces and will continue to work with partners to ensure that U.S. assistance is complementary and used effectively to meet these growing challenges. In line with this, I am traveling to France later this month to discuss our mutual efforts and complementary assistance in Lebanon.

Our International Military Education and Training (IMET) program with Lebanon is the fourth largest IMET program in the world. IMET builds strong ties between the United States and Lebanon by bringing Lebanese officers and officials to the United States for professional development and to train alongside U.S. forces. For example, in fiscal year 2013, the IMET program supported 68 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.

Our Section 1206 assistance has enhanced the Lebanese Armed Forces' ability to monitor, secure, and protect Lebanon's borders against terrorist threats and the illicit transfer of goods. Most recently, the United States increased funding to enhance Lebanon's border security capability further by providing the Lebanese Armed Forces' 2nd Border Regiment with additional surveillance equipment to guard its portion of the border - including radars, seismic sensors, and cameras.

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We are also focused on supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces' desire for institutional reform; the Department of Defense has just started a Defense Institution Reform Initiative (DIRI) with the Lebanese Armed Forces. This initiative complements a U.S. whole-of-government effort supporting Lebanese security sector reform. U.S. Central Command continues to provide support to the training and professionalization of the Lebanese Armed Forces, while the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and Bureau of Counterterrorism jointly fund a program to strengthen the capability and border management capacity of the Internal Security Forces. All of these programs help to strengthen our relationship and ties between our two militaries and throughout their ranks.

As mentioned in Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Larry Silverman's testimony, the Lebanese have agreed upon a new government formed by Prime Minister Tammam Salam. This is an important step for the government and people of Lebanon as the cabinet is able to provide political support to back the LAF's critical work to maintain stability. Having a new cabinet also provides us with an opportunity to increase our engagement with Lebanon's government and the Lebanese Armed Forces in particular.

Supporting Lebanon

Even if the crisis in Syria were to end quickly, the security and economic implications for neighboring Lebanon will be felt for years to come. Our positive relationship with, and continued support to, Lebanon and the Lebanese Armed Forces are now more important than ever. The Lebanese Armed Forces is 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.

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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.