

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

U.S. Policy Toward 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 United States policy towards Lebanon. Promoting a Lebanon that is independent, sovereign, stable, prosperous, and religiously diverse is crucial to advancing a range of U.S. interests in the Middle East. Lebanon today faces three critical challenges: first, the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict, including refugee flows into Lebanon and security threats such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Nusra Front; second, the activities of Hizballah, a terrorist organization that puts its own interests and those of its foreign backers ahead of those of the Lebanese people; and third, a political crisis that has nearly paralyzed government decision-making and left the country without a president for almost two years. We are grateful to Congress for its strong support of U.S. assistance to Lebanon and for the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act, signed into law last December. This legislation provides us with critical new tools to dismantle Hizballah's global financial network.

Our comprehensive strategy for helping Lebanon address these challenges is simple: ensure that the Lebanese security forces have the tools they need to prevent ISIL from destabilizing the country while helping build legitimate state institutions in order to deny Hizballah what it seeks to avoid: a strong central government capable of providing services for the entire country.

The conflict in Syria has severely tested Lebanon's resilience. There are over 145,000 refugee children from Syria in Lebanese public schools. Lebanon is now running a second school shift to make this happen. Our assistance to refugees from Syria – and to the Lebanese communities which have graciously hosted them for nearly five years – has helped alleviated the economic burden on the Lebanese

people. In February 2016 at the London Humanitarian Conference, Secretary Kerry announced over \$133 million in new humanitarian aid, bringing the U.S. contribution to Lebanon to over \$1.1 billion since the start of the crisis. At the London conference, Lebanon made significant new commitments to educate and employ Syrian refugees. We are looking to the Lebanese to fulfill those commitments as soon as possible. Our shared goal is to prevent a “lost generation” of Syrians with no resources, no education, and no hope.

Lebanon faces a real threat from ISIL and the Nusra Front. This is why support to Lebanon’s legitimate state security institutions, in particular the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), is a down payment on a long-term investment in regional stability. The LAF, not Hizballah, is responsible for protecting the country from ISIL and Nusra. The international community must come together to increase, not decrease, assistance to the security forces to enhance their capabilities in defense of Lebanon’s security.

Our strategy, which builds on U.S. security assistance programs launched after the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, is bearing fruit. Lebanon is an active partner in the global coalition to combat ISIL and is now confronting them along the Lebanese-Syrian border. The brutal suicide bomb attack in the Burj al-Barajneh neighborhood of Beirut on November 12, 2015, which killed 43 civilians, served as a stark reminder that we are in the fight against ISIL together. We believe that international counter-terrorism cooperation with Lebanese authorities, however, has prevented other attacks.

In January 2016, in a briefing for Members and staff of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, spoke to the

progress his troops have made in taking terrorists off the battlefield in northeastern Lebanon and preventing ISIL fighters from flowing into Lebanon. Using equipment provided under our Foreign Military Financing program – \$150 million provided during FY 2015 – the LAF has prevented further attacks by ISIL launched from Syria, so that northeastern Lebanon is no longer in immediate danger from cross-border incursions by violent extremist groups. Lebanese aircraft use U.S.-supplied Hellfire missiles to pinpoint terrorists and take them out. The effectiveness of this firepower and U.S. training was on full display in the early hours of March 10, 2016. That morning, the Lebanese Forces executed a daring operation outside Ras Baalbek, which took out over a dozen ISIL fighters and destroyed ISIL vehicles, a command post, and a safe house. I will defer to my Pentagon colleague to discuss our relationship with Lebanon’s security institutions in greater depth.

Our close counterterrorism cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces and Lebanon’s Internal Security Forces (ISF) is also helping target threats to both Lebanon and the U.S. Homeland. For example, the FBI-trained ISF now conducts forensic investigations using the latest post-blast investigation techniques. These investigative skills make the ISF more effective partners and leaders in counterterrorism operations and major incident response. With State Department assistance, the ISF is transforming into a modern, capable force ready to conduct advanced counterterrorist operations and maintain safety and security throughout the country for all Lebanese people. We are helping the ISF better target organized crime nodes and investigate more efficiently in addition to providing training in human rights and community policing. Our assistance to the ISF also helps relieve the Lebanese Armed Forces from internal security matters and law enforcement

duties, enabling the military to devote its full attention to external threats such as ISIL and the Nusra Front.

However, our cooperation is not limited to counterterrorism. Combatting trafficking-in-persons is one of our highest priorities in Lebanon. Lebanon has made gains in targeting human traffickers, the slave traders of our day. The Internal Security Forces raided a human trafficking ring in late March, arresting 16 traffickers and rescuing 75 victims. The traffickers had lured the victims, almost all Syrian women and girls, to Lebanon under false pretenses and forced them into prostitution. More recently, on April 21, the Lebanese military arrested five individuals allegedly involved in a trafficking ring in the eastern Bekaa Valley and seized two vehicles used to smuggle their victims from Syria into Lebanon. Still, there is more the Lebanese Government can do to combat trafficking, including enacting legislation such as the National Action Plan and National Strategy to Combat Trafficking.

I want to stress that our assistance to Lebanon and its people is much broader than the security sector. We provided \$65 million in Economic Support Funds for Lebanon in FY 2015. Through our USAID mission in Beirut, we are training teachers, rehabilitating school buildings, providing classroom equipment, repairing water pumping stations, and building up the capacity of civil society organizations by improving their financial management controls.

I want to turn to the second challenge that threatens Lebanon and one I know this Committee tracks closely, Hizballah. When Hizballah intervened in Syria beginning in 2012 to prop up the Assad regime, the group showed its true colors to anyone who still doubted Hizballah puts its own interests and those of its foreign

backers ahead of those of the Lebanese people. When Hizballah conducts terrorist attacks abroad or drags Lebanon into the war in neighboring Syria, it is ordinary Lebanese people who pay the price – in security threats, lost tourism and investment revenue, and reputation. These costs are, unfortunately, very tangible.

The U.S. government is actively implementing the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA). The Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued new regulations, as required by HIFPA, on April 15. Simultaneously, OFAC identified approximately 100 previously designated persons as agents, instrumentalities, and/or affiliates of Hizballah, or as persons designated for acting on behalf of or at the direction of, or being owned or controlled by, Hizballah. The governor of the Lebanese Central Bank immediately announced that Lebanon would comply with these regulations. We will use our full authority under HIFPA to target foreign financial institutions that knowingly facilitate significant transactions or engage in money-laundering activities or certain other activities related to Hizballah. If the U.S. government has the necessary evidence, we will build a case, and we will take action. Before the passage of HIFPA, we already targeted the nodes of Hizballah's international financing by designating over 100 Hizballah-affiliated individuals and entities. The world is rallying against Hizballah. We welcome decisions by the Arab League, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to treat Hizballah as a terrorist organization. Two weeks ago, the State Department, Justice Department, and the Department of the Treasury held a law enforcement workshop for GCC countries in Manama, Bahrain, to improve our partners' capacity to address Hizballah's activities.

As we go after Hizballah and its backers around the world, our target is not Lebanon or the Lebanese economy. On the contrary, we cooperate closely with the Central Bank and Lebanese banks on money-laundering and counterterrorist finance. Lebanese screen transactions against OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List.

The third major challenge Lebanon faces is restoring effective governance. Providing for a country's security requires effective political leadership. We commend Prime Minister Tammam Salam for his courage and perseverance in addressing Lebanon's most pressing challenges. But he cannot do the job alone. Next month will mark two years the Lebanon people have been without a president. The price – political and economic – of this political dysfunction has been alarmingly high. The presidential vacancy has bred an ineffective cabinet and an absentee parliament, leading to forgone foreign investment, a garbage collection crisis, and worsening electricity coverage. Without an effective cabinet and parliament that meets regularly to make decisions and do the people's work, Prime Minister Salam alone cannot address these issues.

Now is the time for Lebanon to uphold its democratic principles and for the Lebanese parliament to meet and elect a president according to the constitution. Through the International Support Group for Lebanon, the United States has rallied the international community to speak with a united voice in calling for an end to the presidential vacancy. The Lebanese people deserve a government that can deliver basic services, promote economic prosperity, and address the country's most pressing security challenges. Some in Lebanon are tempted to lay the problem at the doorstep of the international community. But electing a president and ending the governance crisis is first and foremost a Lebanese responsibility.

They are the ones who have the greatest stake in their country's success. Lebanon's leaders – particularly those who are blocking a quorum from convening in parliament – must put the interests of the Lebanese people first by electing a president and restoring a fully functioning government. Lebanese political leaders can count on the international community's strong support as they do so.

I want to highlight the importance of nurturing people-to-people ties between our two countries. This often overlooked aspect of our diplomacy is a crucial ingredient in some of our biggest successes. In February, a multi-partisan delegation of Lebanese Members of Parliament visited Washington to meet with the Executive Branch and Members of Congress, including the House Lebanon Caucus. Impressed by the depth of knowledge on Lebanon they encountered in the U.S. Congress, the delegation returned to Beirut and decided to establish a "U.S. Caucus" in the Lebanese Parliament to strengthen ties with the United States.

Also in February, with the support of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Primesouth, a Columbia, South Carolina-based company, won a five-year \$339 million contract to operate two power plants in Lebanon. These are just a few examples of our close ties. In March, it was an Internal Security Forces officer who remembered his week in the United States participating in an anti-trafficking course under the State Department's International Visitors Leadership Program who alerted his superiors to what he rightly suspected was a major trafficking ring in Lebanon. The officer's actions led to the successful anti-trafficking operation I mentioned earlier in my statement. This month, the State Department sponsored a visit to Beirut by a West Palm Beach, Florida-based energy expert, Tom Henderson, to show the Lebanese how cutting-edge technology can turn solid waste into electricity.

Madame Chairman and, in these and many other ways, we are contributing to the stability, independence and security of Lebanon, which is as much in the U.S. interest as it is Lebanon's.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee. I welcome the opportunity answer your questions.