

Paul Salem briefing  
Thursday, July 28, 2005  
3:00 p.m.

Dr. Paul Salem, director of the Fares Foundation, told a CSIS audience that democratic reform in Lebanon was contingent on the country's securing friendly relations between both Syria and the United States simultaneously. He spoke at CSIS on July 28, after testifying earlier in the day before the House Committee on International Relations. In Salem's view, successful democratic reform in Lebanon would both fulfill the country's potential and serve as an example for the Arab world.

Salem suggested that the future of Lebanese democracy lies in an ambitious reform of the political system. Calling for no less than a reform to the electoral law and an end to the confessional system, Salem has proposed a model of a Lebanese "Third Republic," consisting of two or three truly national, interfaith political parties.

To this end, Salem urged the audience to consider Hezbollah's inclusion in Lebanese politics optimistically, as its participation in the new government will co-opt the group into the political mainstream. Hezbollah's role in the government will empower the southern Shi'a community, whose support will be a vital ingredient to successfully pushing through needed reforms.

At the same time, Salem observed that the most obvious obstacle to a warm U.S.-Lebanese relationship is U.S. hostility toward Hezbollah, which has refused to disarm as prescribed by both the Ta'if Accords and UNSC Resolution 1559. Even so, Hezbollah enjoys tacit support far beyond its core Shi'a base, due to the role it played precipitating the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

Another challenge will be building a stable relationship with Syria, one of Hezbollah's principal patrons. Despite the official withdrawal of the Syrian military, Syrian influence in Lebanon will persist. Such influence does not only flow through Hezbollah—the recent elections highlighted Syria's influence not only with longstanding allies among the Lebanese elite, but also among many of Syria's former enemies.

Yet Lebanese rapprochement with Syria cannot be at the expense of continued US support. Indeed, Salem stressed that a Syrian-American tug-of-war over Lebanon would be disastrous. Balanced relations with both countries are essential to its political and economic development; just as Syria cannot strangle the Lebanese economy by blocking trucks at its border, nor can the United States waver in its support of Lebanon.

Salem said he was cautiously optimistic for the future of his country. Civil society institutions, such as universities and the press, are historically very strong in Lebanon, and provided the backbone for the state through years of violence. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of people publicly voiced their opposition to Syrian presence in the March 14 demonstrations, without a single incident of violence or police oppression. Salem coupled these two factors to suggest that the climate was right for

democratic reform in Lebanon, and that the Lebanese example can potentially be applied as a model to other Arab countries.