



**Oral Testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central
Asian Affairs**

“LEBANON AT THE CROSSROADS”

A Statement by:

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Chairman Kaine, Ranking Member Risch and distinguished members of the sub-committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Lebanon and the pressures it faces in the wake of the Syria crisis and broader instability across the Levant.

I have submitted a longer written analysis that both explains and contextualizes what I am about to say in depth, using open source reporting and research conducted in field work in Lebanon.

I fully understand how busy Members and their staff are, but I hope that some of you will still be able to look to the full report for a level of detail that I cannot go into in this short statement, and I request that it be put into the official record.

Allow me to summarize some of the key points:

- **Syria's civil war and the Lebanon-Syria insecurity nexus now complicate and inform every aspect of sectarian and factional competition in Lebanon** in ways that neither the Lebanese nor their regional and international allies seem to have fully accounted for. The conflict in Syria also defines how both the United States and Iran deal with their respective sets of interests, partners and allies in Lebanon and the broader region.
- **Competing Lebanese factions have adopted diametrically opposing views on Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia.** Anecdotal data

from polling and field work all shows deep divisions along Sunni-Shi'a lines. Lebanon's Shi'a continue to view the Assad regime, Iran and Hezbollah favorably, while maintaining unfavorable views of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, the country's Sunnis continue to maintain the opposite set of views relative to the country's Shi'a.

- **The Pressures that Lebanon's Christians feel as a result of local and regional Sunni-Shi'a tensions are also growing.** Whether it is on Assad, Iran, Hezbollah or Saudi Arabia, a significant portion of Christians remain divided about whether any of these regional and local actors can be viewed favorably, or whether they could be trusted to make positive and stabilizing use of their influence in Lebanon.
- **Hezbollah's decision to commit to offensive military operations inside Syria in concert with Assad's forces is a "preemptive war of choice" in Syria that reflects its own narrow set of overlapping priorities in Syria.** These include the primacy of preserving the "Resistance Axis with Iran," Hezbollah's sense that it can neither appease increasingly militant Lebanese Sunni political forces, nor reverse deepening regional Sunni-Shi'a tension, and that Shi'a communal fears as a regional minority group increasingly inform a need to create strategic depth in Syria.
- **In 2014, Hezbollah's military priorities in Syria continue to center on its combat role east of the Bekaa valley with a focus on strategically significant terrain such as the town of Qusayr and the Al-Qalamoun mountain range.** Both remain critical to supply

lines and whoever controls them can shape the flow of aid, weapons and personnel either to or from Syria.

- Hezbollah may have accurately calculated that moderate and urban Sunni factions would not or could not escalate in Syria, or by resorting to attacks against the militant group or the Shi'a community. **However, the rural Sunnis in the North and the Bekaa have always been a separate demographic, and Hezbollah actions in Syria may dramatically accelerate major shifts currently under way within the Sunni community.**
- In 2014, Lebanon's mainly Sunni rural North continues to maintain the highest overall and extreme poverty rates in the country at levels in excess of 52%, or more than twice the national average. Dire socio-economics, and feelings of being under-represented by traditional Sunni leadership have left northern Sunnis increasingly vulnerable to the recruitment efforts of militant and jihadi groups, including the Abdallah Azzam Brigades, Jabhat Al-Nursa and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham.
- Meanwhile, these shifts within Lebanon's Sunni community are taking place both alongside and because of acute demographic, socio-economic and security pressures from the influx of mainly Sunni displaced Syrians, now numbering more than 900,000 in Lebanon, and centered in parts of the country with high poverty rates and poor education, healthcare and other infrastructure.

- While the scale of pressures on Lebanon and its people continues to grow, there are still a broad range of actors and institutions that seek to play a stabilizing role, and **no national institution has contributed more to relative stability than the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).**
- **The principal national security partner of the US in Lebanon, the LAF has expanded from a force of 59,000 in 2010 to a force of 65,500 in 2014, largely in an effort to stand up border protection forces, including the 1st and 2nd Border Regiments, to deal with pressures from Syria.** The under-manning of conventional units has also proven to be a necessary evil to ensure as broad a national deployment as possible, totaling some 24,000-30,000 troops in the field.
- As a result of the conflict, the LAF maintains three core national security priorities. These include creating a real-world security and border regime along the Lebanese-Syrian border, managing the risk of on-again-off-again volatility along the UN Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon, and lastly conducting what the LAF calls “high intensity internal stability and counter-terrorism operations.”
- **In many ways, the LAF’s growing counter-terrorism capabilities and the central role of LAF military intelligence and counter-intelligence efforts increasingly define the US-Lebanon military-to-military relationship.** The LAF’s growing ability to act on external intelligence, focus on dismantling groups like the Abdallah Azzam Brigades and similar militant and jihadi organizations, and the

- military's interdiction of IED, vehicle-borne IED and suicide attacks are key sources of even limited stability in a region in turmoil.
- The LAF has worked hard to rapidly bring online its border forces to manage growing instability from Syria. This has included building up fixed "Sangar"-style hardened observation posts that will be equipped with day and night electro-optical surveillance systems, anti-RPG netting and protection along with other defensive countermeasures. The towers are located close enough to each other to allow for overlapping fields of view to boost LAF situational awareness along key smuggling and trafficking routes. The LAF hopes to build at least an additional eight fixed observation posts in 2014.
 - What the LAF needs now at the national level to push through its national security priorities is strong government leadership and political top cover. While Prime Minister Tamam Salam managed to form a cabinet that included both the March 14 and the March 8 coalitions – including Hezbollah and Saad Hariri's mainly Sunni Future Movement – and that enjoys broad international legitimacy, it still remained unclear at the end of February 2014 whether the new cabinet would be capable of seizing on the LAF's momentum along the border.
 - At the international level, the LAF and the Lebanese need countries like the US and other donors and partners to support the military's development efforts, especially the LAF's capabilities development plan, the International Support Group for Lebanon, and the upcoming

Rome conference to support the LAF, and efforts to build up additional border units and critical infrastructure.

- As the Syria crisis drags on, supporting Lebanon's military and security forces will prove to be critical. The LAF in particular has and will continue to play a critical role in terms of internal security, safeguarding borders, and insulating Lebanon from regional instability. In order to face potentially years of regional instability, the Lebanese government, and the country's military leadership, will need help in planning to bolster the resources and capabilities of the LAF to secure Lebanon.
- While it remains unclear how recent unrest will impact the effort, that any sitting government in Lebanon would endorse such a move is a testament to how destabilizing the Syria crisis has become.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.