S. HRG. 116–225

LEBANON AND IRAQ PROTESTS: INSIGHTS, IMPLICATIONS, AND OBJECTIVES FOR U.S. POLICY

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST, SOUTH ASIA, CENTRAL ASIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

DECEMBER 4, 2019

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations

Available via the World Wide Web:
http://www.govinfo.gov

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE
40–801 PDF WASHINGTON : 2020

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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2019

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE NEAR EAST, SOUTH ASIA,
CENTRAL ASIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM,
U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:40 p.m. in room SD–419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Mitt Romney, chairman of the subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Romney [presiding], Cruz, Murphy, Shaheen, and Kaine.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. MITT ROMNEY, U.S. SENATOR FROM UTAH

Senator ROMNEY. The hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism will come to order.

I am going to note in advance that, given the fact that there are votes being undertaken right now on the floor, we are going to stay here for probably 15 minutes or so, maybe 20 minutes. Then we are going to run down, I think probably all of us. We will take a short break. We will run down and vote on two different matters and then come back for the next round.

The focus of today's hearing is to assess the implications of the protest movements in Lebanon and Iraq and understand the impact of these on U.S. policy in each of these countries.

I want to thank our witness, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joey Hood, for being here today. I note that Senator Murphy and I had the pleasure of spending some time with Mr. Hood when we were in Iraq in the spring. His perspectives and understanding of the region were most impressive.

Both Iraq and Lebanon are geographically significant from a regional security perspective. They also face similar challenges. They are fragile democracies. They have faltering domestic economies, and there are increasing efforts by Iran and Iranian-backed groups to gain greater influence over their respective governments and civil societies. Both countries are currently engaged in protests, with civilians decrying corruption, high unemployment, and what they perceive as Iranian intervention.

The current situation in Lebanon poses complex challenges for our involvement there. Hezbollah is a terrorist organization. Yet, the Iranian-backed group and its allies hold seats in parliament. They control ministerial positions. This is the same group that bombed the U.S. embassy in Beirut, the Marine barracks in 1983, and regularly targets our ally Israel. They now control parts of southern Lebanon, as well as neighborhoods in Beirut. Lebanon is on the brink of financial ruin. People are prohibited from withdrawing more than a few hundred dollars a week from their banks. Corruption is rampant. Protesters are demanding government resignations and reforms.

The country will exhaust its currency reserves by February. It could face currency devaluation or default on its debt obligations if it does not receive foreign funding soon. CEDRE has pledged $11 billion in funds to Lebanon, but these funds are contingent on government reforms. Prime Minister Hariri resigned in October, and President Aoun is now only starting to form a new government.

The U.S. is to provide military aid to the Lebanese armed forces, but the administration had previously placed that aid on hold. I am glad the aid has now been released. I know that the subcommittee will be interested in hearing the reasons for the delay in that funding.

The Iraqi protests are similarly significant, recently resulting in the prime minister's resignation. Iraq faces major security and economic challenges, among them how to build an independent and unified nation, how to sustain an economy, whether and how to assimilate returning ISIS fighters, and how to counter excessive Iranian influence. What happens there matters greatly for our regional security interests, and any mention of Iraq must, of course, be accompanied with a recognition and honor and respect for the 4,565 American service members who gave their lives in that country.

Mr. Hood, I hope that you can help us have a better understanding of the intent of the protest movements and the related economic factors and the position the protesters are taking regarding Hezbollah and the Iranian-backed militias. I would also appreciate your take on the professionalism of the Lebanese armed forces and whether it has the support of the Lebanese people, whether it can counter Hezbollah, and the state of U.S. aid for the Lebanese armed forces. And finally, the implications of these situations for U.S. national security interests in the Middle East is most interesting and important.

Increasing instability in both countries would have serious repercussions throughout the region, and the U.S. must have an effective strategy on how best to partner with these nations to support our mutual interests.

And with that, I will turn the time over to Senator Murphy for his remarks.

STATEMENT OF HON. CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Hood, very good to see you again after our visit to Baghdad earlier this year.

Listen, let us face the obvious. Everywhere we look in the Middle East today we are seeing easily avoidable mistakes by the President and his team that are weakening our allies, increasing the threat of attack against the United States, and abandoning our allies. To the extent there is a common thread to the President's actions in the region, it is a myopic, but often counterproductive, focus on Iran. But because of this obsession, seeing everything through an Iran prism, the administration is missing key opportunities to advance U.S. interests in other countries.

The demonstrations that have gripped Lebanon and Iraq are remarkable. These protesters are non-ideological. They are multi-ethnic and nonsectarian. So many of the things they are demanding of their governments—to be responsive and accountable to everyday needs, to tackle rampant corruption, to create economic opportunities and public services that work for all of their citizens—these are exactly the kind of priorities that align with U.S. interests. But at this critical moment of change in both countries, the United States is missing the opportunity.

I agree that the United States has got to push back against Iranian influence in the Middle East, but we cannot let our focus on Iran destabilize other parts of the region, especially when it seems like this Iran strategy is not actually working in the first place.

In Lebanon, where I was just a week ago, U.S. policy has long been aimed at reducing outside influence in that country. Well, over the past couple months, we have seen a lot of popular anger on the streets in Lebanon. It is directed against political elites and outside actors like Hezbollah. And with their political power under threat, Hezbollah is putting thugs out to violently attack these nonviolent protesters, threatening to plunge the entire country into chaos.

And yet at this critical moment, the United States is not supporting the very actor inside that country, the Lebanese armed forces, who have stepped up to defend the peaceful protesters. Instead, we withheld U.S. aid just at the moment that we should have been supporting them. When I was in Lebanon a week ago, no American official could give me a reason as to why the aid was held up or what the LAF needed to do to get unstuck. And I agree with Senator Romney. We will be seeking answers to those questions today.

We are also missing an opportunity in Iraq. As with Lebanon, I am in awe of the courage of these protesters who have refused to back down from their peaceful demands even when more than 400 people were killed when those demands were met with gunfire. Sadly, it seems that security forces in Iraq are looking more towards Iran on how to deal with peaceful protests rather than where they should be looking towards: the LAF in Lebanon. And just as we have seen in Lebanon, much of the protesters' anger in Iraq is directed towards the established elites, including figures backed by Iran.

So did the United States seize this opportunity, surging in our best and brightest diplomats to try to calm the situation and support popular demands for responsive government? No. We have largely stayed on the sidelines, hobbled by an unjustifiable decision to completely gut our diplomatic corps in Iraq.

Now, I have warned that we were making a disastrous mistake by slashing the number of diplomats at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad to just 15 people doing principal diplomacy back in July. Today the shortsightedness of that decision is painfully clear. And yet the administration apparently still thinks that somehow we can manage this crisis with a skeleton crew inside Baghdad.

We have a lot to discuss today. I know the decisions that are being made that I am critical of are made far above the head of our guest, but he is an able, capable, and experienced diplomat in the region. I look forward to his testimony.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Senator Murphy.

Joey Hood is Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs. He has served as deputy chief of mission in Iraq and in Kuwait, as well as counsel general and principal officer in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Prior to these assignments, Mr. Hood was acting director of the Office of Iranian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. Mr. Hood has also served in Riyadh, where he coordinated U.S.-Saudi military cooperation in Asmara where he was a liaison to rebel leaders from Sudan's Darfur region. He has also been assigned to U.S. embassies in Yemen and Qatar.

I look forward to hearing his insights today.

We will now turn to our witness, Mr. Hood. Thank you for your willingness to testify here today. Your full statement will be included in the record, without objection. So if you could please keep your remarks to no more than 5 minutes or so, we would appreciate it so that we can engage in questions and vote. With that, thank you, Mr. Hood.

STATEMENT OF HON. JOEY HOOD, PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. HOOD. Thank you, Chairman Romney, Ranking Member Murphy, Senator Kaine. Thank you for the kind words, first of all. Thank you for the kind words also about me in the Salt Lake Tribune back in May. My family appreciated that as well.

But I am honored to appear before you today to discuss the situation in Iraq and Lebanon and the ways in which the United States is helping and can help the citizens of those countries achieve the stability, security, and economic prosperity that their leaders have not delivered.

People across the region, in particular its youth, wish to overcome the economic and political stagnation that has left many of them no better off today than they were 10 years ago.

In Iraq, the demonstrations are also fueled by anger over Iran's destabilizing influence. As recently as last weekend, Iran's chief exporter of terrorism, Qassem Soleimani, was widely reported to have been in Baghdad once again meeting with, threatening, and cajoling politicians.

Iran has exploited the dysfunction not just within the Iraqi body politic, but also in Lebanon. Iran supports the terrorist group, Hezbollah, and has contributed to the group's ability to put its own interests over those of the nation. In Iraq, people are demanding an end to Iran's Mafioso tactics such as arming terrorist groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah, calling the shots among political party

bosses, dumping agricultural goods on Iraqi markets, and peddling counterfeit or expired pharmaceuticals.

In this context, it is imperative that the United States remain, as Secretary Pompeo has said, a force for good across the region.

In stark contrast to Iran, the United States has partnered with the Lebanese people through a range of humanitarian, economic, and security assistance. Since 2006, we have provided more than $2 billion to strengthen the Lebanese armed forces. In fiscal year 2018, we obligated and are currently expending $115 million in economic support funds to promote employment, good governance, and economic growth. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, we have also provided over $2.3 billion in humanitarian assistance for refugees and the people who host them, including food, shelter, water, medical care, education, and psychological services. That is what we mean when we say America is a force for good in Lebanon.

In Iraq, we remain a steadfast partner of the Iraqi people. With our coalition partners, we continue to ensure that the Iraqi security forces can ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. As the country's largest humanitarian donor, we have also provided more than $2 billion in food, water, medicine, and shelter since 2014 alone. We are also the largest donor to stabilization, funding the rehabilitation of more than 500 schools, 100 health centers, and 50 water treatment plants so far. We are also the largest donor to demining, having removed thousands of explosive hazards so people can return to their homes. That is what we mean when we say we are a force for good in Iraq.

And our relationship with Iraqis remains vital for U.S. national interests. Bolstering Iraq as a sovereign, stable, united, and democratic partner of the United States with a viable Kurdistan region as a component of it continues to be our principal objective.

If we see Iraqi leaders willing to address the demands of their people, we will join with the U.N. and others to support badly needed electoral and economic reforms. And as Secretary Pompeo said recently, we will not hesitate to use tools such as designations under the Global Magnitsky Act to sanction individuals who are stealing the public wealth of the Iraqi people and killing or wounding peaceful protesters.

The popular protests underway today show that people are finally fed up with the damage that corruption causes. We are offering to partner with those who want to unlock the potential of people across the region because we understand that a country is most successful when its people are secure, prosperous, and free.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hood follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. JOEY HOOD

Chairman Romney, Ranking Member Murphy, Members of the Committee: I am honored to appear before you today to discuss U.S. policy in several Middle Eastern countries in which public demonstrations have erupted over citizens' frustrations with their governments all the way from Iran to Algeria. Specifically, I look forward to discussing the ways in which the United States can help the citizens of Iraq and Lebanon achieve the stability, security, and economic prosperity that their leaders have not delivered. Allow me to start by identifying two threads linking these protests.

The first lies in the longstanding desire of people across the region—in particular among its youth—to overcome the economic and political stagnation that has squandered the promise of a better future. They have not seen nearly enough investment in expanding economic opportunities, leaving many young people no better off today than they were 10 years ago. This frustration is compounded by years of rampant corruption and political systems that treat government services as patronage rather than public obligations. Today's protests over these circumstances share a common thread with others in the recent past, including the "you stink" demonstrations over failed garbage collection in Lebanon and protests by Iraqis in Basra during the summer of 2018.

In this context, it is imperative that the United States remain, as Secretary Pompeo has said, a force for good across the region. We offer a partnership that is unmatched. It reflects our values. It also supports the region's security and stability. Our help can provide the people of the region the security and stability they need to face challenges with a modern vision anchored in universal rights and fundamental freedoms.

In Iraq, it is also of note that the demonstrations are fueled by anger arising from the results of Iran's destabilizing influence. As recently as this weekend, Iran's IRGC–QF (or IRGC–Qod Force) commander, Qassem Soleimani, who remains under a U.N. Security Council travel ban, was widely reported to have been in Baghdad once again meeting with, threatening, and cajoling politicians. This is just the type of unacceptable interference Iraqis are protesting in the streets.

Both Iraq and Lebanon have systems of government that are largely formed along sectarian lines, fomenting corruption to maintain influence, and inviting in external backers. Iran has exploited the dysfunction within both systems, exacerbating the fault lines in each. In Lebanon, Iran's support to the terrorist group Hezbollah has contributed to the group's ability to exert domestic influence and put its own interests over those of the nation., leaving the Lebanese people on the losing end. In Iraq, people are demanding an end to Iran's mafioso rules, such as arming terrorist groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah, calling the shots among political party bosses, dumping agricultural goods on Iraqi markets, and peddling counterfeit or expired pharmaceuticals. Allow me to address the situations in both countries in greater detail.

For almost 2 months, Lebanon has experienced an unprecedented popular movement led by ordinary citizens fed up with corruption and ineffective political leaders that have too often put their own interests over their own people. In a country known for its multi-religious character, these protests have been unparalleled in their national character and the way that Lebanese citizens—across the nation, across sects, and across socio-economic levels—have become involved. While the demonstrations were at first triggered by an absurd proposed tax on voice-over-internet-protocol calls (such as WhatsApp), it became clear within hours that the tax was just the final straw. Even after the proposal was withdrawn and Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced a package of economic reforms 4 days later, protesters, skeptical of more empty promises from the very political leaders who failed to deliver for years, remained on the streets and demanded the resignation of his government. Hariri stepped down on October 29, and since then declared that he would return only if he could lead a cabinet of experienced, non-political individuals (often referred to as "technocrats") as the protesters were demanding. Hezbollah and its political partners refused, and last week the former prime minister announced he would not seek another term.

Since Hariri's resignation, the government has been in caretaker status, which means it has limited power and cannot pass any of the reforms Lebanon desperately needs to stabilize the economy. The last time Lebanon's political leadership had to form a government it took them 9 months. We do not believe the Lebanese people want another drawn-out contest over political spoils. As each day ticks by, the delays demonstrate a determination by the country's political elite, especially the sectarian leaders behind most of the political parties, to protect their own interests and not to serve the interests of the Lebanese people.

We have repeatedly urged Lebanon's political leaders to respond to their people's demands for a properly functioning country through immediate reforms. We are working with key allies and the international community to discuss how we would assist with these reforms to avert a full-blown economic crisis and create the conditions for economic recovery. Until the sectarian leaders that fuel the political parties support real and immediate reforms, Lebanon will go nowhere, whether it has a new government or not.

The United States supports the rights of the brave men and women of Lebanon to meet on their streets and squares to express themselves through peaceful demonstrations without fear of retribution or violence. However, the ability to do that is under constant threat. Over the last 2 months, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)

and Internal Security Forces (ISF) have stepped in to protect protesters from thugs threatening and using violence in an effort to send them home. For example, on November 24, Hezbollah and Amal partisans confronted peaceful protesters with violence and sectarian slogans, trying to prod them with old resentments into a new clash that would undermine their demands. Intervention by security personnel stopped the situation from escalating before dispersing both groups with tear gas. None were injured that day, but the pressure from these politically motivated groups to either get protesters off the streets or undermine their demands with an appeal to divisive sectarianism remains a significant threat.

The United States also remains concerned about the role being played by Hezbollah, and its benefactor Iran. During these protests, Hezbollah, with some echoes from Russia, has tried to blame the United States for instigating the protests. Those efforts have fallen short. Protesters in Lebanon know they are not the puppets of external influence. As noted in our statement on November 18, "the popular demonstrations we have witnessed over the past weeks in Lebanon have clearly shown that it is the Lebanese people that are working together to hold their leaders to account. Any argument to the contrary is frankly insulting to their perseverance and determination to work towards a brighter future."

In stark contrast to Iran and Russia, the United States has partnered with the Lebanese people through a range of humanitarian, economic, and security assistance. Since 2006, we have provided more than $2 billion to help strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces. In FY 2018, we obligated, and are currently expending, $115 million in Economic Support Funds for initiatives in Lebanon that promote employment, good governance, social cohesion, and economic growth. Our projects also improve access to clean water and education, especially in areas heavily impacted by the influx of Syrian refugees. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, the United States has also provided over $2.3 billion in humanitarian assistance for refugees in Lebanon, as well as the Lebanese communities that host them, including food, shelter, water, medical care, education, and psychological services. This is what we mean when we say America is a force for good in Lebanon.

In Iraq, where I was privileged to serve for 2 years as the Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargè d'Affaires, the demonstrations that swept Baghdad and the southern provinces in the last 2 months have exposed growing revulsion for Iraq's political elite by the rest of the population. Although exact numbers are debated, it is clear that hundreds of Iraqis have been killed and as many as 20,000 injured so far. What began as a wave of primarily Iraqi youth demanding the elimination of corruption and greater economic opportunity has transformed into a broader societal movement, with demonstrators spanning religious sect, gender, occupation, and generational lines. Like in Lebanon, these protests arose from popular discontent with endemic corruption and mismanagement, high unemployment, and poor delivery of basic services. The demonstrators want better from their leaders.

Not surprisingly, an important element of this movement has been rejection of Iran's corrupting influence, including anger at Iranian-supported political parties and armed groups. Iraqis increasingly view Iran as having coopted and exploited Iraq's political system, its economy, and its security at the expense of the Iraqi people, and this has clearly made Iran nervous. Thus far, Iran's public attempts to spin the narrative have been met with immediate scorn and mockery, and further lowering the regime's standing with the Iraqi people. At the same time, many protesters have rejected being painted as tools of American influence.

Although many protesters are too young to remember Saddam's tyranny, most are intimately familiar with the shortcomings of political elites that many believe the United States is responsible for bringing to power. We must acknowledge and respect the fact that what is occurring in Iraq is indigenous to it and reflects its citizens' needs and desires.

Like in Lebanon, we have called for the government to respect Iraqis' freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Their voices should be heard without fear of retribution or violence. We are deeply concerned by the killing, kidnapping and intimidation of protesters and civil rights leaders and have demanded that the government protect them and lift restrictions on all forms of media. We are working with our allies to echo this message, and we welcome efforts by the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) to assist with electoral reform, in accordance with its U.N. Security Council mandate.

As Secretary Pompeo has said, the United States welcomes any serious efforts to address the protesters' demands. But like in Lebanon, nothing will change until political leaders decide that government agencies should provide public services rather than serve as ATM machines for their parties. Until that happens, the people's demands for a clean and effective government will not be met, no matter who serves as Prime Minister or in Cabinet positions.

Meanwhile, we will remain a steadfast partner of the Iraqi people. With our International Coalition partners, we will continue to ensure that the Iraqi Security Forces can ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, which just 3 years ago occupied a third of the country. We will remain the country's largest humanitarian donor. Since 2014 alone, we have provided more than $2 billion in food, water, medicine, and shelter. We are the largest donor to stabilization, as well, rebuilding more than 500 schools, 100 health centers, and 50 water treatment plants, with many more projects coming soon. We are the largest donor to demining, having removed thousands of explosives hazards so people can return to their homes. This is what we mean when we say we are a force for good in Iraq.

Our relationship with Iraqis remains vital for U.S. national security interests and regional security, and bolstering Iraq as a sovereign, stable, united, and democratic partner of the United States, with a viable Kurdistan Region as a component of it, continues to be our principal objective.

If we see Iraqi leaders willing to address the demands of their people, we will join with UNAMI and others to support badly needed electoral and economic reforms. Whether we have partners among Iraqi leaders or not, Secretary Pompeo has said, we will not hesitate to use all the tools at our disposal, including designations under the Global Magnitsky Act, to sanction corrupt individuals who are stealing the public wealth of the Iraqi people and those killing and wounding peaceful protesters.

Together, the popular protests in Lebanon and Iraq show that people are finally fed up with the damage that corruption does to government's willingness and ability to provide the basic services that people need to live and thrive. In stark contrast to Iran, which uses corruption to create openings to extend its influence, we are offering a positive vision, a force for good willing to partner with those who want to unlock the potential of people across the region. We understand that a country is most successful when its people are secure, free, and prosperous.

We are committed to a vision of shared prosperity, regional and global security and stability, and lasting partnership with the people of Lebanon and Iraq.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Hood.

Now we will turn to questions. A couple of things. First of all, as we look at the protests that are going on, surely the state of the economy is one of the reasons for the anger on the part of, particularly, so many of the young protesters. That economy has been buffeted by the decline in tourism, by the fact that Syria next door is in turmoil. And apparently remittances from Lebanese workers working in Saudi Arabia or other places throughout the Middle East have declined precipitously.

Is there a realistic prospect of economic vitality that will meet the demands of these protesters?

Mr. HOOD. Yes, Senator, in a word. Lebanon is capable of much better economic performance. But we need to see major reforms. Some of these are quite simple. It is about literally picking up the trash. You were Governor of Massachusetts. You understand better than most probably what kind of services a government has to provide to meet the basic needs of its citizens. And it is just not happening in Lebanon. You will recall a couple of years ago maybe the "You Stink" protests over the trash collection problem. Some of these are basic fixes. They are not difficult to do. But the leaders have to be committed to that. And if they are not committed to basic and wide-ranging reform, then it does not really matter what faces they put in the government. It will be like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. So that is what we are pushing for, is real reform.

Senator ROMNEY. What kind of confidence do you have in the new leadership that is in Lebanon, and is there a capacity to really form a new government based upon your perspective?

Mr. HOOD. Right now there is not a new government. They are still in the caretaker mode. The president only just today I saw as I was coming in here called for binding negotiations between the parties for formation of a new government. There is no telling how long that is going to take. The last time they formed a government, it was 9 months. One would hope that with the pressure from the street they will have gotten the message that they need to act quickly and they need to act seriously on reform. And if they do—you mentioned in your opening remarks, Senator, that they have CEDRE funding of over $11 billion waiting to help, but there is no Western country that is going to jump in there and say we are going to bail you out this time once again even though you have not gotten the message from your people and even though you have not committed to reform.

Senator ROMNEY. As you know, Congress appropriated $105 million to support LAF and their effort there. Why was that held up?

Mr. HOOD. Senator, I cannot get into the internal deliberations. It is true that bureaucratic processes often work more slowly than we would like them to. I am daily frustrated with that myself. But what I can say is that no delivery of materiel, no assistance was delayed or prevented from going to the LAF because of these internal deliberations. The money has been approved for expenditure, and now we are in the process of what you normally do for FMF funding: letters of requests, letters of offer and assurance, and so forth.

Senator ROMNEY. Are you saying that the delay was due to bureaucratic processes as opposed to policymaking from the highest levels of our government?

Mr. HOOD. Yes, sir, internal deliberations, policy deliberations that often accompany big decisions like this.

Senator ROMNEY. I am told that we have about a minute—excuse me—about 4 minutes. So I am going to turn to Senator Kaine and let him ask some questions because I am going to be coming back.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Senator Murphy.

Just on that, so I get we are not asking about internal deliberations, but the funding was mandated by Congress.

Mr. HOOD. Yes, sir.

Senator KAINE. We are appropriators and we put it into an appropriations bill, and the President signed it. And so I think we are entitled to know the reason why it was held up. Internal deliberations are, what were the discussions of the pros and cons and the backs and forths. I am not interested in any of that. I want to know, was there a decision that was made in the White House to withhold these funds?

Mr. HOOD. Sir, I would refer you to the White House for what White House thinking is. But in terms of——

Senator KAINE. Let me ask you it this way. Are you aware of whether there was a decision at the White House to withhold the funds?

Mr. HOOD. I am not aware of that decision. What I am aware of is that there was lots of robust discussion about this before I arrived in my job and afterwards.

Senator KAINE. Was the discussion about whether we would ignore Congress? Or what was the discussion about?

Mr. HOOD. No, sir.

Senator KAINE. So when Congress mandates it, what is the deliberation past that point?

Mr. HOOD. We need to make sure that what we are providing and how we are providing it is not only in line with congressional appropriations but also with the best stewardship of taxpayer money.

Senator KAINE. Were there concerns about Lebanon's stewardship of these dollars, and what were those concerns?

Mr. HOOD. Senator, that is one of the things that we always deliberate before we undertake assistance programs. We need to make sure that military units, for example——

Senator KAINE. But in this particular case, you are saying that one of the reasons for the delay was particular concerns about the LAF and their use of these funds?

Mr. HOOD. No, sir. I do not want my comments to be construed that way. It is just that in general when we talk about providing assistance to any other country, we have all sorts of discussions about making sure that——

Senator KAINE. Do you know whether the timing of the release of the funds was dictated by the State Department or by the White House or by the DOD?

Mr. HOOD. Sir, that is internal deliberations that I cannot get into, unfortunately.

Senator KAINE. So you know the answer to the question, but you do not want to testify to it?

Mr. HOOD. I would not say that either, but I cannot get into the internal deliberations of how we are making the sausage on this or any other particular decision.

Senator KAINE. Yes. Again, I am going to ask it for the record, too, because we are not asking you about internal deliberations of something that is on your side of the aisle. When we specify that the dollars shall be spent in this way, and then we have to find out in the newspaper that the administration is withholding the dollars against our mandate, you can understand the concern that we have.

One other question. You talked about the administration's willingness to use the Global Magnitsky Act, and you have used it in some instances. But this committee sent a letter to the administration about the Global Magnitsky Act and the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia with respect to the murder of Virginia resident, Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The administration refused to answer the question that the Global Magnitsky Act requires: was this individual culpable in a human rights violation? Do you have any knowledge about why the administration refused to answer the question that the Global Magnitsky Act required an answer for?

Mr. HOOD. Well, Senator, we certainly share your concerns over that horrible murder. But I do not have a specific answer for you on that today. I can assure you that we have held accountable more than 100 people so far in that——

Senator KAINE. Do you know whether there are any ongoing efforts still to determine whether the Crown Prince was culpable in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi? Is that matter a closed matter as far as the State Department is concerned?

Mr. HOOD. As far as I know, Senator, we are not holding any individual outside the scope of who we would hold accountable for this.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Senator ROMNEY. We are going to take a break right now. We will be back in approximately 10 minutes. So it is a 10-minute break. Thank you.

[Recess.]

Senator ROMNEY. Mr. Hood, thank you for remaining here. We are back in session and I am going to turn to Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Let me just, if I could, complete the series of questions you were getting from Senator Kaine about the rationale for the hold. As you know, the reason that we are concerned and inquiring about the hold on funding for the Lebanese military is that it had an impact. It is true that the aid is now flowing, but remember, we are outside the bounds of the fiscal year. We are in the next fiscal year and we are operating on a continuing resolution. But we went effectively into overtime before this funding was released, and people on the ground in Lebanon noticed. It had an impact even though the funding was eventually released because, at the very moment that the LAF was literally standing in between peaceful protesters and Hezbollah, there were stories circulating in the press about the fact that the United States was perhaps going to walk away from our funding commitment to them at the very moment that they were advertising to the world how different they were than the other militaries in the region.

So I hope the administration knows that when it holds funding, whether it be for policy reasons, which I think we can agree are not allowable if those policies are not articulated in the statute or for bureaucratic reasons, it has an effect.

But let me just get back to that fine point. I mean, you would agree that the administration cannot attach conditions to funding, policy conditions to funding that are not in the underlying statute. I understand what you said. You need to make sure that the money is going to the right place, but it is Congress that decides whether there are going to be policy conditions on funding, whether it be to Lebanon or any other country. Is that not correct?

Mr. HOOD. Thank you, Senator.

Yes. We have not attached any policy conditions on this funding and no expenditures or deliveries or purchases of military materiel were delayed. So we explained to Lebanese officials that this was just part of our internal process. We remain committed to our longstanding partnership with them. As I said earlier, no one working in the bureaucracy is happy with the speed at which we do things, but, in this case, the delay was not related to anything having to do with the protests. The Lebanese armed forces, as you said, have shown themselves to be a model for security forces in region with how well they have done to protect the peaceful protesters and how few incidents they have been involved in that have to be followed

up on. We believe strongly that strengthening the capacity of the LAF is critical to securing Lebanon's borders, defending its sovereignty, and preserving its stability. And so that is why we all made sure as an interagency that nothing was delayed, no expenditures, no purchases, no deliveries. And as I said, the funding has been approved.

Senator MURPHY. So thank you for that statement in support of our continued partnership and training with the LAF. You would agree that they have made remarkable progress over the course of the last decade in improving their ability to provide security for the people of Lebanon and securing the borders, something that was not done by the Lebanese military only a short time ago. You would assess that they have made tremendous progress in terms of professionalization and capability.

Mr. HOOD. That is right, Senator, largely due to our assistance. Just a little over a decade ago, it was the Syrian military that was on the borders of Lebanon. Now it is the Lebanese armed forces. We have not seen a substantial ISIS presence in Lebanon even though there was one directly over the border because of the professionalism and the capability of the Lebanese armed forces. They have coordinated with us on a number of counterterrorism operations that have taken down a number of plots that were not able to see their way to fruition. And as I pointed out again earlier—and it bears emphasizing—their role in protecting the peaceful protesters from Hezbollah thugs and Amal thugs has been absolutely extraordinary.

Senator MURPHY. And last question on this topic. What would be the impact if the capabilities of the LAF were severely curtailed? Hezbollah's claim is that they are the only legitimate defender of the people of Lebanon, and every day and week that the LAF becomes more capable of defending the country, my impression is that it is a blow to Hezbollah's arguments that only they can be trusted with defending the security of that nation. My impression, especially having spent some time on the ground there, is that if the LAF is weakened, then it accrues to the benefit of Hezbollah. They seem to be the counterweight.

Mr. HOOD. You have got it absolutely right, Senator. Let us enter your remarks as my answer to your remarks.

No. You are exactly right. And you see people out in the streets right now who are starting to say, well, look, we do have a pretty good army. We do have a nonsectarian, non-ideological, pan-Lebanese institution that is doing a really good job defending us and our rights to raise our voices. And so the more that that happens, the less legitimate are Hezbollah's arguments for having their own armed force right alongside the legitimate institutions of the state.

Senator MURPHY. Let me turn to Iraq. What level of detail can you provide to the committee about the drawdown of diplomatic presence in Baghdad? The reports that I stated at the outset suggest that there are perhaps six USAID staffers and maybe over a dozen diplomats. What is our diplomatic and USAID presence today in Baghdad, and how does that compare to what it was perhaps when you showed up on the ground there several years ago?

Mr. HOOD. Sir, primarily for security reasons, we do not get into discussions of specific numbers. But I have personally come up and

briefed staff members of the SFRC and the SASC folk, and I would be willing to do so again in as much detail as they would like.

But we believe that the numbers that we have now are exactly what we need, no more or no less, to get the mission accomplished. And that is something that we worked, and I personally worked very hard on before I left, to get those numbers right. We are always reviewing our numbers, weighing security risks, weighing what the mission is before us in every high threat post, but especially in Iraq. But to emphasize again, we believe that we have got exactly the right number there that we need to get the mission done. And they are doing a tremendous job under Ambassador Tueller's leadership, having lots and lots of meetings with Iraqis from across the spectrum, including those in Tahrir Square, and they are sending lots of good reporting back to us.

I would like to welcome my Senator, Senator Shaheen.

Senator MURPHY. Okay. So I will take your reservation for sharing numbers with us in open session. But as you know, Iraq has always been a very dangerous post, and we are so thankful for both the military and diplomatic personnel who are willing to put their lives at risk by serving in a place where you are constantly under threat of attack. But it is a little hard to sort of accept as the rationale for the drawdown the security risk given the fact that I think we can all agree that the security risk was probably much higher during a time in which we were in active combat in large parts of the country and large parts of the capital city. And yet we managed to have thousands of personnel there. And maybe it is coincidental that the political and security situation has unraveled in Iraq at the exact same moment that our diplomatic drawdown has happened, but maybe it is not. Maybe the fact that we do not have the personnel there that we used to in order to go out and try to convince our friends to make the right decisions when encountering difficulty is in fact correlated.

And so, again, I understand you cannot share with us the intel on the security threats, but is it not true that Iraq has always been a place where there was threat of attack against diplomatic personnel and we were able to manage that threat because we thought it was so important to have hundreds of diplomats rather than a handful of diplomats? If we could do it in 2006 and 2007, why can we not manage that security risk today?

Mr. HOOD. Well, Senator, a few points on that. Compared to 2006 and 2007, we had probably 150,000 American troops in the country, which is a very different story than today. We, from time to time, review our numbers and our capabilities and our mission set in front of us, and that is what we did in Iraq. And we believe that we have got the right mix of people there now.

I would invite you to visit again. I know all three of you on the committee right now have been out there this year, and I think it is just invaluable to have you out there to help brief you on these things in detail. I can say the Ambassador and his team are as active as ever. They are just making even more meetings than ever before and having just as much an impact as ever before. So I think that their capability is there, and if he were to ask us for more capabilities in this area or that area, we certainly would not be in a position to say no.

Senator MURPHY. Well, let me just submit that I disagree with you. I do not think you can cover the panoply of threats in that country presented to us and to our allies with the numbers that you have. I do think there is a correlation between the two.

And the last comment I will make before turning it over is that I accept your invitation. I thank you for how hard you worked to make Senator Romney's and my visit productive. But I will also say it has never been harder than today for Members of the Senate or Congress to visit Iraq. This administration is making it very difficult for Members to get there and do the kind of oversight that we would like. When we were there, we were able to see our diplomatic personnel, but we were not able to go and visit our military personnel. And I have heard from other Members expressing the same frustration with our ability to see how our taxpayer dollars are being spent there. And, again, I am speaking above your pay grade, but I just think it is important to state for the record that many Members of the Congress would like to be there, would like to accept that invitation but find it often hard to do so given some of the constraints. But I appreciate the invitation.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, Mr. Hood, it is very nice to have you here. Thank you for your service and for being such a great host when Senator Reed and I visited Iraq and Senator Jones. And we are very proud of your service in New Hampshire and are glad you are where you are.

I appreciate your pointing out in your opening remarks the situation of Amer Fakhoury who, as you know, is a constituent of mine from New Hampshire and an American citizen who has been illegally detained in Lebanon since September the 12th. He is currently hospitalized and is in very serious medical condition.

Would you agree that a country or official that imprisons an innocent individual without charge for months on end and does not allow the prisoner any appropriate due process to prove their innocence is committing a human rights violation?

Mr. HOOD. Thank you for the question, Senator Shaheen.

We have no higher calling than to protect American citizens living and traveling overseas. Every day the U.S. embassy team in Beirut is working very hard to secure the release of the unjustly detained Amer Fakhoury. They last visited him just today and gave me a report that I will share with you, if we have time, afterwards. And I spoke with Ambassador Richard as well on the phone earlier today. She follows the case daily in a very personal way.

Anyone in New Hampshire's seacoast region who loves Middle Eastern food, as I do, is a fan of Little Lebanon To-Go, and I know that Mr. Fakhoury's customers miss him. His family misses him. And we hope to see him come home very, very soon.

You are absolutely right that there are grave concerns about the process and the way he is being treated, but we are making this our absolute highest priority at the embassy and here at the State Department.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, thank you. I appreciate that. And I very much appreciate all the assistance from Ambassador Richard. And

I have spoken with Deputy Secretary Sullivan. I know that at the highest levels of our State Department people have been concerned about Mr. Fakhoury. I believe that if he dies in the custody of Lebanese officials, that Lebanon should be subject to sanctions under section 703(1)(c) of the State Department and Foreign Operations Act, which states—and I quote—"any officials of foreign governments and their immediate family members about whom the Secretary of State has credible information have been involved in a gross violation of human rights shall be ineligible for entry into the United States." I think this is a very serious situation that has not been taken seriously by the officials of the Lebanese Government, and they need to be on notice that we are looking very carefully and closely at what they are doing.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to enter into the record documents that have been provided by Mr. Fakhoury's lawyer that clearly indicate that he is not the individual that the Lebanese and Hezbollah-linked papers allege him to be.

[The information referred to follows:]

[The information referred to above is located at the end of the hearing.]

Senator SHAHEEN. Mr. Hood, I look forward to working with you, with Ambassador Richard, with Secretary Pompeo and continuing to do everything we can to ensure that Mr. Fakhoury gets back home. Again, I think his health is very critical, and we do not want a situation where he dies in Lebanese custody. That would not be good obviously for Lebanon, for the United States, and it would be a tragedy for Mr. Fakhoury and his family.

Mr. HOOD. Hear, hear.

Senator SHAHEEN. Mr. Chairman, so I want to go to some of the other concerns that Lebanon is confronting right now with unrest because one of the things that I think we are seeing is that Hezbollah and Iran view the protests in Lebanon as a threat to their influence within the country, and the reports that I have seen suggest that the Lebanese people are very concerned about what Hezbollah is doing there and the continued corruption that they are seeing in the country, and that there will be efforts on the part of Hezbollah to influence any new cabinet and government that is formed.

So can you talk about what we are doing to try to address the Iranian and Hezbollah influence in Lebanon as they look to form a new government?

Mr. HOOD. Well, Senator, as I said in my opening statement, we view Iran's role in both of these countries as very unhelpful, and the people agree with that assessment. We think one of the major ways that we can try to diminish that is through our maximum pressure campaign, which is denying the regime in Tehran the revenues that it used to have to fund groups like Hezbollah and Kata'ib Hezballah and the Houthis and others. For the first time ever recently, Hassan Nasrallah had to go on TV and do a telethon to try to get donations for Hezbollah. That is a sign that the decreasing revenues in Tehran are having an effect on his funding. And that is, I think, a very appropriate use of the power of our financial system, the power of our sanctions.

We are also using our bully pulpit. We are calling out this activity, and we are naming and shaming. We are using the legislative authorities that we have to sanction individuals. Something like more than 1,000 individuals and organizations just in the past couple of years we have sanctioned with regard to Iran and its malign activities throughout the region.

So this is obviously having an effect on the pocketbook, and the people themselves are standing up and saying, you know, I know how life looks on the outside. I know what people in the United Arab Emirates live like, for example. I do not have to live like this. I do not have to live under this sort of condition. And I think they are gaining inspiration as well from each other and from the protests in Iran, which we have not talked about but which have been just as terrible in terms of their repression and possibly more. We cannot know exactly how many people have been killed there because of the throttling of the Internet and the regime keeping such a blackout, but it is clear that it is bad what is going on there.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, I am glad that you mentioned that because, again, the news reports suggest that these are the worst protests in Iran since 1979 and that close to 800 people, that we know about, have been killed by the regime.

Are there ways in which we can try and address the Iranian people who are being repressed such that they understand that there is an interest in seeing that they have some opportunities in the future to ultimately get out from under the current leadership?

Mr. HOOD. Absolutely, Senator. The Secretary, the President have been very clear in standing with the Iranian people who are, we should not forget, the longest suffering victims of this regime. We are committed to promoting accountability. I have talked about the sanctions that we have levied. We will continue to make public statements not just from our own podium but from cooperation in U.N. forums to strengthen the international community's resolve.

And we do see that, whatever our disagreements may be on policy approaches, the Europeans are taking some similar steps. Denmark and France and the Netherlands went to the European Union to get sanctions levied on the Iranians for assassination plots that had taken place in their countries. France, Germany, and Britain came out and condemned the September 14th missile attacks on Saudi Arabia.

So we have to be careful not to try to portray these protests as pro-American. I think they are pro-Iranian. They are nationalists. They want to be living like normal people. And we hold out a great hope as a force for good, as I talked about earlier, for countries like Iran, Iraq, Lebanon. We have got a $22 trillion economy. We have got a lot of private investment that could go forward. We have got a lot of programs and assistance that we could provide if they are just ready to start acting like a normal government again. And that is the hope that we hold out.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Senator.

I am going to ask a couple of questions. Then I am going to leave and Senator Murphy is going to ask questions, and then he is going to gavel us out. He may never gavel you out, but we will see.

A couple of things. Turning to Iraq and the protests there, what is the administration's posture with regards to the protesters in Iraq? Are we supportive of their effort? Are we helping the protesters? Are we opposed to the protesters? Or exactly what is our posture with regards to what is happening in Iraq?

And I say that because, when we there with you some months ago, there was a perspective that given energy shortages and likely power blackouts, that there would be protests during the summer. But I do not think there was any indication at that time that protests would be going on through November, that hundreds of people would be killed, and that there was no end in sight to these protests. So it has, obviously, taken on a different character than what we were thinking about, or at least the Government of Iraq was thinking about, when we were there.

What is your perspective, and what is the impetus for these protests? And what is our national policy with regards to them?

Mr. HOOD. Well, Senator, we absolutely support the protesters' right to peacefully demonstrate and express themselves. We also strongly support and have talked about this many times at the highest levels from Secretary Pompeo on down.

We think that they have a right to free media. As you may have seen, the government shut down nine television stations last week. There have been mysterious third parties that have raided media headquarters and that have harassed reporters and other journalists. And we are calling this out at every opportunity.

We again, like in Lebanon, have to be careful not to portray these protesters as pro-American because they do not want to be. They want to be seen as Iraqis first and foremost. So we extend to them this offer of being a force for good, a partnership with leaders that they want to see, we think, just like we do in putting in place reforms that would allow the economy to open up and grow and for people to get meaningful jobs and for the government to just do its job providing services.

So we have been calling for all of this at the highest levels, making it clear to them that we support their legitimate rights and calling out the government and individuals, both privately and publicly, when we see that they are not holding up those rights. We will hold accountable those individuals over time as we find out who is responsible for killing and wounding the protesters, and we will continue to do that. But we do hope that soon we will get partners in the Iraqi Government, throughout the Iraqi Government, that are willing to work with us on real reform.

Senator ROMNEY. There are some conflicting reports about who it is that has been killing protesters. Some have indicated that perhaps Iranian sharp shooters have done so. Others, of course, point to the Iraqi military itself. Do you have any perspective on who might be responsible at this stage for the hundreds of deaths that have been reported?

Mr. HOOD. Yes, sir, and no, sir. Yes, in the sense that there have been Iraqi military leaders and units implicated, such as in the deaths of upwards of 40 people in Nasiriya last weekend. That general, as I understand it, has been arrested and brought up on charges.

But there are many other cases where it is not entirely clear who is doing what. Some of the Iranian-supported proxies in Iraq are very good at hiding their affiliations. You see them in black uniforms with no insignia in the videos. But Secretary Pompeo and Special Representative Hook have called for Iraqis to share with us the videos and pictures that they have so that we can go through those, and we can try to help identify those people and hold them accountable even if Iraqi Government leaders now or in the future do not want to.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you. I am going to ask Senator Cruz to take over and ask any questions he might have. I need to go vote, and I hope to see you again soon.

Mr. HOOD. I hope you will be back, Senator.

Senator CRUZ [presiding]. Well, thank you, Mr. Hood, and thank you for your testimony. Thank you for being here.

Let us start by talking about Lebanon. Over the past decade, the United States has spent over $2 billion in aid to the Government of Lebanon and specifically to the Lebanese armed forces. According to Congress, the goal of funding the Lebanese army is so that the army can meet its obligations under U.N. Security Council resolution 1701 to disarm Hezbollah. According to the administration, the goal of supporting the government is to build a free, democratic, U.S.-oriented governmental institution in Lebanon.

But by any measure, our policy is failing right now. Lebanon's government institutions have disintegrated. The ministries that are still running are marked by endemic corruption, and Hezbollah has amassed over 100,000 rockets and missiles pointed at Israel and regularly moves personnel and weapons into Syria. Hezbollah functionally runs major ports and parts of Beirut's international airport.

I have a couple questions I want to ask. Number one, Congress has authorized the administration to distribute security assistance to the Lebanese armed forces so that they can meet their obligations under U.N. Security Council resolution 1701 to disarm groups south of the Litani River, by which the resolution meant Hezbollah. What percent of our security assistance to the army has gone to disarming Hezbollah in recent years?

Mr. HOOD. Thank you, Senator, for the question.

We think that we would disagree with your assessment that our policy is failing, especially when it comes to the Lebanese armed forces. I think we see that no more starkly than in the streets as we speak, where the LAF is regularly getting in between Hezbollah thugs and Amal thugs and the peaceful protesters and protecting them. We see the people raising their voices, Shia for the first time saying, Hezbollah is not what I want. I want the Lebanese armed forces. I want something that is nonsectarian, non-ideological, pan-Lebanese, something that is responsive to our elected leaders and not what we see with Hezbollah and its armed wings.

So I think that we are actually seeing a Lebanese armed forces that is coming into its own now vis-à-vis Hezbollah. It is a political decision in that country as to whether they want to send that army into direct combat with Hezbollah. It is not our decision. I can understand, however, that the Lebanese, after so many years of bloody civil war want to try to resolve this problem as peacefully

as they can. They probably understand better, as well as anyone, the challenge that they face in doing that.

So our best approach is to make sure that the LAF remains strong and becomes even stronger in the face of Hezbollah, which is now backed into a corner with its revenues going down because Tehran is squeezed for funding, and with the people out in the street saying, this is not what we want to see anymore.

Senator CRUZ. I want to make sure I understand your testimony. You view and the administration views Lebanon as a success story?

Mr. HOOD. We view the Lebanese armed forces and our investment in it as a succeeding investment. We are not there yet, but it is money that is, so far, well spent. If you look back a little over a decade, it was the Syrians that were on the border of Lebanon. Now it is the Lebanese armed forces. They regularly go into the Beqaa Valley. They conduct operations. They do not answer to the orders of Hezbollah. And they are growing in their capacity. So I would say that investment is a success.

Senator CRUZ. Well, let me go back to my initial question, which you did not answer. What percent of our security assistance to the army has actually gone to disarming Hezbollah in recent years?

Mr. HOOD. Senator, I am not aware that the Lebanese Government has directed the armed forces to go and disarm Hezbollah. That is a decision for them to make and not for us.

Senator CRUZ. So we do not have any say on what happens with Hezbollah? There is no U.S. policy on Hezbollah. Is that what you are saying?

Mr. HOOD. There is absolutely a U.S. policy on Hezbollah. We are taking every measure that we can to squeeze its funding out by our maximum pressure campaign on the regime in Tehran and designating individuals and institutions, such as the Jammal Trust Bank, that have any role in moving people or money on behalf of Hezbollah, and we see that this is having a real effect. But the biggest effect——

Senator CRUZ. But am I understanding your testimony correctly that right now none of our funds are going to disarming Hezbollah?

Mr. HOOD. I would say, Senator, that that is not a decision for us to take on behalf of the Lebanese Government, but——

Senator CRUZ. How many billions of dollars have we given them? At some point we get to make some decisions when we are writing really big checks.

Mr. HOOD. As I was reminded earlier, policy conditions on assistance are the domain of Congress. So I will leave that to you.

Senator CRUZ. But apparently you are telling me the administration's policy is to be agnostic whether they are combating Hezbollah, whether they are funding Hezbollah, whether they are in bed with Hezbollah. Are you telling me the administration has no views? It is just, hey, whatever floats your boat?

Mr. HOOD. No, Senator. What I am saying is we think we are making strategic investments in this nonsectarian, non-ideological, highly effective security force and that we need to continue doing that because the strategy is working. We have got people out in the streets right now saying this is the security force we want to see. This is the legitimate face of the Lebanese Government, not Hezbollah. And I think that is where we all want to be.

Senator CRUZ. What would you say is the role of Hezbollah right now within the LAF and within the governmental institutions such as they exist in Lebanon?

Mr. HOOD. Senator, I would say the role is they are trying to maintain the status quo. They want to maintain a corrupt system over which they have great influence so that they can use ministries as a source of revenue rather than a way to provide services to the people. And so I think that is what the people are reacting to and they are saying no more. This is not what our government is supposed to be. And I think they would like to have influence over the Lebanese armed forces. They are not. That is why, in October, you saw the LAF get in front of a bunch of Hezbollah thugs on motorcycles and say you are not coming in here to terrorize the protesters. We saw it again just a couple of weeks ago where they did the same thing. They got in between the Hezbollah thugs and the protesters and said this is not happening today.

Senator CRUZ. Well, let me be clear on something. You referenced our maximum pressure campaign on Iran, and I am a vocal proponent of maximum pressure meaning maximum pressure on Iran. At the same time and for the same reasons, in Lebanon and elsewhere, we should not be funding and we should not be supporting people who want to kill us, and Hezbollah falls into that camp of people who want to kill us and kill our friends and allies. And so let me encourage the administration to focus on those core priorities more than I fear you are doing now.

Mr. HOOD. Let me assure you, Senator, that our commitment to the security of friends in the Middle East, especially the State of Israel, is unshakeable, and we will continue to work with them and with others to make sure that the Iranians are not able to carry out their agenda without costs anywhere in the region.

Senator CRUZ. Senator Murphy?

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Senator Cruz.

I think we all share in the objective of lessening Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon and let me sort of restate in a different way a question I asked you earlier. It is the State Department's belief that helping to stand up the LAF as an independent, nonsectarian guarantor of security in Lebanon is a part of our strategy to decrease the influence of Hezbollah inside Lebanon.

Mr. HOOD. Yes, sir.

Senator MURPHY. I just have a couple additional questions to close out.

So there was a real sense, when I was on the ground there a week ago, that this crisis of leadership could not last much longer and that those nations that have typically stood by the side of Lebanon—the United States at the top of that list—needed to play a more active role in trying to help resolve it. There were reports you mentioned, literally as you were coming in to see us today, that there may be a pending breakthrough, a businessman who is being put forward as perhaps the next prime minister.

But what role do you think is appropriate for the United States and others to play in trying to help bring an end to this moment of political instability? And how confident are you that we are on the same page with other international players? It obviously worries many of us when we see the President departing in a huff from

a NATO summit at the way that he was treated by the exact allies that we are supposed to be talking to about how we land a very difficult political crisis in Lebanon. How confident are you that we are working in a multilateral way to try to help end this leadership crisis in a country that matters so much to our interests?

Mr. HOOD. Senator, I am very confident that we are working multilaterally in an effective way. In fact, Assistant Secretary Schenker is, right now, on a trip to consult with British counterparts. Last week he was in France and Italy doing the same thing with counterparts there. And we believe that they do share our goal of making sure that whatever government comes along next in Lebanon is not just a set of pretty faces but is a group that is entirely committed to real reform and is backed up by those sectarian leaders and others who have influence in the country, whether we like it or not, with a real commitment to reform because if they do not have that commitment, then it really does not matter who they put in what chair.

But what we are proposing, the way we are trying to help is not by saying pick this one and not that one, but by holding out that hand and saying we got a $22 trillion economy here. We have got a pretty robust assistance budget thanks to the Congress. We have got a lot of tools and levers that we can use to help a reform-minded government. And so take our hand. Take that $11 billion in CEDRE funding. Take the private investments that we would be able to advocate for if the environment allowed for it.

Senator MURPHY. One last question on Iraq, and I am sorry if this ground has been covered. Tell me if it has been. But we have spent $5 billion to train Iraqi security forces, and today we are spending about 3 or 4 times as much money on security assistance as we are in reconstruction, rebuilding, and economic aid, which I do not understand. I do not understand the justification for that division of funding.

But we now are seeing reports that it may be that U.S.-trained units were amongst those involved in the killing of around 400 civilian protesters. We need to make sure that our dollars are not going to security forces that are firing on peaceful protesters. What is being done about accountability for the decisions that were made to potentially turn U.S.-trained and U.S.-funded forces on protesters in Iraq?

Mr. HOOD. I appreciate that question, Senator, because we have a full-time staff dedicated to Leahy Law vetting to figure out exactly the answer to this question. And that person works 50–60 hours a week with other colleagues just on this very question. I am looking at one of the individuals that has been responsible for that right now sitting behind you, John Weadon. They do a tremendous job. It is a lot of hard work, a lot of slogging through the data, and making important decisions and recommendations. This is exactly the kind of oversight and policy deliberations I was trying to explain to Senator Kaine earlier that we go through for this sort of funding.

So rest assured we will take it very seriously. We are taking it very seriously, and we will make sure, as we have done in the past in Iraq and elsewhere, that any unit or leader that is implicated

in human rights abuses will be barred from our assistance through the Leahy Law.

Senator MURPHY. Well, this is a perilous moment, but it is a moment that also is flush with opportunity. These are protesters who are not seeking to increase the ideological divides and separation in the region. They are seeking to unite folks around a common set of good governance and economic demands. And I think you and those that work with you are doing a very, very good job amidst difficult circumstances.

But one of those circumstances is the person you work for, who is sending mixed messages every single day about whether we support or do not support these protesters. The idea that the President was asked whether we supported the protests in Iran and said that he did not want to get into it, but the answer was no, only to correct himself an hour later, makes your job and others' immensely, immensely difficult and sends a signal of mixed policy to the region that ultimately may mean that we miss this opportunity to support these, I think, very, very promising protest movements.

But thank you for the good work that you do.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator ROMNEY. [presiding]: Thank you, Senator Murphy.

Mr. Hood, I have just got a couple more questions for you.

One is what Iran's involvement is now with the protests in Iraq. I think the modus operandi of Iran in circumstances where there is turmoil is to step in and try and provide the, I will call it, help, with quotation marks around the word "help," that the government might be looking for. They might step in and try and take advantage of the circumstance to strengthen their hand with the government and to aid in repression of violence which they may be helping to stimulate in some respects.

What is our sense of their involvement in these protests occurring in Iraq today?

Mr. HOOD. Well, Senator, it is clear that they do not want things to change. This setup that they have got in Iraq now, where they have got proxy armed groups that also have political parties, that also have economic offices—you know, it is a pretty good deal for them. But the Iraqi people are standing up and saying no. This does not work for me anymore.

And so as I said earlier, we saw Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad just a few days ago meeting with political party leaders. This is completely abnormal for the special forces commander of some other country to swoop in and be caucusing with political party leaders in another country. It is up to those party leaders and Iraqis of all stripes to stand up and say this does not work for me anymore, and we see a substantial number of people doing that on the streets right now at great peril to their own lives, as you pointed out.

So we think that Iran is trying to play its usual role of unacceptable influence, but Iraqis are pushing back. And what remains to be seen now is how Iraqi leaders will respond to that malign influence. So far it does not seem that they are entirely getting the message from the street, but we hope that they do.

Senator ROMNEY. Well, given the extent of our financial and personnel commitment to their country, you would anticipate that we

could have some influence about whether or not they are going to be influenced by an individual from Iran of that nature and indicating to them that that kind of behavior is unacceptable, that kind of involvement and participation with them is unacceptable to us, and that our continuing support relies upon them being an independent nation but not being one that is under the thumb of Iran and its most malign influence.

One more simple question, which is when we were last there, we spoke about the fact that Iraq was flaring billions of dollars of natural gas a year. Here we are sending billions of dollars. They are flaring natural gas worth billions of dollars. At that time—this was in May—they said they were at the cusp of signing an agreement with a major corporation to make the technology investments necessary to capture the value of that natural gas. Has that contract been signed, and if not, why the heck not?

Mr. HOOD. No, sir, it has not been. And that is exactly our question every single day. We continued to get those messages right up until the time the prime minister resigned. But the fact of the matter is it has not been signed, and we continue to push and we would like to see negotiations restarted. The fact of the matter is my children breathed the fumes from that flared gas just across the border in Kuwait for 5 years. We feel it more acutely than probably just about any other American. But the real people who suffer here are the Iraqis from all that money that is burned off into the atmosphere so that they can then purchases electricity from Iran? This is nuts. It is like carrying coals to Newcastle.

So we have got the companies that are ready to do that work, and they are ready to do it in a very transparent, non-corrupt way, which is I think part of why it is a challenge to get this thing signed because, up until now, a lot of party leaders and their Iranian backers have not wanted to see a non-corrupt, very transparent deal be put in place for the benefit of the Iraqi people. That is not what they are working for. A lot of these guys are working for their own benefit and the benefit of Iran.

Senator ROMNEY. It strikes me that the administration has been effective from time to time employing our leverage where we have it, such as on the Chinese for instance, and saying, hey, we got leverage on you. You want access to our markets. We are going to put some tariffs on your products to get you to do some things that are important to us. That philosophy may want to be employed as we deal with Iraqi leadership with regard to them solving, whether it is with an American company or some other company that has the technology to take advantage of that natural gas, to say, guys, we are not going to keep funding at this level perhaps or we are not going to keep making the investments we are making if you do not get something done on this in a hurry. And I would imagine that that would also be related to the involvement of Iran and its malign actors in the affairs of Iraq.

Mr. Hood, thank you for being with us today. It is good to see you again. I appreciate your perspectives and help.

And until next time, this hearing is adjourned.

[Pause.]

Senator ROMNEY. So let me read the other things I am supposed to say at the very end here. So we will open for just a moment. I

know I have a script, which is in here somewhere. There it is. We will get to it. I am supposed to keep the record open. There we go.

Thank you for our witness.

And for the information of members, the record will remain open until the close of business on Friday, including for members to submit questions for the record.

And with the thanks of the committee, the hearing is now adjourned again.

[Whereupon, at 4:05 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSE OF HON. JOEY HOOD TO QUESTION SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TED CRUZ

Question. Does the State Department assess that it would be in America's national security interest to provide money to the Government of Lebanon even if that government was controlled or unduly influenced by Hezbollah?

Answer. The U.S. government works assiduously to prevent the use of U.S. government funds from benefitting individuals or entities associated with terrorist groups, particularly Hezbollah. U.S. foreign assistance to Lebanon aims to counter Hezbollah's narrative and influence and build the institutions of the Lebanese State. U.S. economic aid is not provided directly to the Lebanese government, but implemented through NGOs and international organizations. U.S. security assistance provides training and equipment to the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces to build capable and committed partner forces for the United States.

Question. What percent of U.S. assistance to Lebanon was used for activities or operations aimed at disarming Hezbollah in 2019? A rough estimate or a range will be sufficient.

Answer. U.S. military assistance to the LAF does not focus on direct disarmament, but rather focuses on developing the LAF as an institutional counterweight to Hezbollah's influence and freedom of action. Since 2006, the United States has provided over $2 billion in security assistance to the LAF and ISF. U.S. assistance to the LAF has helped it to increase its ability to act as the exclusive legitimate defender of Lebanon's sovereignty, enabling it to defend Lebanon from violent extremist organizations, including ISIS.

Question. What percent of U.S. assistance to Lebanon was used for activities or operations aimed at disrupting Hezbollah activities short of disarming them in 2019, e.g. through roadblocks? A rough estimate or a range will be sufficient.

Answer. With complementary diplomatic efforts, the entirety of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon since 2006 has been an integral part of the Department's strategy to support state institutions and security agencies in order to bolster stability and counter Hezbollah's malign influence in Lebanon and in the region. Over the past several months, the LAF has undertaken a series of security actions, including maintaining security cordons and roadblocks, that have prevented or deterred Hezbollah from intimidating or harming peaceful protesters.

Question. You testified on December 4 that funding the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) bolsters American national security because it helps to dissolve Hezbollah's narrative that they are the only legitimate defender of the people of Lebanon. Please describe: Which parts of Hezbollah's narrative have been dissolved due to U.S. assistance since 2006? Which parts of Hezbollah's narrative remain to be dissolved? According to State Department assessments, how much more assistance from the U.S. will be necessary to dissolve these remaining parts of Hezbollah's narrative?

Answer. According to a December 2019 GAO Report, the LAF's border security and counterterrorism capabilities notably improved from 2013 to 2018, undercutting Hezbollah's long-standing, disingenuous claim that state institutions are not sufficient to protect Lebanon. With the support of U.S. training and equipment, the LAF has defeated ISIS in Lebanon, reasserted control over Lebanese territory along its border with Syria, and increased its presence in southern Lebanon in support of UNIFIL. These improvements undercut Hezbollah's unfounded argument that its weapons are necessary to protect Lebanon's sovereignty. During the recent protests, the LAF helped contain the violence and protect protestors.

Question. You testified on December 4 that the LAF hasn't moved to disarm Hezbollah pursuant to their obligations under U.N. Security Council resolution 1701 because the Government of Lebanon has not directed them to do so. You added that it is a decision for them to make. Please describe: Why hasn't the Government ordered the LAF to disarm Hezbollah? The degree to which the LAF is under the authority of Lebanon's civilian government. The degree to which the LAF is independent of Lebanon's civilian government.

Answer. The LAF's leadership acts to fulfill its mission under the guidance of Lebanon's civilian leadership. It is unlikely the LAF, which responds to the civilian authorities in Lebanon, would be ordered to disarm Hezbollah by force.

Question. Please describe the degree to which Hezbollah exercises influence or control over the Beirut–Rafic Hariri International Airport or facilities located within the airport.

Answer. The United States government is concerned about Hezbollah's influence at ports of entry into Lebanon, including at the airport. As U.S. Treasury Assistant Secretary Marshall Billingslea stated publicly last September, Hezbollah "engages in a wide range of illicit business activities in Lebanon, [that are] well outside the financial sector," including, he said, "the abuse of the airport and the seaports."

Question. Please describe the degree to which Hezbollah exercises influence or control over the Port of Beirut or facilities located within the port.

Answer. The influence Hezbollah exerts over ports of entry remains of considerable concern and denies the Lebanese people the benefit of customs revenue, significant given the large budget deficits Lebanon continue to face. In order to combat Hezbollah's influence, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated under Executive Order 13224 Hezbollah security official Wafiq Safa for acting for or on behalf of Hezbollah. As head of Hezbollah's security apparatus, Safa exploited Lebanon's ports and border crossings to smuggle contraband, facilitate Hezbollah travel, and facilitate the passage of illegal drugs and weapons into the seaport of Beirut, routing certain shipments to avoid scrutiny.

Question. Hanin Ghaddar, an expert on Lebanon from The Washington Institute for Near East Politics, testified to Congress in November that should the U.S. fail to cover the salaries of LAF soldiers, those soldiers may be unable to prevent Hezbollah from seizing U.S. weapons: Has the State Department conducted an assessment regarding the likelihood of such scenarios? What measures has the State Department taken to ensure that weapons we've provided to Lebanon do not fall into Hezbollah's hands, whether or not we pay for LAF salaries? Have you briefed the relevant committees of jurisdiction on those contingencies, and if so, at what level?

Answer. The Department of State and USAID work assiduously to prevent the use of U.S. government funds from benefitting individuals or entities associated with terrorist groups, particularly Hezbollah. The LAF places a high priority on maintaining its exemplary track record with U.S. government-provided equipment and fully complies with end-use monitoring requirements that mitigate the risk of any assistance being diverted to Hezbollah. We assess that given the LAF's strong track record, it will continue to execute its mandate effectively.

Question. How many operations against ISIS did the LAF conduct in 2019?

Answer. In 2019, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) facilitated the arrests of approximately 25 individuals associated with ISIS, including individuals who carried out terrorist attacks in Lebanon and those planning attacks. The Department can provide more detailed information on LAF operations in a classified setting.

AMER FAKHOURY'S LEGAL TEAM DOCUMENT SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEANNE SHAHEEN

AMER FAKHOURY: A GRAVELY ILL AMERICAN CITIZEN ILLEGALLY DETAINED IN LEBANON

(Information Compiled by the Legal Team of Amer Fakhoury)

Amer Fakhoury is an American citizen who, in contravention of Lebanese and international law, has been detained without charges in Lebanon since September 12, 2019. He is gravely ill and requires urgent medical treatment in the United States. His family, lawyers, and the U.S. Government are urging the Lebanese Government to release him on humanitarian grounds.

BACKGROUND

Amer grew up in Marjeyoun, in the south of Lebanon. In 1983, he joined the Southern Lebanese Army (SLA). He was assigned to Khiam Prison from 1989 to 1996. He was never involved in the interrogation or torture of prisoners. In 1996 he left the SLA, after advocating for an end to the occupation. He started a building materials business. When the occupation ended in May of 2000, those who had served with the SLA, including Amer, received credible death threats. Amer fled Lebanon, through Israel, for his safety as well as the safety of his family—eventually settling in the United States. He traveled on "laissez-passer" documents. He never held an Israeli passport. After arriving in the United States, Amer did not cross the Atlantic until he returned to Lebanon in September of 2019. Amer is a United States citizen.

PRIOR TO HIS ARRIVAL IN LEBANON IN SEPTEMBER, THERE WERE NO PENDING CASES, CHARGES OR ACCUSATIONS AGAINST AMER

Over the last three decades Khiam prison and the SLA have been investigated and documented exhaustively by journalists, international organizations, NGOs, political groups, and agencies of the Lebanese Government. In 2018, a 1996 collaboration charge and conviction against Amer officially was dismissed under Article 163 of the Lebanese penal code. As such, under Lebanese law, he cannot be charged with this crime again. Despite all of the investigations and the coverage of Khiam Prison, no other charges or accusations, official or unofficial, were lodged against Amer.

In fact, in August of 2018, Amer received official acknowledgement, in writing, that there were no accusations against him in Lebanon from: 1) the Military Tribunal; 2) the General Directorate of General Security and the Ministry of Justice; 3) the Internal Security Forces in the form of Attestation of no Legal Pursuits; and 4) the Internal Security Forces in the form of the standard Record of No Conviction.

In September 2018, Amer met a senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [1] at an event at the Our Lady of the Cedars of Lebanon Church in Boston, Massachusetts. Amer told this official about his background, and that he had received legal clearance from the Lebanese Government. The official told Amer to send his complete file to the embassy and that he would have his subordinates check to assure that there were no matters that might preclude his return. He encouraged Amer to come back to Lebanon. Amer then received assurances from Lebanese government officials that there were no legal matters that might interfere with his return.

Based on the official documents and assurances from Lebanese officials, Amer returned to Lebanon for a brief visit on September 4. His passport was seized at the airport. A week later, on September 12, an article appeared in Al Akhbar newspaper. This article contained a series of new and false accusations, including that Amer was called "the Butcher of Khiam" and that he was guilty of torture and murder. On the same day the al Akhbar article appeared, Amer was arrested. Certain outlets in the Lebanese media have subsequently smeared Amer and accused him of taking part in a number of crimes. These allegations are patently false. Some of the allegations contained in these reports occurred during a period when Amer was not at the Khiam prison barracks.[2] Others are alleged to have taken place in locations other than Khiam [3] and have been attributed until now to other men.[4] Finally, some of these false reports contain accusations from individuals who have written extensively of their experiences in Khiam without ever before accusing Amer of any crimes or abuse.[5]

AMER IS BEING HELD WITHOUT BOND PRESUMABLY FOR ACCUSATIONS THAT CANNOT POSSIBLY LEAD TO CHARGES UNDER LEBANESE LAW

Amer has been unable to obtain appropriate due process before the Military Tribunal. The accusations against him are for alleged crimes that are more than two decades old, well outside the maximum non-tolling 10-year statute of limitations, and yet he remains uncharged, and incarcerated without bond.[6]

The U.S. Government as well as Amer's lawyers have spoken with Lebanese officials at the highest levels. These officials freely admit that "the file is empty," and that Amer received legitimate and official legal clearance before traveling to Lebanon citing that under Lebanese law "there can be no legal charges against him." Yet, Amer remains in custody, without charges and with limited time to seek adequate medical attention to treat his life-threatening illness.

AMER'S MEDICAL SITUATION IS CRITICAL

Amer's medical condition has deteriorated throughout his time in custody. Amer arrived in Lebanon in good health. During his initial interrogation by Lebanese General Security officials he sustained multiple injuries, including rib fractures. Since then his condition has rapidly deteriorated. Two months after his initial arrest, Amer has experienced: a bacterial infection; enlarged lymph nodes; an enlarged spleen; splenopathy; coagulopathy (bleeding disorder); polyps in the stomach; abdominal cysts; pancytopenia, low WBC, RBC, and platelets (indicative of bleeding); blood in stool; gastric and large intestinal issues (the probable source of bleeding); rib fractures; abnormal liver tests; bone pain; 40 pound weight loss; night sweats; and coughing up blood. While incarcerated, he developed what doctors believe is a very aggressive form of lymphoma. In the past 2 weeks it has moved from his abdomen to his neck.[7] It is medically and physically evident that Amer Fakhoury could die in Lebanese custody, or, if he is not released soon, the lymphoma could spread to the point that it will be untreatable even once he is released.

Notes

[1] The identity of this official is known and confirmed and has been relayed to the U.S. Government.

[2] Despite the fact that Amer did not work at Khiam at the time, Amer is accused in the 1986 death of Ali Abdullah Hamzeh.

[3] Anwar Yassine was imprisoned at Swareem prison in Israel from 1987 and then he was transferred to Bitah Tekfa, a prison also in Israel. (Alsafeer Article dated May 1, 2003 at bintjbeil.com); Nabih Awada was arrested in September 1988 and was imprisoned at Tabraya Prison and Askalan Prison. (elwatannews.com, article dated April 17, 2016); Ahmad Taleb stated in an article in alahednews.com that the Lebanese Forces (militia) arrested him on a ship at Jounieh Port and tortured him for 2 years, and then he was transferred to prison in Israel (elwatannews.com).

[4] Accuser Souha Bechara wrote a book called Resistance; my life for Lebanon. In it she documents her treatment at Khiam prison and names other men. She never mentions Amer Fakhoury, but mentions an "Amer" who attended a Red Cross visit with her.

[5] Id.

[6] During questioning and in discussion with Fakhoury's attorneys, the investigative judge raised possible legal issues surrounding the possession of an Israeli passport, which may, according to him, indicate ongoing collaboration. There has been no evidence presented against Amer on these issues, and no charges. A review of official United States State Department documents, produced by Amer's defense, show that he has not held an Israeli passport and has not travelled overseas for over 20 years.

[7] His family recently was allowed to employ private doctors to attempt to stabilize him and perform surgery on his neck. They are awaiting pathology reports on the removed lymph nodes and a biopsy on a bone in his leg.

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