

LEBANON AT THE CROSSROADS

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs

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Senator Kaine, members of the Committee, I am honoured to share with you my thoughts on the political and security situation in my native Lebanon, the impact of the ongoing war in Syria, and what implications there may be for US policy.

The precarious republic of Lebanon has survived three years of the Syrian conflict, but it has been teetering close to the breaking point. Unless a resolution or dramatic de-escalation is achieved in the Syrian war in the coming year, Lebanon's political and security institutions, its economy and its social fabric might begin to come apart.

Syria Spillover

The number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, a country of only 4 million people, is rapidly approaching the one million mark, with thousands more arriving every day. That is like the United States receiving an influx of 80 million refugees in two years. 65% of these refugees are women and children. One in five of them are under the age of 4.

Lebanon has kept its borders open, and the country's communities have welcomed these refugees in their villages, neighborhoods and local facilities. But the burden has been heavy and the cost high. There are now as many Syrian children as Lebanese in a school system that was barely able to keep up with its pre-crisis obligations. The strain on the health, water, electricity, housing, and public service infrastructure has been enormous.

The crisis has also impacted the economy, which has gone from healthy growth to contraction; and unemployment, especially in host communities, has climbed rapidly. Tensions between host and refugee populations in some areas are on the rise, and the strain has added to the political and sectarian tensions already present in the country.

Coping Mechanisms

But Lebanon—a country not unaccustomed to crisis—also has remarkable coping mechanisms. The political system, although weak and often dysfunctional, is nonetheless inclusive, and is built on principles of accommodation and power-sharing. The army, although severely challenged during the present crisis, remains a national and inclusive institution. And the living memory of Lebanon's own 16-year civil war that only ended two decades ago, presents a strong antidote to any rush toward major internal conflict.

The main political coalitions in Lebanon—known as the March 14 and March 8 coalitions—have been aligned for and against the Assad regime for the past ten years. And while their differences increased during the Syrian crisis, leading to political tension and institutional paralysis, neither side was interested in pursuing significant internal conflict. For the first two years of the crisis, Lebanon had a lop-sided government in which the March 14 coalition was not represented; but even that government resigned a year ago, and the country limped along with only a caretaker government. Parliamentary elections scheduled last year, also were not held.

A major step forward was achieved ten days ago, when the country's polarized political factions agreed to form an inclusive national unity government. This is an important step in easing sectarian and factional tensions, consolidating precarious national stability, and helping the country ride out the oncoming waves of instability emanating from Syria. This new government should receive rapid and strong international support and endorsement.

To further reinforce Lebanon's political institutions, this step needs to be followed by the election of a new president for the republic to a fresh six year term, as the current president's term ends in May. And this should be followed in the fall by overdue parliamentary elections.

A revival of Lebanon's democratic and inclusive political institutions is essential to giving Lebanese confidence in their own future, and to give Lebanon's friends and investors, confidence as well that Lebanon can pull through this latest crisis. Lebanon's precarious republic has survived external and internal wars before; with strong external support, it might survive this latest crisis as well.

Extremist Groups

While the country's main parties have joined a national unity government, polarization among the communities continues, and risks to security mount. Lebanon's outgoing government had declared an official policy of neutrality and disengagement toward the Syrian conflict, but Hezbollah fully engaged in the fight alongside the Assad regime. And many in the Sunni community sympathised with the Syrian rebels, offering various forms of aid and assistance.

Although the country remained generally calm, intermittent eruptions of violence have racked the northern city of Tripoli, the southern town of Sidon, and several border towns such as Ersal in the eastern part of the country. A string of car-bombs targeting Shiite as well as Sunni neighborhoods have repeatedly threatened to push tensions to the boiling point.

In the face of a heavily armed and militant Hezbollah, the main Sunni parties and politicians have generally chosen accommodation not confrontation. This has left some of the Sunni street dissatisfied, and created space for the rise of more radical groups that want to challenge Hezbollah directly. Some of these are home-grown, such as the movement of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, but others are part of wider regional networks in Syria and elsewhere, such as the Abdullah Azzam brigades that claimed responsibility for the latest bombings, Jubhat al Nusra and other al-Qaeda linked groups.

The leader of the mainstream Sunni Future Movement has recently called on his community to renounce such radical jihadist groups, and the state's security apparatus is struggling to better secure the border and track down members of these cells and networks, but these security breaches are likely to continue intermittently. They will shake Lebanon's stability, but are unlikely to bring the whole house down.

What can and should the US do?

Address the Cause

The key goal, of course, is to go to the source, and try to end or dramatically de-escalate the raging conflict in Syria. The tepid international response over the past three years to the Assad regime's massacring of its own people, and the feeble support to the Free Syrian Army and the non-rebel groups, has convinced the Assad regime and his allies that they can prevail. It has also created an opportunity for the rise of more radical opposition groups. Without serious pressure, this conflict will be resolved neither on the battlefield nor on the negotiating table; it is likely to go on for a decade or even two, with unimaginable human suffering and incalculable consequences for the region and for global security.

The Assad regime has proved willing to fight to the last Syrian and would rather govern part of a devastated Syria than share power with others in a united Syria. And yet, when faced with a massive military threat, as that made by the US last August, it has buckled and made major concessions. A regime that rules by force responds only to superior force. As long as that is not forthcoming in terms of serious military support to the Free Syrian Army or external military action, they will offer no major concessions.

The latest pledge from the Obama administration to increase support to the opposition is welcome, but is likely to be below the level that would seriously worry the Assad regime or alter the balance of power. And it is way below what Assad's allies are pouring into Syria in terms of men, money and materiel. Unless the power calculations are changed dramatically, Assad is not going anywhere in the foreseeable future.

De-Escalation

If the Syrian conflict is not going to end soon, and a real transition is not currently viable, the alternative interim goal should be to at least de-escalate the conflict and focus on achieving cease fires, getting aid to the millions of Syrians that need it, stabilizing as many parts of the country as possible, and limiting the zones of active warfare. When Lebanon fell apart in 1975, it took 15 years to patch it back together again. But during those 15 years, there were periods of intense civil war, but many years and zones of relative calm in which citizens could rebuild their lives and businesses, send their kids to school, and go about their daily life while the political order that had fallen apart awaited a new configuration.

The UN Security Council Resolution passed last week ordering warring parties in Syria to stop blocking the delivery of humanitarian aid is an important but long overdue step in putting people first. If no one is going to win this war anytime soon, the world must focus on de-escalating the fighting, delivering urgent aid, creating zones of stability and normalcy, and saving Syrian civilians.

For Lebanon a resolution or de-escalation of the Syrian conflict would mean that no new refugees would enter the country, and the million that are already there would begin to make their way back to Syria. And it would also allow a diminution of political and security tensions that keep the country on tenterhooks.

Support for Lebanon

But if the Syrian conflict will be neither resolved nor de-escalated, then Lebanon is in for a very dangerous ride in 2014 and 2015 and will need all the help it can get from the US and other friends.

The US and Lebanon have enjoyed many decades of warm relations reinforced by shared values and a large Lebanese American community. And the US has been a strong supporter of the Lebanese armed forces and the biggest contributor to Lebanon's refugee relief needs. Among the ways that the US could build on this support and help Lebanon survive the continuing storm are the following:

- Endorse and support the new national unity government.
- Encourage the Lebanese parties to move forward in electing a new president of the republic and in holding overdue parliamentary elections.
- Include Lebanon in high level visits of US officials to the region.
- Continue to take the lead in donating and getting other nations to donate to the urgent and growing needs of the massive refugee population, with an immediate focus on the upcoming International Support Group for Lebanon meeting on March 5 in Paris.
- Build on long standing US-Lebanese military cooperation and work with other allies to bolster the capacities of the Lebanese army and internal security forces.

- Continue to work with the Lebanese security forces to boost their counterterrorism capacities.
- Encourage and provide assistance to the new Lebanese government to move forward with the delayed offshore gas bidding round; this would provide much needed economic confidence, and help build a more promising economic future for the country's rising generations.

In Closing

The Syrian war has devastated Syria and destabilized the entire region. Lebanon is the weakest link in the chain of countries around Syria. It has been the most generous in welcoming war-ravaged refugees and paid the highest cost in terms of its own stability and security. It deserves all the help you can offer. And any investment in Lebanon's stability, is an investment in regional stability, and in global security.

I thank you for your attention and for the opportunity to address your esteemed Committee.