

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP PRESIDENT ROBERT MALLEY

TESTIMONY ON LEBANON

U.S. SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

SUB COMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST, SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS AND
COUNTERTERRORISM

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Kaine, and members of the Committee. First, let me express my deep appreciation for the invitation to testify before you and discuss how best to support security and stability in Lebanon.

I am the President and CEO of the International Crisis Group, a non-governmental organization that conducts field-based research on 40 conflicts and vulnerable countries and monitors another 30 around the world. I previously also had the honor of serving in the White House under both Presidents Clinton and then Obama, most recently as his Senior Adviser for the Counter-ISIL Campaign and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf region. My government and Crisis Group roles entail different mandates, interests to pursue, and interlocutors with which we can engage; in particular, Crisis Group has the ability to talk to people on all sides of the Lebanese divide, Hizbollah included. Today, I am speaking in my capacity as head of Crisis Group whose overriding goal is to resolve and prevent deadly conflict around the globe

You will likely have heard from others that the solution to diminishing Hizbollah, and by extension Iranian influence, lies in punishing the Lebanese state, sanctioning it, and conditioning support to its institutions and national army on an end to the Shiite movement's wholly disproportionate role. But Crisis Group's field work and analysis—as well as my own experience—paints a different picture. To drop our assistance to Lebanese state institutions and force a confrontation among Lebanese would produce precisely the opposite of what advocates of this approach purport to achieve. It would jeopardize Lebanon's stability; potentially prompt a domestic showdown in which Hizbollah's superior cohesion and military might would prevail; intensify risks of war with Israel; and imperil what remains of Lebanon's state institutions. Besides the enormous human cost entailed, such chaos and violence would come a time when the region already is experiencing far too much of both and would play into the hands of Iran and its allies that thrive on them.

1.

Mr. Chairman, to begin, a few words about Lebanon, a unique case in the region – both a microcosm of the Middle East, but also a striking exception to it. Lebanon has participated in, experienced and suffered from the Israeli-Arab conflict, the pernicious influence of sectarianism, the rise of militant jihadism, interference from regional actors, and dramatic refugee flows. The region's more powerful actors use it, variously, as a venue for their proxy

wars, an arena in which to play out the Arab-Israeli conflict, and a testing ground for Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Yet Lebanon also is that rarest of examples of what so much of the Middle East is lacking: pluralism, tolerance, consensus-based politics, and an ability to maintain relations with the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The shocks Lebanon has experienced – from more than a million Syrian refugees, or a quarter of its population, who’ve poured in through Lebanon’s eastern border, in addition to hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees; to a vicious war next door; to the sectarian tensions generated by that war and Hizbollah’s direct involvement in it; to the rise of jihadi militancy – would have destabilized even a sturdy country, let alone one as polarized along political and confessional lines. The fact that it continues to hold together in large part is due to memories of the recent civil war but also to the delicate and at times unsavory domestic and foreign balancing act in which it constantly engages.

Its resilience, in other words, has come at a price, including a power-sharing arrangement prone to paralysis, fragmentation along clan, family, regional, social and ideological lines, corruption and vast patronage networks, vulnerability to outside influence and, most notably, the persistent weakness of the central state and its coexistence with a powerful non-state armed actor closely allied with Iran that enjoys outsized influence. But that price ought not make us ignore the achievement of building and preserving a relatively stable and diverse entity in an exceptionally violent and polarized part of the world and in the wake of an extraordinarily long and bloody civil war. And it must not make us forget the overriding U.S. interest in preserving its stability, helping it cope with the strains caused by the inflow of Syrian refugees, strengthening its national institutions and independence, and avoiding another costly war with Israel.

That once may have been a relatively uncontentious view. No more. My friend and fellow witness, Elliot Abrams, as well as senior officials from Saudi Arabia, advance a different view. They argue that the time has come to rip the mask off a government that, in their view, has simply become a convenient cover for Hizbollah’s and, it follows, Iran’s agenda in the region. In Abrams’ words,

Economic assistance to Lebanon and military assistance to its army should be made dependent on pushing back on Hezbollah and regaining Lebanese independence. The price Lebanon pays for Hezbollah should be made far clearer, and the advantages Hezbollah gains from its control of Lebanon should be reduced—and made far more controversial.

He concludes: “The United States should reassess our military assistance and our entire policy”.

That might sound good on paper but is highly risky and inadvisable in practice. Saudi Arabia toyed with this approach late last November, when it unceremoniously compelled Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign in a bid to force his country to choose between continued Saudi assistance and Lebanon’s stability on the one hand and Hizbollah continued outsized role on the other. I happened to be in Lebanon the day after Hariri was held up in Riyadh, and I happened to be in Riyadh last week meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed

Bin Salman, on the eve of his visit to the U.S. I came away from both convinced that the Saudi gambit had backfired, and only slightly less convinced that the Crown Prince realizes it. Indeed, since those days, the Kingdom has reverted to a more realistic and pragmatic approach, maintaining ties to Lebanon without a fundamental change in the delicate political balance among Hariri, Hizbollah, and other forces that govern the country.

It's what the U.S. administration also concluded after an animated debate at that time, when sounder minds that saw value in protecting Lebanon's stability and supporting its institutions prevailed over those who argued for the more hazardous option of fully backing the Saudi gambit. It's what I'd like to convince members of this committee of today.

3.

Mr. Chairman, potential threats to Lebanon's resilience could emanate from three distinct sources. The first is a stark disruption in the domestic balance of power which, frustrating and troubling as it may be, has preserved stability against the odds. A second danger is the outbreak of another war between Israel and Hizbollah, whose relations are governed by a regime of mutual deterrence that keeps conflict but one misstep or miscalculation away. The third peril comes from a regional environment that currently is experiencing far too many sources of tension and far too little diplomacy. Let me address each in turn.

As for the domestic equilibrium: Lebanon's relative stability, as I noted, has been purchased at a disturbing cost. It has entailed accommodating an armed movement, Hizbollah, founded with active participation and funding from Iran, with the explicit mission of fighting against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon at the time and that has been a loyal Iranian ally ever since. Hizbollah, which has developed strong social roots by successfully exploiting the historical marginalization of the Shiite community, acts with considerable autonomy in Lebanese affairs. Today, it holds 12 parliamentary seats and, together with the closely aligned Amal movement, largely monopolizes the Shiite vote in Lebanon's sectarian political system.

But while Hizbollah is thus a political actor that represents the choice and preferences of a sizable Lebanese constituency, as expressed in consecutive elections deemed largely free and fair (2005 and 2009), this, as you know all too well, is only part of the picture. The group has the capacity to maintain, equip and deploy its own militia fighters. It engages and cooperates with state institutions at its own discretion, and it maintains the de facto ability to block actions by political institutions that do not align with its agenda. It takes direct action in foreign theaters such as Syria to promote its agenda. In other words, the two secondary ministries (industry, youth and sport) it presently holds hardly reflects its actual power. Its massive military and organizational strength has discouraged or quelled any attempt to challenge it. It has resorted to arms in the past to make this clear and has demonstrated that it will not tolerate any accommodation by the Lebanese state with Israel, nor will it permit any alignment between Lebanon with regional actors that are opposed to the so-called "axis of resistance." Indeed, in the past, Lebanese politicians who advanced policies contrary to this agenda were the target of assassinations in which Hizbollah's role is widely suspected. As other Lebanese parties have learned at their expense, at times

violently, there is no government, let alone a sustainable one without Hezbollah's participation and support.

The question for this subcommittee and for the U.S. more broadly, is what to do about this far from satisfactory reality. That was the question Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman asked and answered last November. As he saw it, and as he and other Saudi officials told me, for Hariri to preside over a government that included Hezbollah meant allowing one of Riyadh's closest allies to cooperate with Tehran's most loyal partner, and thus to empower and – given various forms of Saudi economic assistance, from the employment of Lebanese workers to its deposits in Lebanese banks, to its import of Lebanese products – indirectly subsidize both Iran and Hezbollah. MBS viewed this as an irrational and counter-productive arrangement and, just two days before I coincidentally was to meet with Hariri in Beirut, held him against his will in Riyadh and got him to announce his resignation. As I wrote from Beirut at the time, "That [Hariri] made the statement from Riyadh told much of the story; that he delivered it with the genuineness of one forced to read his own prison sentence told the rest. The decision was announced by the Lebanese prime minister but it was made in Saudi Arabia." While to this day Saudi officials deny this and maintain Hariri's resignation was entirely voluntary, few – in Lebanon, in the region, in Europe, or in the U.S. administration – take that denial at face value.

The gambit failed, and it failed in large part because Lebanese – whether Sunni, Christian or Shiite, and whether they support or decry Hezbollah – resented such brazen foreign interference and feared the destabilizing impact of such a disruption of their political order. It failed, too, because most Lebanese understand that, as of now at least, keeping Hezbollah within the government is a better guarantor of peace than forcing it out, and that an inclusive power-sharing arrangement is more stable than an exclusive one.

Indeed, by and large, Hezbollah's agenda today is one of maintaining internal stability. We should be clear-eyed about why it does so: Hezbollah prizes calm because the status quo serves the organization well. On one hand, formal Lebanese state sovereignty provides a legal umbrella under which it can operate despite terrorist designations, without that state exerting real influence, let alone control over its actions. Preserving stability and state functionality also allows Hezbollah to focus on its military agenda and creates an environment in which its constituents can benefit from state services.

Hezbollah has also shown a readiness to cooperate with political rivals and state institutions on security matters. With Hezbollah's quiet support, the last several years have seen Lebanon absorb large numbers of Sunni refugees from the Syrian conflict without significant sectarian violence. Hezbollah was also a force for restraint after a series of jihadi attacks against Shiite neighborhoods in the southern suburbs of Beirut between 2012 and 2015.

Hezbollah's benefiting from the status quo and cooperating with the Lebanese Armed Forces (or LAF) in combatting jihadists is, of course, part of the problem. But it's also part of the reality we need to take into account in seeking to address it – namely that any effort to break the current governing alliance risks tearing Lebanon down and exposing to a greater jihadist threat. In offering you this picture, I do not mean to suggest any level of comfort

with Hizbollah's status as an armed and unaccountable state within a state. But it is important to have a clear sense of how the group is operating on the ground, and what an effort to exclude it or sanction Lebanese institutions would provoke.

4.

Mr. Chairman, the picture I have just painted counsels in favor of continued donor assistance to the Lebanese state, rather than treating it as a pariah. While one ought not underestimate the role Hizbollah plays in Lebanese political life, and particularly in its foreign policy, it is not coterminous with the Lebanese state, and the Lebanese state cannot be reduced to, or should be held responsible for, the actions of an actor that has largely usurped its foreign policy. Furthermore, punishing the Lebanese state and weakening its institutions by withholding support likely would not inflict substantial harm on Hizbollah, which may be appropriating some of this support but does not rely on it. It would, however, disproportionately affect those Lebanese who attempt to defend what remains of the autonomy of state institutions, and their capacity to enable governance and participation in sectors that have not been captured by Hizbollah. As a Lebanese academic once quipped: "People say that Hizbollah is a state within a state, but in reality it's a state within a failed state". Getting that state to function better and with more autonomy will not rein in Hizbollah in the short term, but may narrow their base of support further down the road. By contrast, cutting off all support to and cooperation with the LAF would leave Iran and its allies without competition.

The Lebanese army and other security forces form an important bulwark against the influence of jihadi elements in Lebanon, defeating ISIS and AQ-affiliated groups. Investing in these institutions is likely to be particularly important following the impending defeat of jihadi elements in Syria, which may prompt such groups to move to ungoverned or weakly controlled areas of neighboring countries like Lebanon. By supporting Lebanese institutions, the U.S. and donors more broadly can support stabilization of the perimeter of the Syrian conflict, help prevent spillover effects, and help provide security for the vast Syrian refugee community that currently resides in Lebanon.

But there should be no expectation that Lebanese state security agencies will face down Hizbollah militarily. For one, even with much better equipment and training than they have today, these forces and agencies will not be a match to the size, equipment and combat experience of Hizbollah, in particular after the latter's participation, and training acquired, in the Syrian conflict. More importantly still, Lebanese security institutions comprise a cross-section of Lebanese society, and a significant part of their personnel, if put to the test, should be expected to place loyalty to the sectarian community to which they belong over loyalty to the Lebanese state. An open confrontation between Hizbollah, which enjoys the overwhelming support of the Shiite community, and any state security institution will almost certainly lead to the fracturing of the latter into its sectarian components, and initiate a sectarian civil war from which Hizbollah is likely to emerge victorious. Such a course in any event almost certainly would be rejected by the security establishment itself, as well as by the majority of political actors, including Hizbollah's opponents.

Following the upcoming elections in May, the emergence of yet another “national unity government”, in which Hizbollah and its allies will be included, is highly probable. Hizbollah has expressed the clear intention to continue the current, broad political alliance that enabled the unblocking of the political/constitutional impasse in late 2016. The U.S. administration should accept this irrespective of its view of the organization, as an adversarial government formation would likely return Lebanon to the paralysis that characterized its politics prior to 2016, and potentially would be destabilizing, without affecting the behavior of the organization and Lebanon’s regional posture.

Finally, the U.S., and other international donors, should continue and if possible enhance support for Syrian refugees. Lebanon is bearing a huge burden remarkably well, but there are clear signs of strain. It is critical to continue financial support of humanitarian agencies to prevent existing tensions between refugees and host communities from escalating, and the Lebanese authorities from responding to popular pressure by pushing for unsafe returns to Syria.

6.

Mr. Chairman, the second threat facing Lebanon, as I mentioned, is another Israeli-Hizbollah war.

Although Israel and Hizbollah face each other across Lebanon’s southern border, and although tensions are mounting regarding the precise path of Israel’s fence and the delineation of the Lebanese and Israeli maritime Exclusive Economic Zones, few in Lebanon seem to believe such a war is imminent. Both protagonists have cause for self-restraint. Hizbollah knows that a provocation on its part would be met by devastating Israeli force. And the very reason Israel wishes to forcefully strike Hezbollah is the reason that it is inhibited from doing so — namely the prospect of a barrage of missiles on its urban centers. While Israel still possesses far greater ability to inflict pain, Hezbollah possesses far greater capacity to absorb it, which means that any large-scale Israeli operation runs the risk of being open-ended.

At bottom, and despite the huge disparity in military power, each party recognizes in the other a formidable adversary and that any conflict likely would be far more destructive than their last military confrontation in 2006. On the one hand, according to Israel’s own assessments, Hizbollah had some 16,000 missiles on the eve of the 2006 war and holds today 130,000 missiles, including some with more advanced capacities. On the other hand, Israeli officials have made clear that, should a war break out, this time they would make little distinction between Hizbollah and the state behind which it hides. In the words of a senior Israeli military commander,

If a war breaks out in the northern arena we need to act with full force from the beginning. What we could do in 34 days during the second Lebanon war we can now do in 48 to 60 hours. The growth of our strength has not been linear. This is potential

power unimaginable in its scope, much different to what we have seen in the past and far greater than people estimate.

In a similar vein, last October, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman warned, “today, the Lebanese army has lost its independence and is another unit in Hizbollah’s apparatus, and therefore, as far as we are concerned, the infrastructure of the Lebanese army and the Lebanese state is one with the infrastructure of Hizbollah.”

There are other reasons why war may not be imminent. The presence of United Nations peacekeepers (the UNIFIL mission continues to patrol the area between the Litani river and the Israel-Lebanon border with a total of 10,838 troops) and the existence of established channels for communication and mediation of disputes helps manage the risk of an accidental escalation. Because both Israel and Hizbollah have understood the de facto “rules of the game,” mutual deterrence has worked for the past 12 years to keep the peace on that border. The recently more vocal maritime dispute between the two countries already secured constructive U.S. mediation efforts, led by the State Department, and is unlikely to lead to war.

Yet any sense of complacency would be misplaced. Those rules of the game have been challenged by significant changes in the ground, most notably the Syrian conflict and attendant growth of Iran’s and Hizbollah’s presence in that country. In response, Israel has described several redlines the crossing of which already has, or will prompt a military response. First, Israel has made clear it would not accept Hizbollah developing the indigenous capacity to build high-precision missiles whether in Lebanon or Syria. Against the backdrop of Israel’s successes in blocking convoys with high-precision missiles from Syria, Israeli officials claim Hizbollah has attempted to build subterranean high-precision missile factories in both countries. If Israel were to destroy such a factory, Hizbollah and its allies may forcefully react, potentially triggering a major conflict.

Second, Israel is determined to prevent Hizbollah or Shiite militias from approaching the 1974 armistice line in southwest Syria and setting up offensive infrastructure in its vicinity. Yet if the Syrian regime were to seek to retake the southwest, it likely would do so with support from Hizbollah which could mean hundreds of Hizbollah fighters adjacent to the Israeli-Syrian fence. Israel fears that troops operating from this area, which has no Shiite population, would be harder to deter than Hizbollah forces operating from southern Lebanon, where any firefight with Israeli forces would produce large numbers of casualties among the organization’s core constituency.

Third, and more broadly, Israel wants to prevent its rivals from consolidating a permanent military presence anywhere in Syria, which, it fears, would strengthen their hand in future wars as well as their influence in Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian arena. Iran is of particular concern: Israel’s redlines seek to block it from establishing an airport, naval port, military base, or permanent presence of militias. Israel has already demonstrated its resolve to disrupt the construction of this sort of major military infrastructure.

Under virtually any of these scenarios, including those originally limited to Syria, the risk of war spreading to Lebanon would be considerable. If a tit-for-tat encounter were to begin in

the southwest, and pressure to build in Israel to conduct a more robust response, it would have to choose among a series of bad options: target Hizbollah in Lebanon; strike Syrian targets in an effort to force Damascus or Moscow to rein in Hizbollah; or, should strain mount to levels it deems unbearable, launch an incursion into Syria to push Hizbollah back. All have the potential to trigger a wider war. And, as noted, the odds of that war being far more intense, bloody and costly than the last confrontation that occurred in 2006 would be high.

The region already had one close call. In February 2018, Israel responded to the intrusion of an Iranian drone into its airspace with airstrikes against alleged Iranian bases in Syria. During that attack, Israel lost an F16 fighter jet and responded by destroying a part of the Syrian anti-aircraft defenses. The chain of events demonstrates the potential for rapid escalation in the southern Syria theater. Were Hizbollah involved in such a cycle of escalation, it almost certainly would spill into an all-out confrontation in Lebanon.

It is often said, in both Israel and in Lebanon, that the next war is no longer a matter of “if” but of “when”. Israel, from this perspective simply cannot accept the presence of a large, armed non-state actors on its borders whose ability to inflict pain would, over time, significantly limit Israel’s freedom of maneuver. And Hizbollah would feel no choice but to react, lest it lose what is left of its “resistance” credentials. The trendline of the past four decades or so provides fodder for this view. Since 1978, Israel and Lebanon have been involved in three major confrontations, and the current lull – some 12 years of relative calm – has been the longest since 1978.

For various reasons, the U.S. enjoys only modest ability to prevent such an occurrence but it should use whatever influence it retains. Together with Russia and Jordan, it is a co-signatory of the southwestern ceasefire agreement, which includes limitations on Iranian and Hizbollah presence in the area. In a recent report, Crisis Group recommended steps to bolster this arrangement and decrease risks of a Syrian regime attempt to retake the southwest – and thus reduce the odds of an Israeli-Hizbollah war. In reality, however, Russia has the most important role to play in that effort. Alone among major players, it enjoys good relations with all parties involved – Syria, Israel, Iran and Hizbollah – and all these regional actors in turn feel some obligation to accommodate Russian concerns. Moscow reportedly stepped in directly in early February to keep the confrontation triggered by the drone incursion from spinning wholly out of control. But it can and should do more: rather than rushing to contain such flare-ups, Russia should facilitate channels of mediation and the establishment of rules of the game that would prevent such escalation from occurring in the first place. The U.S. should be clear with Russia on what those rules should be, and what Israel’s redlines are.

7.

The third threat to Lebanon’s stability is one that would appear beyond this hearing’s remit, but it is not. I am referring to the broader regional context. Instability and conflict in the Middle East is nothing new. What *is* new, however, is Iran’s unusually far-reaching regional role, an unusually apprehensive Israel, an unusually assertive Saudi leadership and, of course, an unusual U.S. president. As for Iran: For several years now, it has successfully

exploited regional chaos to spread or enhance its influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. As for Israel: For months now, it has been sounding alarm bells about Hezbollah's and Iran's growing footprint in Syria, and more particularly about the Lebanese movement's potential capacity to indigenously produce precision-guided missiles.

As for the new Saudi leadership: MBS is convinced that Iran for too long has viewed Saudi Arabia as a punching bag, and that Saudi Arabia for too long has obliged. He sees Tehran possessing far less money, military equipment, or powerful international allies than Riyadh, yet nonetheless on the ascent, exerting or expanding control over Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa. He believes that only by more forcefully and aggressively pushing back – whether in Yemen, Iraq, or Lebanon – can Saudi Arabia and its partners halt Iran and turn the tide.

As for the U.S.: Unpredictable and inconstant in so many ways, President Trump has been consistent in one regard at least, which is a belligerency toward Iran that has become the hallmark of his administration's Mideast policy. U.S. officials evoke his willingness to take action against Iran to restore the U.S. credibility and deterrence he feels his predecessor frittered away. To which one might add the administration's calling into question the Iranian nuclear deal and considering ramping up sanctions against Tehran, which unnecessarily heightens tensions. In this, the U.S. approach appears to be very much of a piece with the kingdom's: dismissive of diplomatic engagement with Tehran and persuaded of the need to establish a new balance of power.

In such a tense environment, conflict is always but one step away, and confrontation in one arena quickly could spread to another. While the nuclear deal, by design, was tailored to exclusively address concerns over Iran's nuclear program, the implications of its demise may become manifest not only in stepped-up Iranian efforts to enrich uranium but in asymmetric responses by Tehran, targeting U.S. forces deployed in close proximity to Iranian local partners in Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan. Economic sanctions against Iran might have effects in Syria's Deir el-Zour province, where U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and Iranian-backed Shiite militias compete over territory that has strategic value and energy resources. Another missile strike fired by Huthis in Yemen toward a Saudi or Emirati city or an inadvertent clash in the Strait of Hormuz could provide justification for direct U.S. retaliation on Iranian soil, or for new sanctions that could jeopardise the JCPOA. All of which could – given its susceptibility to regional dynamics – quickly drag Lebanon into a regional escalation.

Missing from this picture is any hint of diplomacy – between Iran and Saudi Arabia or between Iran and the U.S. Rather, the region faces a free for all in which the only operative restraint on one's actions is nervousness over what it might provoke. That's hardly reassuring and ought to change. That need not mean halting efforts to push back against Iranian destabilizing activities. But it would mean halting efforts to undo the Iranian nuclear deal and resuming at least some of the high-level U.S.-Iranian engagement that existed in recent years.

This, then, is the complex reality of Lebanon and Hizbollah. A surprisingly resilient but nevertheless fragile Lebanese state coexists with an autonomous armed actor, Hizbollah, that is fixed in its opposition to Israel and alliance with Iran; a tense Israeli-Hizbollah relationship that is a single mistake or misinterpreted signal away from a very dangerous confrontation; and regional context rife with conflict trigger points and devoid of diplomacy.

Mr. Chairman, given this picture, the lesson – unsatisfying as it might seem – is that outside actors, the U.S. among them, should deal cautiously with Lebanese affairs; bolster the central government and its institutions, notably the LAF; mitigate risks of a new Israel-Hizbollah confrontation; reduce regional tensions through diplomatic engagement, including with Iran, all the while the putting aside more ambitious goals.

This is not necessarily the most inspiring or transformational of agendas. But Lebanon is too weak, too vulnerable, too fragile, too finely balanced to be the vehicle for a transformative agenda. Lebanon is not the place where grand dreams are made. It's where they crash.