

US Welcomes Lebanon Agreement

Contributed by David Gollust, VOA
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State Department

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The United States Wednesday welcomed the Doha agreement aimed at ending Lebanon's 18-month political crisis. But U.S. officials are more cautious about the public revelation that Israel and Syria are holding indirect peace talks mediated by Turkey. VOA's David Gollust reports from the State Department.

The Doha agreement gives the Lebanese opposition, led by Hezbollah, veto power in a new cabinet and does not call for the Iranian-backed militia to disarm.

But U.S. officials say the deal does end the stalemate over electing a new president, and is far preferable to the possible alternative, a new round of Lebanese civil warfare.

The officials also say that Hezbollah, and by extension its Iranian and Syrian sponsors, sustained political damage in the Arab world when the militant Shiite group attacked government supporters in Beirut earlier this month.

Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch told reporters the deal in Qatar is a welcome development, and what he termed a necessary and positive step toward fulfilling the Arab League initiative on Lebanon, starting with the anticipated election Sunday of army chief Michel Suleiman as president.

Welch said while the Doha accord does not mandate the disarmament of Hezbollah, it does reaffirm the primary authority of Lebanon's central government and demands that other parties refrain from using weapons and violence for political ends.

He suggested that the deal represents a setback for Hezbollah and its outside sponsors, and is reflective of a wide backlash in the Arab world against the Iranian-backed militia:

"Many people in Lebanon are upset over the situation that has evolved," said David Welch. "Press and editorial commentary throughout the Arab world has been very critical of Hezbollah's actions. The veil of resistance was ripped off this organization the fifth of May when it took up guns against innocent people against press establishments, against other political parties."

Welch downplayed the enhanced power Hezbollah will have in a new government, saying the cabinet has long been operating by consensus. He also said there will be no change in the U.S. refusal to have direct dealings with cabinet members of Hezbollah, which the United States lists as a terrorist organization.

The Assistant Secretary also said the confirmation Wednesday of Turkish-mediated peace contacts between Israel and Syria came as no surprise, since he said both Turkey and Israel have kept the United States apprised of the talks.

Welch said the United States has no objection to Israel seeking an accord with Damascus though it has well-known concerns about the Syrian government:

"We do have reservations about the foreign policy behavior of Syria and for that matter its internal politics as well," he said. "We have expressed those many times, including directly to the Israelis. I have to say they share our concerns. That said, Israel lives in a difficult neighborhood. It's in its national interest to find ways to expand the circle of peace, if other people are serious about doing it. And I see they're undertaking that experiment now."

Welch rejected a reporter's suggestion the Bush administration is unenthusiastic about the Israeli-Syrian dialogue, saying he preferred the term dispassionate.

But he said the United States sees the Israeli-Palestinian peace track as the most promising, and that direct negotiations as pursued by those two parties are always "the best way to proceed." VOA news

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