

# Congressman Gary L. Ackerman Continued Support for Lebanon at Congressional Hearing US Congress

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Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia The Honorable Gary L. Ackerman, The Honorable Jeffrey Feltman

Update on the situation in Lebanon  
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman  
House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia  
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In the 19th century, a Scottish preacher named Alexander MacLaren warned us that "Our blunders mostly come from letting our wishes interpret our duties." I fear this habit has been at work on our policy in Lebanon, and that the new state of affairs which exists in that country is as much the work of our, and our allies', lack of energy and action as it is a product of the brutality and determination of Hezbollah and their Iranian and Syrian patrons.

The practical consequences of the Doha agreement are not yet fully clear, and I want to state as plainly as I can that the future of Lebanon is NOT settled. Changes in Lebanon's electoral laws may produce more Hezbollah seats in the next election, but the shock of Hezbollah's war against the Lebanese state may have finally dealt an irreparable blow to the credibility of the delusional Gen. Aoun, and could result in the reallocation of his voters to other Christian blocs. Moreover, news reports indicate that Hezbollah may have succeeded in stirring up the embers of Sunni militancy in Lebanon, the consequences of which are far from clear. It should also be noted, that Gen. Sleiman is now President Sleiman, and that Prime Minister Siniora is still Prime Minister Siniora.

I am not suggesting that what happened in June was not an agonizing setback, or that, like a burst cyst, that the turmoil, distrust and hostility in Lebanon's political system has been fully vented and the nation is now headed for recovery and healing. Not at all. What I am saying is that the Doha agreement is a beginning, not an end; that the struggle for Lebanon's independence and sovereignty is not even close to over; that the future of Lebanon as a state for all of its people, democratic and governed by the rule of law, has been delayed but not cannot forever be denied.

It's true that the recent Hezbollah insurrection has, by intimidation and murder, forced a new and unjust political status quo upon Lebanon. But I can not, and will not, accept that the future of Lebanon is with a gang of vicious thugs hiding in clerics' robes awaiting instructions from Tehran and Damascus. Lebanon is too diverse, too modern and too boisterous a society to be stuffed into the straitjacket of tyranny and religious or ideological conformity.

In short, there is no reason for Lebanon's allies to give up on a better future for that state and, by implication, the region as a whole. There is, however a serious need for us to review both our overall strategy and our tactics. What happened in Lebanon was absolutely foreseeable and probably preventable.

Back in July of 2007, the situation in Lebanon was already deteriorating severely enough for Congress to address the issue. The House adopted H. Res. 548, which "re-affirmed" its intention to continue to provide financial and material assistance to support the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity, and political independence of Lebanon under the sole and exclusive authority of the Government of Lebanon.

Although the political dynamics in Lebanon worsened in the Fall of 2007, the Bush Administration's response remained limited and tactical. The House, noting the slide, in October 2007 took up another resolution, H. Res. 738, which "urged" the President to use all peaceful means at the disposal of the United States to help safeguard Lebanon's sovereignty and independence.

Still the Bush Administration—mired both in Iraq and a faith-based foreign policy, where the President boldly declares his wishes, and then prays for them to come true—remained strangely passive. While U.S. assistance to Lebanon surged after the 2006 war, it quickly fell back to the tens of millions of dollars while Lebanon's enemies, both foreign and domestic, took advantage of our, and our allies, relative frugality and poured huge investments into arms-purchasing, social services, reconstruction efforts and propaganda.

On October 24, Secretary Rice appeared before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. In person, and in a letter, I warned that the threats to Lebanon were urgent and that "Unless the United States responds appropriately to this challenge, I fear our allies in Lebanon will be overcome." I suggested four policy responses: a major presidential address declaring red-lines for Lebanon's independence; aggressive sanctioning of the Syrian regime's key figures; creation of an international contact group for Lebanon; and additional U.S. assistance to Lebanon.

Shortly thereafter, the Secretary graciously responded by letter, and reiterated her commitment, and that of the President, to Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, and noted progress on the Special Tribunal, new sanctions on Syria, and a high-level meeting of interested foreign ministers in Istanbul. A good start, but unfortunately, not much more than that.

In November, Assistant Secretary Welch appeared before this Subcommittee and heard this warning: "Lebanon truly is on the brink of either the collapse of the Cedar Revolution, or the return of civil war. Like most Lebanese, we want neither. For Lebanon to remain a sovereign and independent state, ruled by a government elected and accountable only to the Lebanese people, the United States and the international community are going to have to act fast." And still there was no noticeable shift or change in U.S. policy.

As Fall 2007 passed into the Spring of 2008, various Lebanese leaders came to Washington to plead for assistance and to warn of the danger in Lebanon. These are brave, decent and admirable people, and they deserved every bit of support we gave them. But there are significant failures on their side that, if the future is going to be different than the past, must also be considered and remedied.

As the Lebanese political crisis worsened, and their own situation became more perilous, their focus became more and more narrow; rather than rallying the Lebanese people to save their state, they focused on rallying foreign support; rather than exploiting the rancid hypocrisy and staggeringly obvious political liabilities of the the March 8 opposition, they remained at war with each other over strategy and control of policy; rather than reaching out to the large number of Lebanese Shiites who are not aligned with Hezbollah, they preferred to watch and wait.

Benjamin Franklin warned our Founding Fathers, "We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." And in the end, this lesson was not absorbed in Lebanon.

So what now? Number one, no deal on the Special Tribunal. Period, full stop. No one knows what it will do or say and we—and more importantly, the Lebanese—are entitled to find out. Second, the United States cannot continue to try to shape events in the region by reading the newspaper. As a number of analysts have recently described, a great number of political deals in the region are in negotiation, or are being put into effect, and our net input into nearly everyone of them is zero. Nobody in the history of any sport ever scored from the bench.

Third, what's done is done; the reality in Lebanon is what it is regardless of our likes or dislikes, and we have to go back to work on building up the strength of our allies. But this time, I think we have to focus not only on the capacity of Lebanese governing institutions, but also on helping our friends learn some important lessons about coalition building, grassroots politics, political outreach, and voter registration and mobilization. Ultimately, as people who believe that Lebanon must be governed by and for the Lebanese people, we must recognize that this democratic test is the true center of gravity in the struggle for Lebanon's future. It is Lebanon's best hope, and it is a challenge Lebanon's enemies can never hope of winning

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Thank you, Mister Chairman, and other distinguished Members of the Committee for inviting me here today and providing the opportunity to discuss recent developments in Lebanon. President Bush and Secretary Rice are committed to supporting a sovereign, democratic and prosperous Lebanon. We will continue to seek full implementation of all UN Security Council resolutions on Lebanon and remain engaged with our partners working in support of this goal.

Now is a crucial stage in the run-up to Lebanon's spring 2009 parliamentary elections. Lebanon has recently emerged from an episode of Hizballah-engineered political deadlock beginning with the November 2006 resignation of six opposition-affiliated ministers in the previous cabinet. This crisis came to a head in May when Hizballah turned its weapons against the Lebanese people. The Doha agreement, which engaged Lebanon's Arab neighbors in helping resolve this political crisis helped to bring this chapter to a close.

Since Doha, Lebanon has made important strides. A re-opened parliament elected President Michel Sleiman on May 25. PM Siniora was asked to form a new

government. Lebanese political leaders reached agreement on formation of a new cabinet on July 11, after seven weeks of intense political negotiations. The new 30-member cabinet, headed by Fouad Siniora and forged under the framework established by Doha, is a welcome development in light of the country's recent political impasse. The cabinet is now working to develop a statement outlining the government's policy platform.

Many have noted the majority March 14 coalition conceded a blocking third of cabinet seats in the Doha agreement. We must acknowledge that this agreement was made for Lebanon by Lebanese to help in bringing a resolution to a longstanding political crisis. By taking a step back and placing this development in a broader view, we see that this concession may have less significance on the ground, given that the previous Lebanese cabinet nearly always operated on consensus basis and many decisions require only a simple majority to pass.

Significantly, March 14 has retained the Prime Minister and majority in the cabinet, elected a president it supports, and received an agreement to raise

Hizbullah's arms in the context of renewed national dialogue. Hizbullah has only one minister in the cabinet and for the first time, March 14 has appointed an independent Shia minister, Ibrahim Shamsiddine, to the cabinet, which will make it much more difficult for Hizbullah and its allies to assert that they are the sole voice of the Lebanese Shia community.

For his part, President Sleiman played an important role in the cabinet's formation. In his inaugural address, he supported the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and relevant UN Security Council resolutions, as well as his commitment to a national dialogue process that will address creating a national defense strategy that would include Hizbullah's arms.

Looking forward, parliamentary elections will be held in spring 2009. The new government will need to work with parliament to implement remaining items from the Doha agreement, including drafting a new electoral law. Serious shortcomings exist in the current electoral framework, which fails to meet international standards in many areas. We are hopeful that the new government will take up this issue and not only encourage adoption of a new electoral law, but pass the necessary reforms to ensure that Lebanon's elections meet international standards and are considered free and fair.

We remain concerned about the destabilizing role of Hizbullah and its continuing efforts to build its military capabilities. Arms continue to flow to the group across the Syria-Lebanon border in contravention of United Nations Security Council resolutions. Hizbullah also has made a number of statements asserting it will not relinquish its weapons, even if the disputed Sheba'a farms territory is handed over to Lebanon. Hizbullah's efforts to establish its own telecommunications network and conduct airport surveillance in Beirut — two issues that triggered the violent crisis in Beirut last May — are lingering examples of its challenge to Lebanon's institutions.

We also are troubled by Hizbullah's efforts to exploit the July 16 return to Israel of the bodies of two Israeli soldiers captured in 2006 in exchange for the return to Lebanon of five prisoners, including Samir Kantar, and the remains of nearly 200 fighters. Despite Hizbullah's claims that the presence of its arms made the exchange with Israel possible, the reality is that this action resulted from the determined efforts of the UN and its negotiator, working in furtherance of UNSCR 1701 to bring an end to the issue. Although we note this exchange marks the closing of a difficult chapter in Lebanese-Israeli relations, we condemn the egregious crimes committed by Kantar.

We continue to press Syria to normalize its diplomatic relationship with Lebanon, to include exchanging embassies and bilateral delineation of the Lebanon/Syria border. The recent announcement in Paris that there will be an exchange of embassies with Syria is a positive step toward ensuring Syrian respect for Lebanon's sovereignty; however, Syria must move from mere jargon to undertake the concrete actions required to formally establish diplomatic relations in a way

beneficial to both countries. We join with President Sleiman in pressing for Syrian cooperation in delineating the common border between Syria and Lebanon. We also continue to press for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias as outlined in UN Security Council resolutions 1559, 1680 and 1701, recognizing this will be a subject of national dialogue.

Turning specifically to the issue of Sheba'a farms, we believe a diplomatic resolution to the dispute would undermine Hizballah's spurious "resistance" credentials and complicate the group's efforts to maintain an armed state-within-a-state. UN Security Council resolution 1701 calls upon the UN Secretary General to develop proposals for the delineation of Lebanon's borders, especially in those areas where the border is disputed or uncertain, including the Sheba'a farms. It also calls in parallel for the disarmament of Hizballah and all Lebanese militias. A diplomatic solution to the Sheba'a farms dispute, beginning with the Syrian-Lebanese delineation of their border would constitute an important step toward implementation of one part of resolution 1701, normalized relations between Syria and Lebanon, and a lasting peace between Israel and Lebanon.

U.S. support for the Lebanese people's aspirations for a sovereign, democratic and stable Lebanon continues through a robust bilateral assistance program. Since 2006, the U.S. has committed over one billion dollars to help Lebanon. Most recently, Under Secretary Burns and U.S. Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Michele Sison represented the United States on June 23 at a donors' conference in Vienna to support Prime Minister Siniora's plan—developed in coordination with the World Bank and the UN Relief and Works Agency—for the reconstruction of the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee camp and the revitalization of adjacent Lebanese communities. The United States is a strong supporter of this initiative, as demonstrated by our initial pledge of \$22 million in Vienna.

In addition, the United States continues working to strengthen the forces of the Lebanese state—the Lebanese Army and the Internal Security Forces. Since 2006, we have committed an aggregate of over \$400 million to help the Lebanese government protect Lebanon's borders, maintain law and order, and confront threats to the nation's internal security. Capable and credible Lebanese army and police forces that can fight some battles—like last summer's conflict with Fatah al-Islam militants in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp—and deter others, will allow the Lebanese people to live in peace and security without recourse to illegal militias.

Our assistance already has had tangible effects. While sectarian-charged violence of early May posed a challenge beyond the current capabilities of the Lebanese army and police, government forces have worked cooperatively to counter more recent violence in Tripoli and the Beka'a Valley. The Lebanese Army has increased its presence in areas of tension, moving troops with recently delivered U.S.-origin trucks and HMWVs, and reinforcing them with M113s the United States repaired and refurbished. Lebanese police worked alongside them, putting to use their U.S.-funded training, vehicles, and equipment. Lebanese army and police forces participating in a pilot project to increase security along Lebanon's northern border have successfully intercepted a number of commercial smuggling operations while communicating on new U.S.-funded radios.

Our assistance continues to focus on addressing the more basic needs of these two forces after decades of neglect under Syrian occupation. In 2008, ammunition, small arms, spare parts, vehicles, communications gear, and individual equipment including body armor will constitute the bulk of our deliveries to the Lebanese Armed Forces. In addition, we are committed to addressing the need for more advanced capabilities, and will inaugurate a multi-year comprehensive training program for all echelons of the Lebanese Armed Forces later this year.

Meanwhile, the Internal Security Forces continue to receive U.S.-funded training at the police academy we are helping refurbish, and have deployed their U.S.-funded police vehicles, radios, and duty gear throughout the country.

As we expand provision of equipment and training to these two forces, we have also increased our engagement with their leadership. Acting CENTCOM Commander, General Martin Dempsey, visited Beirut on May 14 to discuss

