

FLOOR STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN McCAIN ON 9/11 AND THE SITUATION IN LEBANON

Contributed by Senator John McCain
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FLOOR STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN McCAIN TO COMMEMORATE THE ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 AND THE SITUATION IN LEBANON

“While all Americans take occasion today to commemorate the terrible attacks of 2001, each of us also has cause to reflect on some of the lessons our nation learned in the wake of 9/11. It’s often hard to think clearly about the days before those attacks, when the world seemed at once a safer and more distant place, and our country a superpower in a secure neighborhood. We saw before 9/11 that America had interests across the globe, and we believed that our actions must be motivated by the ideals that have made us great. Yet we also often assumed – wrongly – that the volatility that spilled across distant shores would never wash over ours; that instability and repression in remote and obscure places was cause for tragedy but not for alarm.

“We’ve learned a lot since that day. We’ve learned that history is often made in the very remote and obscure places that draw so little of our attention. We’ve learned that the degree of freedom and stability in other countries is connected to the security we enjoy at home. And we’ve learned that we must remain the authors of history, or face becoming its victims.

“Today I’d like to spend just a few moments discussing recent events in one of those places which, I’d bet, seems like a peripheral concern to most Americans. Few of us wake up in the morning scouring the papers for the latest news from Lebanon, or follow the ins and outs of politics in Beirut. Yet in recent days we’ve seen the portents of new political crisis in Lebanon and, while all of us must hope that it will be resolved easily and peacefully, we know from the history of that country that it very well may not be.

“Yesterday, Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri stepped down, unable to form a national unity government some two and a half months after his election in June. After his moderate and relatively pro-Western party won the largest number of seats in the Lebanese parliament, Mr. Hariri proposed the formation of a broad based government that would even award a share of the cabinet posts to Hezbollah. Yet Hezbollah has been intent on thwarting these efforts to form a cabinet.

“Despite the fact that the Lebanese constitution confers on the President and Prime Minister the power to make cabinet appointments, and irrespective of Mr. Hariri’s repeated attempts to form a government, talks have broken down over the demand by a Hezbollah-allied party that it retain the Telecommunications Ministry. This may appear to be a small and insignificant point of contention, and surely not one that would prompt an incoming Prime Minister to abandon his post, until we consider that Hezbollah badly wants to retain control over telecommunications and surveillance in Lebanon.

“Hezbollah, of course, not only possesses a surveillance capacity and an independent communications and broadcasting system, but also retains vast weaponry befitting its status as an independent militia. Along with its Syrian and Iranian sponsors, Hezbollah continues to both exert influence outside the constitutional process and invite foreign meddling in Lebanese affairs.

“I believe that the United States should take a strong stand in favor of respecting the outcome of the June democratic elections, and urge the parties in Lebanon to form a government in a manner that respects the constitutional process. Over the longer term, it is abundantly clear that there can be no durable peace in Lebanon – nor any long term stability in the political process there – as long as Hezbollah continues to act freely as an armed, independent militia. According to some reports, Hezbollah remains today the best armed force in the country – better armed, indeed, than even the Lebanese Armed Forces. Such a situation invites further fighting at some point between Hezbollah and Israel and suggests that Hezbollah will continue to use its military power to induce cooperation with its demands at home. Sooner or later, one way or another, and as the United Nations Security Council has demanded, Hezbollah must be disarmed.

“We should also make perfectly clear to Syria that better ties with the United States will require an end to its malign interference in its neighbor’s affairs. The Administration has made a major effort this year to reach out Syria, sending a number of delegations to Damascus and making clear that better ties with the United States are possible if Syria changes its ways. Yet we should recall that it has been just four years since Mr. Hariri emerged onto the political stage after his father, Rafik Hariri, was murdered in a bombing. Reports indicate that suicide bombers continue to cross the Syrian border into Iraq. And Syria maintains its hostility to Israel and its close ties to the government of Iran. We must be clear that there must be real change on these issues in order for Syria to enjoy significantly warmer relations with the United States.

“Some Americans might reasonably ask why. Why should we care about the freedom and democratic aspirations of the Lebanese people? What matter is it of ours? Don’t we have enough problems here at home, without spending our time and attention on the affairs of a small country far from our shores?”

In answering this, I’d return to the theme with which I set out these brief remarks. We have learned since the attacks of 9/11 that instability in such places is not often confined to its borders. In lands where repression and despair are rife, intolerance and extremism grows in the hearts of some – and violence in the minds of a few. In Lebanon, as in so many other places around the world, the population aspires to something better than to be pulled from side to side by a thuggish and cruel militia. The vast majority of the Lebanese people want only that which we here in America desire – the freedom and security to build, through their talents and industry, a better life for themselves and their children. As Americans, we must demonstrate that we stand beside them in this hope. As we commemorate today the terrible acts of a small group dedicated to extinguishing this very ideal throughout the world, we should, I believe, rededicate ourselves and our policies to advancing this noble goal.”