

# Syria, Iran, Influence Lebanon Vote

Contributed by Newsmax  
Thursday, 25 October 2007

Thursday, October 25, 2007 2:11 PM  
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A U.S. ambassador in Beirut fears the worst for Lebanon — that elections for a new president will be postponed to allow time for Iran to place a straw man candidate, or will be canceled altogether, causing unrest in the unstable region.

“I am worried for Lebanon,” U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey David Feltman told a visiting delegation of U.S. Christian leaders in a mountain hideaway north of Beirut.

Unlike some of the alarmist voices being raised here by Christians and Muslims alike, Feltman said he was less worried by the prospect of a civil war, which he doubted would erupt, than by the “missed opportunity” of the parliament failing to elect a new president.

## Straw Man for President

Parliament had been scheduled to meet on Tuesday, Oct. 23, to elect a new president, but the meeting was canceled on Sunday night once it was clear that no political deal had been cut, well-informed Lebanese sources told Newsmax in Beirut.

Syria and Iran are hoping to use local proxies to elect a president who will do their bidding when parliament next meets on Nov. 12.

If that fails, their plan B is to prevent the election altogether, a move that many prominent Lebanese leaders interviewed this week believe will demoralize the country and could provoke a new exodus of Lebanese professionals.

Top on the Iranian and Syrian agenda is to elect a candidate who will prevent the conclusions of an international tribunal established to investigate the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005 from being made public.

Initial leaks of those conclusions have suggested substantial evidence implicating top Syrian government leaders in the plot.

The United States has thrown in its lot with the Cedars Revolution, the mass movement that coalesced after the Hariri assassination and that ultimately forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon two months later.

Known as the March 14 coalition, after the date their mass protests against the Syrian occupation began, the Cedars Revolution leadership cut across the traditional political divide, bringing together Muslim and Christian leaders who had opposed each other in the past.

Walid Jumblatt, a key leader of the Cedars Revolution, told reporters in Washington, D.C. on Sunday before returning to Lebanon that Hezbollah also was involved in the conspiracy to assassinate Hariri and other prominent Lebanese leaders.

His statement was immediately criticized by Hezbollah in Beirut, which called him a “Jewish agent,” a term they applied to Hariri just weeks before the former prime minister was assassinated.

Feltman has also been tarred with the pro-Israel brush.

A profile of the ambassador that aired on a Lebanese TV station this past Sunday said he was Jewish, had been stationed in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and was working on behalf of Israel.

The report also said he was close to Richard Perle, a prominent neo-conservative who is Jewish.

Feltman knew the reporter who did the profile, and laughed it off. “She said that Jeff Feltman was a Jew, but the real Jeffrey David Feltman happens to be a Presbyterian from Greenville, Ohio,” he said.

## Help for Christians

Former South Carolina Gov. David Beasley, who met with Feltman and with key leaders in the Lebanese Christian community as part of a fact-finding mission this week, said the television report on the U.S. ambassador was not mere yellow journalism.

“We know anecdotally that this is a clear death threat,” Beasley told Newsmax in Beirut.

Beasley thanked Feltman for the work he and his embassy has been doing to help the estimated 25,000-50,000 displaced Iraqis now in Lebanon. Approximately 20 percent of the Iraqis here are Christians, and many fled after working for the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq.

He contrasted the efforts of the U.S. embassy in Beirut to those that his fact-finding mission had uncovered in Amman, Jordan, where refugees universally complained of distant, even arrogant treatment by embassy officials, especially U.S. consular officers and Jordanian security staff. “It’s truly refreshing to see a U.S. ambassador who reaches out to the local community as he is doing,” Beasley stated. “I have met with U.S. ambassadors all over the world, and this man is a good one.”

Feltman also won praise from local leaders for his forward-leaning role in helping Lebanese Christians and Muslims find common ground in opposing the Syrian and Iranian occupation. “Ambassador Feltman is one of the true heroes of the Cedars Revolution,” said Roger Eddé, a businessman and prospective presidential candidate.

Feltman’s biggest problem may be in convincing the Cedars Revolution leaders that the United States will remain committed to a free Lebanon, as Democrats increase pressure on the Bush administration.

“We have no doubts as to the White House policy toward Lebanon,” Lebanese forces leader Dr. Samir Geagea told Newsmax in an interview at his heavily-guarded compound near Bkirké, in the Christian mountains above Beirut. “But we have doubts as to what he can accomplish as a lame duck.”

Geagea praised Feltman, and said it had been “a long time since we have had a U.S. ambassador like this . . . The United States is doing good these days in Lebanon with the Christians.”

Salim Zeenni, president of the American Lebanese Chamber of Commerce in Beirut, had hearty praise for Feltman: “Ambassador Feltman is one of the best U.S. ambassadors we have ever had,” he told Newsmax. “You really feel that he is trying to help us find a way to get out of this situation.”

#### Land Grab

The “situation” that so worries the Lebanese is the steady but covert return of the Syrians, despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops two years ago, and the growing presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran through its proxies, Hezbollah.

Hezbollah front-men are rumored to have spent more than \$1 billion over the past two years to buy up land in the Christian mountains north of Beirut. The land buy has so alarmed Christian leaders that some have banded together to raise funds to keep the land in Christian hands.

“If we lose the land, we will have nothing in one hundred years,” said Robert Kanaan, a board member of the newly-formed Lebanese Christian Congress.

The Lebanese are known for their resourcefulness, and their ability to rebuild after war has destroyed their homes, villages, and cities. But as they watch the gradual but seemingly relentless expansion of the Syrian and Iranian grip on their homeland, they are worried as never before.

“We are sprinters,” Kanaan said. “But the Iranians are marathon-runners. This is why we are so worried.”

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