

Lebanon: The Last Frontier

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Why Lebanon Matters

Lebanon is the last frontier to reverse the trend of instability in the Middle East. Despite American fatigue in the region, the United States cannot afford to lose Lebanon as the consequences will be catastrophic for our national security interests in the region. Whether we like it or not, the burden will fall on the U.S. because what happens in the Middle East does not stay in the Middle East. As the U.S. seeks a sustainable path to reduce the presence of American troops in the region and protects Americans from terrorism, the surest way to do so is to strengthen America’s diplomatic and development efforts to address these challenges.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks marked a strategic shift in U.S. relations with the Middle East. The development of democratic institutions and good governance assistance as tools to support political pluralism gained traction. Unfortunately, momentum was soon lost given the failures of imposed nation-building from outside. In Lebanon, however, there is currently a homegrown movement that presents a real opportunity for the U.S. to show how channeling funding towards civil-society organizations can help strengthen those fighting the corrupt regime without the blunders of previous wars.

The undisputed link between corruption and illicit activities fuels the widespread reach of terrorists. Good governance that offers the region’s youth accountability, transparency and improved socio-economic political conditions is the thread that links the protests from Lebanon to Iraq. Just as the 2005 Cedar Revolution inspired waves of protest in the region (Iran 2009) (Arab uprisings 2010), a wave of more freedom-yearning resilient and media savvy protesters are currently paving the way for new revolts in the region. By launching a strategy that ensures the success of the goals of the revolution in Lebanon, the U.S. will increase the chances for a shift in the balance-of-power from tyranny to a pluralism that will reverberate across the region.

Impact of U.S. Leadership

Lebanon is a microcosm of the Middle East. Therefore, the results of successful U.S. diplomatic leadership in Lebanon will be felt across the region. Iranian influence will be thwarted, prospects for regional peace will be enhanced, and a worsening humanitarian migrant crisis will be averted. Albeit with a short window of opportunity, the U.S. has a historical chance to positively shape the outcome of this indigenous and organic movement for change that will yield high returns at low risk. By implementing strategic diplomacy and foreign aid that is reflective of American values, properly vetted and channeled more effectively, stability can be fostered in the region. Lebanon is the last frontier for the U.S. to restore its leadership in the Middle East without one boot on the ground. The priorities of geo-political interests in Asia does not mean we are only

left with the choice between two extremes, endless wars and walking away. A middle path can be forged that does not cede the region to adverse hegemonic powers like Iran, Russia and China.

The primary goal of U.S. policy to Lebanon now should be to widen the scope of targeted sanctions, to the greatest extent possible recapture looted funds, strengthen the LAF as a beacon of stability with conditions that call for the protections of protesters, and aggressively channel support to help organize the opposition for elections in Spring of 2022.

What Can Congress Do?

- **Sanctions:** A bipartisan letter from the Chairs and Ranking Members of the pertinent committees in the House and Senate with Global Magnitsky Act (GMA) jurisdiction calling for the Administration to widen its scope of targeted sanctions on corrupt individuals that give political cover and legitimacy to Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs);
- **Blacklist Corrupt Officials:** One way of reducing the power of corrupt officials and FTOs in Lebanon is to raise the stakes and consider blacklisting individuals who participate in corruption or give cover to FTOs by not engaging with them and/or revoking their visas.
- **Foreign Assistance:** U.S. Economic Support Funds (ESF) are channeled by USAID through NGOs. This policy should be maintained so that aid is going to the people who need it the most and not to a corrupt regime. The U.S. can encourage and sustain the resilience of the protest movement by announcing the possibility of a direct assistance package to a future government that demonstrates transparency, accountability and is free from armed militias and FTOs.
 - Given the elections are scheduled to happen in Spring of 2022, a bipartisan bill that authorizes U.S. assistance to the political reconstruction of Lebanon that emphasizes good governance, anti-corruption and women's rights would be timely.
- **Strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF):** Continue supporting the LAF as a beacon of stability but ensure that any U.S. assistance to the LAF is contingent on the protection of the protesters. The U.S. should accelerate this support to meet these demands.