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“Update on the Situation in Lebanon”
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman
House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

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 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 every one 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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