

Policy Forum Report: Lebanon November 8, 2012

Background

On November 8, 2012, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the current situation in Lebanon and its connection to Syria. The following is a summary of the views expressed and insights that emerged from that discussion.

The Lebanese-Syrian Relationship

Lebanon is a diverse and complex conflict zone, often affecting—and affected by—other regional tensions, particularly those relating to Syria. Historically, many Syrians believe that they and the Lebanese are two people of the same country; however, there is a strong sense of nationalism within Lebanon itself, despite its challenging mix of peoples and religious sects. The common perception in Lebanon is that Syria has always been engaged in Lebanon in some manner for good or for ill. Syria's military occupation of the country, which ended with the Cedar Revolution of 2005, represents a recent case in point. There is also widespread suspicion in Lebanon that Syria was involved in the recent assassinations of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 and of Lebanon's Security Chief, General Wissam al-Hassan, in October 2012.

The Effect of Syrian Violence on Lebanon

Participants held varying views on the degree to which conflict in Lebanon reciprocally fuels the violence in Syria. Some felt Lebanon's security is a precondition to peace in Syria and advocated stronger enforcement of the Lebanese-Syrian border. Others felt that tighter border controls would have a debilitating impact on the Syrian refugees currently pouring into Lebanon. There are thought to be at least 100,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, which far surpasses the number in neighboring countries. Combined with the estimated 450,000 Palestinian refugees already incountry, this places an enormous humanitarian burden on Lebanon.

By the same token, collapse of the Assad regime could have a significant impact on Lebanese demographics. Lebanese Christians constitute about 35% of the population, and are the last Christian population in the region that has a large constituency and significant political representation in their country's rule. A major influx of either Muslim or Christian refugees into Lebanon if post-Assad sectarian violence erupts could tip the current balance of proportional

representation, as well as provoke added sectarian conflict in Lebanon. Thus, Syrian challenges, including potential post-Assad civil war or sectarian violence and the probability of an influx of violent extremist groups into Syria, will most assuredly affect developments in Lebanon.

Role of Regional Actors

Assad is not likely to step down without Russian or Chinese pressure, which neither country appears willing to exert. Iran is even less likely to encourage Assad to yield power since he has provided an invaluable prop to the Iranian regime. Looking to enhance its profile in the region and adversely impacted by cross-border violence, Turkey may increasingly attempt to influence the Syrian conflict.

U.S. Role and Policy Options

The United States has limited ability to influence the Syrian government and lacks the resources, capacity, and political will for military involvement. Syrian requests have ranged from direct military intervention (by those doing the actual fighting) to more limited military intervention coupled with assistance in building a new government (by the diaspora), to the provision of weapons (by certain armed groups), to humanitarian aid. To address the immediate safety of Syrians and Lebanese near the border, suggestions offered by some participants included the creation of a no-fly zone, the development of safe spaces nearer to the border, or the installation of missile defense capabilities to provide protection for certain villages. None of these, however, is likely to be totally effective.

It was also recommended that the United States increase its efforts to address the refugee problem in Lebanon, which could include assisting the Lebanese government in supporting them, encouraging improvement of conditions in the camps, and persuading other nations to support the efforts of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While the UNHCR has been the primary mechanism through which America has provided support to the refugees, some nations hesitate to use this channel because they receive no public credit for their aid.

Many participants also recommended that the United States explore what it could do to secure Russian cooperation in pressuring Assad to step down. Key Russian interests in Syria include maintaining access to the Mediterranean Sea, its arms sales to Syria, and keeping Syria within its "sphere of influence," while maintaining the regional balance of power. It was suggested that America could explore ways to reassure Russia that it would gain opportunities for new partnerships with a successor regime, provided its support for the existing government hasn't already poisoned the well with the opposition. The United States could also pressure those Gulf States that are funding some of the more radical groups in Syria.

Another key challenge is the uncertainty of what U.S. intervention might lead to after the fall of Assad, which could include weapons falling into the hands of terrorist groups (as happened in Afghanistan and Libya), and the absence of a single cohesive opposition group with which to interact. The U.S. approach has focused on encouraging broader inclusiveness within the Syrian opposition, strengthening civil society organizations and nonviolent political groups both in Syria and the surrounding region, and encouraging Syrian-driven change. Some participants recommended that America continue to push for greater inclusiveness, even if opposition elements protest over too much U.S. interference.

*The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO that prevents and resolves identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.

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¹ Subsequent to this Forum, the United States officially recognized the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as Syria's legitimate representative.

² Toward this end, ICRD has been assisting the Syrian opposition forces (at their request) to reconcile their differences.