



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## “Update on Lebanon”

U.S. House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia  
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2172  
March 24, 2009, 2:00 PM

**Jeffrey Feltman**, the Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs at the Department of State (DoS), appeared before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs to provide an update on U.S. policy toward Lebanon. Mr. Feltman also served as United States Ambassador to Lebanon for over three years.

Subcommittee chairman **Gary Ackerman (D-NY)** began the hearing by noting that U.S. diplomatic engagement with Syria should not compromise our commitment to democracy and peace in Lebanon or to the UN tribunal on the assassination of former prime minister **Rafik Hariri**. **Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA)** expressed his support for U.S. talks with Syria, but said that talking is not enough, and the U.S. must resist Syrian interference in Lebanon. **Rep. Ron Klein (D-FL)** asked what the U.S. response would be if Hezbollah wins a majority in the parliamentary elections scheduled for June, while **Rep. Michael McMahon (D-NY)** inquired about ways the U.S. can help moderate parties deliver tangible benefits for Lebanese citizens.

Mr. Feltman began by asserting the **Obama** administration’s commitment to Lebanese democracy and independence. With aid from the U.S., the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are expanding the government’s control over Lebanon’s territory. He stated that the upcoming elections provided an opportunity for moderate parties and that the outcome would hinge on which parties Lebanon’s Christians support. The U.S. is providing \$10.5 million dollars for carrying out the election, but the administration believes no outside power should interfere with its outcome. DoS does not differentiate Hezbollah’s political, social, and militant wings and is concerned that Hezbollah continues to engage in violence and to receive illegal arms from Syria and Iran. **U.S. support for the next government in Beirut will depend on who wins the election and the policies of the new cabinet.** Mr. Feltman, who was part of the recent U.S. delegation to Syria, also noted that **DoS intends to use talks with Syria to press Damascus not to intervene in Lebanon’s affairs, and will make no deals compromising the Hariri tribunal.**

**Ackerman** mentioned the Syrian government’s public threats to Lebanon and asked how Syria could be deterred from destabilizing Lebanon. Feltman argued that **there would be an international outcry if Syria interfered with the upcoming elections** and noted his Syrian counterparts had affirmed their support for free elections in Lebanon when he met with them in official talks in Damascus. Rohrabacher felt that such assurances were not credible.

**Rohrabacher** also asked if there were any signs that Syria was ready to make peace with Israel, and Feltman pointed to the four informal meetings in the past year between Israeli and Syrian diplomats brokered by Turkey. He later noted that **Syria is trying to have it both ways by talking to Israel**

**while abetting Hamas and Hezbollah** and there was not yet a clear way to get Syria to commit to regional peace.

**Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN)** asked Feltman how Lebanon could disarm Hezbollah. Feltman noted that LAF and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) were now securing the Lebanon-Israel border, which Lebanon's government has not controlled since the 1960s. Disarming Hezbollah will also require international cooperation as well as more responsible behavior by Syria and Iran. **The ultimate antidote to the Hezbollah threat would be a strong and accountable Lebanese government.** Ellison suggested that promoting economic development outside Beirut would also undercut militants and Feltman agreed, arguing that the institutional vacuum leads citizens to turn to Hezbollah, tribal leaders, etc. for social services and protection. The U.S. is therefore providing aid to strengthen local governance.

Ranking Member **Dan Burton (R-IN)** called for the U.S. to place "stringent conditions" on Iran and Syria before we hold talks with them, such as requiring them to stop supporting Hamas and Hezbollah. Otherwise, he claimed, restoring diplomatic relations makes the U.S. look weak and provides political gains for Syria and Iran's "recalcitrant" leaders. He pointed to **Ayatollah Khamenei's** rebuke of President Obama's recent message to Iran. **Feltman said he did not believe talks were a sign of weakness, that diplomacy was just one tool of many**, and that such talks were aimed at ending Iran and Syria's support for Hamas and Hezbollah among other goals. He also interpreted Khamenei's harsh response to Obama as a sign that the overture had "thrown [Khamenei] off balance" politically.

**Rohrabacher** asked what "sticks" the U.S. can use with Syria if diplomacy fails to change their behavior. Feltman said he wanted to avoid that language but that **Syria is extremely isolated and therefore would be eager for the chance to rejoin the international community.** Rohrabacher suggested that the U.S. should threaten to support internal democratic forces to put pressure on Syria and Iran.

**Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA)** – not a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs – observed that in recent years "attempts to pull Lebanon apart have failed". Feltman agreed, noting that, with the exception of Hezbollah's confrontation with the government in May 2008, **violent incidents haven't ignited but have led Lebanon's people to pull together and support their democracy.** Feltman also said that the assassination of a PLO official in Lebanon yesterday was a setback for the country, because he was a moderate who had sought nonviolent solutions and tried to bring Palestinian factions together.

**Rep. Russ Carnahan (D-MO)** asked whether the LAF has made any progress over the last year, in light of U.S. support. Feltman pointed out that, given the pressure on moderate Arab leaders during the Israeli operation in Gaza in January, it was remarkable that the LAF immediately stepped up patrols on the southern border and that militants in southern Lebanon were only able to fire a few rockets into Israel. Ackerman asked about Syria's proposal for a Lebanese unity government. Feltman said it was America's position that no outside power should be making such decisions for the Lebanese. He added that, in his personal view, the Lebanese government's attempts to make decisions by consensus have led to paralysis.