

Jeffrey D. Feltman
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Near Eastern Affairs Bureau
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia
July 29, 2008

Thank you, Mister Chairman, and other distinguished Members of the Committee for inviting me here today and providing the opportunity to discuss recent developments in Lebanon. President Bush and Secretary Rice are committed to supporting a sovereign, democratic and prosperous Lebanon. We will continue to seek full implementation of all UN Security Council resolutions on Lebanon and remain engaged with our partners working in support of this goal.

Now is a crucial stage in the run-up to Lebanon's spring 2009 parliamentary elections. Lebanon has recently emerged from an episode of Hizballah-engineered political deadlock beginning with the November 2006 resignation of six opposition-affiliated ministers in the previous cabinet. This crisis came to a head in May when Hizballah turned its weapons against the Lebanese people. The Doha agreement, which engaged Lebanon's Arab neighbors in helping resolve this political crisis helped to bring this chapter to a close.

Since Doha, Lebanon has made important strides. A re-opened parliament elected President Michel Sleiman on May 25. PM Siniora was asked to form a new government. Lebanese political leaders reached agreement on formation of a new cabinet on July 11, after seven weeks of intense political negotiations. The new 30-member cabinet, headed by Fouad Siniora and forged under the framework established by Doha, is a welcome development in light of the country's recent political impasse. The cabinet is now working to develop a statement outlining the government's policy platform.

Many have noted the majority March 14 coalition conceded a blocking third of cabinet seats in the Doha agreement. We must acknowledge that this agreement was made for Lebanon by Lebanese to help in bringing a resolution to a longstanding political crisis. By taking a step back and placing this development in a broader view, we see that this concession may have less significance on the ground, given that the previous Lebanese cabinet nearly always operated on consensus basis and many decisions require only a simple majority to pass. Significantly, March 14 has retained the Prime Minister and majority in the cabinet, elected a president it supports, and received an agreement to raise

Hizballah's arms in the context of renewed national dialogue. Hizballah has only one minister in the cabinet and for the first time, March 14 has appointed an independent Shia minister, Ibrahim Shamsiddine, to the cabinet, which will make it much more difficult for Hizballah and its allies to assert that they are the sole voice of the Lebanese Shia community.

For his part, President Sleiman played an important role in the cabinet's formation. In his inaugural address, he supported the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and relevant UN Security Council resolutions, as well as his commitment to a national dialogue process that will address creating a national defense strategy that would include Hizballah's arms.

Looking forward, parliamentary elections will be held in spring 2009. The new government will need to work with parliament to implement remaining items from the Doha agreement, including drafting a new electoral law. Serious shortcomings exist in the current electoral framework, which fails to meet international standards in many areas. We are hopeful that the new government will take up this issue and not only encourage adoption of a new electoral law, but pass the necessary reforms to ensure that Lebanon's elections meet international standards and are considered free and fair.

We remain concerned about the destabilizing role of Hizballah and its continuing efforts to build its military capabilities. Arms continue to flow to the group across the Syria-Lebanon border in contravention of United Nations Security Council resolutions. Hizballah also has made a number of statements asserting it will not relinquish its weapons, even if the disputed Sheba'a farms territory is handed over to Lebanon. Hizballah's efforts to establish its own telecommunications network and conduct airport surveillance in Beirut – two issues that triggered the violent crisis in Beirut last May – are lingering examples of its challenge to Lebanon's institutions.

We also are troubled by Hizballah's efforts to exploit the July 16 return to Israel of the bodies of two Israeli soldiers captured in 2006 in exchange for the return to Lebanon of five prisoners, including Samir Kantar, and the remains of nearly 200 fighters. Despite Hizballah's claims that the presence of its arms made the exchange with Israel possible, the reality is that this action resulted from the determined efforts of the UN and its negotiator, working in furtherance of UNSCR 1701 to bring an end to the issue. Although we note this exchange marks the closing of a difficult chapter in Lebanese-Israeli relations, we condemn the egregious crimes committed by Kantar.

We continue to press Syria to normalize its diplomatic relationship with Lebanon, to include exchanging embassies and bilateral delineation of the Lebanon/Syria border. The recent announcement in Paris that there will be an exchange of embassies with Syria is a positive step toward ensuring Syrian respect for Lebanon's sovereignty; however, Syria must move from mere jargon to undertake the concrete actions required to formally establish diplomatic relations in a way beneficial to both countries. We join with President Sleiman in pressing for Syrian cooperation in delineating the common border between Syria and Lebanon. We also continue to press for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias as outlined in UN Security Council resolutions 1559, 1680 and 1701, recognizing this will be a subject of national dialogue.

Turning specifically to the issue of Sheba'a farms, we believe a diplomatic resolution to the dispute would undermine Hizballah's spurious "resistance" credentials and complicate the group's efforts to maintain an armed state-within-a-state. UN Security Council resolution 1701 calls upon the UN Secretary General to develop proposals for the delineation of Lebanon's borders, especially in those areas where the border is disputed or uncertain, including the Sheba'a farms. It also calls in parallel for the disarmament of Hizballah and all Lebanese militias. A diplomatic solution to the Sheba'a farms dispute, beginning with the Syrian-Lebanese delineation of their border would constitute an important step toward implementation of one part of resolution 1701, normalized relations between Syria and Lebanon, and a lasting peace between Israel and Lebanon.

U.S. support for the Lebanese people's aspirations for a sovereign, democratic and stable Lebanon continues through a robust bilateral assistance program. Since 2006, the U.S. has committed over one billion dollars to help Lebanon. Most recently, Under Secretary Burns and U.S. Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Michele Sison represented the United States on June 23 at a donors' conference in Vienna to support Prime Minister Siniora's plan—developed in coordination with the World Bank and the UN Relief and Works Agency—for the reconstruction of the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee camp and the revitalization of adjacent Lebanese communities. The United States is a strong supporter of this initiative, as demonstrated by our initial pledge of \$22 million in Vienna.

In addition, the United States continues working to strengthen the forces of the Lebanese state – the Lebanese Army and the Internal Security Forces. Since 2006, we have committed an aggregate of over \$400 million to help the Lebanese government protect Lebanon's borders, maintain law and order, and confront

threats to the nation's internal security. Capable and credible Lebanese army and police forces that can fight some battles—like last summer's conflict with Fatah al-Islam militants in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp—and deter others, will allow the Lebanese people to live in peace and security without recourse to illegal militias.

Our assistance already has had tangible effects. While sectarian-charged violence of early May posed a challenge beyond the current capabilities of the Lebanese army and police, government forces have worked cooperatively to counter more recent violence in Tripoli and the Beka'a Valley. The Lebanese Army has increased its presence in areas of tension, moving troops with recently delivered U.S.-origin trucks and HMWVVs, and reinforcing them with M113s the United States repaired and refurbished. Lebanese police worked alongside them, putting to use their U.S.-funded training, vehicles, and equipment. Lebanese army and police forces participating in a pilot project to increase security along Lebanon's northern border have successfully intercepted a number of commercial smuggling operations while communicating on new U.S.-funded radios.

Our assistance continues to focus on addressing the more basic needs of these two forces after decades of neglect under Syrian occupation. In 2008, ammunition, small arms, spare parts, vehicles, communications gear, and individual equipment including body armor will constitute the bulk of our deliveries to the Lebanese Armed Forces. In addition, we are committed to addressing the need for more advanced capabilities, and will inaugurate a multi-year comprehensive training program for all echelons of the Lebanese Armed Forces later this year.

Meanwhile, the Internal Security Forces continue to receive U.S.-funded training at the police academy we are helping refurbish, and have deployed their U.S.-funded police vehicles, radios, and duty gear throughout the country.

As we expand provision of equipment and training to these two forces, we have also increased our engagement with their leadership. Acting CENTCOM Commander, General Martin Dempsey, visited Beirut on May 14 to discuss security cooperation with Defense Minister Elias Murr and then-Army Commander Michel Sleiman. He was followed by Under Secretary of Defense Eric Edelman on May 31. From July 13-15, CENTCOM Major General Robert Allardice visited Lebanon to discuss the army's specific equipment and training needs. On March 31, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement David Johnson visited Lebanon to discuss progress in the U.S.-funded training and equipping program for the Internal Security Forces with Prime Minister Siniora, Interior Minister Hassan Sabaa and Internal Security Forces Director General Asraf Rifi. U.S. Charge d'Affaires, a.i. to Lebanon Michele Sison also maintains

regular contact with the leadership of Lebanon's security forces to ensure our assistance is meeting their needs.

Helping Lebanon establish capable and credible security forces to protect the nation's sovereignty and security will require sustained engagement, significant resources, and coordination amongst numerous U.S. government agencies. I thank Congress and particularly the members of this committee for their generous support of our efforts. In addition to the democratic freedoms they have fought so hard to win, the Lebanese people deserve freedom from violence and the threat thereof. The best way to provide it is to strengthen the legitimate security forces of the Lebanese state.

We must continue to support Lebanon. Along with the United Nations, the United States continues to voice its commitment to support the Lebanese people in their goal of a fully sovereign democratic state as outlined in UNSCRs 1559, 1680, and 1701. This goal is not only vital to Lebanon itself, but also to the achievement of peace and stability throughout the region.

Thank you for your time. I would be pleased to address your questions.