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March 24, 2009

**“Update on Lebanon”**  
**Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman**  
**House Subcommittee on the Middle East & South Asia**

Among the great speeches in American history is President Kennedy’s inaugural address in 1960. With the Cold War accelerating toward a catastrophe that almost came in October 1962, Kennedy proposed a new beginning. Addressing “those nations who would make themselves our adversary” the President offered “not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace.”

Cognizant that cynics might misunderstand his intent, President Kennedy reminded all those listening, “that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”

These simple words convey the character of American foreign policy properly understood, and were echoed recently by President Obama who promised even “those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent” that “we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”

I am pleased that we are joined today by Acting Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey D. Feltman, who returned recently from an effort to put into action this approach to our national security. If anyone can deliver the message that engagement with Syria will not be paid for in Lebanese coin—and this is a message that needs to be repeated again and again—it is Ambassador Feltman.

America’s interests in Lebanon can be easily summed up: sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. We want Lebanon to be ruled by the Lebanese, for the Lebanese. A pluralistic democracy in landscape mostly occupied by strongmen and tyrants, Lebanon is, sadly, a canary in the Middle East coal-mine. If Lebanon can be free; if Lebanon can find space for all the different voices and religions and convictions within it; if Lebanon can continue to exist with one foot in the West and the other in the Arab world; if Lebanon can simply be a normal country and not a battleground for outside powers; then our interests, and I think those of most Lebanese, will be fully satisfied.

We seek a partner, not an outpost. We want an ally, not a proxy. And we must continue to aid those Lebanese committed to their country’s freedom from foreign rule or domination.

Lebanon is approaching a crossroads. The elections which will take place in June will have a powerful effect on the country's future, and I believe that we and Lebanon's friends in the international community must be vigilant and active in the days leading to the contest.

The real work of winning the election must be done in Lebanon by the Lebanese. It is their campaign to run, it is their future on the line, and it is their message that must resonate with the electorate. One side can offer a future of peace and prosperity. The other can promise only dogma and destruction. But unless the forces of progress achieve real coordination and meaningful compromise with each other, their prospects both before and after the election will be greatly diminished.

The United States can not and should not interfere in the election. The campaign and election are for the Lebanese to succeed or fail in on their own. But neither should we be impassive. There is much that we can do and should do on the outside to demonstrate that Lebanon's future is not dependent on either militias or mullahs.

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon has begun, and the United States must continue to be a strong advocate for this body. More significantly, in addition to providing funds for its operation, American diplomats, in every country and context, must continue to insist on the Tribunal's continued importance and on the validity of its work. Especially in the Middle East there is a tendency to believe that there is a reality behind reality. So, in word and deed we must continue to make clear that there is no deal on the Tribunal, and there will be no deal on the Tribunal. Period. Full stop.

We need to continue and enhance our support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF). These institutions enjoy strong support throughout Lebanon, and have a pressing mission in battling terrorists activated and armed by foreign powers. I am a strong proponent of maintaining Israel's Qualitative Military Advantage, but there is nothing we are providing to the LAF and ISF that has or will endanger Israel's defense capabilities. There is a very large space between the capabilities needed to effectively challenge the IDF and those needed to tackle a terrorist group like the Fatah al-Islam, that in 2007 held off the LAF for three months in the Nahr al-Bared camp. Even erring on the side of caution, something on which I would insist, the LAF has real needs that I believe we can help fill without endangering Israel.

But we also need to look closely at the points of friction between Israel and Lebanon which pose a significant risk to regional security. One thing we should have learned about the Arab-Israeli conflict is that it rarely gets better on its own, and that problems left unresolved don't ameliorate, but fester. The United States needs to initiate and lead a process to help resolve the immediate conflicts over borders and territory, Lebanese airspace and locating unexploded munitions from 2006. Doing so will not only demonstrate that diplomacy works, but that American assistance can improve security for all sides.

What we, and our friends in Lebanon need to offer is hope; not as a method for solving problems, but as a source of energy and a reason for continuing to struggle for something better. Lebanon's future is not yet written; it doesn't have to be one of civil war and foreign conflict. Lebanon's best and brightest shouldn't have to leave to the country in order to live normal lives. Lebanon's landscape doesn't need to be scarred with wreckage and its leaders need not live in fear of their lives. None of it is necessary. But the Lebanese people will have to choose to make it so. And if they do, they should have no better partner in their efforts than the United States.

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