

# **THE LEBANON UPRISING**

## **And Its Impact on the Region**

Discussion at the National Press Club  
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**Steven M. Schneebaum, Moderator**  
**Introductory Remarks**

When Americans think of pressing issues in the Middle East, we rarely give any thought to Lebanon. It is easy to overlook that small but highly strategic country, when attention is diverted to the civil war and mass atrocities in Syria, the malign and expanding influence of Iran, the Saudi war in Yemen and the blockade of Qatar, and these days the turmoil and apparently uncontrollable violence in Iraq. And of course, the attention of the United States is always focused on the security of Israel, perhaps more now in this time of domestic political uncertainty.

Yet Lebanon is critical to U.S. interests in the region, for at least three major reasons and a host of others:

1. Lebanon has been forced by reasons of geography to absorb literally millions of Syrians fleeing their homes, generating not only a massive humanitarian crisis, but also an economic one, both of which threaten the country's stability;
2. Lebanon's government is dominated by Hezbollah, considered a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union, among others, and thought by many to be a front for the expansionist Iranian regime. Its role as a beachhead for the Iranian theocracy raises serious concerns about Lebanon as an instigator, and not just a victim, of organized international terrorism; and
3. Lebanon borders Israel to the north, and that troubled frontier always poses threats to the security of America's most prominent ally in the Middle East.

Lebanon has not had a stable, functioning, and reliable government for decades. Its economy is in shambles, with unmanageable unemployment, and with access to water and electricity unreliable and largely dependent on criminal elements. Its current account deficit is also out of control; it is one of the most deeply-indebted countries in the world. Austerity programs inexplicably patterned on those that have dramatically failed in developed countries have fared no better in Lebanon. The government of this heavily import-reliant country faces a desperate need to increase revenues, in part to provide for the enormous costs of sustaining refugee inflows. The financial crisis is an existential one.

Yet, as we have seen recently in places as diverse as Chile and Iran, the solution chosen by the government – raising taxes on basic necessities – unsurprisingly has met with mass protests that quickly became violent. Among those services targeted for taxation were social media: the lifeblood of the younger population cohorts that, coincidentally, are those most disposed to take their dissatisfactions to the streets.

Demonstrations across the country in late October were the largest seen since the chaos of 2005. The President's address to the nation on October 31, pleading for calm and promising unspecified reforms such as the reduction of corruption, was met not with acceptance but with more demonstrations. Hezbollah, attempting to evade liability for the failures of governments in which it was a prime participant, has opportunistically played both sides, both supporting and opposing the protests. Strikes, both general and sector-specific, have thoroughly disrupted daily life (service station owners declared an open-ended strike last Thursday, as they demand higher fuel prices, a demand that the government can hardly grant under the circumstances).

Lebanon is well familiar with the consequences of deep ethnic division. The sectarian and political turmoil it has seen for years has never been quieted, and it is hardly surprising that at this moment of general unease, those rivals are once again clamoring for attention. And they are armed.

There are no signs that the violence is being abated, or that the effectively leaderless government has any concrete plans to address the demands of protesters or the life-threatening absence of security throughout the country. As of this morning, the situation can be described only as dire, extremely volatile, and potentially disastrous.

Throughout the Lebanese uprising, the position of the United States has been meek. The Embassy in Beirut has called for calm, but seems to see the most important issue to be the containment of Hezbollah, rather than the restoration of some kind of functioning government, or concern for the consequences of Lebanon's inability to handle the chaos at its eastern border.

Here we have yet another Middle East crisis in which the United States position is equivocal. It is impossible to detect any kind of strategy, any kind of coherence, among the actions taken by the United States vis-à-vis Syria, the Kurdish fighters with whom American soldiers have bled and died, the slaughter and humanitarian crisis committed by Mohammed Bin Salman (whom our President has described as "doing a wonderful job") on the Arabian peninsula, and even the current crisis in Iraq, which many have seen as the inevitable results of 15 years of U.S. presence in that country.

Our panel today will address three issues: the current situation in Lebanon, and what next steps can be anticipated; the role of other Middle Eastern powers (notably Iran and Saudi Arabia) in the crisis; and what the United States is doing, and should be doing, in regard to Lebanon.

Our speakers, in the order of their presentations, are:

1. **Kinana Al Shareef** is currently a freelance reporter, documentary film maker and Middle East researcher, and formerly reported for Orient News. She will discuss the current situation in Lebanon and what is likely to happen next.
2. **Saif Almuthana**, an expert on human rights in the Middle East and a researcher at SAM Rights & Liberties, a non-profit organization based in Geneva that aims to put human rights violations and their perpetrators on the radar screens of international decision-making institutions, will discuss the role that Arab countries and Iran play in Lebanese politics.

3. **Dr. Jeffrey Stacey** is a United Nations consultant, and a former official with the Department of State. He has taught international relations topics at George Washington and Tulane Universities. He has also served as a Chief of Staff at the European Parliament, and a speechwriter in the U.K. House of Commons. He will speak to us about the role of Iran in recent Lebanese history, and in the current uprising.
  
4. **Bassima Alghussein**, the Managing Partner of a global strategies consultancy that she created. Bassima is a Truman National Security Project Political Expert and an Advisory Board Member of Women of Color Advancing Peace & Security, served as a White House-appointed Legislative Affairs Advisor to the U.S. Department of Energy. She is a graduate of the White House Management Leadership Training Program, and she will give us her views on U.S. policy in Lebanon.

After the last of the four presentations, I will open the floor to take your questions for the panelists.