Washington, D.C. - Congressman David Price (D-NC) wrote the following analysis of U.S. policy toward Lebanon for the Center for American Progress's Middle East Bulletin . Price is Chairman of the House Democracy Assistance Commission, which is engaged with the Lebanese parliament to support continued democratic development in the Middle East. He recently visited Lebanon with the Commission, and his impressions of the situation in that country are reflected in his recommendations for U.S. policy.

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Lebanon for Lebanon's Sake

By Rep. David Price (D-NC)

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Lebanon is in trouble. It is no exaggeration to say that its government is on the verge of collapse.

I recently led a delegation of the House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC) to Lebanon as part of our ongoing partnership with that country's parliament. We are working with the parliament to strengthen its essential institutional capabilities, such as its capacities for oversight of the executive branch, budgetary analysis, and independent legislative research. Our work has set the stage for what we hope will be a long-lasting partnership to help the parliament realize its potential as a responsive and effective branch of government.

In this trip, we got a unique, first-hand understanding of the fragility of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government. While we were there, pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud was announcing his plan to dissolve the government and appoint a new, six-member "national salvation government." This plan has not been enacted yet....not yet. But make no mistake: Lebanon is deeply enmeshed in a constitutional crisis of which there is no easy – or even discernible – way out. With presidential elections looming less than three months away, the stakes are rising with each passing day.

During our visit, we met with leaders from nearly every political faction: Prime Minister Siniora, reform leader Saad Hariri, Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, and over 30 members of Parliament (MPs). We heard the constitutional crisis and Lebanon's current situation dissected from every angle. I came away from our visit with four key conclusions about U.S. policy there:

(1) We must support the pro-reform leaders and legislators in Lebanon. We – and especially this administration – have talked a great deal about supporting democracy in the Middle East, but we have done far too little to bolster Prime Minister Siniora and the March 14 bloc in Parliament. As Lebanon continues its rebuilding following last summer's war, the U.S. can help shore up public support for the Siniora government by helping accelerate this work. Of equal importance is the need to help the government extend its reach to all parts of Lebanon, especially the South, where Hezbollah currently runs a de facto social and public services network. Above all, the United States must make it clear that it supports the leaders and the people of Lebanon, not as a piece in a complex regional puzzle, but purely for Lebanon's sake. Now is the time: these leaders are fighting, literally, for their lives.

(2) U.S. support for the Lebanese military is essential. Unlike nearly every institution in Lebanon, the military is a truly cross-sectarian, national institution that enjoys overwhelming support from all sectors of the Lebanese population. It also happens to hold the key to rooting out Sunni extremists, like the Fatah al-Islam militia responsible for the recent conflict, and Hezbollah militants, and for strengthening security along Lebanon's porous borders. The U.S. should be working overtime to help train and equip the Lebanese military, strengthening it to the point where it can assume responsibility and control over the entirety of Lebanese territory.

(3) Peace in Lebanon is directly linked to peace in the region. There is no shortage of reasons to pursue peaceful resolutions to long-standing disputes in the region like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but add this to the list. Lebanon is deeply affected by other regional disputes, especially those involving its nearest neighbors, Israel and Syria. A resolution – which a forthcoming U.N. report may make imminent – on the dispute among Israel, Lebanon, and Syria over the Shebaa

Farms territory would significantly deflate Hezbollah's raison d'etre. Achieving peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would have an inestimable impact on the more than 400,000 Palestinian refugees living in camps in Lebanon. And an agreement checking Iran's worrying ascendance in the region would help to ensure that events like last summer's conflict are not repeated.

Hezbollah has repeatedly justified its well-armed militia on the back of two assertions: first, that it is a legitimate resistance against Israeli occupation of Shebaa Farms and, second, that the Lebanese military is too weak to protect Lebanon's sovereignty. It is naive to think that Hezbollah would suddenly give up its weapons should these justifications disappear. But, in military terms, Hezbollah's most important center of gravity is its public support. Undermining that support attacks Hezbollah at its most vulnerable point.

(4) Lebanon cannot be a bargaining chip. The previous recommendation cannot be pursued without this important qualification: regardless of the potential benefits agreements negotiated with Syria or Iran might bring, Lebanon cannot be used as a bargaining chip. The United States must make clear that Lebanon's sovereignty and autonomy are not on the table for any price, including discussions about Shebaa Farms, a peace agreement between Israel and Syria, the implementation of the U.N. Tribunal examining assassinations of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and other Lebanese leaders, Iraq's stability, or Iran's nuclear program. We must stand firm with Lebanon, no matter how attractive the prize.

As long as the U.S. and its allies are firm on this point, there is significantly less reason for anxiety about developing diplomatic initiatives, like Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's recent discussions with her Syrian counterpart and the movements toward a resumption of Israeli-Syrian talks. The latter talks hold both risk and promise. No one can doubt that, if talks between those nations in 2000 had come to fruition, Lebanon's subsequent history would have been much different. The right kind of resolution between Israel and Syria would hold tremendous benefits for Lebanon; in fact, such a resolution will almost certainly have to precede any lasting resolution of issues between Israel and Lebanon.

The United States cannot and should not try to solve Lebanon's problems on its own. Lebanese leaders must take a stand – if not against Syria, then at least for their own country and its institutions. Nabih Berri's refusal to allow parliament to convene or to allow elections replacing assassinated MPs is an embarrassment and an insult to the institution over which he presides. I have also been perplexed by General Michel Aoun – once one of the most vocal opponents to Syrian dominance in Lebanon – and his followers, who now find themselves aligned with Hezbollah and in rejection of the sitting government. General Aoun and other leaders must

stand up for the good of their country and demand a government that works according to the constitution and on behalf of the Lebanese people.

The next few months pose several questions that will undoubtedly define Lebanon's future. Will the competing factions find a way out of the current constitutional crisis, or will the current stalemate continue indefinitely? Will Lebanon elect a president who is a true national leader, or will the next Lebanese president answer to Damascus? Will Syria successfully intimidate leaders in Lebanon and at the U.N. and prevent the Hariri tribunal from moving forward? Will the U.N.'s reexamination of Shebaa Farms and Israel's discussions with Syria yield progress on that decisive issue?

These are questions that will resonate throughout the country and the region, and all are questions to which the United States should be an active participant in developing an answer. But as we engage with the Lebanese people in seeking these answers, we should not fall into the trap of considering them through the lens of our policies toward Syria, Iran, Israel, or any other regional interest. Each time I return to Lebanon, I am more and more convinced that we need to treat Lebanon, not as a proxy for some other challenge, but as a critical interest in its own right. Throughout its long history, Lebanon has been a vital center in the Middle East, a cornerstone for economic and political vitality. Let us treat it as such, working to support Lebanon for Lebanon's sake.

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