LEBANON

Background

Lebanon is a historic and vital partner of United States. Through a difficult civil war and countless external interferences, the United States has supported Lebanon’s unity, independence, and territorial integrity. The U.S. has maintained a strong presence in Lebanon through its close relationships with universities and academic centers, like the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University, as well as a range of economic and military assistance programs designed to support Lebanon’s institutional development, economic prosperity, and civil society. Today, Lebanon remains a model of secular pluralism despite the ongoing conflict in neighboring Syria, and the looming presence of the self proclaimed “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL).

As of September 2015, 1,078,338 million Syrians were registered as refugees in Lebanon; however, accounting for the several hundred thousand refugees that are unregistered, the figure is believed to be closer to 1.6 million people. Among this new wave of refugees are Palestinians who were previously living in Syria. Over 50,000 Palestinians are now doubly displaced, leaving Syria for Lebanon and joining the 450,000 Palestinian refugees whose community has resettled in Lebanon since as early as 1948. Palestinians and Syrians arriving in Lebanon are in need of critical support. According to the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan, a report developed by the government of Lebanon and the United Nations, “nearly 90 per cent of registered refugees needed support to register, find shelter, food, and meet basic material needs” since seeking refuge in Lebanon. This tragic human tide has flooded Lebanon placing severe strains on its economy and its resources—housing, employment, health, education, and public and social services—while posing a direct threat to civil order. The U.S. Department of State recently announced that Lebanon will receive $75.5 million in U.S. humanitarian aid to fund Syrian refugee programs and “makeshift camps.” A portion of the funding will also be distributed to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Lebanon has received $965 million in U.S. humanitarian aid since 2012.

While we remain concerned with the continued war in Syria and the humanitarian needs of the Syrian refugees, attention must also be paid to the dangers and hardships facing Lebanon.

Lebanon has become “the forgotten front” since all too often, the ongoing conflict within Lebanon is ignored in discussions about the war against ISIL. The immediate danger, however, is real. Lebanon is drowning and may not recover unless attention is paid to the impact the last four years have had on the country and the Lebanese people. As a member of the international coalition fighting ISIL, Lebanon needs U.S. support both to win the war and to provide for those who have been affected by the conflict.

Syria’s war, too, has started to spill over into Lebanon. Groups like Jabhat al Nursa and ISIL have attacked several Lebanese towns, are holding 30 members of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) hostage, and have engaged in terror attacks against Lebanese targets. To date, the LAF has been successful in containing this threat.

The Problem

The 2014 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community presented a dire picture: “The conflict in neighboring Syria is the primary driver of the sectarian unrest and terrorist attacks
in Lebanon; already this year, sectarian fighting and political assassinations in Tripoli, Beirut, and Sidon have killed more than a hundred Lebanese. Increased frequency and lethality of violence in Lebanon could erupt into sustained and widespread fighting.” The LAF is actively fighting extremist groups at Lebanon’s borders.

Concerns with Lebanon’s infrastructural and resource capabilities have existed for several years. However with the recent influx of Syrian refugees, strains on water, electricity, food, job opportunities, and shelter are extensive. Public institutions cannot cope with the added volume of needs in a country where the development challenges pre-existed the crisis, and where the private sector traditionally delivers many public services. Public institutions face a widening gap between scale of emerging challenges and their capacities to meet them.

Lebanese communities across the country are incapable of meeting increased demand on scarce resources, even to satisfy their most basic needs. With a lack of strategy for managing both Syrians entering the country and the demand on internal resources, and without any immediate prospects of resolving the conflict, the Syrian refugee crisis will continue to consume Lebanon, its institutions, and its people for the foreseeable future.

Moving Forward

• Members of Congress and the Administration must continue to support efforts to maintain and strengthen the U.S-Lebanese bilateral relationship.

• The U.S. must continue to support development aid initiatives that are needed to sustain Lebanese communities that currently host and will continue to host refugees for the foreseeable future.

• The U.S. must ensure the protection of Lebanon’s borders from the war next door.

• Directly support the government through funding to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Agricultural affairs. These are the specific agencies running programs to meet the needs of Lebanese host communities.