

FDD Event with Amal Mudallali, Tony Badran, John Hannah and Hassan Mneimneh
June 15, 2012

Before a capacity crowd on Friday, June 15, 2012, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies hosted a panel discussion on the future of Lebanon, and the potential for the Syrian civil war to spill over the shared border between the two countries. **Amal Mudallali**, who serves as a foreign policy advisor to Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri, joined FDD research fellow and *Now Lebanon* columnist **Tony Badran**. **Hassan Mneimneh**, Senior Transatlantic Fellow for the Middle East and North Africa at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, also participated. The event was moderated by **John Hannah**, a senior fellow at FDD and national security advisor to former Vice President Richard B. Cheney.

“Other than the Syrian people themselves, no other country has a greater stake in what happens in Syria than Lebanon,” **Hannah** said in his opening remarks. “The Alawite dictatorship in Syria has had a major effect on Lebanon, and the unraveling and collapse of that dictatorship will have an equally profound effect.”

“Lebanon is ground zero for the spillover of the Syrian crisis,” he continued, and could yet see a “broader, bloodier and far more dangerous regional conflagration that poses a real and present danger to international peace and security. Lebanon is a witch’s brew where all the ingredients come together: A weak and fractured state, boiling sectarian tensions, rising extremism and fundamentalism, Hezbollah’s arms, Iranian regional ambitions, and Israeli concerns and insecurities.”

Hannah also noted the risk of Syria’s chemical and biological arsenal and ballistic missiles falling into the wrong hands, “whether by design, or by accident.”

Amal Mudallali responded that Lebanon is in better shape than most observers assume. “There no party in Lebanon that has an interest in civil war,” she said. “The party that has the most weapons and power is Hezbollah, and it’s not in their interest to have a war.”

Nonetheless, Mudallali acknowledged, sectarian tensions are rising. Lebanon’s Sunnis feel a sense of empowerment after the Arab Spring, she said, and they don’t like what Hezbollah has been doing for the past 15 years.

Ironically, embattled Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad has appealed to the United Nations to stop the flow of Lebanese weapons across the border -- much as the United States, its European allies and Israel have long appealed to Assad to stop the flow of weapons from Syria to Hezbollah.

Hassan Mneimneh lamented Lebanon’s lack of national cohesion. “The 14th of March, 2005 was the true Lebanon,” he said, referring to the revolution which saw Rafik Hariri and his pro-American March 14 coalition rise to power, prompting Syrian forces to withdraw from Lebanese soil.

In Mneimneh's view, there are "a couple moments in Lebanese history where we would have been able to transcend this fragmentation" and create "an integrated Lebanese core."

"The liberation in the south in 2000," was one such opportunity, he argued, "forcing an occupation army out of Lebanon," followed by the Syrian withdrawal in 2005. "Again, we did not capitalize on it. It could have been our national moment."

There is "no national project in Lebanon," **Mneimneh** lamented, raising the possibility of a Syrian collapse resulting in a situation like "Somalia, with northwestern Syria an Alawite state, and the rest in hell."

Tony Badran spoke to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's concerns in Lebanon. "There's a dilemma for the Assad regime, because Lebanon has functioned as a sort of strategic depth for the Free Syrian Army and other fighters," right on the border with the Alawite enclave in northwestern Syria, he said.

"This is why he has moved to make trouble" for Lebanese prime minister Najib Mikati and president Michel Suleiman, **Badran** continued, "to push them, to embarrass them further, to take an unambiguous stance in support of the Syrian regime, and not this policy of dissociation where Lebanon remains neutral."

"Assad wants to raise the cost of Tripoli's support for the rebels," **Badran** said, distilling the dictator's policies to: "You will be facing constant struggles and constant fighting until you stop."

"Sheikh Abdel Wahad, who was apparently very active in support of the Syrian revolution, was essentially assassinated by a hit squad," **Badran** said. "It wasn't Hezbollah, or a Syrian group, but a hit commissioned by Hezbollah's allies in the Lebanese military."

"Hezbollah doesn't want to be in the spotlight," **Badran** explained. "It's trying to hide behind the Lebanese army."

Hannah asked the panelists about different contingencies for Lebanon in the event that the Assad regime disappears.

"Iran has invested heavily in Lebanon. It is the flagship of Iranian power," **Mneimneh** said. "Iran is unlikely to let that investment go to waste."

"If the new Syria is hostile to Hezbollah, that's a problem," he continued. "Iran would be faced with a choice of letting that investment [disappear]...or using it at some point or another. And using it might be more interesting."

Badran argued that the kidnapping of Lebanese Shiites in Syria shows that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah no longer enjoys the same influence he used to. Nasrallah has

begun urging his supporters not to travel by land through Syria anymore, and to fly instead.

Badran speculated that the Iranians would want to keep Hezbollah for its utility as a retaliatory option, in the event someone attacks their nuclear program, but added, “the problem is that you can only use this once.”

“The change in doctrine of the Israeli military from the 2006 war to today,” **Badran** continued, “means that the devastation this time around is going to be total. Any village now that served as a logistical hub for Hezbollah will be treated as a military target.”

“In light of Hezbollah’s influence in the Lebanese army,” asked Eli Lake from *Newsweek/The Daily Beast*, “what’s the status of U.S. military assistance to the Lebanese army, and what should it be, given these new political facts?”

“American assistance to the Lebanese army is continuous,” **Mudallali** responded. “And I think it should continue, because the Lebanese army is still the only institution that can safeguard security in Lebanon and act as a counterbalance to Hezbollah, even if it’s a lot smaller.”

“Hezbollah’s influence in the army is calculated to be up to a level where it would still be logical and appropriate for the Americans to continue support,” **Mneimneh** added, “because the army is needed as a stabilizing force. But ultimately, the situation is not tenable long term.”

In Mneimneh’s view, the situation in Lebanon bears an increasing resemblance to that of Iraq in 2005, shortly before Abu Musab al-Zarqawi began killing Shiites in hopes of sparking a sectarian war and uniting the Sunnis behind him.

“Ultimately, the U.S.’ interest in Lebanon is to keep things nice and quiet,” **Badran** said, but “there is real strategic confusion about what the U.S. wants in Syria.”

“If the U.S. wants to support the Syrian opposition” and enable it “to get lethal aid through neighboring countries, it might lead to clashes,” **Badran** concluded. “On the other hand, if you don’t want Lebanon to be part of that logistical effort, then you find yourself in the same position as Hezbollah, trying to hide behind the Lebanese army as a stabilizing force.”

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