
The Lebanese Link: Building a Comprehensive Regional Peace Roundtable Discussion - Summary and Ideas for Action

The Regional Context

Poised as the country is on Israel's northern border, the Obama Administration cannot afford to ignore Lebanon if it intends to aggressively pursue a comprehensive regional peace. On 26 February the Aspen Institute held a roundtable discussion on Lebanon's place within the framework of a comprehensive Middle East peace process. Discussion leaders included UN Special Envoy to the Middle East Terje Rød-Larsen, Lebanese Kataeb Party Second Vice President Dr. Selim Sayegh, and Tripoli MP Misbah al-Ahdab, with al-Arabiya Bureau Chief Hisham Melhem moderating.

It was agreed that, where before the Arab-Israeli conflict was the center of gravity, there are now four major interrelated epicenters of conflict in the region: growing Iranian hegemony, Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Syrian-Lebanese conflict. Many regional players see Iran as the primary threat to regional peace and stability. All these issues are mirrored in Lebanon itself, imbuing the upcoming June 7 parliamentary elections with regional importance. Three possible regional scenarios were identified: continued "business as usual," a new diplomatic breakthrough, or a regional war. Hezbollah and its allies are currently within striking distance of winning a parliamentary majority, and thus control of the Lebanese government, increasing the chance of a regional war.

Building Towards Peace

Several of the participants urged Lebanon to get engaged on issues involving the Arab-Israeli conflict to ensure its voice is not the only one going unheard. Several points of conflict exist between Lebanon and Israel. From the Lebanese side, Israel's continued occupation of the northern half of the border town of Ghajar and the Shebaa Farms are top concerns, along with obtaining the full maps of cluster munitions and landmines in South Lebanon and the regular violations of Lebanese airspace by Israeli jets. From the Israeli side, Hezbollah remains a heavily armed and openly hostile force on its northern border, and it and its Palestinian militia allies continue to sporadically fire rockets into northern Israel. Neither side accepts settling the over 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon within its borders.

The international community can help counterbalance the appeal of the Hezbollah-led coalition by supporting peaceful negotiations and ensuring that good faith efforts are rewarded in kind. One participant cited recent polls showing that the Lebanese public, across all sectarian lines, favors negotiating with Israel if those negotiations can bear fruit, and support Hezbollah's becoming a purely political entity. But for peace talks to bear fruit there must first be a will and capability to deliver on any promises made.

Ideas for Action

The participants agreed that there are some moves could be made now to help build the will and capacity on both sides to move towards direct peace negotiations:

- Given the regional nature of the conflict, participants supported a new and updated multilateral architecture along the lines of the 1991 Madrid talks. Building on the Arab Initiative announced in Beirut in 2002, such an approach could provide the necessary political cover for Lebanon to engage Israel. This could occur in the context of simultaneous bilateral talks as well. As an added incentive for Israel, Lebanon could propose a multilateral agreement on water resource management as part of the process.
- As more “shovel ready” confidence building measures, participants suggested that the international community move to resolve lingering border disputes in Ghajar and Shebaa through negotiations via a third party such as the United Nations, which is already working with both sides on the related technical details.
 - It was thought that negotiations on Ghajar would be straightforward, but the Shebaa Farms dispute will be more complicated as there is no clear definition of the territory. However, sketching out a process, were Beirut to agree to the latest UN study showing parts of the Shebaa Farms to be Lebanese, that agreement would be taken to Damascus for approval and then finally to Tel Aviv. A UN mandate would then replace Israeli forces, who would pull out of the agreed area.
- Participants favored further empowering the Lebanese Armed Forces as the legitimate force for national defense to further reduce the appeal of Hezbollah as an armed “resistance.” It was felt that focusing solely on the LAF was not enough, and more comprehensive state building efforts should occur across the institutional spectrum.
- Several participants suggested pursuing “track two” diplomacy as well, to engage the people on all sides and build constituencies for peace. Building partnerships that empower moderates could provide needed boosts both before the elections and in the longer term run-up to renewed negotiations.
- Participants emphasized that progress on any or all of these fronts before June 7, 2009, would provide a significant boost to Lebanese moderates’ electoral chances, and consequently would improve the chances of further progress towards a regional peace.