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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (0850)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Good morning, everyone.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we'll continue with our briefing on the situation in Syria.

I want to welcome our friend on the line, our colleague Nadim Gemayel, member of Parliament from the National Assembly of the Lebanese Republic.

Sir, we certainly welcome you here today. We thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk to our committee.

As you know, this is a public meeting. We have been studying the situation in Syria. We most definitely look forward to your insight as to what has been happening in the region.

We'll give you the floor, and then we'll go around the table and have our colleagues ask some questions for the next 55 minutes or so.

Sir, welcome. I'm going to turn the floor over to you.

Mr. Nadim Gemayel (Member of Parliament, National Assembly of the Lebanese Republic, As an Individual): Thank you very much for your kind invitation.

I just want to tell you that I really appreciate your invitation, as a member of Parliament here in Lebanon. We need big support from the international community in order to apply a real independent and sovereign regime in Lebanon, with all that is happening today in the area—especially in Syria, which is trying as much as it can to influence the interior political situation in Lebanon.

I'm going to speak in French.

[Translation]

I have prepared a brief presentation that provides somewhat of a summary of the Syrian influence in Lebanon and how that influence has developed from the 1960s to today. I will also address what Syria's objective in Lebanon has essentially been since the Ba'ath Party came to power, with President Assad taking office in 1970, and over the 42 years of the Assad family's presidency: 30 years for the father and 12 years for the son. I will also explain how that regime has done its utmost to exercise total domination over Lebanon, and especially how it has tried to eliminate the Christians of Lebanon, this being a major issue today.

As you know, the big question that arises in Syria today, which we will address later, is whether the Christians are in danger: whether they will be safe in Syria in the post-Assad period. These are questions that I will try to answer as objectively as possible, and most importantly as knowledgeably as possible about what the Syrian regime has committed in Lebanon.

If you do not mind, I will start with a quick summary of the situation between Lebanon and Syria.

First, I would like to say that Lebanon has never been a country that was annexed as part of Syria or a territory under Syrian control, although Syria has always wanted to annex Lebanon to Syria.

Lebanon achieved independence well before the Syrians. It secured independence from the French in 1943, while Syria gained its own independence some years later. Before that, the territories of Syria and Lebanon were under the Ottoman Empire, and they were then administered by the French. During those periods, relations between the two countries experienced highs and lows, in several phases, until 1964 when the Ba'ath Party took power.

In 1970, when President Hafez al-Assad took power by force in Syria, by his semi-coup d'état, he decided to attack Lebanon directly and control it by force.

This control by force has been marked by several phases over the centuries, but all of the phases are identical. The Syrians have always tried to control Lebanon and exercise total domination over it. They did this first by force of arms, and then mainly by using factions, groups, political parties or military parties in Lebanon and supporting them militarily, politically and especially financially. That is why, from the beginning of their journey, the Syrians have supported and sustained the armed Palestinian movements in Lebanon.

Here, I would just like to note that what was called the Palestinian Liberation Army was based in Syria, but conducted no military actions from Syria. The Syrians always sent these armies and factions to use Lebanon for their battleground, to create a sort of chaos inside Lebanon. In fact, in 1975, it was transformed into a war between the Lebanese and the Palestinians: the Lebanon-Palestine war was fought from 1975 to about 1982.

Then, in 1976, after Lebanon went to war with the Palestinians, the Syrians decided to support the Palestinians all the way. Moreover, that same year, the Syrians decided to enter Lebanon directly and officially with their army, under cover of the Arab Deterrent Force, 90% of which unfortunately consisted of the Syrian army and 10% of other armies, including the United Arab Emirates and Libya. All the other Arab parties made up only 10% of the Arab Deterrent Force. That was when Syria really decided, instead of halting the fighting between the Palestinians and the Lebanese, to completely control the country and exercise total domination over all state institutions.

This situation has lasted since 1976. The Syrians are still present in Lebanon. They have considered Lebanon to be an occupied country under their authority. This situation has created human, political, economic and social terror in Lebanon over the 35 years of Syrian occupation.

I skip ahead quickly and take us to the year 2000, when the Israeli troops withdrew from Lebanon. From that year forward, after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory, many Lebanese political voices have made themselves heard, mainly voices other than the Christians. It must be noted that for 30 years, it is the Christians who have called most for the withdrawal of Syrian troops. After 2000, there was no longer any excuse for the Syrian presence in Lebanon to continue. As a result, many voices, such as the Sunni, with Rafic Hariri, and the Druze, with Walid Jumblatt, started to call for the withdrawal of Syrian troops, and especially for a reduction of the Syrians' role in Lebanon.

In 2004, it culminated in a sort of meeting and alliance between Rafic Hariri and Walid Jumblatt, first, and then between those two poles, Sunni and Druze, and the Christians, to form a genuine sovereignist coalition. That coalition against the Syrians in Lebanon had two goals: first, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon; and second, the demilitarization of Hezbollah and the total elimination of its weapons. That coalition worked hard, and ultimately, in September 2004, produced the famous Resolution 1559, with which you are familiar, calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the total disarming of Hezbollah within Lebanese territory.

In response to the United Nations decision, the Syrians decided to return to Lebanon by force, extending the term of their president, or their strongman, in the country, Émile Lahoud, whom they had appointed themselves and trained from a young age to be president of the republic. That was when the reign of terror started, with the 12 assassinations in Lebanon ordered by the Syrians. The minister Marwan Hamadeh was the first victim of a series of assassinations in late 2004. The goal of that assassination was essentially to remind all Lebanese and everyone working for Lebanese independence, and who wanted to liberate their country from the Syrian troops, that they would be killed by the Syrians just as Kamal Jumblatt was in 1977, Bachir Gemayel was in 1982 and president René Moawad was in 1989. The Syrians' goal was to remind them that everyone demanding independence and sovereignty for Lebanon would be killed. A series of assassinations ordered by the Syrians then started, although the perpetrators were sometimes different. They would be different over the next few years.

The liberation of Lebanon came in 2005 with the famous March 14 Alliance, whose goal was to chase the Syrians from the country. Before continuing, I would note that these assassinations were essentially part of a very specific strategy on the part of the Syrians in Lebanon: like their Iranian allies in Lebanon, but particularly Hezbollah, they were starting to feel the wind change. As well, there were polls predicting defeat in the 2005 elections. That is why these people decided to assassinate Rafic Hariri in February 2005. The objective was to change the 2005 parliamentary majority, because that majority was automatically going to lead to the official, legal demand for Syrian withdrawal. And so after the assassination of Rafic Hariri, on February 14, 2005, a huge demonstration was held to demand that the Syrians withdraw from Lebanon. That withdrawal took place on April 26, 2005.

A new period then began. A much stronger kind of coordination developed between the Syrians and the Iranians. Today, the Iran-Syria axis is moving in the same direction, and that is why, when the Syrians withdrew, they decided, with their Iranian allies, to do all they could to support and strengthen Hezbollah's position on the Lebanese political scene. At that point, Hezbollah did its utmost to defend Syrian interests, and especially to veto the creation of an international tribunal as the United Nations voted to do.

After the Syrian withdrawal, there were many assassinations, including a dozen after the assassination of Rafic Hariri. In every case, the people targeted were anti-Syrian writers, journalists, legislators or ministers with sovereignist allegiances. They were all eliminated by the Syrians for purely political reasons.

Hezbollah itself started to act inside Lebanon in the service of Syrian interests. I am going to quickly name several of Hezbollah's initiatives designed to cripple Lebanese institutions and the Lebanese sovereignist movement. As I said earlier, there was the attempt to veto the creation of an international tribunal. There was then the 2006 war that Hezbollah itself started against Israel, and that ended in total defeat for Lebanon, economically, socially and financially. Finally, on May 7, 2008, there was an attempt to invade Beirut by terror and weapons. Hezbollah decided, on impulse, to move on an entire portion of Beirut, simply to sow terror and try to establish its influence by force of arms. Fifty people died.

I want to point out that we are working for the independence of Lebanon in two respects today: first, there is internal independence, from Hezbollah; and second, there is external independence, in relation to the Syrian and Iranian influences that are trying to impose themselves on Lebanon.

I think you have paid close attention to the belligerent action by Hezbollah, which not long ago sent a drone over Israeli territory. There were a lot of statements made, particularly by senior Iranian military officers, saying that the Iranian army was currently in possession of images of the drone and was analyzing them. That shows that Hezbollah is an Iranian agent par excellence, that the alliance that exists today between Iran and Syria has Hezbollah as its arm in Lebanon. Hezbollah's influence today—

● (0905)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Gemayel, sorry to interrupt. We have a limited amount of time and you've given us a great presentation. Can we take some time just to ask some questions?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Yes, no problem. I'm really sorry for having taken a bit of time.

The Chair: We appreciate your time. I think the members want to ask some questions, if that's at all possible. We only have another 25 minutes, so why don't we do that and go from there. Thank you, sir.

I'm going to start with Mr. Dechert, for seven minutes.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: I'm a little bit confused because I haven't done this very often.

Mr. Dewar, seven minutes, sir.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, and I want to thank our witness for his testimony. When he was first elected, I was an election observer during that election and was able to be both in Beirut and in the Bekaa Valley.

I hope to return to your country because I didn't get much time to see the whole country.

As you know, we were kept very busy before the election, during the election, and just after the election when we did our report. Congratulations on your election in 2009.

What I was quite taken with during the election was the multiplicity of parties, of course, and your coalition was made up of a number of parties. There was clearly, in 2009, a lot of hope about the future for Lebanon, for reasons you mentioned. The importance of having the Lebanese decide their future is what many people were seized with, and still are. Of course, that is what your concern is with regard to the neighbourhood, ensuring that the Lebanese will determine Lebanon's future, which hasn't always been the case, as you mentioned.

One of the things that I think is important for us to understand with regard to Lebanon and Syria is the effect of the war on Lebanon right now. I wonder if you could just tell us approximately how many Syrian refugees are in Lebanon right now.

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: The numbers are not very clear concerning the refugees. The numbers vary from around 30,000 to 50,000 refugees. There is no exact number because the government here didn't want to interfere in any way in trying to control the borders, or even trying to control the refugees. So the numbers we have are mainly from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. This number is specific to people who came through the official border. However, a lot of refugees have come from the north, from an area that the Lebanese government can't control very efficiently.

I can assure you that this large number of refugees who have come to Lebanon in the last few months has created a lot of disequilibrium in the social and civil society here in Lebanon. There is no government control because it doesn't want to interfere at all with the

Syrian regime. There is no control at all of these refugees, and they are not even taking care of them.

● (0910)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Have you, as a member of parliament, asked for more support from other countries, and specifically, obviously, Canada? Are you asking for more support to help with the refugee situation there?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: No, we haven't requested that. We have many more important problems, actually. We are facing security problems. We are facing assassination problems. As you know, the last assassination, which happened 15 days ago, removed all kinds of security levels against all kinds of assassinations to come.

We have many more important situations, including the control of the border from a military perspective, since Syrians are always sending arms, or Hezbollah is going to fight in Syrian territory. This is much more important for us on a first level than the refugees, who are mainly taken care of—or half of them are being taken care of—by the HCR.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Do you see the actions of the Syrian government as a provocation to draw Lebanon into the war?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Can you repeat the question?

Mr. Paul Dewar: Do the actions of the Assad regime right now, and the way they're operating...are they, in your opinion, trying to draw Lebanon into the war?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Yes, exactly. This is what they are trying to do. They are trying to export their conflict to the Lebanese one. They've tried several times.

The main concrete example was when President Assad requested, not officially but directly, that our ex-minister, Mr. Michel Samaha, transport around 20 bombs to Lebanon in order to explode in several regions. It was directly requested by Mr. Mamlouk, who is the head of intelligence in Syria. He requested this directly from Mr. Michel Samaha—who has been caught for the first time in Lebanon's history—to explode 20 bombs all around Lebanon in order to create chaos and to create a conflict between the different communities in Lebanon. Mr. Samaha has officially been in front of a judge and has officially said that it was requested by Mr. Mamlouk.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's all the time we have. We're going to move over to Mr. Dechert, now.

You have seven minutes, sir.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Gemayel. It's good to see you again. You may recall we met when you were in Ottawa recently.

First, I'd just like to take this opportunity to express my sympathies, and the sympathies of the Canadian government and the Canadian people, through you to the victims and the families of the victims of the recent bombing.

I understand that occurred in the district that you represent in parliament and was very close to your office. Our deepest sympathies to the victims of that terrible event.

That's obviously part of what's going on in Syria, along with the destabilization of the region, which is moving from Syria into Lebanon and to other countries in the region.

You mentioned Hezbollah and what Hezbollah fighters might be doing in Lebanon. You mentioned that to me when you were here a few weeks ago. Can you tell us a little bit more about how many Lebanese members of Hezbollah are active in the fight in Syria, who they're fighting for, and who they're being funded by, in your opinion?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: First, there is no official number, and we cannot have an official number. The only way we know, and the only way it became official, that Hezbollah was fighting in Syria was when they buried several Hezbollah fighters and said they were martyrs. No war zone was declared in Lebanon, so where did these martyrs fall?

A few weeks later—and I have the exact dates. The first time Hezbollah declared that they had martyrs, who fought without any fight, was in early October, and then a few days later, on October 8, Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, officially declared that these people had died or had fallen as defenders of the jihad in Syria, because they were doing their jihad in Syria.

What we are sure of is that these fighters are fighting with the regime against the Syrian opposition, against the people of Syria who are requesting their freedom and their democracy. What has linked Hezbollah to Syria is jihad, which means it is really a non-political fight. It's really a confessional fight, and this is where today Hezbollah is no longer a Lebanese fighter in Syria, but rather is playing the role of Iran directly in the Syrian regime.

• (0915)

Mr. Bob Dechert: Okay. So Iran is funding those fighters, is supplying arms to those fighters, in your opinion?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: I'm sorry, I didn't hear what you said.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Is Iran funding those fighters and providing them with arms and ammunition in your opinion?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Sure. Iran has been funding Hezbollah for the last 20 years, militarily and economically—all the support. This is why it doesn't want to lose Syria, in order to keep the link present between Hezbollah and Iran and its funding.

Mr. Bob Dechert: May I ask you, in your opinion, does the fact that Iran is involved in helping to defend the Assad regime—is recruiting people from other countries such as Lebanon, funding their war effort, providing them with weapons and ammunition—change the nature of the conflict in Syria from one that is essentially just an internal civil war to something that is more international in scope? What's your opinion on that?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Until now, I don't think it has changed a lot. However, we've heard a lot of declarations from the Iranian representatives that in the case where Syria will be targeted by the international community or by international forces, it will enter into war. It's a declaration of the Iranians much more than the analysis that we have.

However, the only reason, and why it's important, for Iran today to have its fighters, Hezbollah, in Syria is that the Syrian regime is a

must for the Iranian-Hezbollah link. It is of real importance in the matter of arms, money, and everything in order to keep the link.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you.

Mr. Gemayel, you may be aware that Canada has put some of the strongest sanctions in place against Syria. Canada is also working with its international partners to continue to isolate the Syrian regime and to try through that method to convince them to end the bloodshed against their own people. In your opinion, how have these international sanctions against Syria affected the Assad regime? Do you think they have had any influence on them at all?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: I don't really think it has influenced President Assad. It makes him maybe only more savage and makes for more terror. He doesn't have anything more than using all of his means in order to eliminate all kinds of revolution.

• (0920)

Mr. Bob Dechert: I'm sorry to interrupt. We have a short period of time left.

In your opinion, is there a peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Yes. There is only one peaceful solution, which is to remove Bashar al-Assad and the Ba'ath regime.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Is that by peaceful or by violent methods or conflict?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: I don't know if you have peaceful means to remove Bashar al-Assad, but it's the only way to get a solution in this country.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to switch to Mr. LeBlanc, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Gemayel. It is very good of you to give us your time this way. It is very interesting to hear the perspective of someone in your situation.

Like my colleague Mr. Dewar, I was at the summit of La Francophonie in Beirut with former Prime Minister Chrétien, nearly 10 years ago. That was an eye-opening experience for me, and I hope to return to Lebanon. As you know, the Lebanese-Canadian community is very important in our society. It is a privilege to have you with us.

I would like to go back a little to my colleagues' questions. Mr. Dewar asked you earlier to give a brief description of the influence of the conflict in Syria on your country. You referred to that in your comments at the beginning. I would be happy if you would say a little more about the consequences of the violence in this difficult conflict in Syria on Lebanese society and politics. Is the conflict causing concern in the Christian community? Is it causing divides in that community? There are times when it is not easy. How do you think this conflict, specifically, might inflame the situation in your country?

I would also like to go back to Mr. Dechert's last question, which I thought was interesting. Do you have any advice for Canadians? What, exactly, can we do to put an end to the situation in Syria? Do you think there are measures that Canada or the international community could take? Canada could encourage other countries to bring more pressure to bear, or to propose more ways of putting an end to the situation, which everyone thinks is appalling.

So those are my two questions. If you would be so kind as to offer some clarification for us, it would be appreciated.

Thank you again for your testimony.

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Certainly. Thank you.

First, I would like to thank you for your kind words and tell you that you will always be welcome in Lebanon.

You asked me whether the conflict in Syria had repercussions for politics and the economy in Lebanon. The fact is that in Lebanon, politics is really divided between pro-Syrians and anti-Syrians, that is, between allies of the Syrian regime and sovereignists. The large majority of the people who support the regime are Hezbollah and its allies in Lebanon. On the other hand, on the sovereignist side, there are all sorts of people, including Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, Kataeb and the Lebanese forces, who want sovereignty for Lebanon.

Certainly, the conflict is extremely difficult in Lebanon. For example, about a year and a half ago, when Saad Hariri was in the government, the Hezbollah members of the government and their allies withdrew from the government in order to make him resign. He did resign, but because they were unable to form a government as they wanted, they resorted to force. They deployed more than 1,000 men in the streets of Beirut, dressed in black, as a show of force and to have the majority overthrown.

That was when Walid Jumblatt and Najib Mikati, the present prime minister, switched sides to form a government along Hezbollah lines. This present government is under the heel of the Syrians. The international community, including the United Nations and the Arab League, is taking no position against the Syrians and the acts of terror and crimes being committed by the Bashar al-Assad regime. There are huge conflicts and tensions between these two camps. On the one side, there are people who are trying to get the country back on the right track, and on the other, there are people who are trying to take total control of the institutions and the country and create an Iran-Syria-Lebanon axis. What we want is to get Lebanon out of the Iran-Syria axis.

And to answer your second question, how to get rid of the regime, I really have no advice to give, but I think what is needed is a little more pressure, not just economic, but also political, on Damascus's allies, and probably especially on the Turks. It has to start with helping the Syrian people, and here I am talking about the humanitarian aspect, not the political aspect. People in that country are dying by the thousands every day. As of today, over 50,000 people have died, if my figures are correct, but there may have been even more. If things continue the same way, the number of deaths will very soon reach 100,000. I believe President Assad is committing actual genocide against his people. There are many things that can be done.

As the international community, you know more than we do what methods can be used. It could mean a no-fly zone or an international deterrent force. Another possibility would be to do exactly as was done in the case of UNIFIL, which was tasked at the time with confirming the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon. That might at least make it possible to establish a safety zone for the Syrian people, who I can assure you today, have no safety.

• (0925)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

Ms. Brown, we probably have time for a couple of quick questions. We've got about two or three minutes left.

I'll let you finish.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you very much. I will try to be very quick.

Thank you very much for being here with us this morning. It gives us a slightly different view from somebody who's living in the situation right now. Again, our condolences to those who have lost their lives in your area.

I have two questions and maybe first a statement.

Thank you for what Lebanon is doing to take care of the refugees. As you know, Canada is working with our partners in the Red Cross and with the Red Crescent. We had them here a week ago and we had an update from them. There's a lot of concern over the situation with the refugees who are fleeing Syria.

My question really is this. In Syria about 10% of the population are in control over the majority population of Sunnis, but we have the Christians, the Druze, and the Kurds all in fear for their lives. In fact, back in January, in the United States, Martin Indyk testified and said that "the Alawites fear that if the regime falls, they will be slaughtered—that there is no place for them in a post-Assad, Sunni-dominated Syria".

We have the same situation in Syria that we saw in Sri Lanka several years ago, where the minority was in fear for their lives if they lost power. Given that Lebanon has so many of the same groups of peoples within its borders, is there any room for Lebanon to help be a part of a peaceful resolution in Syria? Is there room for that discussion? Do you see where any of your leaders could have an impact?

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Let me start by clarifying one point. The Christians, the Druze, and all the minorities in Syria are not in power. Those who are in power actually are only the Alawites, the confessional group of Bashar al-Assad. They are controlling all the others. I would like to remind all present today that since the accession to power of the Ba'ath regime, Christians in Syria have diminished from 34% to 12% today. This is the first point.

The second point is that you cannot say that this regime has protected Christians and is willing to protect them, for the only reason that if you see how this regime has acted in Lebanon, how it assassinated all the leaders of minorities, who were very influential in Lebanon—Kamal Jumblatt, the Druze; Bashir Gemayel, the elected Christian president; Rene Muawad, the elected Christian president; Rafik Hariri, the Sunni prime minister. You can see the aim of Syria was to diminish the role of these minorities and not to give them more than really effectively a minority role.

So we cannot think of...[*Technical difficulties—Editor*]...minorities. [*Technical difficulties—Editor*]...in Lebanon to be able to gather all this. I don't think Lebanon can play this role. We should start by having Lebanon be a peaceful country with no influence from external communities, from Syria or Iran or even Hezbollah. Then we can think about creating a peaceful state.

For Syria, don't think for one minute that when this regime folds, the minorities will be in danger. They think they are in danger because they haven't known anything else for 40 to 60 years. But when you give them the choice to live in freedom, you can be sure that all the minorities will have a new spirit, a new hope, living in Syria.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Gemayel—

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: I don't know if I was clear on this point.

The Chair: That's good. I realize we cut you off at the beginning. If you have any notes that you want to send us, we'd be happy to distribute them to all the committee members, but I'll leave that to you to decide.

We really appreciate you taking the time to be here with us today. We wish we had more time. We really appreciated the dialogue back and forth.

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Thank you very much. I indeed also appreciate that you invited me.

I can try to send you a small memo about what we've said. I didn't write anything down very clearly, but I'll write down a clear memo and send it to you with some opinions about what we've said.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Once again, thank you very much for taking the time today. All the best to you.

Mr. Nadim Gemayel: Thank you.

The Chair: To the committee, we're going to take a minute to suspend before we go in camera.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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