



CJPME

Meeting the Challenge

A CJPME Proposal for Canada's Middle East Policy

11. Lebanon

Prepared by Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East



August, 2009

Meeting the Challenge

A CJPME Proposal for Canada's

Middle East Policy

11. Lebanon

Issued by Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East



11 Lebanon

Lebanon has long been and remains a focal point of conflict in the Middle East. International, regional, and domestic pressures continue to strain internal attempts to build strong national cohesion, which remains key to any long-term stability in the country. CJPME believes that Canada's support for Lebanon through humanitarian relief and reconstruction, as well as through assistance provided to the Lebanese government as it tackles the deficit and debt problem, is encouraging but not sufficient. Canada's primary role in Lebanon should be to encourage and support internal efforts at achieving consensus and nation-building.

Lebanon has always been internally vulnerable to fragmentation along ethno-religious lines and has struggled to maintain internal cohesion, particularly in the face of the challenges posed by its strategic location between Syria and Israel, and the presence of a large Palestinian refugee community within its borders. While the immediate danger in 2008 of civil war in Lebanon has been attenuated by the creation of a national unity government that includes both anti- and pro-Syrian elements, as well as by the election of General Michel Suleiman as President, challenges to long-term stability and peace persist and require attention, particularly as the country heads for new elections in June 2009.

The most pressing challenges facing Lebanon include:

a) *The international tribunal on the Hariri assassination.* On 14 February 2005, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated by a massive car bomb in downtown Beirut. Many observers, both internal and external, have pointed the finger of blame at Syria due to its extensive military and intelligence presence in Lebanon at the time, as well as the significant rift that had developed between Hariri and Damascus over the Syrian-backed constitutional amendment to extend then pro-Syrian President Lahoud's term in office.

While the international tribunal is supported by a coalition known as the March 14 Alliance, a second bloc composed predominantly of Hezbollah and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement headed by former Lebanese general, Michel Aoun, argues that any investigation into the assassination should be internal. The call for an external investigation thus continues to be a destabilizing point of contention.

b) *Influence from Syria.* Despite its military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Syria continues to exert important influence in Lebanon, both through alliances and convergences of interests with local factions, most importantly with, but by no means limited to, Hezbollah. Syria's interests in Lebanon are almost exclusively tied to its unresolved conflict with Israel and as such it is unlikely that it will cease interference completely in the absence of a broader peace treaty with Israel.

d) *Additional external interference.* In addition to Syria, the interference of other foreign parties in Lebanon is equally disconcerting, including the Hariri family's links to Saudi Arabia and the recent influx of Gulf arms and financing into the Sunni-dominated Internal Security Forces, as well as Western support for the Lebanese military more generally under the guise of the war on terror. These tensions have repeatedly resulted in clashes between pro-Hariri and other groups in areas of Lebanon where Hariri has a strong support-base. Equally of concern is the influence that Iran exerts in Lebanon.

c) *The continued threat of Israeli military action.* Given that Israel's July 2006 invasion of Lebanon failed to significantly weaken Hezbollah, and that the group continues to retain significant military capabilities,

the threat of Israeli military action in Lebanon persists. Moreover, Hezbollah's inclusion in the current government indicates that the question of its armed militia will only be resolved through a delicate and potentially extremely long internal political process.

e) *Poverty and inequality.* Lebanon's economy – already burdened by a monumental debt of over \$30 billion – was painfully set back by the July 2006 war, which cost the country close to \$4 billion in infrastructural damage alone, and led to a contraction of 5% of GDP. These recent developments overlay an already deeply unequal distribution of resources and power, and an unemployment rate of 20%. Studies as recent as 2001 show continued sectarian divides in wealth distribution, particularly but not exclusively between Christians and Muslims.¹¹ This inequality also takes on a regional dimension, with rural areas mainly populated by the Shia still the poorest regions of the country.

Canadian policy on Lebanon should shift from seeing the instability in the country as the result of a struggle between pro-Western/anti-Western or pro-Syrian/anti-Syrian sentiment, and focus on its internal socio-economic and political dimensions. Canada should reconsider its position on Hezbollah, particularly in light of the fact that external support or isolation of one or another group has historically hindered stability in Lebanon, and has deepened internal divisions and conflicts. Overall, Canada must support "Made in Lebanon" solutions, and discourage interference by external parties:

- Canada should support the long-term socio-economic development which is at the root of much of the internal conflict, and which continues to exacerbate internal and regional political conflicts.
- Canada should also support government reform with the long-term aim of creating a cohesive national identity no longer rooted in sectarianism.
- Canada should encourage the continued integration of Hezbollah into legitimate, mainstream governmental structures and the future integration of its military wing into the national army
- Finally, Canada should support an investigation of Hariri's assassination, as well as the subsequent assassinations of other political figures in Lebanon, through a mechanism approved by the Lebanese government, whether it take the form of an international investigation or a national tribunal.

¹¹ European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, Lebanon. Accessed May 6, 2009. www.europeanforum.net/country/lebanon.