

Lebanon All Party Parliamentary Group

Delegation July 2009

Report



Background to the delegation

A delegation from the Lebanon All Party Parliamentary Group, funded by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, visited Lebanon between 6-11th July 2009, to assess the political situation after the Lebanese elections. The delegation included APPG chair Andy Love MP (Labour), John Barrett MP (Liberal Democrat), Mark Pritchard MP (Conservative) and Graham Bambrough from the Council for Arab British Understanding (CAABU).

The delegation met with President Michel Sleiman, Prime Minister designate Saad Hariri, Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, Walid Jumblatt of the Progressive Socialist Party and former President, Amine Gemayel. Andy Love and John Barrett met with Mohammad Raad, leader of the Hizbollah parliamentary bloc.

The delegation visited the south of Lebanon, examining reconstruction and ordnance clearance work following the Israel-Hizbollah conflict of 2006, and the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr al-Bared, destroyed in 2007 in fighting between the Lebanese army and the Fatah al Islam group.

Overall situation



The delegation arrived in the wake of a peaceful June 2009 election. Turn-out had been high and Saad Hariri's March 14th Alliance, having won a majority of 71 seats, was in the process of forming a government. Most politicians cited the peaceful elections as a positive victory for the democratic process in Lebanon. The improvement in relations with Syria, represented by the exchange of ambassadors between Beirut and Damascus, was also largely welcomed.

One of the most pressing problems is that of public debt. 70% of the national income is spent servicing the \$46billion government debt. Investment in national infrastructure has been neglected, with power cuts remaining a consistent problem. As a middle income nation, Lebanon does not qualify for bilateral aid from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID)

Political Meetings

The Prime Minister, **Fouad Siniora**, said that the Lebanese had voted for the "reinstatement of the state", wanting political change to be performed only through the correct parliamentary and constitutional arrangements. He believed that Lebanese politics must be based upon diversity within unity, referring to the Taif Agreement and the division of key executive positions amongst the primary confessional groups of the state.

He spoke of the rising significance of Islam across Lebanon and the wider Middle East. He believes that the growth of

Taif Agreement

The Taif Agreement divides the key positions of the government amongst Lebanon's three most prominent religious groups. The Agreement stipulates that the President of the Republic must be Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shiite Muslim.

an Islamic polity is linked to a sense of frustration in the region over social, political and economic reform, as well as the actions of Israel. Mr Siniora expressed the view that whilst the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to frustrations in the region, it often acted as cover for more local problems.



Delegation with President Sleiman and
Ambassador Guy

The issue of Lebanon's 400,000 Palestinian refugees, the majority of whom live in over-crowded refugee camps across the country was raised with **President Sleiman**. The President reaffirmed that Lebanon could not support such numbers on a permanent basis. He cited the Palestinians as the source of the civil war and blamed the presence of Palestinian militia for the 22 year Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. The President said that refugee camps contained "dangerous elements" that constitute a threat to Lebanon's internal security. He expressed his hope for a lasting settlement between Israel and neighbouring states that would permit Palestinians the right of return.

Speaker Nabih Berri discussed the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israeli Prime Minister, and US policy under President Obama. He claimed that the election of Netanyahu was a signal that the Israeli people were not ready for peace. Speaker Berri urged the UK and US to refrain from attempting to encourage change in Iran.

Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri discussed relations with Israel and Syria and was critical of Israeli comments about Hizbollah. He called upon Israel to stop settlement expansion in the Occupied Territories, and for the US and Europe to exert more pressure to this end.

Also discussed were the internal challenges faced by the new government, such as the global economic downturn and the historic lack of investment in Lebanese public infrastructure.

Gen. Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, highlighted the role of money in the outcome of the election – citing a report in Newsweek that alleged a total expenditure of US\$750 – as a critical issue in the victory of the March 14th Alliance.

Walid Jumblatt, Druze leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, expressed concerns over the privatisation plans of the new administration, of which he forms a central part, and stated that the role of Syria in Lebanese politics remained a central issue.

Andy Love and John Barret met with **Mohammad Raad**, leader of Hizbollah's parliamentary bloc. Mr Raad accepted the results of the election and that concessions would have to be made over the formation of the new unity government. He cited the voting rights and the issue of the veto as examples and rejected the notion that the investigation into Rafiq Hariri's death (now moved to the international tribunal at the Hague) was a matter of unity government negotiations. He also criticised the West's interference in Lebanese politics, and uncritical support for Israel by the US and UK governments.

General Kahwaji, Head of the Lebanese Armed Forces, claimed that Israeli flight incursions into Lebanese air space remain a problem, but since the end of the conflict in July 2006 there had been

no significant incident along the southern border. The Lebanese army is focusing its efforts upon defending the country's borders, tackling organised crime and preventing terrorism.

The delegation found the two days of wide-ranging discussions to be highly instructive. They were consistently informed that the formation of a government of national unity would require concessions from both the March 14th Alliance as well as leading opposition parties, and were encouraged by the clear acceptance of the election's results by all the political factions.

Southern Lebanon post 2006

The delegation visited the south, the population and infrastructure of which suffered greatly in the 2006 conflict, under the invitation of local Member of Parliament and former Minister, Yassine Jaber. The group visited a school to discuss education provision with local teachers and met with Mine Action Group (MAG) and local business and community leaders.

UK-based charity **Mine Action Group (MAG)** has been involved in ordnance clearance programmes since the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. MAG focus their operations on "battle area clearance" - the removal of cluster munitions dropped by the Israeli military which fail to detonate upon impact.



The delegation witnessed one of MAG's teams operating near Arabsalim, the road into which had been heavily bombed during the conflict. Each cluster shell dropped by Israel contains 80-200 smaller 'bomblets'. Some bomblets do not explode upon impact but remain active, effectively mining the whole area. Over 300 items of UXO had been reclaimed by clearance teams in Arabsalim alone.

MAG has 14 battle area clearance teams working around the Nabatieh area and additional teams operating in the Chouf Mountains. Nine civilians have been injured by unexploded ordnance (UXO) in the area surrounding Nabatieh since January 2009, and a member of MAG staff recently lost a foot whilst clearing an area of munitions.

MAG's work is part-funded by DFID until March 2010. At the current speed of operations, and with a consistent budget, work in southern Lebanon will not be due for completion for at least 3-5 years.

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

Salvatore Lombardo, Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Lebanon, informed the delegation that the refugee issue had not been a critical issue of the elections, with most politicians believing that the Palestinians' future lay outside of Lebanon.

Lack of the right to work is the main issue affecting refugees. Legally, for a diaspora to have access to full employment rights, a reciprocal agreement must be made with the state of the people in question. As no agreement is possible in the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, refugees from Palestine are restricted to only the most basic of manual jobs.

Visit to Nahr al-Bared

The Cairo Agreement stipulates that the Lebanese security services are not permitted to enter Palestinian camps. As a result, criminal gangs largely comprised of Lebanese or even foreign nationals often use the camps as a base for local operations. In 2007 heavy fighting erupted in Nahr al-Bared between the Lebanese army and members of militant group Fatah al Islam. 95% of the camp was razed to the ground, largely due to shelling from the Lebanese army who encountered fierce resistance over a period of three months. The conflict led to the deaths of 42 civilians and the displacement of the camp's 27,000 inhabitants.

Reconstruction of the camp is a priority for UNRWA. Many residents live in temporary housing near the perimeter, with UNRWA subsidising rental costs. Conditions within the camp are inadequate, yet poor sanitation and severe overcrowding are an improvement on the even more dire condition of the temporary accommodation.



Ordnance clearance work began in October 2007, and as of July 2009, 8,273 items of UXO had been recovered from the rubble of the camp. Items found include mortars, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and four large munitions shells. A fifth bomb dropped by the Lebanese army has yet to be found amongst the rubble. This has hampered operations to clear away debris before building work can begin. UNRWA hopes to have the first 500 people moved back into the camp by 2011. This will depend upon UNRWA's access to funding. \$300m is required to rebuild Nahr al-Bared, only \$80m of which has been received from the international community. Work will grind to a halt unless further funding can be secured. The main donors have been the US, the EU and Saudi Arabia.

Thanks

The delegation would like to thank Frances Guy, HM Ambassador to Lebanon, for her hospitality. Particular thanks are expressed towards Nicola Davies and embassy staff for facilitating much of the programme. The delegation would also like to thank the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mine Action Group and the UNRWA.