

Statement by Joey R. Hood
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism
December 4, 2019

Chairman Romney, Ranking Member Murphy, Members of the Committee: I am honored to appear before you today to discuss U.S. policy in several Middle Eastern countries in which public demonstrations have erupted over citizens' frustrations with their governments all the way from Iran to Algeria. Specifically, I look forward to discussing the ways in which the United States can help the citizens of Iraq and Lebanon achieve the stability, security, and economic prosperity that their leaders have not delivered. Allow me to start by identifying two threads linking these protests.

The first lies in the longstanding desire of people across the region – in particular among its youth – to overcome the economic and political stagnation that has squandered the promise of a better future. They have not seen nearly enough investment in expanding economic opportunities, leaving many young people no better off today than they were 10 years ago. This frustration is compounded by years of rampant corruption and political systems that treat government services as patronage rather than public obligations. Today's protests over these circumstances share a common thread with others in the recent past, including the "you stink" demonstrations over failed garbage collection in Lebanon and protests by Iraqis in Basra during the summer of 2018.

In this context, it is imperative that the United States remain, as Secretary Pompeo has said, a force for good across the region. We offer a partnership that is unmatched. It reflects our values. It also supports the region's security and stability. Our help can provide the people of the region the security and stability they need to face challenges with a modern vision anchored in universal rights and fundamental freedoms.

In Iraq, it is also of note that the demonstrations are fueled by anger arising from the results of Iran's destabilizing influence. As recently as this weekend, Iran's IRGC-QF (or IRGC-Qod Force) commander, Qassem Soleimani, who remains under a UN Security Council travel ban, was widely reported to have been in Baghdad once again meeting with, threatening, and cajoling politicians. This is just the type of unacceptable interference Iraqis are protesting in the streets.

Both Iraq and Lebanon have systems of government that are largely formed along sectarian lines, fomenting corruption to maintain influence, and inviting in external backers. Iran has exploited the dysfunction within both systems, exacerbating the fault lines in each. In Lebanon, Iran's support to the terrorist group Hizballah has contributed to the group's ability to exert domestic influence and put its own interests over those of the nation., leaving the Lebanese people on the losing end. In Iraq, people are demanding an end to Iran's mafioso rules, such as arming terrorist groups like Kata'ib Hizballah, calling the shots among political party bosses, dumping agricultural goods on Iraqi markets, and peddling counterfeit or expired pharmaceuticals. Allow me to address the situations in both countries in greater detail.

For almost two months, Lebanon has experienced an unprecedented popular movement led by ordinary citizens fed up with corruption and ineffective political leaders that have too often put their own interests over their own people. In a country known for its multi-religious character, these protests have been unparalleled in their national character and the way that Lebanese citizens -- across the nation, across sects, and across socio-economic levels -- have become involved. While the demonstrations were at first triggered by an absurd proposed tax on voice-over-internet-protocol calls (such as WhatsApp), it became clear within hours that the tax was just the final straw. Even after the proposal was withdrawn and Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced a package of economic reforms four days later, protesters, skeptical of more empty promises from the very political leaders who failed to deliver for years, remained on the streets and demanded the resignation of his government. Hariri stepped down on October 29, and since then declared that he would return only if he could lead a cabinet of experienced, non-political individuals (often referred to as "technocrats") as the protesters were demanding. Hizballah and its political partners refused, and last week the former prime minister announced he would not seek another term.

Since Hariri's resignation, the government has been in caretaker status, which means it has limited power and cannot pass any of the reforms Lebanon desperately needs to stabilize the economy. The last time Lebanon's political leadership had to form a government it took them nine months. We do not believe the Lebanese people want another drawn-out contest over political spoils. As each day ticks by, the delays demonstrate a determination by the country's political elite, especially the sectarian leaders behind most of the political parties, to protect their own interests and not to serve the interests of the Lebanese people.

We have repeatedly urged Lebanon's political leaders to respond to their people's demands for a properly functioning country through immediate reforms. We are working with key allies and the international community to discuss how we would assist with these reforms to avert a full-blown economic crisis and create the conditions for economic recovery. Until the sectarian leaders that fuel the political parties support real and immediate reforms, Lebanon will go nowhere, whether it has a new government or not.

The United States supports the rights of the brave men and women of Lebanon to meet on their streets and squares to express themselves through peaceful demonstrations without fear of retribution or violence. However, the ability to do that is under constant threat. Over the last two months, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) have stepped in to protect protesters from thugs threatening and using violence in an effort to send them home. For example, on November 24, Hizballah and Amal partisans confronted peaceful protesters with violence and sectarian slogans, trying to prod them with old resentments into a new clash that would undermine their demands. Intervention by security personnel stopped the situation from escalating before dispersing both groups with tear gas. None were injured that day, but the pressure from these politically motivated groups to either get protesters off the streets or undermine their demands with an appeal to divisive sectarianism remains a significant threat.

The United States also remains concerned about the role being played by Hizballah, and its benefactor Iran. During these protests, Hizballah, with some echoes from Russia, has tried to

blame the United States for instigating the protests. Those efforts have fallen short. Protesters in Lebanon know they are not the puppets of external influence. As noted in our statement on November 18, “the popular demonstrations we have witnessed over the past weeks in Lebanon have clearly shown that it is the Lebanese people that are working together to hold their leaders to account. Any argument to the contrary is frankly insulting to their perseverance and determination to work towards a brighter future.”

In stark contrast to Iran and Russia, the United States has partnered with the Lebanese people through a range of humanitarian, economic, and security assistance. Since 2006, we have provided more than \$2 billion to help strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces. In FY 2018, we obligated, and are currently expending, \$115 million in Economic Support Funds for initiatives in Lebanon that promote employment, good governance, social cohesion, and economic growth. Our projects also improve access to clean water and education, especially in areas heavily impacted by the influx of Syrian refugees. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, the United States has also provided over \$2.3 billion in humanitarian assistance for refugees in Lebanon, as well as the Lebanese communities that host them, including food, shelter, water, medical care, education, and psychological services. This is what we mean when we say America is a force for good in Lebanon.

In Iraq, where I was privileged to serve for two years as the Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d’Affaires, the demonstrations that swept Baghdad and the southern provinces in the last two months have exposed growing revulsion for Iraq’s political elite by the rest of the population. Although exact numbers are debated, it is clear that hundreds of Iraqis have been killed and as many as 20,000 injured so far. What began as a wave of primarily Iraqi youth demanding the elimination of corruption and greater economic opportunity has transformed into a broader societal movement, with demonstrators spanning religious sect, gender, occupation, and generational lines. Like in Lebanon, these protests arose from popular discontent with endemic corruption and mismanagement, high unemployment, and poor delivery of basic services. The demonstrators want better from their leaders.

Not surprisingly, an important element of this movement has been rejection of Iran’s corrupting influence, including anger at Iranian-supported political parties and armed groups. Iraqis increasingly view Iran as having coopted and exploited Iraq’s political system, its economy, and its security at the expense of the Iraqi people, and this has clearly made Iran nervous. Thus far, Iran’s public attempts to spin the narrative have been met with immediate scorn and mockery, and further lowering the regime’s standing with the Iraqi people. At the same time, many protesters have rejected being painted as tools of American influence. Although many protesters are too young to remember Saddam’s tyranny, most are intimately familiar with the shortcomings of political elites that many believe the United States is responsible for bringing to power. We must acknowledge and respect the fact that what is occurring in Iraq is indigenous to it and reflects its citizens’ needs and desires.

Like in Lebanon, we have called for the government to respect Iraqis’ freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Their voices should be heard without fear of retribution or violence. We are deeply concerned by the killing, kidnapping and intimidation of protesters and civil rights leaders and have demanded that the government protect them and lift restrictions on

all forms of media. We are working with our allies to echo this message, and we welcome efforts by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) to assist with electoral reform, in accordance with its UN Security Council mandate.

As Secretary Pompeo has said, the United States welcomes any serious efforts to address the protesters' demands. But like in Lebanon, nothing will change until political leaders decide that government agencies should provide public services rather than serve as ATM machines for their parties. Until that happens, the people's demands for a clean and effective government will not be met, no matter who serves as Prime Minister or in Cabinet positions.

Meanwhile, we will remain a steadfast partner of the Iraqi people. With our International Coalition partners, we will continue to ensure that the Iraqi Security Forces can ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, which just three years ago occupied a third of the country. We will remain the country's largest humanitarian donor. Since 2014 alone, we have provided more than \$2 billion in food, water, medicine, and shelter. We are the largest donor to stabilization, as well, rebuilding more than 500 schools, 100 health centers, and 50 water treatment plants, with many more projects coming soon. We are the largest donor to demining, having removed thousands of explosives hazards so people can return to their homes. This is what we mean when we say we are a force for good in Iraq.

Our relationship with Iraqis remains vital for U.S. national security interests and regional security, and bolstering Iraq as a sovereign, stable, united, and democratic partner of the United States, with a viable Kurdistan Region as a component of it, continues to be our principal objective.

If we see Iraqi leaders willing to address the demands of their people, we will join with UNAMI and others to support badly needed electoral and economic reforms. Whether we have partners among Iraqi leaders or not, Secretary Pompeo has said, we will not hesitate to use all the tools at our disposal, including designations under the Global Magnitsky Act, to sanction corrupt individuals who are stealing the public wealth of the Iraqi people and those killing and wounding peaceful protesters.

Together, the popular protests in Lebanon and Iraq show that people are finally fed up with the damage that corruption does to government's willingness and ability to provide the basic services that people need to live and thrive. In stark contrast to Iran, which uses corruption to create openings to extend its influence, we are offering a positive vision, a force for good willing to partner with those who want to unlock the potential of people across the region. We understand that a country is most successful when its people are secure, free, and prosperous. We are committed to a vision of shared prosperity, regional and global security and stability, and lasting partnership with the people of Lebanon and Iraq.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.