



**American Islamic Congress, Inc.**

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**American Islamic Congress  
Capital Hill Distinguished Speaker Series**

**Topic:**

**Democracy in Lebanon: A Dream Deferred?**

**Panelists:**

**Firas Maksad: Executive Director, Lebanon Renaissance Foundation**

**Sheikh Marouf Rahal: Lebanese Shiite Shari'a judge**

**Tony Badran: Research Fellow, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies**

**David Schenker: Senior Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy**

**Moderator:**

**Hussain Abdul Hussain: Washington Correspondent, Al Rai newspaper (Kuwait)**

Three years ago, over a million Lebanese peacefully revolted in the streets of Beirut, calling for democracy and sovereignty. Today, that dream is shattered, and political reform is besieged by internal factions and regional actors whose agenda extends beyond Lebanon. What is causing the deadlock and inability to elect a new president? What is the role of Muslim states in light of last month's Arab summit? And how can the US help the Lebanese achieve democracy and sovereignty?

On May 6, 2008, the American Islamic Congress hosted **Firas Maksad**, the Executive Director of the Lebanon Renaissance Foundation, **Sheikh Marouf Rahal**, a Lebanese Shiite Shari'a judge, **Tony Badran**, a research fellow focusing on the Levant at The Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and **David Schenker**, a senior fellow and the Director of the Program of Arab Politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, in order to discuss these issues and more.

To achieve a democracy, Lebanon must take control of its own political situation and minimize negative influences polluting its system. Syria is constantly attempting to influence Lebanon's government and strengthen its position within the government, which is causing a deadlock in the government and chaos in the country. As **Firas Maksad** described, "the nature of [the Lebanese political] system is like a pendulum, where overbearing Syrian domination gives way to the people revolting back." This occurred in 2005, as the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri symbolized the swinging of the pendulum back in favor of the Lebanese people, leading to the Cedar Revolution.

To solve this problem and regain sovereignty, Lebanon must reform its political system and limit Syrian influence in the country. Also, Lebanon must try to limit the role that religion plays in the political system. As **Sheikh Marouf Rahal** said, "Any person in Lebanon can endorse any religion, but on political issues there are redlines." He then continued, "the Lebanese state is the sole sponsor of all the interests of its citizens and we have no other authority other than the state of Lebanon." In order for a true democracy to come about, Lebanon must seize control of its government and not allow for it to be easily influenced by antagonistic foreign or domestic actors.

The Lebanese conflict has evolved over the years and has great regional and international dimensions, in addition to domestic aspects. Today, neither Arab Nationalism nor the Palestinian elements play a role in the crisis as they did in previous decades. Also, alliances in the region have shifted over the years. To gain strength in Middle East, Syria is relying on a 30-year alliance with Iran, a situation that is problematic for other Arab states. On the other hand, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are now anti-Syrian, and question the Assad regime and its rationale. Both countries, along with Jordan and several Gulf States, have also denounced Hezbollah. This was an unprecedented rebuke towards both Syria and Iran.

Despite all of this, Syria is still able to use Iran to help its position in the Middle East, a situation that could have grave effects on peace in the region and Lebanon. Again, Lebanon must work to exclude this Syrian influence from their political system, and other governments can help this cause by putting pressure on Syria. The crisis in Lebanon is not an entirely domestic issue but an international one, and countries must help Lebanon establish a peaceful democracy in order to effectively stabilize the region.

Lebanon is not only important in the Middle East, but is also important to the United States. For the U.S., "Lebanon represents a future struggle in the Arab World," as **David Schenker** noted. Iran and Syria have a shared ideological interest of opposing a strong United States presence in the region and have taken efforts to undermine U.S. policy there. In Lebanon, Syria is attempting to seize the only democratic pro-U.S. government in the region and. In order to prevent this, the United States financially supports Lebanon, encourages the Lebanese Armed Forces, and pressures Syria to leave the country.

**Schenker** adds, "It is not the time to engage Syria." It is important for the U.S. to continue to support Lebanon, let the UN Tribunal, which is working towards prosecuting the killers of the former Prime Minister, play itself out, and work on cultivating an alternative Shi'a who are anti-Hezbollah.

By achieving all of this, the United States will greatly help Lebanon towards attaining peace and democracy. Peace in Lebanon is critical to peace in the region as well as security in the U.S. and, in order to achieve this peace, the United States must work with Lebanon to limit Syrian influence in the Lebanese government and create a functioning democracy in the country.