

Opening Statement
Mr. Cardin

I thank Chairman Brownback for convening this hearing on this timely topic which has grave consequences for U.S. security and the interests of our allies. Though recent events in the Middle East have rejuvenated hope that democracy can take hold in that region, there are some, such as Syria and Iran – state-sponsors of terrorism – that want to thwart that process. While the scenes from Beirut offer a glimmer of hope that Lebanon will soon regain its sovereignty, we must not underestimate infiltration of that country by Syrian forces, visible and invisible. We will explore the connection between Moscow and Damascus and the implications of ties for the region and beyond.

For years, Syria has both sponsored and hosted terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and al-Qaeda. This is particularly pertinent in light of the February 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The act, which seems to be linked to al Qaeda, targeted a man who stood adamantly against the Syria's occupation of his country.

The car bombing has drawn attention to the even larger issue of Syria's control of Lebanon. Upon the request of the Lebanese Government in 1976, Syria sent troops to restore peace during the Lebanese civil war. In 1989, the signing of the Taif Accord signaling the end of the civil war, required Syria to pull its troops back to the Bekaa Valley, but failed to specify a date. Syria has capitalized on this ambiguity by maintaining a military presence of nearly 15,000 uniformed soldiers in Lebanon and thousands of intelligence agents.

Promises of withdrawal have been continually made, but never entirely fulfilled. Since the assassination of Hariri, thousands of Lebanese protestors have taken to the streets in Beirut demanding full Syrian withdrawal, bringing the matter to the forefront of international politics. In the past few weeks, much of the international community has reiterated its demands that Syria remove its troops in accordance with September 2004 UN Security Council Resolution 1559. In a recently published letter to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, over 140 Syrian intellectuals insisted that it was time for Syria to change its policy toward Lebanon. However, Mr. Assad has resisted international pressure, asserting that Syria will pull out, eventually.

Though Russia has also called for a withdrawal, President Vladimir Putin's recent behavior has undermined these demands. Reports indicate that Russia and Syria are negotiating a military alliance, in direct contradiction to the 2002 OSCE Charter on Preventing and Combating Terrorism. In the Charter, Russia fully agreed to condemn all acts of terrorism and to "refrain from... providing active or passive assistance to, or otherwise sponsoring terrorist acts in another State." The State Department has determined the Syrian Government to be a sponsor of terrorism. As such, Russia's warming relations with Syria threatens to undermine the spread of democracy in the Middle East.

I look forward to hearing the discussion.