

Can the Lebanese Army Prevent a Hezbollah-Christian Conflict?

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Brief Analysis

Given the military's behavior during a recent confrontation and the spike in Christian anger toward Hezbollah, Washington should consider fine-tuning its assistance to the LAF, cutting off units that are not committed to protecting the people.

In recent weeks, a series of security incidents between Lebanon's Maronite Christian community and Hezbollah have raised the possibility of increased domestic instability. If this trend continues, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) will need to play a crucial role in preventing major escalation and protecting civilians. Although there is a general understanding in Lebanon and Washington that the LAF will not go after Hezbollah, the army is still expected to protect the people from spikes in violence provoked by the group and to directly confront other armed elements (e.g., the Palestinian Islamist factions tied to recent clashes in Ain al-Hilweh, an issue that will be covered in future articles).

This week's events in the Christian community of Kahaleh highlight the LAF's priorities. On August 9, a Hezbollah truck loaded with weapons was passing through the village near Beirut on its way from Beqa when it overturned in front of a church. Hezbollah members rushed to the scene, surrounded the truck, and tried to stop locals from approaching. Yet rather than staying back as they normally would in situations involving Hezbollah, residents insisted on investigating, which led to a gun battle that caused two fatalities, one of them a Hezbollah member.

Realizing the situation could escalate even further, the Hezbollah personnel fled the scene, leaving the LAF in charge. Yet the confrontation continued—as army personnel removed the truck from the street, angry residents tried to stop them, demanding that the soldiers let them see the cargo and asking them to arrest the culprits who shot resident Fadi Bejjani. Instead, the soldiers pushed them away, stopped reporters on the scene from filming, and continued removing the truck and its contents.

The next day, the LAF issued a [statement \(https://www.alhurra.com/lebanon/2023/08/10/اعتراف-حزب-الله-بها-الحيش-الليبناني-يكشف-جمولة-شاحنة-الكدالة\)](https://www.alhurra.com/lebanon/2023/08/10/اعتراف-حزب-الله-بها-الحيش-الليبناني-يكشف-جمولة-شاحنة-الكدالة) confirming that the truck contained weapons. Yet it failed to mention Hezbollah's involvement and did not say whether the cargo will be handed back to the group. Military judge Fadi Akiki is now investigating the incident; given the military court's close ties with Hezbollah, the cargo will probably be returned.

The LAF at a Crossroads

Kahaleh is hardly the first instance of clashes between Christians and Hezbollah. In a similar case in August 2021, residents in the Druze town of Chouya [stopped a Hezbollah truck \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/rare-challenge-hezbollah-fighters-held-after-rocket-launch-2021-08-06/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/rare-challenge-hezbollah-fighters-held-after-rocket-launch-2021-08-06/) that was preparing to launch rockets against Israel following other launches earlier that day. Afterward, the launcher was returned to Hezbollah. Two months later, Hezbollah stormed the Christian neighborhood of Tayouneh in Beirut [as a warning \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/amid-beirut-clashes-lebanese-investigators-need-protection\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/amid-beirut-clashes-lebanese-investigators-need-protection) to authorities investigating the 2020 Beirut port disaster, which included allegations that the militia had been siphoning explosive ammonium nitrate stored there. Tayouneh is symbolic because it is where Lebanon's civil war began in 1975, so Hezbollah's message was clear: continuing the probe could lead to civil war. More recently, Hezbollah is suspected of [assassinating \(https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4479941-killing-senior-lebanese-forces-official-slebanon-deepens-political-sectarian\)](https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4479941-killing-senior-lebanese-forces-official-slebanon-deepens-political-sectarian) Elias Hasrouni—a member of the so-called “Lebanese Forces,” a Christian political party—earlier this month.

Accumulating frustration with such behavior has led to increased hostility against Hezbollah on the street and in social media spaces, and for many Lebanese, the Kahaleh incident seems to have cracked the wall of fear surrounding Hezbollah. More Christian civilians and community leaders are now calling for an armed response and self-defense measures.

To contain the potential violence and prevent a security explosion, the LAF must do its core job of protecting the Lebanese people. If it refuses to tackle this duty in earnest, the result will be more armed groups and more neighborhood clashes. Independent armed groups have already begun to form in Christian neighborhoods and are taking security into their own hands—a potentially dangerous development given the rise of factions such as Junud al-Rab (Soldiers of God), which espouses strong sectarian rhetoric and a far-right social agenda. It is still too early to predict whether such elements will attack Shia neighborhoods or engage in other forms of violence, but their budding growth in popularity could pose problems for those hoping to keep the peace.

The LAF's tendency to let Hezbollah perpetrators off the hook or abet their activities stems in part from an official Lebanese doctrine adopted by successive governments. For years, the formulation “the people, the army, and the resistance” has enabled the Hezbollah “resistance” to hold onto its weapons (in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which called for the disarmament of all nonstate entities), move them around the country freely, and use residential neighborhoods as human shields against Israeli military action without any accountability. It is imperative that Lebanon's next president be able to form a government that can challenge this doctrine and pursue a defense strategy that frees the LAF and other security institutions from the shackles of enabling Hezbollah. With a clear executive and legislative directive, the LAF would be empowered to act—or pressured to do so if it proves hesitant.

Either way, the Kahaleh incident showed that the LAF can no longer play the game of satisfying both its primary funders in Washington and its strange bedfellows in Hezbollah (and, by extension, the militia's patrons in Iran) without consequences. Continuing that approach will only destroy the people's eroding trust in the army, spurring more locals to take security into their own hands as they did in Kahaleh.

LAF commander Joseph Aoun may believe that the army's response to this incident will bolster Hezbollah's support for his presidential bid, but facts on the ground suggest otherwise. The LAF's behavior in Kahaleh will likely undermine his support among key Christian constituencies and leaders, mainly the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party. And Hezbollah's position on Aoun's political future did not change after the LAF seized weapons from Chouya residents and returned them in 2021, so he can hardly expect such a shift today.

Indeed, Hezbollah now wants more from the LAF—it aims to take over all security and military decisions, including who is appointed to key positions and how personnel respond to domestic incidents. The LAF is therefore at a crossroads: amid increased Christian resentment against Hezbollah and a widening void in state institutions, the army will have to decide whether to protect the people or the militia.

Domestic Political Fallout

The Kahaleh incident may affect ongoing talks between Hezbollah and Christian leader Gebran Bassil, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), regarding the next president, though to what degree is uncertain. Hezbollah leaders have never seen such resentment from the people—mainly Christians, who were always divided over the group.

After the incident, both Hezbollah and Bassil issued statements on the shootings. Hezbollah's statement—that a Christian militia attacked its personnel—drew public criticism from FPM member Cesar Abi Khalil (<https://www.elnashra.com/news/show/1632855/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AB%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%A7>), who said it “contradicts the truth” and called for a discussion on turning over the perpetrators. His remarks likely stemmed from the fact that one of the victims was close to FPM, leaving the party unable to ignore the anger in the streets. Yet Bassil's official statement endorsed Hezbollah's stance.

Ultimately, the incident appears to have united the Christian street against Hezbollah and may therefore weaken the group's Christian partners—not just Aoun, but also the militia's preferred candidate, Sleiman Frangieh. Thus far, the Lebanese Forces party has accused Hezbollah of killing a civilian in Kahaleh, while Kataeb leader Samy Gemayel offered more forceful and wide-ranging (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/levant-turkey/1691746449-christian-official-says-lebanon-has-reached-point-of-no-return-after-clashes>) remarks: “What if the truck had contained explosives, if the incident had caused a huge explosion and hundreds of people had been killed? We are not prepared to coexist with an armed militia in Lebanon. There will be practical measures, opposition meetings and decisions will be taken.”

These statements reflect real anger within the Christian community, though this resentment is hardly new. Antipathy toward Hezbollah has been growing ever since it attacked the people in May 2008 by invading the streets of Beirut and besieging the prime minister's residence—something it had never done before. That incident made clear to many citizens that the militia had put its war with Israel on hold and was turning its weapons against the Lebanese people and other targets. Then came the Syria war, during which Hezbollah lost its credibility as a “resistance” group among Lebanon's Sunni community and certain other constituencies. The biggest hit to its image came in 2019, when Hezbollah decided to protect the corrupt political class (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis>) against mass public protests. The 2020 port explosion was another blow, especially after Hezbollah security chief Wafiq Safa publicly threatened Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the investigation.

Today, most citizens—including many in Hezbollah’s core Shia constituency—seem to view the group as an Iranian occupation force and regard its “resistance” narrative as irrelevant. Few believe that its arms are necessary to liberate or even protect Lebanon.

The U.S. Role

The Kahaleh incident gives Washington another opportunity to use its ample assistance to the LAF as leverage for ensuring accountability. In particular, U.S. officials should inquire about the army’s response to the shooting, the truck’s whereabouts, and any plans the military judiciary may have for returning the weapons to Hezbollah.

More broadly, Washington should look into the structure of its military aid to the LAF and decide which units actually deserve this assistance and which do not. For example, the LAF unit that responded to the Tayouneh clashes of 2021 performed better than the unit in Kahaleh. In Tayouneh, the army protected the neighborhood and its residents by shielding locals from gunmen entering the area and later arresting armed elements on both sides. This approach was deliberately chosen by the commander on the ground and may have been coordinated with elements of the LAF leadership. Such units and commanders need to be protected, assisted, and encouraged, while those who take Hezbollah’s side against civilians should not benefit from U.S. aid.

Moreover, some LAF institutions—such as the military courts and army intelligence—are more infiltrated and controlled by Hezbollah than others. U.S. aid to these institutions could serve the militia’s interests more than the army’s capabilities and Lebanon’s stability. Washington should also pay extra attention to military and security appointments, since these play a key role in Hezbollah’s efforts to take over decisionmaking in this sector.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Hezbollahland: Mapping Dahiya and Lebanon’s Shia Community](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community>). ❖

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