Why Siccing Syria's Army on Hezbollah Is So Dangerous

by David Schenker **(/experts/david-schenker)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

The potential upsides of implementing the Trump administration's poorly conceived idea are negligible at best, while the downsides would be legion, including further damage to Middle East stability and American interests.

From the Gaza Riviera to the promised annexation of Greenland to the alienation of India, to neutrality in Ukraine—and this is just a partial list—the Trump administration has pursued a series of ill-advised foreign policy initiatives during its second mandate. Among the growing catalogue of problematic policies advocated by the administration, its latest bid to deploy the Syrian army to fight Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon is particularly dangerous. If implemented, the intervention would all but certainly further undermine regional stability and US interests in the Middle East.

On 16 June, President Trump said he believed the best approach to Hezbollah was for the military forces of Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa to deploy to Lebanon and attack the group. While Israel had proven incapable of disarming the militia, the president maintained that Syria could "do a better job of doing it." It was the first official admission by the administration of a long-rumoured US plan that, until then, Washington had denied. Indeed, in March, US Special Envoy Tom Barrack tweeted that these stories were "false and inaccurate."

After months of persistent reports, Trump's call for Syrian military intervention didn't come as a total surprise. Yet it was nonetheless shocking, given the predictably negative consequences. Even for an administration that prides itself on disruption, this seemed a bridge too far.

Washington's friends in Lebanon who support the disarmament of Hezbollah oppose Syrian involvement. There's a complicated history between the states that resonates to this day. Under the authoritarian Assad regime that ruled Syria from 1970 until it was toppled in 2024, Damascus did not recognise Lebanese sovereignty. For the Assads,

Lebanon was part of Syria. This wasn't just a theoretical approach; from 1991 to 2005, Syria militarily occupied Lebanon, disappearing thousands of Lebanese political opponents along the way.

The brutal Syrian occupation only ended after a mass uprising following the assassination of Lebanon's most popular politician, former premier Rafik Hariri, by the Assad regime and Hezbollah. After working so hard to end the Syrian presence, the vast majority of Lebanese have no interest in seeing their neighbours return. Many Lebanese, not surprisingly, also harbour an enduring disdain for Syrians.

At the same time, Lebanese are suspicious of Syria's new government, led by al-Sharaa, an erstwhile member of al-Qaeda. Moderate Sunni, Christian, and Druze Lebanese express concern about religious extremism next door, and a Syrian army brimming with foreign fighters and allegedly former jihadis.

Washington's friends aren't the only ones concerned about a Syrian military deployment to Lebanon. The Shiite militia Hezbollah also talks a lot about the threat from Sunni extremism in Syria and what it would mean for the group's constituents. It wasn't that long ago that the region was plagued by Sunni-Shiite sectarian violence.

No doubt, Hezbollah has exploited (and exaggerated) fears about al-Sharaa to shore up support for the militia, but it does have some very real reasons to be concerned about the Syrian military. During the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah deployed to Syria to defend the Assad regime. At the time, the group's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, said the move was defensive as he believed there was a Western plot to empower extremist Sunni groups to be used against Hezbollah. Over the course of 8 years, Hezbollah, along with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, helped prop up the Assad regime in a war that destroyed Syria and ripped apart its social fabric.

Hezbollah also fought against the very same Sunni foreign fighters who are now incorporated into the predominantly Sunni Muslim Syrian military. To say there is bad blood is an understatement. As a result, it is unlikely that Syrian military operations in Lebanon could avoid degenerating into a very ugly sectarian conflict, especially if Lebanese Sunni jihadist groups join as well.

What Sovereignty?

To be clear, the US plan inviting Syria back into Lebanon to deal with Hezbollah undermines Washington's stated objective to support Lebanese sovereignty. Furthermore, a recent US invitation to Tehran to participate in the Hezbollah "deconfliction cell" in Lebanon also throws Washington's commitment to Lebanese sovereignty into question. It is difficult to make the case that the Trump administration seeks to advance Lebanon's sovereignty when it is allowing—and even encouraging—Syria, Iran and Israel to station forces there.

Lastly, the deployment of Syrian forces to Lebanon could have negative implications for the Sharaa government in Damascus. President Trump has heavily invested in the success of the Sharaa government in post-Assad Syria. Damascus continues to face enormous economic and security challenges, making a costly military campaign a ridiculous proposition.

Furthermore, Syria's relatively small army, which already has limited capabilities, could be dangerously stretched. If a significant number of Syrian forces enter Lebanon, it could leave a vacuum where remnants of the Islamic State (IS) could step in, especially now that US forces have fully withdrawn from Syrian territory.

Even if such military adventurism does not break or strain the Syrian army and the Sharaa government, it would almost certainly distract it from delivering on promises made to the Syrian people of a better life following 60 years of authoritarian rule. Over the past 18 months, Damascus has been laser-focused on managing Syria's tenuous political transition, piecing together the war-torn country, and rebuilding state institutions.

Little Upside

The downsides of this Trump administration proposal are legion. As with the war on Iran, which led to the closure

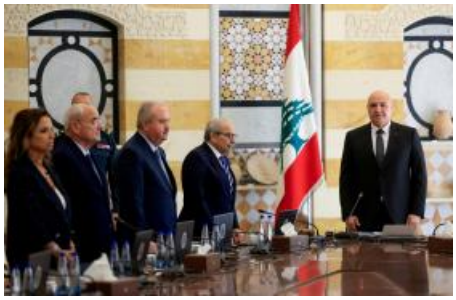
T of the Hormuz Strait, the implications of pursuing this Syria policy are just as predictable and detrimental to US interests, while the upside is almost negligible.

While President Trump—impatient with the slow pace of Hezbollah disarmament—sees the Syria option as a quick fix to the Hezbollah problem, it almost certainly will not resolve the issue. A wiser path would be to patiently stay the course with the slow but steady Lebanon-Israel talks being mediated by Washington. The recent framework agreement was a positive development on that front.

The Trump administration's Syria initiative is poorly conceived and dangerous. Fortunately, President Sharaa understands the risks associated and has so far had the wisdom and resolve to refuse the undertaking. Ironically, the restraint and political insight of this former jihadist are likely to save the Trump administration from yet another unnecessary foreign policy debacle.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics. This article was originally published ***on Al Majalla's website (https://en.majalla.com/node/331787/politics/why-siccing-syrias-army-hezbollah-so-dangerous)*** *.* ❖

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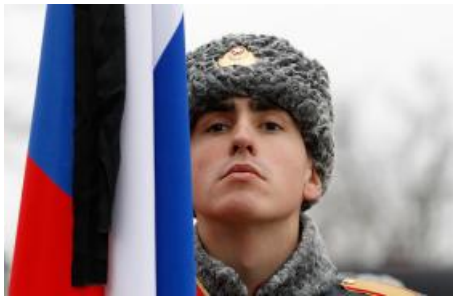
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