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U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon at Risk

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Brief Analysis

Despite collusion between the LAF and Hezbollah, the United States may still have an interest in funding the Lebanese military.

Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Shia militia, is winding down its offensive against Sunni Islamist militants in Aarsal, a Lebanese town near the Syrian border. In recent weeks, Hezbollah backed by Syrian airpower, pressed into the outskirts of Aarsal from the Syrian side to drive out Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, a Sunni jihadist group that opposes the Assad regime. But Hezbollah wasn't supported only by Syria. The operation was also aided by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which reinforced its units surrounding Aarsal on the Lebanese side prior to the campaign and subsequently targeted militants with artillery during the battle.

The LAF's role in Aarsal is just the latest evidence of its ongoing coordination with Hezbollah. And while this particular incident may serve U.S. short-term interests, it also complicates matters for Washington. Since 2005, the United States has been providing the LAF with baseline military assistance amounting to nearly \$85 million per year. Last year, U.S. assistance to the army exceeded \$150 million. Despite widespread praise for the LAF at U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), cooperation between recipients of U.S. foreign assistance and U.S.-designated terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah is prohibited.

Background

In the aftermath of the Cedar Revolution, the 2005 popular uprising that ended the decades-long Syrian military occupation of Lebanon, the Bush administration increased its annual support to the LAF from \$1.5 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) to more than \$100 million to purchase weapons. At the time,

some administration officials expressed the hope that the LAF would eventually become a counterbalance to Hezbollah; others eyed the more modest goal of improving the LAF's domestic counterterrorism capabilities. Regardless, over the past twelve years, the LAF has developed to the point that today many U.S. military officers consider Lebanon's military to be -- man for man -- the best Arab army.

The issue with the LAF, however, is not capability but domestic politics. Lebanon is home to eighteen officially recognized confessions, predominantly Sunnis, Shia, and Christians, and rife with sectarianism. While the LAF is a "national institution" staffed by all Lebanon's confessions, the organization itself is beset by sectarianism. In the 1970s, when tasked to operate against Palestinian and Christian militias, the LAF fractured as Lebanon devolved into civil war. Today, the LAF remains institutionally incapable of taking on politically sensitive missions, such as opposing Hezbollah in any way. Reflecting this dynamic, successive Lebanese governments have legitimated Hezbollah's weapons and the organization's "resistance" mission against Israel in their ministerial statements. But since the war in Syria and the arrival of nearly two million refugees, Lebanese governments have prioritized stability -- and security -- which in practice has implied closer coordination between state institutions and Hezbollah.

A Brief History of Collusion

In July 2006, less than a year after the United States began funding the LAF, Hezbollah launched a cross-border raid into Israel, killing and kidnapping several soldiers and provoking a thirty-four-day war. During the conflagration, Hezbollah fired a C-802 land-to-sea missile that hit and nearly sank the *Hanit*, an Israeli navy corvette operating ten miles off Lebanon's coast. The *Hanit* had no forewarning of the attack because LAF elements allowed Hezbollah to use Lebanese naval radar to track and target the vessel. In retaliation, Israel destroyed all the LAF's naval radar stations.

When the war ended, in a widely applauded move, the LAF deployed to the south for the first time in decades. It had been hoped -- though not expected -- that the LAF might help implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which obliged Beirut to prevent the postwar rearming of Hezbollah. Over the past eleven years, however, the LAF has only interdicted the movement of Hezbollah weapons on one occasion, in 2007, as the militia has fully rearmed. According to Israeli claims at the time, the LAF was also tipping Hezbollah off about UN Interim Force in Lebanon site visits, protecting the militia's assets and undermining UNIFIL's mission.

In 2008, the then pro-West government in Beirut mandated the removal of Hezbollah's dedicated fiber-optic network from the south up to Beirut and the removal of LAF Gen. Wafiq Choucair, the Hezbollah-sympathetic officer who ran Beirut airport. But when the LAF declined to remove Choucair and the government persisted in its demand, Hezbollah militarily took over large swaths of the capital, killing nearly a hundred civilians. At no point did the military challenge Hezbollah's offensive, and after the government backed down, the LAF coordinated with the organization and took up Hezbollah's positions following its withdrawal.

Along these lines, since the Syrian war began in 2011, the LAF has done nothing to prevent, and has perhaps facilitated, the movement of Hezbollah troops and weapons into and out of Syria, where the militia has been fighting in support of the Assad regime. Notably, even as the LAF has tolerated Hezbollah's deployments to Syria, it has taken steps to interdict the movement of Sunni fighters crossing the borders from Lebanon.

In broad terms, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war -- in which more than 500,000 mostly Sunni Muslims have been killed -- has generated some anger among Lebanese Sunnis. Thus, between 2013 and 2014, Lebanon saw a series of high-profile car bombings targeting Shia neighborhoods in Beirut. To prevent a further deterioration, the LAF and Hezbollah established joint security checkpoints during this period. In June 2013 in particular, Hezbollah-LAF cooperation went beyond checkpoints, when the two forces fought side by side against two to three hundred

heavily armed supporters of the anti-Assad Salafi cleric Sheikh Ahmed Assir in the southern city of Saida. Both Hezbollah and the LAF participated in daylong skirmishes, culminating in an assault on Assir's compound in the Abra neighborhood.

More recently, in April 2017, Hezbollah brought more than a dozen international journalists on a tour of Lebanon's frontier with Israel, breezing through several checkpoints manned by national intelligence organs and LAF units, suggesting a high degree of coordination. The next month, Hezbollah turned over several of its Syria border observation posts to the LAF, and is currently reportedly in negotiations with the LAF about other, more sensitive border locations. Some of these Hezbollah positions, however, will likely remain. Finally, in late June, the LAF sent 150 officer cadets to tour Hezbollah's Mleeta war museum, near Nabatiyah, a shrine to the organization's "resistance" credentials vis-a-vis Israel.

Equally problematic -- beyond these particular incidents of coordination, communication, and deconfliction -- have been the perennial reports of LAF-Hezbollah intelligence sharing. On the positive side, the LAF boasts a nearly perfect record of accounting for its U.S.-origin equipment, having transferred none of it to Hezbollah.

Lessons for U.S. Policy

Notwithstanding the collaboration with Hezbollah, senior U.S. military officials still support the military assistance and training program. CENTCOM commander Gen. Joseph Votel, for example, praises the LAF as "among the most capable and valued partners" in the Middle East. On March 15, he told the House Armed Services Committee that Lebanon was "a key partner in our efforts to counter violent extremism," described the LAF as a great "return on investment," and advocated increased U.S. support for Lebanon's military. General Votel also claimed that a strong LAF "acts as a counterweight to the militant arm of Hezbollah" and said that while Hezbollah was fighting in Syria, the LAF had "gained increasing credibility" in Lebanon.

While General Votel is undoubtedly correct about the LAF's high value in fighting domestic Sunni Islamist militants, his claims about its rising domestic credibility or potential role as an alternative to Hezbollah are less easily substantiated. The Lebanese people are generally supportive of the LAF's counterterrorism role, but many bristle at the collaboration with Hezbollah, which is seen as exclusively targeting Sunnis. In June 2017, the LAF evidently tortured and killed four detained (Sunni) Syrian refugees, initially claiming the prisoners died from "preexisting conditions." This incident offered scant assurance to many Sunnis of the LAF's status as a "national institution."

U.S. budget funding for the LAF presents a conundrum, even setting aside the torture allegations. The initial 2018 administration budget request zeroed out U.S. assistance to the LAF, but CENTCOM's support for the program matters greatly. Still, the indisputable collaboration between the LAF and a U.S.-designated terrorist organization could well cause lawmakers to oppose the aid in the future. Equally troubling, the pro-West majority has disappeared in Beirut's government over the past decade as the United States has deepened its ties with the LAF.

Pragmatically speaking, the U.S. assistance is helping the LAF better secure Lebanon against the threat of Sunni Islamist militants. And Washington undoubtedly has an interest in preventing deterioration in yet another Middle East state, especially one bordering Israel. Perhaps more important, ending the program would be taken as a clear signal by Tehran -- and other states in the region -- that Washington is abandoning its interests and vulnerable allies in Lebanon.

At \$100 million per year, the LAF program is relatively inexpensive. Given the dynamics of Lebanon, however, U.S. expectations must remain limited. The LAF is no panacea; it is a U.S.-funded institution that works with Hezbollah. Despite this significant drawback, Washington may still have an interest in supporting a program that promotes stability and maintains a U.S. stake in Lebanon.

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