

Reassessing U.S. Military Assistance to Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

PolicyWatch 1693 is the second in a two-part series discussing U.S. military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). This piece addresses the program's future direction, while [PolicyWatch 1692 \(templateC05.php?CID=3241\)](#) examined the context of the U.S. aid program.

Since 2005, Washington has obligated more than \$700 million in military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces. In the aftermath of the LAF's August 3 cross-border shooting of two Israeli officers, one fatal, this funding has come under increasing scrutiny. Not coincidentally, the shooting followed a series of setbacks for Washington's allies in Beirut, which in turn fundamentally altered the conditions that had spurred the 2005 spike in U.S. funding. It is unclear how this new dynamic is affecting the military, but many infer from the shooting that the LAF is shifting away from neutrality and toward Hizballah. More broadly, the incident has resurrected questions as to whether Washington's main policy objective for the LAF -- establishing state sovereignty throughout Lebanese territory -- is ultimately achievable.

Despite these profound changes on the ground, U.S. policy toward Lebanon -- with LAF funding as its cornerstone -- remains unchanged. On August 12, deputy State Department spokesman Mark Toner went so far as to describe the funding as part of America's "vital...national interests." During the heyday of the Cedar Revolution, this level of prioritization may have been warranted, but does it remain so today?

Background

In 2005, the Bush administration boosted previously minute levels of U.S. assistance to the LAF in response to the Cedar Revolution, which ended Syria's thirty-year occupation of Lebanon. Although Hizballah still dominated the South and much of Beirut, Washington saw Syria's departure as an unprecedented opportunity to foster full Lebanese government control over the entire country.

Currently, however, Damascus has reestablished itself as a force in Beirut, and Hizballah is again ascendant. Recognizing these changes, Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, placed a hold on the 2011 assistance package on August 2, requesting that the administration clarify the provision. The move turned out to be prescient, with LAF troops opening fire on Israeli troops the next day.

Mixed Record

Washington's revitalized Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program for Lebanon had two goals. In the long term, the objective was to build sufficient capacity in the LAF in order to counteract militias and enhance state sovereignty. (The Bush administration did not believe the LAF would be able to supplant Hizballah anytime soon). In the near term, U.S. funding would enhance the LAF's counterterrorism capabilities against al-Qaeda affiliates, a critical need given the lack of state control throughout much of the country.

The program hit a high note early on when, following the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war, the LAF made an unprecedented deployment to the South. Not only was it the first time in decades that the military had based troops near the border with Israel, it also constituted the first significant government presence in that Hizballah-controlled territory.

Counterterrorism cooperation has been a positive as well -- according to Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman, U.S. assistance has led to "significant" improvements in LAF operations along those lines.

But there have also been disappointments. During the 2006 war, for example, LAF elements colluded with Hizballah, allowing the group to use Lebanese navy radar to track and nearly sink the Israeli warship Hanit. Likewise, in 2008, the LAF coordinated with Hizballah during the militia's foray into Beirut, offering no challenge to the offensive and later relieving the militiamen and taking up the group's positions following withdrawal.

The deployment to the South has been problematic as well. At the time, few expected the LAF to fully implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701 by interdicting Hizballah weapons. Yet aside from LAF troops being present in the area, the operation has proven mostly cosmetic. Worse, if Israeli claims are true, the LAF has been tipping Hizballah off about UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) site visits, protecting the militia's assets and undermining UNIFIL's mission.

Purpose of FMF Programs

In general, FMF programs are designed to accomplish three goals: build the military capabilities of friendly states; help Washington understand and gain influence with these militaries; and deter meddling by unfriendly states. Notwithstanding Hizballah's growing political role, Washington continues to count Lebanon among the friendly states, and US military officers have gained important insight into the LAF's thinking via the assistance program. Yet progress on the other objectives has been less slow to come.

First, it is difficult to determine how much influence Washington has cultivated with the LAF since 2005. Beirut's response to the August 3 incident was not reassuring. For example, President Michel Suleiman, former LAF chief of staff, applauded the shooting as a "heroic" act and pledged that Lebanon would seek "more advanced equipment" from "friendly" countries. A statement by Defense Minister Elias Murr after the U.S. congressional freeze was equally hostile: "Let them keep their money or give it to Israel." LAF chief of staff Jean Kahwaji likewise dismissed reports of the freeze as "only ideas suggested by some U.S. Congress members who are [influenced by the] pro-Israeli lobby."

Moreover, the \$100 million in U.S. FMF slated for 2010 may not prevent Lebanon from accepting Iranian or Russian military assistance. Iran has long offered to provide such support, and in 2008, Murr accepted a (yet-to-be-delivered) donation of ten MiG-29 fighter planes from Moscow. Although refusing such gifts would no doubt cause grave embarrassment for Beirut, the LAF is not particularly enthusiastic about them. Its personnel have long been working to standardize on American equipment, and materiel from elsewhere tends to interfere with those efforts. Moreover, the military is well aware that Iranian assistance typically comes with long strings attached.

Keeping Score

Five years after the Cedar Revolution, the last main vestige of Washington's commitment to its Lebanese allies is the FMF program. When Vice President Joe Biden visited Beirut in May 2009, on the eve of Lebanese general elections,

he announced that Washington would "evaluate the shape of our assistance program based on the composition of the new government and the policies it advocates." Today, the March 14 movement sits in a coalition government with Hizballah, and its guiding "ministerial statement" now legitimizes the "resistance" and its weapons. In the past, these developments may have meant an end to U.S. assistance, but with few other avenues of meaningful engagement, the program has persisted.

To be sure, there is merit in Washington's desire to avoid abandoning its allies, which some might view as a repeat of the 1983 U.S. "redeployment" out of Lebanon. But it is also clear that the bar defined by Vice President Biden has been lowered considerably over the past fifteen months. Without some action by the United States that recognizes the profoundly changed circumstances since the vice president announced that aid would effectively be conditioned on the composition and the policies of the Lebanese government, any lingering benefits Washington reaps from maintaining the FMF program will disappear.

One way to remedy the current situation is for the State Department and congressional appropriators to work out clear, transparent, measurable, and verifiable benchmarks by which all sides -- including the Lebanese -- can evaluate the merit of maintaining assistance to the LAF. The key metric is the relationship between the LAF and Hizballah. While some connection between elements of the two institutions is to be expected, especially given the Shiite plurality within the LAF, several indicators would provide useful insight into the depth of the relationship. Specifically, going forward, the FMF program should be contingent on a close assessment that measures, among other things:

- LAF response to officers who share intelligence with Hizballah, "go rogue," or demonstrate other problematic conduct with regard to the group (e.g., are they disciplined or congratulated?)
- LAF's role in harboring or otherwise protecting Hizballah weaponry (e.g., does the LAF play a role in preventing the import of weapons from Syria or their flow south of the Litani or in facilitating it?)
- Flow of personnel between Hizballah and the LAF (e.g., do officials of Hizballah's militia transfer directly into the LAF?)
- Flow of weapons and other material between the LAF and Hizballah (e.g., does LAF weaponry end up under Hizballah control?)
- Quality of LAF cooperation with UNIFIL (e.g., do LAF units seem to follow Hizballah guidance in obstructing the operations of UNIFIL?)
- LAF response to the anticipated indictment of Hizballah members by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, currently prosecuting the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri (e.g., will the LAF arrest and transfer indicted Hizballah officials or refuse to implement the tribunal's request?)

Conclusion

Although \$100 million per year is minimal by U.S. FMF standards, it constitutes a significant portion of the LAF budget and carries great symbolism. Given the competing interests, the most constructive way forward is to define clear benchmarks that track the Hizballah-LAF relationship and limit the potential for nostalgia and sentimentality to cloud the current assessment of the LAF.

In August 2007, Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman -- then ambassador to Lebanon -- gave a speech at LAF headquarters, marking the delivery of 100 Humvees: "Through our military assistance, the people and government of the United States, including members of Congress, show our confidence in Lebanon's government, Lebanon's Ministry of Defense, and in the leadership and soldiers of the LAF," he stated. Absent that kind of confidence, which clear and transparent measurements can provide, Washington's military assistance program with Lebanon has a bleak future.

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