

Defending Lebanon or Israel?

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Jan 7, 2010

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Articles & Testimony

In December, the Lebanese Web site Qifa Nabki featured a satirical "news story" discussing U.S. arms transfers to Lebanon. According to the article, the U.S. gifted "cutting edge" military material to the Lebanese Armed Forces that included camouflage-print bandages and, more menacingly, the USS Tadpole, a decommissioned World War II vessel that "until recently had been used for target practice by U.S. Navy gunners in Norfolk."

Humor aside, the article highlights a serious and increasingly prevalent critique of U.S. military assistance. Since the 2005 Cedar Revolution and the balloting that brought to power the only pro-West democratically elected government in the Arab world, Lebanon received nearly \$500 million worth of military material from Washington. Yet many in Lebanon are concerned that U.S. weaponry enables the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to defend the state neither from Israel nor from local al-Qaida affiliates.

This line of thinking has some prominent and diverse proponents. In 2008, leader of the Shiite militia Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah complained that U.S. support for Israel prevented the transfer of sophisticated weapons to the LAF; in 2009, Minister of Defense Elias Murr implicitly criticized Washington for not providing fighter jets. "If we had aircraft," during the 2007 fighting against Islamist militants, "we would not have lost one martyr from the army," he said. This past December, from the White House podium, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman asked for increases in U.S. military assistance to finally enable the LAF to "defend Lebanon from enemy attacks and confront terrorism."

U.S. officials deny Lebanon is being given short shrift, but the perception articulated by Nasrallah and Suleiman is partly correct and stems from a fundamental Lebanese misreading of U.S. policy priorities: While U.S. taxpayer generosity, currently slated at over \$100 million this year, will enhance LAF domestic counterterrorism capabilities, it is not meant -- and will never be meant -- to help Lebanon deter or defend against Israeli strikes.

For Washington, Hezbollah -- which controls south Lebanon -- not Israel's violations of Lebanese sovereignty, is the problem. Because Hezbollah receives virtually all of its armaments via Syria, Washington has also been far more concerned about the lack of security on the Lebanese-Syrian frontier than about the Israeli-Lebanese border.

Today, both Israel and Lebanon are violating U.N. Security Council Resolutions. Israel's ubiquitous over-flights violate Lebanese sovereignty, while the Government of Lebanon fails to take sufficient steps to prevent the movement of arms to Hezbollah. More problematically, the new, if deeply divided, pro-West/pro-Iran government

seemed to repudiate the core element of UNSCRs 1559 and 1701 when it explicitly legitimized Hezbollah's weapons in its Ministerial Statement. Given these violations, Washington may see Israel's ability to surveil Lebanon as the best way to prevent another war.

U.S. military planners, then, reached a consensus back in 2005 with their Lebanese counterparts to prioritize a domestic counterterrorism mission for the LAF, i.e. fighting al-Qaida affiliates and Syrian-backed militants at home rather than confronting external threats. Even so, the arms transfers made available to the LAF for this more limited mission provide plenty of fodder for detractors of the U.S. assistance program.

Consider the close-combat air support "Armed Caravan," a particular target of Lebanese derision. This Cessna turbo prop plane is capable of deploying hellfire missiles and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance assets in urban environments. At a cost of \$10 million each -- including ISR, missiles and contractor logistical support -- the plane is a bargain, especially considering the \$30 million to \$40 million price tag for a comparable F-16 package.

Given that the only other fixed wing aircraft in the Lebanese arsenal are four 1950s-era British Hawker Hunters -- flown by only one other country, Zimbabwe -- the easily maintained, cost-effective Cessna would seem a perfect fit for Lebanon. But no. Its low prestige value and, in particular, the comical images conjured up when imagining dogfights between this plane and Israeli fighter jets over Shebaa Farms, have made the Caravan a subject of ridicule in Lebanon and an example of the U.S.'s lack of seriousness. The fact that the overnight shipper Fedex is the leading company in the world using the airplanes, albeit without the Hellfires, hasn't helped.

The Caravan's lack of firepower and cachet has led some Lebanese to suggest that the LAF should get its weapons elsewhere. In December, just prior to President Suleiman's Washington visit, Adnan Hussein, a Hezbollah-sympathetic cabinet member close to Suleiman articulated what others were no doubt thinking: "If we don't get our weapons from the U.S.," he said, "we will get them from another country." There are signs this already has been happening. Earlier this year, Russia gifted 10 MiG-29 aircraft to Lebanon. Iran, too, has offered to provide the LAF with aircraft and missiles. In May 2009, Nasrallah touted unconditional Iranian military support as a campaign promise.

While Hezbollah gets its weapons primarily from Iran and Syria, however, the LAF is unlikely to do so any time soon. With an annual budget of less than \$800 million -- 80% of which is devoted to salaries -- the LAF has very little discretionary funding for expensive weapons systems. Even if Lebanon channeled a significant portion of its scarce resources to its southern border, it would unlikely deter Israel. Consider that Syria, which devotes an estimated \$6 billion per year to military expenditures, could not prevent Israel from destroying its nuclear facility in 2007 -- or from buzzing the presidential palace with its F-16s in 2006.

Although Hezbollah is trying to direct Beirut away from Washington and toward Iran, the Government of Lebanon, for the time being, appears stuck with the assistance provided by the U.S. and its Arab friends. Of course, the current arrangement could change. Washington began its robust military assistance program with Beirut in the aftermath of the Cedar Revolution. Recently, however, this independence movement, under pressure from Syria and Hezbollah, dropped its support for certain resolutions designed to strengthen state sovereignty throughout Lebanese territory.

Washington has never been under any illusions regarding the political will of Lebanese politicians to employ the LAF in controversial missions, like securing the border with Syria or disarming Hezbollah, or the LAF's ability to take on such missions. The aid program was not designed to accomplish these highly ambitious goals in the near term.

Rather, it reflects an attempt to strengthen one of the few truly national institutions in a divided country, with the long-term objective of one day helping the democratically elected government to exercise its sovereignty throughout Lebanon.

If the Government of Lebanon demonstrates a commitment to move toward this goal, the kind of advanced systems

that Washington's critics advocate for the LAF may someday be on the table. If progress lapses, however, even the hapless Caravan may be dropped from the American assistance program. In either case, Lebanese visions of U.S.-made F-16s flying over Tyre with the distinctive Lebanese Cedar Flag on the tail -- and not the Israeli star of David -- will remain a dream.

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