

The Future of U.S. Military Aid to Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

Last week, Lebanese president Michel Suleiman met with President Bush at the White House -- the first visit by a Lebanese head of state since 1996 -- and reportedly pressed for a continued U.S. commitment to the bilateral military assistance program. Since the program's revitalization after the election of the pro-West March 14 coalition in 2005, the administration has provided nearly \$400 million in foreign military financing (FMF) to Beirut, making Lebanon the second largest per capita recipient of U.S. military assistance after Israel. While Washington continues to back Beirut (the administration has requested \$60 million in military assistance for Lebanon for 2009), Hizballah's recent political gains and lingering questions about the future disposition of the Lebanese government will likely prevent the administration from expanding either the quantity or quality of the military requests.

Aid to Lebanese Forces

After the anti-Syrian March 14 movement came to power in 2005, Washington revised its longstanding military relationship with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). That year, following the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, and the subsequent expulsion of the Syrian military from Lebanese territory, the administration dramatically increased its military program for Lebanon. The goal was to rebuild and improve the LAF, which had languished under nearly thirty years of Syrian occupation, with the hope that it could someday exert control throughout Lebanon. In the short term, the LAF was not seen as a counterbalance to the military prowess of Hizballah. Rather, it was believed that, with U.S. assistance, the LAF could act as an effective domestic counterterrorism force.

To this end, from 2006 to 2008, Washington provided nearly \$400 million in assistance to the LAF, including the contents of more than forty C-130 transport airplanes brimming with military material. These planes arrived less than a week after fighting erupted between the LAF and Syrian-backed al-Qaeda affiliate, Fatah al-Islam, in Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in May 2007. According to the U.S. State Department, shipments have included ten million rounds of ammunition and "the same frontline weapons that the U.S. troops are currently using, including assault rifles, automatic grenade launchers, advanced sniper weapons systems, antitank weapons, and the most modern urban warfare bunker weapons." In addition, Washington has provided dozens of Humvees, spare parts for Lebanon's helicopters, and vehicles for its internal security forces.

Initial Progress, Unmet Expectations

The LAF demonstrated a great deal of commitment in Nahr el-Bared. Not only did the army follow government orders to enter the camp in the face of Hizballah threats -- Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah described entry into the camp as a "red line" -- the LAF persevered throughout a three-month campaign and sustained heavy losses. Regrettably, however, the LAF's performance in the camp was a high point.

In the year since that campaign, the LAF has taken few bold steps and has seemingly been absent on key initiatives. For example, despite the LAF's deployment in south Lebanon since the end of the 2006 war with Israel (per UN Security Council Resolution 1701), the army has not actively pursued Hizballah's weapons. The UN has indicated that Hizballah has fully rearmed and appears to have retrenched south of the Litani River under the watchful eyes of the LAF (and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon [UNIFIL]). No LAF interdictions of Hizballah weapons or arms caches have been reported during the past year.

Perhaps worse than this cosmetic deployment in Hizballah territory was LAF performance during the Shiite militia's May 2008 occupation of Beirut. That month, the pro-West government of Lebanon issued directives to remove the Hizballah-allied LAF officer in charge of security at Beirut airport and to dismantle the organization's fiber optic network. Hizballah cried foul and demanded that the orders be rescinded. When the government refused to back down, the militia stormed Beirut. During the operation, the LAF was essentially missing in action, taking no steps to secure national institutions. Some reports even suggested that the LAF acted in coordination with Hizballah during the offensive.

Concerns remain about the future disposition of the LAF as a "neutral" national institution under the command of the Lebanese central government. During the summer 2006 war, for example, Israel destroyed several LAF naval radar stations after a Hizballah missile nearly sunk an Israeli warship. Israel targeted the LAF facilities after it was discovered that Hizballah colluded with the military and used its radar to track the Israeli vessel.

On the Table

At present, the Bush administration is currently considering another robust FMF package for the LAF in 2009, which would reportedly include Cobra attack helicopters. The Cobra would greatly improve the LAF's capabilities (as of 2005, Lebanon was said to have less than a dozen operational helicopters) and better enable it to carry out counterterrorism operations. During the 2007 Nahr el-Bared campaign, for instance, the LAF had to retrofit some of its old helicopters in order to carry bombs targeting Fatah al-Islam bunkers.

While the 2009 request for the LAF has not been made public, it is likely that the Lebanese military has asked the Bush administration for even more high-tech equipment. Although the LAF has a good record of security with U.S.-provided weaponry, should the relationship between the LAF and Hizballah formally change, legitimate questions could be raised as to whether Hizballah might gain access to U.S. equipment. Hizballah has its own cutting-edge equipment and would likely see little utility in tapping LAF stocks, but it would presumably be interested in acquiring night-vision goggles, a development that would be of particular concern to Washington.

Conclusion

In the short term, continued U.S. funding and technical support may enable the Lebanese military and security services to better cope with the increasing terrorist threat in the country. But Washington may soon face some very difficult decisions regarding its military assistance program with Lebanon. Until now, even though Beirut has a national-unity government in which Hizballah participates, Washington has been able to cordon off its relations with March 14 from those with the Shi'ite militia. This has not been easy, given that Hizballah heads the Lebanese foreign ministry. In addition, the organization's coordination with the LAF may in fact expand in the near future; a national dialogue between the major political groups could result in a "national defense agreement" between the LAF and Hizballah (See [PolicyWatch #1406 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2932\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2932), "Stability in Lebanon Threatened, Again"). Worse, if the March 14 coalition loses the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, and a Hizballah-led coalition heads the new government, U.S. assistance to the LAF would likely end altogether.

Today, Lebanon faces an increased threat of instability -- from a festering Islamist challenge in the north to ongoing Syrian meddling. Washington's strategy of military-capacity building is important but insufficient and may soon be downgraded. With Beirut on the brink, the task of crafting a new U.S. Lebanon policy to salvage what remains of the pro-West government will fall to the next administration. As Hizballah and the LAF move closer to a formalized operational arrangement, Washington's policy options regarding the LAF will likely face more constraints.

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