

PolicyWatch 1692

Arming Hizballah? U.S. Military Assistance to Lebanon

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PolicyWatch 1692 is the first in a two-part series discussing U.S. military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). This piece examines the context of the U.S. aid program, while [PolicyWatch 1693](#) addresses the program's future direction.

The August 3 fatal shooting of an Israel Defense Forces officer by a Lebanese Armed Forces soldier has sparked debate regarding the utility and wisdom of the U.S. military assistance program to Lebanon. Although such assistance is not new, the program's scope dramatically increased after the 2005 Cedar Revolution ended Syria's thirty-year occupation and swept the Arab world's only pro-Western, democratically elected government to power. In recent months, however, Syrian influence has returned, while Hizballah has secured enough political power to effectively reverse many of the revolution's gains. Even before the August 3 incident, these changes on the ground prompted Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, to place a hold on the 2011 assistance package.

Currently, discussions regarding the disposition of the \$100 million in annual aid are focused on the LAF's relationship with Hizballah and whether the force will ever be in a position -- either militarily or politically -- to supplant the Shiite militia and establish state sovereignty in the South. Largely missing from the discussion, however, is the context of the U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program and its long-term goals: Washington has decades of experience funding the LAF, including one occasion when assistance was ramped up and then suddenly discontinued.

Background

The United States established its relationship with the LAF shortly after Lebanon gained independence from France in 1946. In addition to selling equipment to the fledgling force, Washington provided nearly \$300 million in funding from 1946 to 2005, including some \$16 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) grants that brought more than 3,000 officers to the United States for instruction. Twice during this period -- in 1958 and 1982 -- Washington deployed troops to Lebanon at Beirut's request to help improve stability. The second of these deployments proved exceedingly costly, ending with a 1983 truck bomb that killed 241 U.S. Marines.

During the civil war (1975-1990) and the Syrian military occupation (1976-2005), the LAF experienced a prolonged period of decay. The war precipitated partial dissolution of the military, and what remained was underfunded, undertrained, and relegated to largely nonmilitary missions. Washington continued its IMET funding of the LAF at an average of \$600,000 annually during these dark years, but the aid did little, if anything, to slow the deterioration.

Status circa 2005

Not surprisingly, by the time the Bush administration decided to reinvigorate the LAF in 2005, the force was decrepit. Nearly 80 percent of its \$900 million budget was allocated to recurrent costs, leaving little for procurement or training. As a result, an LAF soldier's annual training reportedly included firing just one full clip of bullets. The force's equipment had become obsolete as well. In 2005, for example, the LAF had fewer than a dozen operational helicopters, and its fixed-wing aircraft included just four 1950's-era British Hawker Hunters, a platform then flown by only one other country, Zimbabwe.

Moreover, although the LAF no longer faced an imminent threat of dissolution by 2005, sectarian issues persisted (indeed, the sectarian composition of individual units remains a closely scrutinized issue today). The LAF's top-heavy structure posed problems as well. With 56,000 men under arms, Lebanon currently fields some 400 generals; by comparison, the U.S. Army has some 538,000 troops but only 300 flag officers.

The poor state of LAF equipment and preparedness was on full display in 2007, when the force confronted al-Qaeda affiliate Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. Responding to the radical group's execution of dozens of soldiers, the LAF deployed its top troops for an offensive in the camp. Photos from the operation's initial days showed LAF special forces fighting without body armor or helmets and using their personal mobile phones for battlefield communication. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they depleted most of their ammunition within the first week of the campaign. (The U.S. resupply mission that enabled them to continue the offensive included forty C-17

transport planes brimming with weapons and ammunition.) Although LAF esprit de corps was high, four months of combat took a heavy toll. By operation's end, 222 Fatah al-Islam militants were dead, but so were 163 LAF soldiers.

Past as Prologue?

Since the Cedar Revolution, Washington has obligated more than \$700 million in FMF to Lebanon. Among other materiel, this assistance has allowed Lebanon to purchase rifles, bullets, man-portable antitank weapons, Humvees, and sniper equipment. For now, the congressional hold on U.S. funding appears temporary. But what would happen if Washington ended the program?

In the early 1980s, the United States ramped up its assistance to the LAF, reaching \$100 million in 1983, equivalent to about \$212 million in 2009 dollars. This spike was intended to underwrite an ambitious expansion of the force from 20,000 to 60,000 soldiers. But the plans did not come to fruition. Under Syrian and Israeli occupation, the LAF was tasked with the sensitive job of providing internal security. Not surprisingly, when the military responded to a Shiite attack in east Beirut by targeting the southern suburbs, LAF Shiites -- who constituted some 60 percent of conscripts -- were aggrieved, and the force began to dissolve.

In 1984, the United States provided just \$15 million in military aid, and none in 1985. What became of Washington's investment? Most famously, the LAF's largely Shiite 6th Brigade -- trained and equipped by the United States -- defected, taking its troops and weapons to Amal and Hizballah. In 1987, the reconstituted unit reportedly ended up under Amal's operational control.

In many ways, the situation today differs markedly from the 1980s -- aside from its counterterrorism mission, the LAF is not routinely involved with precarious and potentially divisive internal security issues. Like the 1980s, however, questions of loyalty and unit cohesion in the face of sectarian divisions remain, and cannot be remedied via U.S. funding.

U.S. Hopes versus Hizballah's Vision

U.S. assistance to the LAF remains a long-term, aspirational program aimed at preparing the military to someday exert sovereignty over Lebanese territory. Ironically, the shooting of Israeli soldiers earlier this month suggests that the LAF may finally be looking to establish itself as a force on the border. As Lebanese military officers have claimed since the incident, the "soldiers received clear orders [from command] to open fire." In any event, although this news is perhaps better than the initially reported "rogue unit" scenario, it is hardly comforting.

Obama administration officials have expressed confidence that no U.S.-provided equipment was used in the shooting. Yet regardless of the rifle's origin, when considered alongside the LAF leadership's increasingly strident rhetoric on Israel, the incident appears to reflect a more aggressive posture -- one more in line with Hizballah and more conducive to volatility on the border. As the militia's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, warned during a speech shortly after the shooting, "If the army is attacked by the Israeli enemy in any area where the resistance has a presence or a say, the resistance will not stand aside silent and disciplined." Indeed, Nasrallah has laid out a vision for Lebanon that marries the LAF to Hizballah, so that "the army defends the resistance and the resistance has the honor to be defended by the army."

Clearly, this was not the dynamic the Bush administration had in mind when it increased assistance to the LAF and encouraged its deployment to Hizballah-controlled southern Lebanon after the 2006 war with Israel. At the same time, it is difficult to envision the circumstances under which the LAF as an institution would establish a close, long-term relationship with the Shiite militia. Israel is a unifying issue, of course, but many in the military (and in Lebanese society writ large) regard Hizballah as equally menacing and loathsome, making persistent operational cooperation between the two a controversial -- and potentially divisive -- proposition for the LAF.

In the coming months, the Obama administration will no doubt be looking for further signs of increased coordination between the LAF and Hizballah. A key test may come if, as widely expected, the international tribunal investigating the murder of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri issues indictments against prominent Hizballah activists. The willingness of the LAF -- and, more generally, the central government -- to act on these indictments, arrest the wanted men, and transfer them to the custody of the tribunal will be a clear sign of whether these state institutions have morphed into Hizballah's appendages or remain truly independent.

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