

## ISSUE BRIEF

# The United States– Lebanese Armed Forces Partnership

## Challenges, Risks, and Rewards

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### Executive Summary

The US military-assistance program to Lebanon has not been without its missteps and complications, but, overall, it has yielded results and been a program that the US Department of Defense and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) continue to regard highly. The LAF have proven a reliable partner force to the US military—one informed observer noted that “the Americans appreciate the fact that unlike many armies the U.S. assists, the Lebanese army has shown a will to fight.”<sup>1</sup> Lebanon was perhaps the only Middle Eastern country threatened by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) where US forces were not required in a combat role, because the LAF had the capability and will to defend its border and defeat the militants. Furthermore, despite the concerns of the program’s critics, the weaponry and equipment supplied by the United States to the LAF have been accounted for, with no evidence to date that any material has been diverted to Hezbollah.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, several challenges lie ahead that could threaten the military partnership. They include the LAF’s complicated relationship with Hezbollah, which has drawn criticism in some quarters in Washington and raised questions about whether the military assistance program

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1 Author interview with informed observer.

2 In January 2017, Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) personnel responsible for end-use monitoring (EUM) compliance conducted a Compliance Assessment Visit in Lebanon. The LAF received the highest possible rating of EUM satisfaction, validating Lebanon’s security and accountability measures for safeguarding sensitive US provided technology.

should continue.<sup>3</sup> Also, there are concerns that another war between Hezbollah and Israel could be nearing. Israel has indicated that the LAF could be targeted alongside Hezbollah in any future conflict, which could undo a decade of US investment in the Lebanese military. Furthermore, Russia is showing a newfound interest in Lebanon, and has been pushing for an enhanced military relationship between the two countries—which, if accepted by Beirut, could undermine the US–LAF military assistance program.

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Despite these potential challenges, a continuation of military assistance to the LAF is critical to maintaining Lebanese stability, especially given the presence of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees in the country and the ongoing war in neighboring Syria. In addition, building the LAF’s capacity serves the longer-term goal of weakening Hezbollah’s narrative that only it, and its style of hybrid warfare, can defend Lebanon from external aggression.<sup>4</sup> The cancelation of the program, or a significant reduction in its scale, would erode US influence in a critical slice of real estate on the eastern Mediterranean, to the potential benefit of Russia and Iran.

## Introduction

On May 6, Lebanese voters headed to the polls for the first time in nine years, to elect 128 members of parliament. The election was held under a new electoral law that included, for the first time, a component of proportionality and allowed expatriate Lebanese to vote.

The confrontational paradigm that shaped Lebanese politics since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005—between the Saudi- and Western-supported March 14 parliamentary coalition, and the Iran- and Syria-backed March 8 coalition—has come to an end, with the latter emerging as victor. The decisive moment came in October 2016 when Saad Hariri, the head of the mainly Sunni Future Movement and a top leader of the March 14 coalition, finally agreed to endorse Hezbollah’s candidate for the presidency, Michel Aoun. This ended two and a half years of gridlock.

Lebanon has experienced a rare modicum of stability in the sixteen months since Aoun’s election. The cabinet and parliament have been able to meet, progress has been made on offering tenders for exploration rights for the suspected oil and gas wealth lying in Lebanon’s coastal waters, an electoral law was passed, and Hariri is pursuing an ambitious attempt to raise about \$16 billion for some two hundred and fifty infrastructure projects.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the relative calm in Lebanon is due to the fact that Hezbollah has won the decade-long struggle for dominance, with its erstwhile opponents agreeing to compromise with the Iran-backed party.

The United States, which in the period following the 2005 withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon wielded tremendous influence over the then-March 14-dominated government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, remains an important international player in Lebanon, but in a reduced capacity. Arguably, the main influence Washington exerts today in Lebanon is through its military-assistance program to the Lebanese Armed

3 Elliott Abrams, “The Latest Developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon,” statement before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, United States House of Representatives, November 29, 2017, [https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/Abrams%20HFAC%20Testimony%2011.29.17.pdf](https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/Abrams%20HFAC%20Testimony%2011.29.17.pdf).

4 In the Hezbollah context, “hybrid warfare” means a nonstate militant group employing both irregular and conventional weaponry and tactics in a single battlespace.

5 “Hariri: We Have \$16 Billion Investment Program in Infrastructure that Includes 250 Projects,” *National News Agency*, January 15, 2018, <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/87248/Hariri-We-have-16-billion-investment-program-in-infrastructure-that-includes-250-projects>.

Forces.<sup>6</sup> The assistance program has proven a success in boosting the LAF's capabilities to better defend Lebanon from internal and external threats.

This was demonstratively proven in August 2017, when the LAF defeated several hundred ISIS militants dug into the rugged mountains of northeast Lebanon. Nevertheless, some critics question why the United States should continue to deliver funding to an army that has a cooperative relationship with Hezbollah. In his first year in office, President Donald Trump reduced international commitments, such as tightening the budgets allocated to the United Nations and the State Department's Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program. The assistance program to the LAF could come under pressure in the months ahead, especially if, following the May 6 election, Lebanon is seen to fall further under the grip of Hezbollah and Iran. Another potential threat to the program is Russia, which has lately signaled an interest in developing a military relationship with Lebanon, through a proposed military-cooperation agreement and the offering of a \$1 billion credit line to purchase Russian weapons.

### 1990–2005—the Pax Syriana Era

The LAF is widely regarded by the Lebanese as the one state institution worthy of trust and support.<sup>7</sup> Lebanese recall that the collapse of the LAF in 1976, and again in 1984, presaged some of the worst bouts of violence during the sixteen-year civil war; they view the military as the principal source of national stability.

When a settlement was reached in 1989, which helped terminate the civil war a year later, Syria was left as the paramount powerbroker in Lebanon. The LAF was obliged to accept the new realities of Pax Syriana; those officers who objected were gradually weeded out into retirement. By October 1993, the civil-war militias had been disbanded, and some six thousand former mi-

litiamen drafted into the LAF.<sup>8</sup> The LAF's personnel strength grew from twenty thousand in 1990 to some sixty thousand by the middle of the decade, drawn mainly from a new conscription requirement of one-year service. The Lebanese defense budget increased significantly, from \$271 million in 1990 to \$700 million in 1995, and up to \$900 million in 2001. Instead of expending the budget on armaments and equipment, Lebanon spent much of it on salaries and benefits for a bloated officer corps, such as free vehicles for personal use, unlimited free gasoline, and landline and mobile-phone bills paid by the government.<sup>9</sup>

The United States had extended between \$145 and 190 million in grants and loans for the LAF in the early 1980s, mainly for training and equipment midway through the civil war.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1990s, after the war ended, the United States again provided nonlethal support for the LAF, mainly in the form of M113 armored personnel carriers (APCs) and UH-1 helicopters, through the Department of Defense's sale of excess defense articles (EDA).<sup>11</sup>

During the Pax Syriana era, the LAF's role was directed more toward internal stability than defending against external threats. The only serious combat it experienced during that era occurred when a Sunni jihadist group ambushed an LAF patrol in the Dinnieh district of northern Lebanon on January 1, 2000. There followed three days of scrappy skirmishes in the freezing-cold mountains, against a force of some 100–300 militants. Eleven LAF officers and soldiers were killed in the three-day battle.

Syria's dominance of Lebanon in the 1990s was generally supported regionally and internationally. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries lavished reconstruction aid on Lebanon, while the United States and France (Lebanon's former mandatory authority) viewed the hard hand of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad as a necessary source of sta-

6 The United States also has the capacity to exert considerable influence on Lebanon's key banking sector, in regard to compliance with the Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing Act.

7 Hashem Osseiran, "Army Scores Highest on Lebanese Trust Index Poll," *Daily Star*, August 14, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Aug-14/267244-army-scores-highest-on-lebanese-trust-index-poll.ashx>.

8 Are J. Knudsen, *Lebanese Armed Forces: A United Army for a Divided Country?* (Bergen, Norway: CMI Insight, 2014), <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5284-lebanese-armed-forces.pdf>.

9 Nicholas Blanford, "Killing Mr Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and its Impact on the Middle East" (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

10 Casey L. Addis, "US Security Assistance to Lebanon," *Congressional Research Service*, April 1, 2009, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=739368>.

11 Ibid.

bility to keep Lebanon’s fractious leaders from returning to conflict.

But, by 2004, sentiment in the West and inside Lebanon had turned against Syria, with increased calls on Damascus to withdraw its troops from its tiny neighbor. In February 2005, Rafik Hariri, a former five-term prime minister, was assassinated in a truck-bomb explosion in central Beirut. The assassination triggered a series of mass anti-Syria protests in Beirut which, combined with international pressure, saw Damascus withdraw its remaining forces by the end of April 2005. Two months later, following parliamentary elections, a Western-backed, March 14-dominated government took office in Beirut.

Under Pax Syriana, Hezbollah had enjoyed protection to pursue its anti-Israel struggle, which peaked in May 2000, when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) withdrew from an occupied strip of south Lebanon. The end of Syrian hegemony over Lebanon, however, exposed Hezbollah to increased pressure to disarm. A war between Hezbollah and Israel, in July and August 2006, further deepened the sectarian and political divide in Lebanon.

In May 2007, clashes between the LAF and Sunni Fatah al-Islam jihadist militants erupted in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon, and rapidly turned into the most challenging engagement waged by the army since the end of the 1975–1990 civil war. Overall, some two thousand LAF troops took part in the operation against up to five hundred militants, some of whom had extensive combat experience and knowledge of insurgency operations.

Having played a mainly internal security role since 1990, the LAF in 2007 had no practical experience in counter-insurgency operations, especially in such a cramped urban environment, and lacked the necessary equipment. Very few soldiers had body armor. There was little in the way of air support, both combat and reconnaissance, and a lack of military communications.<sup>12</sup> The LAF deployed towed 130mm artillery guns on hills to the east of Nahr al-Bared; these, along with mortar and tank fire, were used to pound the militants’ locations.

What the LAF lacked in weaponry and equipment, it made up for with improvisation. Civilian bulldozers were up-armored with metal cages filled with sandbags and soldered steel plates, to protect against snipers and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The LAF also made use of thousand-pound aerial bombs that dated from the 1960s, dropping them from beneath UH-1 helicopters onto Fatah al-Islam positions in the camp. The militants fought tenaciously. Sniping accounted for a large number of the LAF’s overall fatalities.

The battle lasted for three months, and ended with the LAF’s seizure of the camp. The LAF announced that 163 soldiers were killed in the fighting, and another 400–500 wounded, while 222 militants were killed. The defeat of Fatah al-Islam boosted the profile of the LAF, after years of its being overshadowed by Hezbollah in domestic military affairs. But, it also betrayed the LAF’s shortcomings—the lack of adequate weaponry, equipment, and training for diverse operations.

To supplement dwindling stocks, the United States and some Gulf states airlifted artillery and tank ammunition to the LAF during the fighting, including more than forty C-130 and C-17 flights from the United States.<sup>13</sup> Within the LAF, however, there was some unhappiness that international support had been too slow, and that it still lacked suitable weaponry to finish off Fatah al-Islam in short order.

“We didn’t get anything but promises and best wishes and some ammunition, but no equipment,” LAF Commander General Michel Suleiman said in August 2007. “It’s as though they are telling us, ‘die first and assistance will follow.’”

## The United States Steps In

With the departure of Syrian troops in April 2005, and the formation of a Western-friendly government in Beirut three months later, the administration of then-President George W. Bush conducted an assessment of Lebanon’s security needs—to help foster a friendly and independent government, and to build a partnership capability with the LAF. In 2006, the Bush administration

12 The author sat with an LAF captain in a dugout on the edge of the camp during the early phase of fighting, and noticed that the officer’s only means of communication were four cellphones lined up in front of him on an overturned wooden ammunition box.

13 Nizar Abdel-Kader, “US Military Assistance to Lebanon: Equipping LAF not Transforming It,” *National Defense Magazine*, October 2012, <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/us-military-assistance-lebanon-equipping-laf-not-transforming-it>.



US Army Gen Joseph L. Votel, commander United States Central Command, receives a mission briefing at the Lebanese Armed Forces 9th Brigade observation position at Dahr Al Jabl overlook, near the Syrian border during his visit to Lebanon June 7, 2017. On the trip, Votel met with key leaders of the Lebanese government and military to reaffirm a shared commitment of stability and security in the region. *Photo credit: Department of Defense/US Air Force Tech Sgt. Dana Flamer.*

ordered Foreign Military Financing grants for the LAF for the first time since 1984. Initially, \$1 million in FMF grants was sought for 2006, and \$4.8 million for 2007. However, the Hezbollah-Israel war placed a heavier burden on the LAF, as some fifteen thousand troops were deployed to the southern border district to help implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which helped bring an end to the war. The resolution, in part, called on the Lebanese government “to secure its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry in Lebanon without its consent of arms or related materiel.”

In light of the new challenges to the Lebanese government, the Bush administration decided to increase its aid for 2006 to around \$42 million, drawn from multiple budget accounts, and included new equipment, spare parts, and training. The figure included \$10.6 million from the Defense Department’s newly estab-

lished Section 1206 program to train and equip foreign militaries. The Nahr al-Bared battle in 2007 prompted a substantial increase in FMF and Section 1206 allocations for Lebanon—\$220 million and \$30.6 million, respectively.

The assistance includes: professional military training through the Defense Department’s International Military Education and Training (IMET) program; capability development through the LAF’s acquisition of weapons and equipment; defense institution building; logistical support and sustainment; training programs for the LAF’s Special Forces and counterterrorism units; supporting the development of aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets and a tactical air force composed of fixed-wing and rotary aircraft; increased coastal protection; and partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the US Department of Justice, and the LAF on post-

blast analysis, counterterrorism investigations, and legal processes.

The United States has provided a broad range of weaponry and equipment suited to the LAF's needs, capabilities, and challenges. They include: A-29 Super Tucano and AC-208 Cessna Caravan aircraft; towed and self-propelled 155mm howitzers; UH-1 and UH-1 Huey II helicopters (six MD 530G light-attack helicopters are due for delivery in 2018); ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV); armored Humvees; TOW-2A anti-tank missiles; M2A2 Bradley armored fighting vehicles; body armor; night-vision equipment; and millions of rounds of artillery and rifle ammunition.

A condition of the United States approving weaponry for the LAF is that it does not breach the US qualitative military edge (QME) policy, which commits the United States to helping maintain Israel's military superiority against its neighbors and adversaries. For example, the United States has not provided air-defense systems to the LAF, as those could be used against Israeli Air Force jets and UAVs that breach Lebanese airspace on a near-daily basis on reconnaissance missions, or to launch airstrikes against targets in neighboring Syria.

In August 2016, Elizabeth Richard, the US ambassador to Beirut, announced that Lebanon was the fifth-largest recipient of FMF in the world. To date, the United States has allocated nearly \$1.7 billion in defense articles and services since 2006.

The long-term agenda of the military-assistance program is to build an apolitical, competent state security apparatus that can foster public confidence in the LAF and other Lebanese security organs.<sup>14</sup> The unspoken, additional goal is that building a stronger and more capable national army could, over time, undermine Hezbollah's argument that it needs to retain its mili-

tary apparatus, as only its hybrid style of warfare can defend Lebanon against external threats, chiefly Israel.

Nevertheless, the complex, interwoven relationship between the LAF and Hezbollah has, at times, raised doubts in the US Congress, and elsewhere, about the wisdom of maintaining the military-assistance program.

In August 2010, LAF and IDF troops clashed near the Lebanese border village of Addaïseh. During the incident, an Israeli lieutenant colonel was shot and killed, and another officer was wounded, in what the IDF said was aimed sniper fire. Two LAF soldiers and a journalist were killed in retaliatory strikes by Israel.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, the United States placed a hold on the \$100 million FMF appropriation for 2010, in order to "determine whether equipment that the United States provided to the Lebanese Armed Forces was used against our ally, Israel."<sup>16</sup> The hold was lifted in November, after congressional consultations with the State Department.

In November 2016, Hezbollah held a parade in the Syrian town of Qusayr to show off its new "armored brigade," which was active in the Syria conflict. Among the equipment on display were several M113 APCs, a type long in use by the LAF. Israel said that Hezbollah had seized the vehicles from the LAF, a claim disputed by US officials. A Defense Department official observed that "the Lebanese Armed Forces have consistently had the best end-use monitoring reporting of any military that we work with, meaning that the equipment that we provide to the Lebanese Armed Forces, we can account for it at any given time."<sup>17</sup> In fact, the M113s were, most likely, seized by Hezbollah during the IDF withdrawal from south Lebanon in May 2000. The IDF's proxy Lebanese militia was equipped with M113s, and abandoned them during the withdrawal.<sup>18</sup>

In April 2017, Hezbollah invited Lebanese and foreign journalists for a tour of the Blue Line, to observe Israeli

14 Christopher M. Blanchard, "Lebanon: Background and US Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, February 14, 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R42816.pdf>.

15 The IDF blamed the LAF for the incident, saying publicly that it believed an LAF sniper was responsible for the fatal shooting. However, sniper rifles were not usually handed out to the LAF's mechanized infantry brigades (the 11th MIB was the unit involved), and it is unlikely that a LAF sniper would have been deployed at the scene by chance. Hezbollah was a much more likely culprit, with a local commander taking advantage of a moment of opportunity offered by the IDF-LAF clash.

16 Addis, "US Security Assistance to Lebanon."

17 Andrew Exum, deputy assistant defense secretary for Middle East policy, remarks during a hearing entitled "US Policy Towards Lebanon," before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, April 28, 2016.

18 Hezbollah captured at least one M113 from the Israeli-occupied area in the 1990s. Others were believed to have been seized by Hezbollah in 2000, and stored in a garage in Hermel in north Lebanon.

security measures along the border. During the tour, a group of armed and uniformed Hezbollah fighters was conspicuously displayed for the media—a deliberate and provocative breach of UNSC Resolution 1701, which forbids arms outside the Lebanese state in the southern border district. The bizarre display was interpreted as a snub to the LAF and UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) peacekeepers (the armed men were on the outskirts of Naqoura village, UNIFIL’s headquarters)—and a warning to Israel that Hezbollah was still around. The next day, Prime Minister Saad Hariri and LAF Commander General Joseph Aoun hurried to south Lebanon, in a gesture of reasserting the Lebanese state’s authority over the area. The LAF command was aware of the Hezbollah tour in advance, but the armed display took it by surprise.

The latest incident to mar the LAF’s reputation in US eyes occurred in January, when Lebanon’s Military Court ordered a six-month jail term for Hanin Ghaddar, a Lebanese journalist living in Washington, on charges of “defaming the Lebanese army.” Ghaddar had said in a 2014 conference that the LAF tended to crack down on Sunni militants, while ignoring Hezbollah. The Military Court’s sentence was widely criticized, with one activist describing it as “one of the worst free speech violations in Lebanon in years.”<sup>19</sup> It also strengthened public doubts about US support for the LAF.<sup>20</sup> The verdict was subsequently dropped, after the Military Court accepted that the case did not fall within its jurisdiction.<sup>21</sup>

Despite these hiccups, the LAF assistance program has continued to receive the support of the State and Defense Departments. In August 2017, the LAF was able to demonstrate its newfound capabilities in a decisive battle against ISIS, its most proficient counterterrorism operation since the end of the 1975–1990 civil war.

### Operation Dawn of the Outskirts

From 2011, the mountainous backwater region of north-east Lebanon adjacent to the border with Syria became

the LAF’s most significant security challenge, as it evolved into a haven for ISIS and Hayat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS), formerly al-Qaeda’s representative in Syria.

On August 2, 2014, a combined force of some seven hundred militants—drawn mainly from ISIS and the then-named Jabhat al-Nusra (the forerunner of HTS)—stormed LAF positions in Arsal, a remote Sunni-populated town in northeast Lebanon. A ceasefire deal five days later saw the militants retreat to their mountain redoubts to the east, taking with them large quantities of looted arms and ammunition, as well as thirty-six captured LAF soldiers and police officers.<sup>22</sup>

By early 2017, the LAF manned a defensive line of fortified checkpoints and forward-operating bases to the west of the militant stronghold, while Hezbollah had deployed in a line of mountaintop outposts to the north and south. The eastern flank, inside Syria, was guarded by a mix of Hezbollah, Syrian Arab Army (SAA), and loyalist paramilitary forces.

By July, it was evident that an offensive was imminent to defeat the militant groups, but it was unclear whether the LAF or Hezbollah would carry out the operation. For the LAF, the upcoming battle represented an opportunity to showcase its new capabilities after a decade of international support. On July 18, Hariri publicly endorsed the LAF to proceed against the militant groups; two days later, Hezbollah unilaterally launched an operation against HTS, which was deployed in hills east and southeast of Arsal.<sup>23</sup> In less than a week, the surviving HTS militants were corralled into a small area on the edge of Arsal, where a deal was struck that saw them leave Lebanon with their families for the Idlib province in Syria. The LAF, meanwhile, was left on the sidelines, playing an essentially redundant role as Hezbollah reaped the glory of its rapid victory.

On August 4, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s secretary general, said in a speech that the LAF would

19 Alex Rowell, “A Chilling Injustice to One of Lebanon’s Bravest Women,” *Al Jumhuriya*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/chilling-injustice-one-lebanon%E2%80%99s-bravest-women>.

20 Elliott Abrams, “Why are American Taxpayers Funding the Lebanese Army?” *Newsweek*, January 26, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/elliott-abrams-why-are-american-taxpayers-supporting-lebanese-army-792002>. The State Department canceled a visa for Brigadier General Hussein Abdullah, the head of the Military Court, to visit the United States.

21 “Military Tribunal Drops Verdict Against Journalist,” *Daily Star*, April 11, 2018, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Apr-11/444762-military-tribunal-drops-verdict-against-journalist.ashx>.

22 Four of the hostages were executed, and seven others were released. Jabhat al-Nusra freed its sixteen hostages for thirteen jailed militants held by the Lebanese authorities in a December 2015 prisoner swap. The fate of the nine soldiers held by ISIS remains unknown.

23 Statement from the Press Office of the President of the Council of Ministers, July 18, 2017.



A dust-coated LAF soldier stands near M113 armored personnel carriers in northeast Lebanon on August 28, 2017, a day after a ceasefire was reached ending the LAF's Dawn of the Outskirts operation against the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. *Photo credit: Nicholas Blanford*

take the lead in ousting ISIS militants from the mountains, and that Hezbollah would play a support role from the Syrian side of the border. The estimated six hundred ISIS militants were deployed in bunkers, caves, and tunnels across mountains to the northeast of Aarsal, and east of the Christian village of Ras Baalbek. The LAF's theater commander opted for a pincer movement, using some five thousand soldiers drawn from special-forces regiments, counterterrorism units, mechanized infantry brigades, and intervention regiments. Fire support was provided by artillery regiments armed with multi-launch rocket systems and 155mm howitzers employing laser-guided "Copperhead" munitions. AC208 Cessna Combat Caravans armed with Hellfire missiles, SA342L, Gazelle helicopters, and UAVs provided close air support.

The operation began unannounced on August 14, with assaults against ISIS militants at the southern end of

their deployment. A week later, the LAF formally announced the launch of Operation Dawn of the Outskirts. The LAF's Air Assault Regiment launched a frontal attack from the west against the main ISIS defensive line. The LAF made extensive use of the Copperhead munitions, firing more than one hundred and forty rounds at ISIS targets, destroying machine-gun nests, mortar pits, and other fixed positions.<sup>24</sup> The coordination between the LAF's operations center, artillery batteries, and ISR assets denied the ISIS militants the ability to maneuver.

On August 22, the Sixth MIB and a company from the Fourth Intervention Regiment advanced from the south toward the main ISIS concentration. By August 24, the surviving ISIS fighters were bottled up in a valley of some 7.5 square miles adjacent to the border.

The LAF never launched a final assault against the remaining ISIS fighters. Instead, the Syrian government

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Aram Nerguizian, senior associate, Burke Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 8, 2017.

and Hezbollah arranged a controversial ceasefire deal, in which the militants were taken from Lebanon to Syria's eastern border with Iraq, in exchange for information locating the remains of nine LAF soldiers who had been captured in the 2014 battle of Arsal and subsequently executed.

The LAF operation demonstrated efficiency and speed that drew compliments from foreign military officials. One described the offensive as “twenty-first century maneuver warfare by a modern military.”<sup>25</sup> A US special-operations officer, who had been present at the LAF's operations center, subsequently told a diplomat in Beirut that “that is 90 percent how we would have done it.” A retired LAF brigadier general, who was familiar with the details of the operation, said, “Two things won the battle—ISR and precision munitions.”<sup>26</sup>

The LAF made good use of precision-guided munitions, aerial-surveillance platforms, and coordinated ground maneuvers to drive the militants from the mountain redoubts and out of Lebanon. A decade ago, such a feat could not have been replicated with the same fluidity, or with the lack of casualties.

## Future Challenges

The successful conclusion to Operation Dawn of the Outskirts was the LAF's greatest single military achievement since 1990, and clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of the US military-assistance program, as well as support from other countries. However, several challenges lie ahead.

## Hezbollah

Hezbollah has a high level of support in Lebanon, and it should come as no surprise that some in the LAF will endorse the party's anti-Israel credo. Hezbollah wields influence within the LAF, especially in the Directorate of Military Intelligence. And, given its representation

within parliament and government, Hezbollah also has a say in the state's decision-making process toward the LAF. On the other hand, the LAF has a strong esprit de corps, and an identity as a professional and capable body, which has been enhanced by a decade of US and other foreign military assistance.<sup>27</sup> Some LAF officers and soldiers are unhappy with the notion that the LAF must share national-defense responsibilities with a nonstate actor whose ideological and religious reference is the supreme leader of Iran.<sup>28</sup>

As a highly respected national institution, the LAF inevitably competes with Hezbollah, even as it avoids direct confrontation. The LAF's “One Lebanon” ideology competes with the Iran-tinged sectarianism of Hezbollah, even within Lebanon's Shia population, members of which (along with their extended families) serve in the LAF and develop loyalties to the institution.

Hezbollah has not interfered with the LAF's cooperative bonds with the United States and other Western countries, but it clearly maintains a wary eye on the relationship. Hezbollah is under no illusion that the US interest in developing the LAF's capabilities is, in part, to undermine Hezbollah's “resistance” narrative and role as defender of Lebanon.

In its public discourse, Hezbollah lauds the LAF as a partner in defending Lebanon. But, the two offensives against ISIS and HTS in summer 2017 showcased Hezbollah's competitive behavior toward the LAF. Hezbollah stole the LAF's thunder by unilaterally launching an attack against HTS, leaving the LAF looking weak and irrelevant. During Operation Dawn of the Outskirts, Hezbollah media repeatedly maintained that the LAF and Hezbollah were in full coordination, claims that were denied by the LAF. No evidence has emerged of any battlefield cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah. The speed with which the LAF routed ISIS appeared to take Hezbollah by surprise. Also, the unexpected ceasefire deal, which saw the militants bussed

25 Ibid.

26 For more details on the LAF and Hezbollah offensives against ISIS and HTS in summer 2017, see Aram Nerguizian, *The Lebanese Armed Forces, Hezbollah and Military Legitimacy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/171004\\_LAF\\_Hezbollah\\_and\\_Military%20Legitimacy\\_0.pdf?IPqNk5YU1.sIAhz3AHGwRS.hBylhdsNw](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/171004_LAF_Hezbollah_and_Military%20Legitimacy_0.pdf?IPqNk5YU1.sIAhz3AHGwRS.hBylhdsNw); and Nicholas Blanford, *The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah's Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2017), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunni-militants/>.

27 Nayla Moussa, *Loyalties and Group Formation in the Lebanese Officer Corps* (Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016), <http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/02/03/loyalties-and-group-formation-in-lebanese-officer-corps-pub-62560>.

28 Multiple author interviews with LAF officers and soldiers, 2010–2017.

to eastern Syria, was widely interpreted as an attempt to remove the sheen from the LAF's victory.<sup>29</sup>

In a speech on April 8, 2018, Nasrallah claimed that, prior to the 2006 war, the United States had conducted a survey within the LAF to assess whether there was a will to forcibly disarm Hezbollah, and discovered that there was not. He added, "Nowadays, inside and outside Lebanon and in the US and the Gulf, there are new bets on this clash and battle."<sup>30</sup>

Realistically, however, there is almost no chance that the LAF would confront Hezbollah in an attempt to dismantle or disarm the party. Such a step would be a recipe for civil war. The best that can be hoped from the US assistance program is to enhance the LAF's capabilities, to gradually undermine Hezbollah's rationale that it is the most able defender of Lebanese territory from external threats. Nevertheless, while the LAF has proven its capability to defend against the threat posed by radical Sunni jihadists, such as ISIS, the US commitment to Israel's QME will necessarily place limits on the overall strength of the LAF, unless it obtains advanced weapons from other sources. LAF reliance on US-supplied weaponry, therefore, will allow Hezbollah to continue claiming, with some justification, that only its weapons and doctrine of warfare pose a deterrent to the Jewish state.

### The Next War with Israel

The inconclusive end of the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war has long fueled speculation of an inevitable second round between the two enemies, despite a strong mutual deterrence that has helped keep the peace for nearly twelve years. The level of destruction and loss of life for Lebanon in a future full-scale war deters Hezbollah from rash action against Israel. By the same token, the IDF appreciates that the potential damage Hezbollah can inflict on the Israeli homefront today would likely be unmatched since 1948. Israel claims Hezbollah has

acquired up to one hundred and fifty thousand rockets and missiles, and could fire some fifteen hundred to two thousand per day during a war.<sup>31</sup> Some of those missiles are believed to carry 1,100-pound warheads, and are fitted with guidance systems that can target military and infrastructure targets in Tel Aviv and beyond. Hezbollah has also trained to insert fighters into Israeli territory by land—and, quite possibly, by sea and even air via motorized hanggliders. The IDF would almost certainly have to mount an extensive ground campaign to smash Hezbollah's military infrastructure and destroy the rocket launchers. Even if Israel is confident that it could prevail in such a war, victory would come at a heavy price in terms of IDF and civilian casualties.

A number of developments in the past year, however, have tested the mutual deterrence and raised the risk of a war breaking out through miscalculation. The Trump administration has signaled a will to push back against the spread of Iranian influence across the Middle East, of which Hezbollah is a component. Israel has been striking alleged Hezbollah-related targets in Syria since 2013, but has lately expanded its target set to include facilities connected to Iran, part of Israel's attempts to thwart the Islamic Republic's military entrenchment in Syria.<sup>32</sup> In the past year, Syrian air defenses have begun firing back at intruding Israeli jets. In February 2018, an Israeli F-16 was shot down, the first such incident since 1982.<sup>33</sup> On April 8, Israeli jets attacked the T4 airbase in central Syria, killing seven Iranian Revolutionary Guard soldiers. Iran acknowledged the attack, and promised to retaliate; however, no retaliation was immediately forthcoming. Then, on April 29, military bases near Hama and Aleppo were attacked, setting off large explosions and spurring reports of further Iranian casualties. These developments run the risk of triggering an escalation that becomes a full conflict before either side can dial it back.

If a full-scale war breaks out between Hezbollah and Israel, the LAF's role will likely be minimal, as it was in

29 The deal was broadly criticized—not just by Hezbollah's political opponents, but also by the families of the nine LAF soldiers executed by ISIS, as well as Hezbollah's own support base. Many of them were unhappy that a group responsible for staging rocket attacks of Shia villages in the Bekaa, and staging suicide car-bomb attacks, was being allowed to go free.

30 "Nasrallah Urges Voters to 'Immunize Resistance Politically,' Vows Anti-Tax Demos," *Naharnet Newsdesk*, April 8, 2018, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/244631-nasrallah-urges-voters-to-immunize-resistance-politically-vows-anti-tax-demos>.

31 John T. Huddy, "Rockets, Missiles and More: Predicting the Third Lebanon War," *Jerusalem Post*, February 9, 2018, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Rockets-missiles-and-more-Predicting-the-third-Lebanon-war-542171>.

32 Nicholas Blanford, "Peace Between Israel and Hezbollah Endures but Stakes of Conflict are Higher," *Arab Weekly*, April 8, 2018, <https://thearabweekly.com/peace-between-israel-and-hezbollah-endures-stakes-conflict-are-higher>.

33 Mayan Lubell and Lisa Barrington, "Israeli Jet Shot Down after Bombing Iranian Site in Syria," *Reuters*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-iran/israeli-jet-shot-down-after-bombing-iranian-site-in-syria-idUSKBN1FU07L>.

2006. However, Israel has signaled repeatedly that it views the Lebanese state as a legitimate target, due to its acceptance of Hezbollah's armed status and its role in parliament and government. Israel has also stated that it would attack the LAF in the next war, because of its perceived collusion with Hezbollah; in October 2017, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman claimed that Hezbollah had gained control over the LAF, which made it a legitimate target in any future war.<sup>34</sup> He repeated the claim in January, saying that Lebanon would be held accountable in the next war because it had "sacrificed its national interests by subjugating fully to Iran" through Hezbollah.<sup>35</sup> In April, Lieberman listed the LAF alongside Hezbollah, the Syrian army, and Shia militias in Syria and Iran as comprising "one front against the state of Israel, the northern front."<sup>36</sup>

Such comments can be viewed as part of the mutual-deterrence dialogue between Israel and Hezbollah, a series of fiery warnings and threats from both sides. In any major war with Israel, any offensive action undertaken by the LAF would likely be tactically limited, and by chance rather than design.

Nevertheless, it should be incumbent on the United States to protect an institution in which it has heavily invested for more than a decade, by leaning on Israel to spare the LAF from unilateral and unprovoked attack in a future war. The LAF will be required to help maintain domestic stability in the aftermath of the conflict, which would be significantly hampered if Israel were to wage war against it as well as Hezbollah.

## Russia

In recent months, Russia has signaled an interest in developing closer military ties with Lebanon, a development that has raised some unease with the LAF's current Western sponsors—chiefly, the United States and the United Kingdom. Moscow has extended a \$1 billion credit line, with a favorable repayment timeline of fif-

teen years at zero percent interest, and is also seeking a military memorandum of understanding that could see the Russian navy and air force using Lebanese facilities, and Russian troops helping train the LAF.

Russia has shown interest in selling Lebanon weapons systems for nearly a decade, but the \$1 billion credit line offer is one of several recent signals suggesting Moscow is interested in expanding its newfound Middle East influence from Syria into Lebanon, possibly at the expense of the United States.

The Russian move has not gone unnoticed by the United States and UK. Both countries have made it clear to the Lebanese government that taking up Russia's offer could threaten the existing military-assistance programs offered by both countries. Furthermore, Lebanon could face US sanctions if it deals with Russian arms companies that have been blacklisted by the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which was adopted last summer and targets Russia, North Korea, and Iran.<sup>37</sup>

However, the Lebanese government has been eager to pursue closer ties to Russia, perhaps in recognition of Moscow's growing sway in Lebanon's immediate neighborhood.<sup>38</sup> Last September, Hariri paid a visit to Russia, where he sought bilateral economic and military cooperation. He has since called on Russian companies to invest in his \$16 billion infrastructure-rehabilitation program. Russia's Novatek is part of a consortium awarded exploration contracts in Lebanon's coastal waters. Hariri may be calculating that an expanded Russian influence in Lebanon could serve as a counterweight to Hezbollah and Iran.

Nevertheless, the initial reaction from the LAF, and the Lebanese government in general, is not to risk upsetting the existing partnership agreements with the United States and UK by taking up the Russian military offers. Furthermore, although the LAF still possesses

34 Dan Williams, "Israel Says Hezbollah Runs Lebanese Army, Signaling Both are Foes," *Reuters*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-israel-lebanon/israel-says-hezbollah-runs-lebanese-army-signaling-both-are-foes-idUSKBN1CF25R>.

35 "Lieberman [sic]: In Future War, Lebanon will 'Pay Full Price' for Iran Ties," *Times of Israel*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-in-future-war-lebanon-will-pay-full-price-for-iran-ties/>.

36 Judah Ari Gross, "Lieberman [sic] adds Lebanese Army to List of Threats on Northern Border," *Times of Israel*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-adds-lebanese-army-to-list-of-threats-on-northern-border/>.

37 Nicholas Blanford, "Russia-Lebanon Deal? What the Resurgent Power Sees in Syria's Tiny Neighbor," *CS Monitor*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2018/0315/Russia-Lebanon-deal-What-the-resurgent-power-sees-in-Syria-s-tiny-neighbor>.

38 Ibid.

some Soviet-era weaponry, the US assistance program of the past decade has set the LAF on a path toward greater interoperability with NATO systems, which further weighs against the acquisition of modern Russian weaponry and equipment in the future. In addition, acquiring Russian equipment would further strain the LAF’s already limited logistical-support capabilities.

At this early stage, it appears that Russia is testing the waters, rather than mounting a full-blown effort to expand its influence from Syria into Lebanon. But, if Moscow chooses to make a push for Lebanon—and even to begin offering equipment and weaponry for free—it could test Washington’s resolve to remain committed to Lebanon and the LAF.

## Conclusion

The US military-assistance program to Lebanon has not been without its missteps and complications, but, overall, it has proven a success that the Defense Department and LAF continue to regard highly. The LAF has been a reliable partner force to the US military. Furthermore, despite concerns of the program’s critics, to date, the weaponry and equipment supplied by the United States to the LAF have been accountable, with no evidence that any material has been diverted to Hezbollah.<sup>39</sup>

The United States should maintain the military-assistance program for the following additional reasons.

- A more capable LAF is critical to maintaining Lebanese stability, especially given the presence of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees in the country. While the immediate threat posed by ISIS has receded, Lebanon is still susceptible to the winds of war emanating from neighboring Syria. While Bashar al-Assad’s position looks secure for the time being, the war is taking on a more multinational character, which could morph into any number of unpredictable and dangerous directions for Syria and its neighbors.
- Building the LAF’s capacity serves the longer-term goal of weakening Hezbollah’s narrative that only it,

“A more capable LAF is critical to maintaining Lebanese stability, especially given the presence of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees in the country.”

and its style of hybrid warfare, can defend Lebanon from external aggression. The LAF does not have the institutional will, nor the political leeway, to forcibly disarm Hezbollah—a move that would split the army’s ranks and, quite possibly, trigger a civil war. Instead, Hezbollah’s rationale for maintaining its weapons can be weakened over time as the LAF enhances its capacities and, crucially, is seen by the Lebanese population as a credible defender of Lebanese sovereignty.

- Nature abhors a vacuum. If the US assistance program is reduced, or scrapped altogether, other actors will step in. On several occasions, Iran has offered to help arm and equip the LAF, though Beirut has, so far, politely ignored these offers.<sup>40</sup> Lately, Russia appears to be showing a greater interest in Lebanon, a possible attempt to expand its influence from Syria at a time when the United States has been signaling a desire to decrease its footprint in the Middle East. A continuation of the assistance program to the LAF allows the United States a seat at the table, and prevents Russia gaining additional leverage in Lebanon.

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39 In January 2017, Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) personnel responsible for end-use monitoring compliance conducted a Compliance Assessment Visit in Lebanon. The LAF received the highest possible rating of EUM satisfaction, validating Lebanon’s security and accountability measures for safeguarding sensitive US-provided technology.

40 “Senior MP: Iran Ready to Supply Lebanese Army with Required Weapons,” *Fars News Agency*, January 7, 2017, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13951018000928>.

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