



Playing the Long Game

U.S. Counterterrorism Assistance for Lebanon

By Hardin Lang and Alia Awadallah

August 2017

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

During the last week of August 2017, the Lebanese government completed its largest counterterrorism operation in years, pushing Islamic State (IS) militants from the group's stronghold along the Lebanese border with Syria. As many as 7,000 soldiers from the Lebanese army and special operations forces took part.¹ The offensive underscored Lebanon's contribution to the global counter-IS coalition and the key role that its military and security services have played in blocking the expansion of Sunni militant groups in the region.

None of this would be possible without the long-term support of the United States, which has quietly bolstered Lebanon's counterterrorism capabilities over the course of a decade. The cornerstone of the American effort has been a program to strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) that was launched after Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon in 2005.² In particular, Lebanon's special operations community has made impressive strides in confronting the threat posed by Salafi-jihadi terror groups.

However, as the August operation also made clear, U.S. assistance has been far less successful in countering Hezbollah, Iran's most important nonstate ally.³ During the LAF offensive, Hezbollah simultaneously cleared IS positions from the Syrian side of the border in concert with the Syrian army. The LAF and Hezbollah then both declared supposedly separate ceasefires with the Islamic State on August 27.⁴ These ceasefires were followed by the exchange of the remains of captured Lebanese soldiers for the safe passage of Islamic State fighters and their families from Lebanon to the group's strongholds in eastern Syria.⁵

The Lebanese government has repeatedly denied any coordination with Hezbollah. However, events along the border make these claims increasingly implausible. Reports of such coordination undercut the LAF's standing and raise vexing questions for policymakers regarding the utility of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon. Indeed, the Trump administration's proposed fiscal year 2018 budget zeros out American military aid for the LAF—a decision made even before the beginning of recent operations.

However, despite real limitations and frustrations, it would be a mistake to abandon more than a decade of investment in a military the U.S. State Department considers “one of the most effective counterterrorism forces in the region.”⁶ To do so would risk further empowering Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors. Weakening the LAF would only allow Hezbollah to claim a greater role in the country’s security. The result could threaten the country’s delicate sectarian political balance and destabilize the country. This would be a far worse outcome than the current status quo, as unpalatable as it may be.

To better understand the value of U.S. counterterrorism and security assistance to Lebanon, a Center for American Progress research team visited Lebanon in May 2017 to interview a broad range of officials from the LAF, the Internal Security Forces, the General Security Directorate, the General Directorate of State Security, the U.S. and U.K. embassies, and other international interlocutors working in Lebanon. The objectives of the research team were to assess the threat landscape, identify strengths and weaknesses in counterterrorism capabilities, and explore the implications for U.S. counterterrorism strategy and operations.

The report focuses on the Lebanese government’s ability to mitigate threats from Salafi-jihadi groups, and it only explores U.S. policy toward Hezbollah insofar as it is relevant to this focus. It argues against the Trump administration’s proposed cuts to the LAF and suggests additional steps that it and Congress can take to strengthen Lebanon’s counterterrorism capabilities, including:

1. Ensure continued Foreign Military Financing for Lebanon
2. Maintain support for the Lebanese Special Operations Forces
3. Leverage U.S. assistance for better counterterrorism coordination
4. Bolster assistance designed to strengthen state institutions and counter the influence of nonstate actors
5. Fund a feasibility study for the civilian counterterrorism court
6. Call on Saudi Arabia to restore its \$4 billion security assistance package for Lebanon

The August offensive has shown that Lebanon remains an important player in the fight against the Islamic State. The Lebanese military is the most popular public institution in Lebanon and serves as a key foundation of the country’s stability. While concern over the rising influence of Hezbollah is merited, pulling support for the Lebanese army will only serve to further empower the Iranian proxy at the expense of the country’s legitimate institutions.

Building counterterrorism capacity in the Middle East

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States reorganized its military, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies to confront transnational Salafi-jihadi terrorism. However, few U.S. security partners in the Middle East had the capability to find and eliminate Al Qaeda or other related terrorist groups on their own. If action needed to be taken against a threat, it fell to the United States to execute directly.

During the past 15 years, a great deal of work has been done to build the capacity of partners in the region to tackle these threats. The story of building partner counterterrorism capacity does not lend itself to headlines and often has been lost in the dramatic regional events of recent years. Nevertheless, significant progress has been made, and regional partners are now better-positioned to manage terrorist threats. The challenge for American policymakers is to understand

how these gains were made, identify the gaps that remain, and anticipate what will be possible over the next 15 years as terrorist threats continue to grow and evolve.

As part of a series of papers assessing U.S. efforts to build counterterrorism capacity with partners in the Middle East, this report focuses on Lebanon and examines the effort in Lebanon. The cornerstone of the U.S. strategy in Lebanon is a program to strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces and elements of the country's civilian security services, which began after Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon in 2005. Over the past decade, the program has significantly strengthened Lebanon's capacity to manage the threats from Salafi-jihadi and related terror groups. However, it has been far less successful in containing Hezbollah, whose domestic political and military power significantly complicates American policy.

U.S. security assistance to Lebanon

Background

U.S. security and counterterrorism assistance to Lebanon is part of a wider Lebanon policy that balances competing priorities. On the one hand, the United States seeks to shore up stability in Lebanon and ensure that the country does not slide back into civil war. That stability has recently been threatened by dysfunction in Lebanon's confessional political system, which distributes government power and positions proportionally among religious sects. The current confessional system dates back to the 1989 multiparty Taif Agreement.⁷ The agreement distributed power within the Lebanese political system to help end the country's 15-year civil war.

Hezbollah's influence in the confessional system and opposition to several presidential candidates recently left the country deadlocked and without a government for more than two years. Lebanon's stability is also threatened by a civil war in Syria and Hezbollah's sizable role in sustaining the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This has flooded Lebanon with more than 1 million refugees⁸ and resulted in cross-border attacks by the Islamic State and a local Al Qaeda affiliate that have primarily targeted Lebanon's Shiite population.⁹

On the other hand, the United States seeks to mitigate the threat posed by Hezbollah to the United States, Israel, and other U.S. partners in the region. Hezbollah is a powerful Shiite militant group and political movement that serves as an Iranian proxy in Lebanon and the Middle East.¹⁰ The United States has targeted the group's leadership outside Lebanon,¹¹ but it has not directly confronted Hezbollah inside Lebanon. Most analysts and policymakers believe an overt confrontation inside Lebanon would risk plunging the country into internal conflict. Instead, the United States has used sanctions to disrupt Hezbollah's financial flows and sought to build up Lebanese state institutions that could serve as alternative and legitimate power centers. At the heart of this effort is the Lebanese Armed Forces.

FIGURE 1

Lebanon security aid, 2014–2018

Allocations for Lebanon by program*	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018*
Aviation Leadership Program	\$18,668	\$2,435	-	-	-
Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program	\$1,274,266	\$1,357,664	-	-	-
Cooperative Threat Reduction Program	\$10,663	\$5,212,941	-	-	-
Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund	\$0	\$48,338,039	-	-	-
Defense Institute of International Legal Studies	\$34,000	\$0	-	-	-
Defense Institutional Reform Initiative	\$1,368,364	\$0	-	-	-
Developing Countries Combined Exercise Program	\$235,106	\$185,610	-	-	-
Excess Defense Articles Program	\$0	\$0	-	-	-
Foreign Military Financing	\$74,999,000	\$84,117,000	\$85,900,000	\$105,000,000	\$0
International Military Education and Training	\$2,347,000	\$2,218,000	\$2,797,000	\$2,750,000	\$2,750,000
International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement	\$13,894,000	\$10,000,000	\$10,000,000	\$10,000,000	\$6,250,000
Miscellaneous Department of State and Department of Defense Non-Security Assistance	\$0	\$0	-	-	-
Non-Security Assistance - Unified Command	\$0	\$0	-	-	-
Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR)	\$4,760,000	\$4,960,000	\$4,760,000	\$5,760,000	\$9,820,000
Department of Defense Regional Centers for Security Studies	\$31,456	\$41,007	-	-	-
Section 1004 Counter-Drug Assistance	\$7,349,000	\$5,812,000	-	-	-
Section 1206 Train and Equip Authority	\$23,900,000	\$12,020,000	-	-	-
Section 1207 Security and Stabilization Assistance	\$0	\$0	-	-	-
Service academies	\$231,978	\$77,517	-	-	-
TOTAL	\$130,453,501	\$174,342,213	\$103,457,000	\$123,510,000	\$18,820,000

Possible pots of funding for security aid to Lebanon* ***

Levant Regional (Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund)	\$0	\$138,661,961	\$115,000,000	-	-
Middle East and North Africa Regional (NADR)	\$0	\$0	-	\$128,000,000	-
Section 1206 Train and Equip Authority	\$0	\$0	\$314,146,000	-	-
Section 333 Building Partner Capacity (Successor of the Section 1206 Train and Equip Authority)	\$0	\$0	-	\$270,218,000	\$347,223,000
Security Cooperation Programs (Successor of the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund)	\$0	\$0	-	\$1,230,000,000	\$850,000,000

* After fiscal year 2015, some data are unavailable either due to a lack of reporting or the absence of funding; these cells are marked with a hyphen (-).

** All FY 2018 figures are based on administration requests.

*** Department of Defense allocations on a country level are not publicly available for most programs after FY 2015.

Source: Calculations based on data from Security Assistance Monitor, 2014–2018, available at securityassistance.org (last accessed August 2017).

The United States launched a support program for the LAF after the withdrawal of Syrian forces in 2005. At the time, according to former Pentagon official David Schenker, “the Bush administration did not believe the LAF would be able to supplant Hizballah (sic) anytime soon.”¹² While U.S. officials hoped the LAF might eventually balance Hezbollah’s influence, the support program was designed primarily to create military and special forces units capable of containing the domestic terror threats posed by Salafi-jihadi and other Sunni Muslim extremists.¹³ This was viewed as critical to preventing terrorist groups from developing a strong presence in Lebanon, which could pose a threat to Israel and other regional allies.

Between 2006 and 2013, the United States provided “72 percent of overall military aid to Lebanon,”¹⁴ and roughly \$1.4 billion in assistance from 2005 to 2016.¹⁵ By 2015, Lebanon had become the fifth-largest recipient in the world of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF).¹⁶ For an overview of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon, see Figure 1 on p. 5 and the text box below.

Overview of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon

U.S. security assistance to Lebanon supports equipment, training, and counterterrorism capacity building for the LAF and Lebanese security agencies. Key examples of each assistance category are provided below.

Training:

- In 2017, Lebanon was the third-largest recipient of International Military Education and Training (IMET) assistance in the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁷ IMET funding supports courses at U.S. military institutions for foreign security personnel. In addition to exposing Lebanese personnel to U.S. military training and doctrine, the goal of IMET courses is to “build capacity in key areas, increase the professionalization of forces, promote western values, and build lasting military-to-military relationships.”¹⁸
- The United States supports a training program inside Lebanon for the LAF and special operations forces, including assistance for the Lebanese Special Forces School.¹⁹

Equipment and weapons:

- Procurement and sustainment of fixed wing and rotary military aircraft.²⁰ The United States is also providing aircraft for close air support to Lebanon, likely with financing by Saudi Arabia.²¹
- Munitions and weapons procurement for border regiments, special operations, and infantry brigades. This includes air-to-ground missiles, shoulder-fired rockets, precision artillery, small arms, and ammunition.²²
- Procurement and sustainment of vehicles to transport LAF troops around Lebanon, especially through difficult terrain.²³

Border security and counterterrorism:

- Capacity building and technical assistance for Lebanese border security forces to prevent the flow of terrorists and arms across Lebanese borders.²⁴
- Efforts to modernize the LAF and strengthen its capacity to “detect, interdict and ... repel extremist groups and efforts to destabilize Lebanon.”²⁵

The specter of Hezbollah

Critics of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon have long worried about Hezbollah's penetration of the LAF. As one international journalist in Beirut described it, "The relationship between Hezbollah and the LAF is complex. They have to coexist. Hezbollah is the most powerful but lets everyone get on with their lives if it isn't threatened."²⁶

With the resolution of Lebanon's political crisis last October, which saw Christian leader and former LAF commander Michel Aoun assume the presidency, this concern became more acute. President Aoun is a political ally of Hezbollah, and his election was facilitated by a significant weakening of the pro-Western and anti-Hezbollah March 14 political coalition.²⁷ The coalition consists primarily of Sunni Muslim and Christian political parties and includes Prime Minister Saad Hariri's Future Movement party.²⁸ This shift in political power draws into question the ability of state institutions such as the armed forces to operate independently of Hezbollah. Indeed, critics also highlight reports that the LAF and Hezbollah may even share weaponry.²⁹

But those closest to U.S. security and counterterrorism programs for Lebanon tell a different story. In interviews with the authors, both military and civilian officials overseeing American security assistance in the United States and those in the field insisted that Hezbollah has not compromised the independence of the LAF.³⁰ Several current and previous U.S. officials note that the LAF has a "sterling" reputation for end-use monitoring of equipment and weapons. This means that the Lebanese government: 1) does not transfer articles without prior U.S. consent; 2) uses articles for the intended purpose; and 3) provides the same level of security as the U.S. government would provide for the same articles.³¹ These officials were highly skeptical that Hezbollah could have acquired any LAF weapons supplied by the United States.³² Moreover, Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, underscored his overall confidence in the LAF during a recent visit to Beirut.³³

Threat landscape

Senior U.S. counterterrorism and special operations officials told the authors that their Lebanese counterparts are some of the best in the region.³⁴ These forces are arrayed against significant existing and potential threats inside Lebanon and emanating from across the border in Syria. Like its neighbors, Lebanon juggles threats to its security and stability beyond terrorism, including an overburdened economy and influence from regional powers with competing interests. Taken together, these threats constitute a series of interlocking challenges for Lebanon to address to preserve its stability.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is “the most capable terrorist group” in Lebanon.³⁵ The group is suspected of carrying out at least one major terrorist attack last year in downtown Beirut.³⁶ Hezbollah continues to receive significant support from Iran and to stockpile arms, which it justifies by claiming the mantle of “resistance”³⁷ to Israel. It bears significant responsibility for the major threats facing the country. This has been particularly true since the beginning of the recent Syrian conflict. Hezbollah’s large-scale military support of the Assad regime has prolonged the conflict and increased the number of refugees flowing into Lebanon. Hezbollah’s behavior has also aggravated sectarianism in Lebanon and made the country a target for Sunni militants and extremists. Finally, Hezbollah plays a role in weakening the Lebanese government and military and undermining their ability to keep the country secure.

Infiltration of the Syrian refugee population

Lebanese and international interlocutors all agreed that the presence of more than 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon poses one of the biggest direct threats to the country’s security and stability. All Lebanese security agencies highlighted infiltration of the refugee population by the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, or other extremist

groups as the principal security challenge. Refugee camps such as Ain al-Hilweh and cities with major refugee populations such as Aarsal were of major concern.³⁸ These concerns have been reinforced by several attacks executed by Sunni extremists in Lebanon over the past year in and around Syrian refugee camps.³⁹ The LAF has also reportedly disrupted a number of attacks targeting Beirut and surrounding areas.

Radicalization of the Syrian refugee population and tension with the Lebanese population

The presence of the refugee population also poses a long-term challenge because refugees could be vulnerable to radicalization over time.⁴⁰ Because most refugees live in very poor conditions, they could be susceptible to recruitment by extremist and terrorist organizations. Lebanese security officials pointed to the history of radicalization among the Palestinian refugee population, which faced challenges similar to those of Syrian refugees.⁴¹ After 20 years in Lebanon, Palestinian refugee camps became hubs for militants, who then challenged the government and played a role in sparking the civil war in 1975.⁴² The number of Syrian refugees has far outstripped the number of Palestinian refugees, and there is little reason to believe that they will return to Syria in the foreseeable future. The higher number of Syrian refugees and the resulting challenges could result in radicalization more quickly than in the Palestinian refugee population. Further, there is growing resentment against refugees in Lebanon because of their burden on the country's economy and infrastructure, creating tensions and escalating the risk of radicalization.⁴³

Cross-border attacks

Lebanese and U.S. security officials remain deeply concerned about the ability of the Islamic State and other extremist organizations to launch attacks from the border area with Syria. In recent years, terrorists from the Islamic State and Al Qaeda Syrian affiliates have demonstrated the ability to plan and execute complex and deadly suicide attacks in Beirut and along the border from their bases of operation inside Syria.⁴⁴ Attacks in Lebanon reached a low between 2009 and 2011 then began to increase, spiking in 2014 with the rise of the Islamic State. These attacks by Sunni militants have largely targeted the LAF and members of the civilian security forces,⁴⁵ as well as Shiite neighborhoods—presumably in retaliation for Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime. However, recent efforts by the LAF and the internal security services to secure the border have significantly lowered that threat. The offensive against the Islamic State in the Aarsal area is the latest and most significant LAF operation to mitigate the threat emanating from Syria.

Lebanese extremists

The Sunni jihadi group Fatah al-Islam remains active, if diminished in its capabilities. Roughly 1,000 Lebanese citizens are thought to have fought for Sunni Islamist militant groups in Syria and Iraq,⁴⁶ and they could pose a threat upon their return to Lebanon. In addition, radicalization in Palestinian refugee camps via groups such as Jamaat Jund al-Sham also remains a threat. In recent months, clashes in Ain al-Hilweh and Bourj el-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camps resulted in multiple casualties.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Islamic State is estimated to have hundreds of Lebanese supporters clustered around Tripoli,⁴⁸ not to mention Al Qaeda's Syria affiliate, which is thought to have a footprint—albeit a much smaller one—in northern Lebanon.

Lebanese counterterrorism actors

Arrayed against these threats are Lebanon's main counterterrorism agencies, which include the Land Border Regiments and Lebanese Special Operations Forces within the Lebanese Armed Forces, the civilian Internal Security Forces, the General Security Directorate, and the General Directorate of State Security. The United States and European countries have provided critical support to these agencies in varying degrees. However, it is unclear how U.S. support for the LAF and civilian agencies would be affected by the Trump administration's proposed budget cuts.

Lebanese Armed Forces

The regular LAF plays a key role in the country's counterterrorism strategy. In addition to its special operations units, the LAF's Land Border Regiments shoulder significant responsibilities in defending Lebanese territory from incursions by the Islamic State and other Salafi-jihadi groups operating from Syrian territory. In 2013 and 2014, for instance, more than 100 people were killed and hundreds more wounded in over a dozen suicide bombing attacks on Shiite-populated areas across Lebanon.⁴⁹ Since these attacks, Lebanese Hezbollah has asserted control over the Syrian side of the border. On the Lebanese side of the border, the LAF is increasingly taking on responsibility for defending Lebanese communities.

The United States and the United Kingdom have both provided support to LAF Land Border Regiments to secure the border. As part of this commitment, since 2012, the UK has been assisting the LAF, through the Rapid Land Border Security Assistance Project, to establish and mentor the LAF Land Border Regiments (LBRs). The mission of the LBRs is to observe, identify, deter and deny activities by illegal armed actors in the near border areas, in line with agreed international human rights standards. Between 2012 and 2015 around £26m of Conflict Pool and Conflict Security Stability funds were allocated to provide observation, protection, mobility and communications equipment to 1, 2, and 3LBRs, and to establish the lead elements of a 4th LBR, as well as a programme of training and

mentoring. As part of this commitment, since 2012, the UK has been assisting the LAF, through the Rapid Land Border Security Assistance Project, to establish and mentor the LAF Land Border Regiments (LBRs). The mission of the LBRs is to observe, identify, deter and deny activities by illegal armed actors in the near border areas, in line with agreed international human rights standards. Between 2012 and 2015 around £26m of Conflict Pool and Conflict Security Stability funds were allocated to provide observation, protection, mobility and communications equipment to 1, 2, and 3LBRs, and to establish the lead elements of a 4th LBR, as well as a programme of training and mentoring. The United Kingdom has been particularly active in its support and committed to spending more than £26 million from 2016 to 2018 to provide observation, protection, mobility, and communications equipment to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Land Border Regiments and establish the lead elements of a fourth regiment, in addition to a program of training and mentoring. The fourth regiment is now deploying between the towns of Masnaa and Aarsal in northeast Lebanon, one of the most sensitive areas on the border with Syria. In particular, Aarsal faces a sizable presence of Sunni extremists from the Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham groups. Traditionally protected by Hezbollah fighters, the 4th Land Border Regiment is now asserting state control in this region as Hezbollah units withdraw.⁵⁰

Lebanese Special Operations Forces

Composed of four main regiments, the Lebanese Special Operations Forces (LSOF) are responsible for critical and high-risk counterterrorism operations in Lebanon. The 1,500-person Lebanese Ranger Regiment is the largest and most well-known LSOF unit. Built around five mechanized infantry companies, three mountain companies, and an armor company, the Ranger Regiment serves as Lebanon's national strategic reserve force. Consisting of five combat infantry companies, one armored company, an artillery battery, and a support company, the 1,100-person Air Assault Regiment serves as a strategic mobile reserve force. The regiment can conduct reconnaissance, raids, ambushes, long-range patrols, and search and rescue missions. The 1,080-person Marine Commando Regiment—trained in combat dive operations, underwater demolition, maritime counterterrorism, and interdiction—provides the LAF a maritime special operations capability. Finally, the Counter-Sabotage Regiment, commanded by LAF Military Intelligence, plays an important role in the military's counterterrorism mission.⁵¹

LSOF elements have been the focus of U.S. foreign-internal defense missions for years, mainly in the form of joint combined exercises for training and counter-narcoterrorism operations. U.S. support for the LSOF is led by Special Operations Command (Forward) - Lebanon and has provided training and infrastructure improvements to the LSOF that have helped make the regiments some of the most capable special operations forces in the region. This program was increased following the 2007 Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp conflict, which exposed significant limitations in the LAF's ability to conduct counterterrorism operations.⁵²

Over the past few years, U.S. support has focused on building LSOF capability to manage information, build target packages, and plan and execute operations. The LSOF now has basic surveillance platforms—ScanEagle drones—and its American counterparts are working to supply it with attack helicopters, close air support aircraft, and armored vehicles.

Internal Security Forces

The Internal Security Forces (ISF) is Lebanon's national police force, with roughly 500 regional offices across the country.⁵³ Although formed to handle general security responsibilities, including maintaining public order, protecting individuals and property, and ensuring the implementation of security laws,⁵⁴ ISF leadership considers the agency to be at the front lines of counterterrorism operations and a civilian counterpart to the LSOF.⁵⁵ The ISF has a number of mobile units, a rapid-reaction battalion, and a special operations unit known as the Panthers (Al Fouhoud).⁵⁶ International experts single out the ISF's information branch as capable, highly motivated, and well-suited to urban operations and intelligence gathering.⁵⁷

The ISF has received support from both the United States and the United Kingdom and has significantly expanded its capabilities over the past decade. A former senior ISF official told the authors that after the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, "the ISF was almost in shambles. We had no equipment, and no capabilities to face threats."⁵⁸ The United States has sought to improve the ISF's capabilities through a range of training and mentoring programs, the provision of equipment, the development of a secure communications radio system, and the construction of training facilities.⁵⁹ The United Kingdom has a significant counterterrorism support package for the ISF's information branch, and British officials were highly complimentary of the unit's capabilities, giving it credit for largely mitigating the jihadi threat in Beirut.⁶⁰

General Security Directorate

The General Security Directorate (GSD) controls all entry and exit points into and out of Lebanon and monitors foreigners in the country.⁶¹ The GSD presents itself as the *primus inter pares* civilian agency responsible for counterterrorism. In interviews with the authors, its leadership underscored that unlike other civilian agencies, the GSD possesses the legal mandate for counterterrorism. Leaders highlighted the high level of coordination with the LAF and the LSOF, noting that the GSD shared significant amounts of intelligence with the LAF and assisted in setting counterterrorism priorities and targets.⁶²

GSD leadership claimed, in interviews, to work closely with the FBI and U.S. intelligence agencies, as well as to have received a considerable amount of U.S. training.⁶³ The head of the GSD was a former commander of the LSOF's Ranger Regiment and claimed to have built a similar, albeit smaller and less capable, unit inside the GSD.⁶⁴ In response to the threat of refugee infiltration, the GSD has increased security at airports and border crossings and implemented new measures to detect counterfeit passports.⁶⁵

General Directorate of State Security

The General Directorate of State Security (GDSS) gathers intelligence and conducts counterintelligence operations in Lebanon.⁶⁶ Until a few months ago, the GDSS had been largely inactive for several years with minimal funding, but the agency appears to be working to get back on its feet. In interviews with the authors, its senior leaders seemed eager to expand the agency; train and equip its new strike force; and build relationships with international partners, including the United States. GDSS officials also expressed an interest in coordinating more closely with other Lebanese security agencies.⁶⁷

Lebanon's counterterrorism capabilities

The strengths

Despite numerous challenges, Lebanon's counterterrorism institutions retain several strengths and areas of potential.

The LAF as a credible state institution

Important progress has been made over the past 10 years to build the Lebanese Armed Forces into a capable and credible national institution. It remains an open question if the LAF will ever be able to serve as a sufficient counterweight to Hezbollah's growing military and political influence in the coming decades. However, the U.S. officials and experts interviewed believe that the program has shown enough promise to warrant the continued investment.

While Hezbollah maintains military superiority relative to the LAF, the Lebanese military's capabilities have grown significantly. The LAF is increasingly capable of managing threats to internal security and stability, including threats emanating from the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and other extremist groups across the border in Syria. Furthermore, the LAF is respected by international partners and enjoys the highest rating of any state institution among the Lebanese people⁶⁸—due in part to the perception that it is somewhat less sectarian than the country's other security institutions.

Gen. Joseph Aoun, the new commander of the LAF, enjoys wide respect among U.S. military officials who focus on Lebanon. Prior to assuming command, he led the 9th Infantry Brigade, a unit with significant combat experience. Gen. Aoun is rumored to be shaking up the senior military leadership and filling key senior positions with competent officers who have fought with him, even if those appointments run counter to the traditional confessional balance of Lebanese politics. In at least one case, Hezbollah reportedly tried but failed to challenge one of these appointments.⁶⁹

The LSOF as a highly capable force

U.S. officials now consider Lebanese Special Operations Forces regiments as among the best in the region, ranking below only the Emirati and Iraqi special operations units. While the Ranger Regiment has the longest record of U.S. assistance and broad international recognition, interlocutors described the Counter-Sabotage Regiment as the most effective, astute, and surgical element, exhibiting “a degree of restraint we don’t see with other units.”⁷⁰ Otherwise known as the Moukafaha, a senior U.S. Special Forces officer noted that the Counter-Sabotage Regiment is among the most active counterterrorism units in the LAF, carrying out multiple operations on a monthly basis.⁷¹ Ironically, the Moukafaha reportedly does not receive the same level of dedicated support inside the LAF as other special operations forces units due to the fact that it reports through Lebanese Military Intelligence (G-2).⁷²

Senior U.S. officials underscore that Lebanon’s civilian security agencies—and not the LSOF—are on the day-to-day counterterrorism front lines.⁷³ Since members of LSOF units—specifically the Ranger Regiment, are frequently recruited to train and lead other LAF units or civilian agency departments, U.S. assistance to LSOF units amplifies American influence throughout Lebanon’s security institutions. Moreover, U.S. and Lebanese officials expressed confidence in the independence and trustworthiness of LSOF units compared with other components of the LAF, indicating that LSOF units remain mostly insulated from politicization and Hezbollah influence.

U.S. officials involved in the training effort point to the high degree of motivation, commitment, and creativity of their local partners as a key ingredient in the success of the program. One official noted that “the Lebanese special forces regiments are hungry” and willing to take the initiative on internal counterterrorism operations.⁷⁴ The same official attributed this commitment to the existence of a serious domestic threat to stability posed by Salafi-jihadis.⁷⁵

Unique role of the LSOF in supporting UNSCR 1701

One of the more creative initiatives in recent years has been the use of LSOF units to strengthen conventional LAF units deployed in southern Lebanon in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701. That resolution calls on the Lebanese government to extend its authority over all its territory through its legitimate armed forces.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, efforts to disarm

Hezbollah and deploy the LAF in the country's south have fallen short of the mark.⁷⁷ To improve the implementation of UNSCR 1701, the United States has supported the creation of the LSOF long-term training teams to build the capacity of conventional LAF brigades stationed in the south. U.S. special operations forces have assisted the Lebanese Special Forces School in developing these mobile training teams, which are then deployed to train other LAF units.⁷⁸

The ISF as an area of potential

After the LAF, the Internal Security Forces are the most promising and credible security agency in Lebanon. The agency is the second-most widely trusted institution after the LAF, and its expansive presence across the country makes it a key player in addressing terrorist threats. While one survey puts Lebanese citizens' trust in the ISF at around only 40 percent, this support varies dramatically by district—with some districts indicating 90 percent trust in the agency.⁷⁹ The same survey also revealed that “[t]he presence of an ISF station generally reduces people's perception of security risks.”⁸⁰ In addition, the ISF's relatively advanced surveillance capabilities can be used to monitor the activities of Hezbollah and other terrorists in Lebanon.⁸¹ Combined with its expansive presence in Lebanon, this capability makes the ISF a critical player in Lebanon's counterterrorism efforts.

One especially promising U.S.-supported ISF program emphasized community policing to increase trust of the ISF among locals. In the first 12 months of the project's implementation in the Ras Beirut neighborhood, the local crime rate was reduced 40 percent.⁸² While community policing is often used to address common crime, it has proven effective in counterterrorism efforts and efforts to counter violent extremism in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.⁸³ The ISF's focus on engaging and earning the trust of the community could reap great benefits in Lebanon, where mistrust of government institutions and other confessional groups remains quite high.

The gaps and challenges

Political limitations

External observers and members of other Lebanese security services consider LSOF regiments to be independent and highly capable in managing threats posed by Salafi-jihadis to Lebanon's internal security. However, these regiments are not completely insulated from Hezbollah's influence. Hezbollah's prominent role within the Lebanese political system precludes LSOF regiments from engaging in external or expeditionary operations against the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, or other terrorist organizations operating across the border in Syria. Reportedly, there is a clear understanding between the LAF and Hezbollah that the LAF will not engage in external operations.⁸⁴ Instead, Hezbollah has led recent operations against IS and Al Qaeda militants in Syria, seemingly in coordination with the Lebanese military.⁸⁵

Dependence on international aid

As of 2017, Lebanon does not have a dedicated budget for the LAF.⁸⁶ While civilian security agencies do receive funding from the state, they remain largely dependent on foreign equipment and technical assistance. The United States provides almost all military support for Lebanon, with the remainder provided by the United Kingdom and other European partners. In 2013, Saudi Arabia pledged \$4 billion in security assistance to Lebanon, mainly in the form of purchasing French equipment for the military. This was suspended in 2016 after the Lebanese government failed to condemn attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran.⁸⁷ The withdrawal of Saudi support reflected a perceived growth in Hezbollah's influence over the Lebanese government. However, Saudi disengagement left a gap that required other partners, including the United States, to step in to minimize increased patronage from Iran.

There does not appear to be a path for solving Lebanon's aid dependency in the near future. Although the Lebanese Parliament has discussed providing limited dedicated funding for the LAF, the country has one of the highest debt to gross domestic product ratios in the world.⁸⁸ This makes it highly unlikely that it will be able to support the LAF at the levels required to keep the country secure.

Gaps in capabilities

Although the LAF and Lebanon's civilian security agencies have improved tremendously since 2005, they still require new equipment and training to address constantly evolving threats. For instance, the United States is currently working with the ISF to address the agency's need for a secure communications system to connect its roughly 500 offices across the country.⁸⁹ In addition, the ISF seeks additional support to upgrade its facilities, equipment, and technical capabilities, including helicopters and a new agency headquarters. In interviews with the authors, GSD officials expressed satisfaction with the level of training assistance from the United States but stressed the need for more technical equipment and assistance to combat terrorism, with cell phone intercept capability their highest priority.⁹⁰

GDSS officials outlined two major areas of need to help the agency get back on its feet. The first was support, training, and equipment for the agency's new counterterrorism strike force, including training and equipment for the sniper and assault teams as well as training on close-quarters combat. Second, the broader agency needs technical equipment, most notably a cell phone interception system and a secure communications system. Other GDSS equipment needs include closed-circuit TV cameras, a forensics lab, and equipment for investigation rooms.⁹¹

All agencies' capabilities are also negatively affected by the pressure of containing the numerous and diverse terrorist threats facing Lebanon. The U.S. Department of State's 2016 Country Reports on Terrorism noted, "Despite notable counterterrorism successes in 2016, the law enforcement capacity of these agencies was overstretched due to the magnitude of the country's terrorism-related threats."⁹²

Lack of coordination

There appears to be significant duplication of effort among the Lebanese state institutions involved in counterterrorism operations. While certain agencies claim a stronger legal mandate for their counterterrorism role, the military and most civilian security agencies appear to be engaged in counterterrorism due to the nature and scope of the terrorist threat. The involvement of all agencies also results in part from Lebanon's confessional division of power, and, particularly from the delegation of each agency's leadership to a member of a particular religious confession.⁹³

There is no formal mechanism or process to coordinate and deconflict counterterrorism operations across Lebanon's military and civilian agencies. These agencies do not carry out joint operations or voluntarily share information unless it is essential. As one senior international security official noted in an interview with the authors, "We're years away from any sort of coordinating body."⁹⁴ Agency heads acknowledge the lack of coordination but attribute it to what they call "healthy" interagency competition.⁹⁵ Coordination does occur when a given agency does not have the capability to manage a specific threat and turns to peer agencies for support, or when multiple agencies are tracking the same threat and are forced to deconflict. Informal coordination also takes place through personal relationships across agencies.

Counterterrorism and the judiciary

The lack of a specialized civilian court responsible for terrorism cases remains a problem. Instead, almost all terrorism cases are adjudicated in a military tribunal. Human rights organizations and lawyers have expressed concern about a lack of due process and transparency involved in military courts, as well as higher rates of torture than in civilian court systems.⁹⁶ An initial three to four days of detention before lawyers and organizations have access to prisoners is of particular concern for torture and abuses.⁹⁷

With a rising number of civilians arrested on terrorism charges in Lebanon, specifically among refugee populations, this dynamic is especially troubling. During the raid on a refugee camp in Aarsal, for instance, the LAF detained four Syrian men for interrogation. It later released a statement that all four detainees died before interrogation as a result of chronic illness aggravated by weather conditions.⁹⁸ Human rights groups have harshly criticized the statement and called for a full and transparent investigation into the deaths of the detainees.⁹⁹ These types of abuses could jeopardize U.S. military funding for Lebanon by violating the "Leahy Law," which prohibits U.S. assistance to security forces if there is "credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights."¹⁰⁰

A number of organizations and politicians have called for the elimination of the military tribunal and the establishment of specialized civilian courts.¹⁰¹ The United Kingdom has also expressed interest in providing technical assistance, such as trainings for judges, to support reform of the court system.¹⁰² However, one interviewee in Lebanon claimed that the tribunal system remains in place due to support from Hezbollah.¹⁰³

Recommendations

Ensure continued Foreign Military Financing for Lebanon

Congress should move swiftly to ensure that Lebanon continues to receive Foreign Military Financing. The United States has been largely successful in building the Lebanese Armed Forces' counterterrorism forces to protect the country against Salafi-jihadi threats. But the Trump administration's FY 2018 budget request cuts military and security assistance to Lebanon by 80 percent from FY 2016 levels.¹⁰⁴ This would weaken the LAF's capabilities and readiness. Specifically, it would prevent the LAF from covering its operating costs and procuring badly needed new equipment.¹⁰⁵ Senior American military and diplomatic officials fear that such cuts would create new space for Hezbollah and Iran to grow its sphere of influence in Lebanon.¹⁰⁶

Instead of scaling back its support for the LAF, the United States should leverage its security assistance to discourage coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah. In light of recent operations, Congress could request a joint semiannual report on LAF-Hezbollah coordination by the Department of Defense and the Department of State. The United States should also beef up the enforcement of Leahy vetting in Lebanon. Leahy vetting can be used to identify individuals or units that are coordinating with or supporting Hezbollah and to impose sanctions as necessary.

Maintain support for the Lebanese Special Operations ForcesThe United States should maintain and consider increasing its support for the LSOF. While U.S. officials describe the LSOF as one of the most capable special operations forces in the region,¹⁰⁷ it still has significant equipment and training needs. The next round of assistance should augment support for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and target package development and other gaps in LSOF capabilities. LSOF funding should be protected through a dedicated funding stream insulated from the political considerations affecting broader U.S. support for the LAF, including concerns about Hezbollah or budget cuts. U.S. assistance should also seek to fill gaps or shortfalls in support for units such as Moukafaha,

which execute a significant portion of overall LAF counterterrorism operations. Finally, the United States should continue to support LSOF teams training other units in the LAF in support of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701.

Leverage U.S. assistance for better counterterrorism coordination

Senior leaders across the Lebanese military and security services acknowledge that interagency coordination remains a major weakness in their approach to counterterrorism. The United States has made great strides since 9/11 in cultivating greater information sharing and coordination across counterterrorism agencies. The United States should leverage its domestic experience and its security assistance to Lebanon to promote better interagency coordination and facilitate joint counterterrorism operations. This effort could include support for joint training and exercises to build relationships across various units, particularly between LSOF and the Internal Security Forces. This effort should be closely coordinated with the United Kingdom through its assistance to ISF counterterrorism units. U.S. support for interagency coordination could also be used to increase transparency and awareness of incidents of possible coordination with nonstate actors and create opportunities to prevent such incidents.

Bolster assistance designed to strengthen state institutions and counter the influence of nonstate actors

Despite internal weaknesses and Iranian influence, Lebanese institutions remain at least partly independent and play a valuable role in protecting U.S. interests in the Middle East. The United States should expand support for legitimate institutions and encourage space for political parties, civil society organizations, and others. Low-profile support and assistance can equip independent and moderate voices with the tools to push back against extremist ideologies. In addition, Hezbollah has diverted resources from Shiite populations in the south of the country to support its war effort in Syria. The Trump administration should quietly help the Lebanese government fill the gap in basic services in these communities as part of a long-term effort to drive a wedge between Hezbollah and its traditional support base.¹⁰⁸

Fund a feasibility study for civilian counterterrorism court

The British government is currently mapping Lebanon's counterterrorism legislation and military tribunal process. The study's aim is to identify weaknesses and potential areas for improvement in the system. The United States should support this effort and fund a feasibility study to assess the best path toward a civilian counterterrorism court and more transparent detention processes. The study should examine the tools and skills necessary to improve the counterterrorism judicial process in Lebanon, such as training judges on the use of forensic evidence in cases. The study can incorporate lessons from other countries in the region with relatively stronger counterterrorism court systems and rule of law, such as Jordan.

Call on Saudi Arabia to restore its \$4 billion security assistance package for Lebanon

The Trump administration should call on Saudi Arabia to reinstate the \$4 billion in aid for the Lebanese army and security services that it abruptly canceled in February 2016. The aid package consisted of \$3 billion to buy weapons for the LAF and \$1 billion in assistance to the security services. Saudi Arabia froze the assistance when Lebanon failed to condemn the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran earlier that year.¹⁰⁹ There have been reports of talks between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon to restore the assistance,¹¹⁰ but no final agreement appears to have been reached. President Donald Trump has put extensive pressure on our European allies to share the NATO security burden. He should leverage his recent round of positive meetings with the Saudi leadership do the same in Lebanon.

Conclusion

Lebanon remains a key partner in the fight against Sunni terrorist groups in the Middle East. Over the past decade, the United States has played a critical role in building Lebanon's capabilities to respond to these domestic and external threats. The United States should continue its financial and technical support for Lebanon to ensure the success of the Lebanese Armed Forces' operations against the Islamic State and other Sunni militants and to strengthen national institutions as a counterweight to Hezbollah domination and bulwark against further sectarian conflict. Hezbollah's involvement in these operations and Lebanon's security agencies remains a valid concern for the United States. However, the best way to counter its influence is to bolster Lebanese institutions and expand security cooperation to respond to shared threats.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank CAP Senior Fellows Brian Katulis, Yoram Schweitzer, Dan Benaim, and Max Bergmann; CAP Policy Analyst Peter Juul, CAP intern Yashar Parsie; and Zack Bazzi, project manager at Spirit of America, for their edits to this report.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

