



ANA MARIA LUCA

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Cheques and balances

How Hezbollah managed to ensure that the Lebanese army poses no threat



Following up on a pledge by Western countries made at the end of last year, a new donor conference to raise funds for the Lebanese Armed Forces is due to take place in Rome this June. The Rome conference also comes after an announcement made by Saudi Arabia in December that it will grant \$3 billion to bolster the LAF. Even if the Rome conference is not expected to endow the Lebanese army with actual combat capabilities, the Saudi grant promises to change the military balance of power in Lebanon, analysts say.

According to a [report](#) published by the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, the West has not been generous in providing the LAF with effective kinetic weapons. Most Western

donations have come in the form of vehicles, patrol boats, helicopters, and support equipment, with little in the way of lethal weaponry. “For example, a brand new 42-meter offshore patrol boat acquired through the American Foreign Military Fund (FMF) program remains without a principal weapon,” the report noted. “The US Congress makes it difficult for the American government to provide the LAF with any lethal weapons in order to appease the Israeli lobby, fearing that these weapons could fall into the hands of Hezbollah or extremist groups.”

American foreign policy priorities in the Middle East often cause Washington to avoid building strong armies in Arab countries in order to keep its traditional ally, Israel, safe from any potential military threat. Hezbollah and its control over Lebanese territory and institutions, including key positions in the army, have also remained an important concern for Western states.

In light of these factors, the aid coming from Europe and the US as a result of the Rome conference is not expected to come close to matching Saudi Arabia’s \$3 billion grant. Western donor conferences occur periodically and the United States is usually the biggest donor, Carnegie Middle East Center analyst Mario Abou Zeid pointed out. “They are made to maintain the logistical operations of the Lebanese Army,” he added. “The Saudi pledge is the main fund that may change the weaponry, the arsenal.”

The purpose of these initiatives to strengthen the Lebanese army is mainly to stabilize Lebanon, argued Imad Salamey, professor of political science and international affairs at the Lebanese American University. “But nothing ever comes for free. Both the Saudis and the European countries want to gain more influence in the Lebanese security apparatus, knowing that Hezbollah, over the past years, has made important gains in controlling the Lebanese army, General Security, and other key institutions,” he said. “Nothing happens in the military structures in Lebanon without the watchful eyes of Hezbollah. The primary sector that Hezbollah made sure that is not undermining its operations is the security sector.”

However, neither Western donors nor Saudi Arabia will impose conditions such as removing Hezbollah from the decisionmaking process over Lebanon’s security apparatus by restructuring the armed forces, analysts said: these countries believe antagonizing Hezbollah and its political allies would destabilize Lebanon even more.

In Salamey’s opinion, whatever aid is going to reach Lebanon, the army and the security forces will become a bargaining chip and each faction will try to turn it to its advantage one way or another. “Right now, Hezbollah is not willing to become a staunch opposition to the Saudi or French support to the army because it can’t afford to create too much fuss about it in Lebanon,” Salamey told NOW.

According to Abou Zeid, Hezbollah's political strategists have already come up with a solution to avoid a confrontation with a stronger Lebanese army. "Hezbollah's strength comes from its arsenal," he said. "If it gives up its arms, it will have no power in Lebanon or the region. It's not in its interest that the Lebanese army is militarily stronger. Precedent has suggested that if Lebanon has two sizeable military powers, they will end up in confrontation," Abou Zeid pointed out, such as when the Lebanese army and the Lebanese Forces clashed in 1989. Hezbollah can't afford to confront the LAF, so it joined the national interest cabinet in order to be a part of the decisionmaking process when it comes to directing the Lebanese Army's efforts.

"And Hezbollah succeeded in doing that," said Abou Zeid. "You can see the cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah in the effort to control the Syrian-Lebanese borders. They are also cooperating on a high intelligence level. Hezbollah agreed on giving certain portfolios to moderate Sunni ministers – such as the interior ministry. And we could see how the Internal Security Forces cooperated with Hezbollah and the Army in securing the village of Tfeil," he noted.

Moreover, the second step in Hezbollah's strategy is the presidential elections. Whenever Lebanon has a strong president, one of his first priorities is to formulate a defense plan. "This is why Hezbollah is not really pushing for the election of a new Lebanese president," Abou Zeid argued. "It's not in its best interest to be confronted by a strong president who might challenge its arms and its involvement in the Syrian conflict."