

Hezbollah's arms decline with more aid

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 8 (UPI) -- WASHINGTON, Dec. 8 (UPI) -- Lebanon isn't hostage to any country nor can any group like Hezbollah hold it captive, the Lebanese finance minister told U.S. lawmakers in Washington.

Jeffrey Feltman, U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, is in Beirut to discuss regional affairs. He said Washington was committed to helping Lebanon secure its borders amid growing concerns over a civil war in neighboring Syria.

Lebanese Finance Minister Mohammad Safadi told U.S. lawmakers, meanwhile, that Beirut wasn't being exploited by any foreign and internal factions.

"Our government does not fall under orders of any country and it is not true that it is a Hezbollah captive," he was quoted by Lebanon's Daily Star newspaper as saying.

Hezbollah, a Shiite movement labeled a terrorist organization by the U.S. government, has two Cabinet seats in the Lebanese government. Lawmakers in Beirut are divided over Hezbollah's military wing. Some see the movement's weapons as vital for national security while others believe the weapons gives Israel an excuse to stay on the offensive.

Early this year, lawmakers on the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee mulled withholding roughly \$100 million in military aid to Lebanon because of concerns over Hezbollah's influence over the military.

Safadi said the stronger the Lebanese military, the less likely Hezbollah would maintain a military footing.

"The decline in the military role of Hezbollah is correlated with the ability of the Lebanese Army to defend Lebanon's territory," he said.

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