
The LAF: Lebanon's Hope...by Default

Introduction

On December 29, 2013, shortly after the funeral for the late Mohammed Chatah (the Sunni former Finance Minister and prominent member of the Hariri establishment who was assassinated earlier that month), President Michel Suleiman announced that Saudi Arabia had pledged \$3 billion in aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). In Lebanon, the announcement received an enthusiastic welcome from friends of Saudi Arabia, particularly the Future Movement which sponsored a series of billboards in Beirut thanking the "Good King" for his donation.¹ During the August 2, 2014 Battle of Orsal between the LAF and Islamist (Syrian) rebels, several LAF members were killed and wounded, while some 35 other individuals from the LAF and Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF) were taken prisoner. Shortly afterward, Saudi Arabia pledged another \$1 billion, which was to be divided among the various Lebanese security organizations, including the LAF.²

In reality, Saudi Arabia is not the only country that responds decisively when Lebanon is shaken by a significant event. On February 22, 2014, just a few hours after a suicide bomber attacked an LAF checkpoint in Hermel (northern Bekaa), British Ambassador to Beirut Tom Fletcher tweeted his country's concern for Lebanon's stability: "Appalled that our Leb army allies hit by cowardly terrorism tonight. We'll help rebuild Hermel checkpoint+offer \$500,000 of protective kit."³ On October 22, 2014, the British Embassy announced that the United Kingdom had delivered military equipment to the LAF to help it deal with the jihadist threat on its eastern border with Syria. The UK donation, described by Ambassador Fletcher in a series of tweets ("to help army secure Syrian border from extremists"), was valued at \$16 million and included 164 Land Rovers, 1,500 sets of body armor, a secure radio communication network, border watchtowers and HESCO barriers to protect LAF positions along the frontier.^{4,5}

¹ <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/198400>

² <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-saudi-arabia-grants-lebanons-army-1-billion-in-aid-2014-06>

³ <https://twitter.com/HMATomFletcher/status/437293081634025472>

⁴ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Oct-22/274964-uk-delivers-aid-to-lebanese-army.ashx#sthash.310kOfJ9.dpuf>

⁵ <https://twitter.com/HMATomFletcher>

Obviously, the LAF's primary benefactor—the United States—is equally magnanimous. On Army Day, August 1, 2014 (commemorated discretely that year due to the presidential vacancy and a day before the Orsal battle began), the U.S. Embassy in Beirut posted a YouTube clip that described the range and depth of U.S. military assistance to the LAF. Soon after the battle, U.S. Ambassador David Hale stated:

The United States will soon deliver additional munitions and ordnance for offensive and defensive combat operations by the LAF. This assistance will enhance the LAF's ability to secure Lebanon's borders, protect Lebanon's people and fight these violent extremist groups. U.S. military assistance will begin arriving in the next few weeks and continue in the months to follow.⁶

Why the LAF Matters to Lebanon

The urgent responses noted above to situations involving the LAF say a great deal about the perspective of the LAF held by regional and international powers—and their expectations of that organization. In a country rife with sectarian divisions, one that continues to experience an enduring political crisis and today is burdened with some 1.5 million Syrian (and several hundred thousand Palestinian) refugees, the LAF is seen as the “only [Lebanese] institution ... considered ... a national body.”⁷ Implicit in that description is that, short of Lebanon achieving

a sustainable political life, the LAF is considered the only institution capable of guaranteeing at least a modicum of national order. Moreover, while many Lebanese institutions either do not function at all or do so at markedly reduced levels of productivity because of the political deadlock (to say nothing of the corruption inherent in the Lebanese system), the LAF is seen as the only institution that has continued to function more or less satisfactorily. According to its mission, the LAF is key to preserving “stability” in its most literal sense, and it does so largely by “containing” related incidents.

At the same time, however, the LAF represents the last Maronite Christian concentration of power within the complex Lebanese landscape. While the country's presidency remains vacant (an office earmarked by the constitution for a Maronite Christian), the prerogatives of that office were truncated dramatically by the Taif Agreement:

The Taif Agreement stripped the President of his constitutional powers and arguably left him with only one effective tool of governance—the authority to appoint the members of the Cabinet as agreed with the Prime Minister. Paradoxically, under the Taif Agreement, the President is the Supreme Commander in Chief of the Army but the Army is under the authority of the Cabinet in which the President does not have the right to vote.⁸

⁶ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/lebanon-asks-us-for-combat-planes-to-battle-jihadists/>

⁷ <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2014/04/lebanons-armed-forces>

⁸ <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/lebanon-constitutional-law.php#taef>

Critically, Lebanon's Christian Maronite community has been wrestling with an acute crisis in leadership. That predicament can be traced technically to the day former President Amin Gemayyel left office in 1988, near the end of the war. Unfortunately, no successor president was waiting in the wings, and the temporal significance of Gemayyel's departure was that disintegration within the state was just then reaching its peak. From that time until the Taif Agreement was concluded, Lebanon existed under the official rule of two governments, one of which was presided over by General Michel Aoun, the chief of staff of one of the factions spawned by the divided army. Clearly, implementation of the Taif Agreement required the clout of the Syrian military (officially a joint Lebanese/Syrian effort that had the blessing of the U.S. and its allies) to dislodge Aoun from the presidential palace when he rejected some provisions of the Taif Agreement and clung to the idea of "legitimacy." The predicament faced by Lebanon's Christians, particularly the Maronites, assumed even greater proportions during the 15 years of "Syrian tutelage." During that period, the LAF's chief of staff accreted ever more constitutional authority to the detriment of the political elites, the members of which either were excluded physically or became secondary actors who seemed unable to accept their own marginalization.⁹

Despite the 15 years of "Syrian tutelage" and the ideological imprint it made on Lebanese society, that

outcome has never been addressed comprehensively at a general or constitutional level. Indeed, the Lebanese and Syrian armies were aligned according to "brotherhood, cooperation and coordination" during that time. Demonstrably, the last two presidents of the Lebanese Republic also served previously as LAF chiefs of staff: former President (General) Émile Lahoud (1998 – 2006) and former President (General) Michel Suleiman (2008 – 2014). Thus, given the current "vacancy" at Baabda Palace, it is unsurprising that a top candidate for the position is General Jean Kahwaji—the LAF's current chief of staff.

As is typical for the Syrian Baathists who blur the lines between the political and military realms, the presidency of the republic seems to have emerged as the ultimate "promotion" a chief of staff may expect. Of course, this propensity has not only exacerbated the malaise that has affected the Maronite Christian political elite, but it has also debased the position of the LAF's chief of staff. Since a chief of staff is thus expected to keep one eye trained on Baabda (the presidential palace), he would also be expected to do his utmost to please the country's various political powers—and even influential regional and international actors—to achieve the dream of exchanging his "general" title for that of "Mr. President."

Sustaining the LAF

As mentioned above, the U.S. historically has been one of the LAF's most generous international donors. By consistently declaring its support for

⁹ General Michel Aoun and former President Amin Gemayyel were forced to leave the country, while Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea was jailed.

the LAF as Lebanon's "sole legitimate defense force," U.S. authorities have often expressed their preference for Hezbollah's disarmament and that the LAF assert itself as Lebanon's sole military organization. At the same time, the U.S. has generally restricted its aid to training and logistical support rather than armaments because of its reluctance to provide Lebanon with any equipment that could harm U.S.-Israeli relations. Nevertheless, the LAF received a dramatic increase in U.S. funding after former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in 2005 and Syrian troops withdrew from the country. A year later, the July 2006 War between Israel and Hezbollah (ended by UNSCR 1701, which also reintroduced the LAF to south Lebanon after a decades-long absence) prompted the U.S. to provide even more funding, such that between 2006 and 2008, the LAF received more than \$400 million in U.S. assistance.¹⁰ Similarly, in early January 2013, the U.S. promised the LAF 200 more armored vehicles to help protect Lebanon's borders and sustain internal stability.¹¹ It seems, therefore, that pitting the LAF against Hezbollah (an unlikely matchup as will be discussed later in this document) is no longer a precondition for the LAF receiving aid.

Such grants, whether from the U.S. or other nations, help underscore the complexity of the LAF's funding regimen. Although the organization generally enjoys broad domestic

support (a recent report by Norwegian NGO FAFO indicated approval ratings as high as 80%), it remains chronically underfunded, which helps explain the LAF's dependence on international donors.¹² The LAF's funding sources are also tied both to Lebanon's relationships with the nations involved and to the organization's internal struggles with domestic terrorism, factors that are linked inextricably to events occurring throughout the region (including Syria and Iraq).

The "CIA World Factbook" states that as of 2010, Lebanon spent 4.04% of its GDP on military expenditures, thus making it the tenth highest spending country in the world.¹³ But according to Aram Nerguizian of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. and an expert on Lebanon's military, "Lebanon is unable to develop its military forces without the assistance of funds and equipment from other countries such as the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium and the UAE."¹⁴ In fact, the LAF's overdependence on foreign assistance highlights the issue of the shifting political agendas behind that assistance. For instance, the post-2006 assistance to the LAF, framed within the provisions of UNSCR 1701, is vastly different from today's version which justifies such aid as a means to achieve the objectives of "fighting terrorism." But while that kind of assistance may expand or contract based on the agendas involved, and

¹⁰ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-u.s.-military-aid-to-lebanon>

¹¹ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Jan-07/201181-us-gives-lebanon-200-armored-vehicles.ashx>

¹² <http://www.fafo.no/images/pub/2013/10179.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2034rank.html?countryname=Lebanon&countrycode=le®ionCode=mde&rank=10#le>

¹⁴ http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/090210_lafsecurity.pdf

while the LAF may indeed receive more weapons and training, the long-term outcome does not favor its sustained development. One example is the ad hoc interest shown in the LAF by the "International Support Group for Lebanon."¹⁵ During a daylong conference held in Rome on June 17, 2014 and attended by representatives from 43 countries and regional and international bodies (including the UN), Italian Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini stated that the group's aim was to "support Lebanon in the face of all the challenges its security and stability are facing.... The Lebanese army is a main base for Lebanon's stability."¹⁶

Later that summer, several other countries pledged moral and material support for the LAF. Egyptian Ambassador Mohamed Zayed said on December 5, 2014 that Lebanon must be isolated from regional crises to maintain its stability and that Egypt would provide security assistance if needed. Zayed explained that Egypt's support for the fight against extremists in Lebanon was linked to a broader regional strategy. In addition, Interior Minister Nouhad al-Mashnouq (who

headed a security delegation to Egypt on November 9, 2014 to purchase military equipment as part of the second Saudi grant) expressed the need "to put efforts together in a bid to combat the spread of terrorism."¹⁷ According to Basem Shabb, a Lebanese MP and member of the parliament's Committee on Defense, cooperation between Lebanon and Egypt would improve the capabilities of the armed forces because of Egypt's advanced weaponry, the existing legal framework within the Arab League's Common Defense Pact, a shared training doctrine, the common language and Egypt's opposition to radical Islamic factions.¹⁸ During a meeting in New York, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi expressed to Prime Minister Tammam Salam Egypt's readiness to train Lebanese troops to fight against terrorists.¹⁹ Iran also offered to donate military equipment to the Lebanese army, but that offer was held in abeyance to prevent harming relations with the West.²⁰ Additionally, March 14 figures in Lebanon have been voicing opposition to Iranian offers by explaining that they would represent a violation of extant

¹⁵ "The inaugural meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon was held on 25 September 2013 at United Nations Headquarters in New York and was chaired by the United Nations Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon. Participants invited to the meeting were: the People's Republic of China, the Republic of France, the Republic of Lebanon, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, the European Union, the League of Arab States, the World Bank, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Development Group, the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon and the Force Commander of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)." See: <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/English/News/Pages/Details.aspx?nid=20763>

¹⁶ <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/551910-international-support-group-for-lebanon-kicks-off-rome-conference>

¹⁷ http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Dec-05/279994-egypt-ready-to-assist-lebanon-against-jihadis.ashx?utm_source=Magnet&utm_medium=Related%20Articles%20widget&utm_campaign=Magnet%20tools#sthash.hjhYp7ie.dpuf

¹⁸ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2014/Jun-20/260820-look-to-egypt-for-military-cooperation.ashx#sthash.idK4TbF2.dpuf>

¹⁹ <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/148546> and <http://al-anwar.com.au/index.php/salam-sees-defensive-role-lebanon-egypt-ready-train-lebanese-army-battle-terrorists/>

²⁰ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Sep-30/272465-iran-to-donate-military-aid-to-lebanese-army.ashx#sthash.nTgGwee6.dpuf>

international sanctions against Tehran over weapons exports.²¹ Based on the international accords concluded recently with Tehran, however, that situation may change. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov added his country's contributions to the mix when he stated at a joint news conference in Moscow attended by his Lebanese counterpart Gebran Bassil, "Russia will enhance military cooperation with Lebanon, mainly by reinforcing the defense capabilities of the Lebanese Army and security forces."²² Notably, former President Michel Suleiman had previously sought stronger military support from Moscow for the LAF during his second visit to Russia in January 2013. This collection of donors and would-be donors span a remarkably broad political spectrum. At the same time, however, they share the notion that the LAF should be supported in its fight against "extremist groups" to ensure "Lebanon's stability."^{23,24}

Although many foreign statements made to explain the provision of material support to the LAF emphasize the importance of "stability" and "security," they have increasingly included references to fighting Sunni extremism. For instance, a February 26, 2014 announcement posted on the U.S. Department of Defense website asserts "Sunni terrorist attacks

are on the rise in Lebanon" and that the U.S. is continuing to provide "counterterrorism funding" to the LAF.²⁵ Of note, such statements are consistent with a wider U.S.-led discourse surrounding the "war on terror" and the need to tackle global Sunni extremism. In a speech delivered to the 2014 graduating class of the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York on May 28, 2014, President Obama announced a \$5 billion "Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund," which includes support to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq to "confront terrorists working across Syrian borders."^{26,27}

The LAF vs. "Sunni Terrorism"

Lebanon did not discover Sunni extremism recently or as a result of the Syrian conflict. In the post-Taif era at the turn of the millennium, a spotlight was focused on the presence of radical Sunni Islamists in Lebanon when the LAF clashed with a group of Islamists entrenched in Akkar (northern Lebanon). Though the LAF proved victorious, it paid a relatively high cost (investigations revealed later that the Islamists involved had international connections, and the failure of Lebanon's political/judiciary system to try them properly ultimately fueled the rise of Islamism in Lebanon). Another wakeup call came on September 11, 2001 when the Lebanese learned that

²¹ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Oct-31/276081-no-good-reason-to-refuse-iranian-aid-hezbollah-mp.ashx#sthash.iPULKxcN.dpuf>

²² <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Apr-25/254307-russia-to-lend-a-hand-to-lebanese-army.ashx#sthash.ZVqNN8B8.dpuf>

²³ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Apr-25/254307-russia-to-lend-a-hand-to-lebanese-army.ashx#axzz37Rsi9JQv>

²⁴ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jul-05/262788-iran-offers-to-help-lebanon-fight-terrorism.ashx#axzz37Rsi9JQv>

²⁵ <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121731>

²⁶ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-wants-to-set-up-new-5-billion-counterterrorism-fund/2014/05/28/c5ee3362-e662-11e3-a86b-362fd5443d19_story.html

²⁷ <http://www.haaretz.com/news/world/1.595842>

one of the terrorists involved in the attacks against the United States was from the Bekaa. Clearly, we cannot find a direct link between the groups that operated in the early 2000s and those that are active today, but we can be certain that the presence of radical Islamists in Lebanon, was neither imported into the country nor was it related to spillover—whether from the war in Afghanistan (as was the case with some who were involved in the 2000 incidents) or the ongoing war in Syria. Some Lebanese, however, would not agree....

In reality, Sunnis represent approximately 40% of the LAF's strength, which complicates the already awkward dichotomy in which the LAF is regarded concurrently as an important job provider and a potential source of ideological opposition.^{28,29} This is particularly true in northern Lebanese districts such as Akkar, which have significant Sunni majorities. Districts such as those are also among Lebanon's most deprived since the north is home to just 20.7% of Lebanon's population but 46% of the country's "extremely poor" according to a 2008 UNDP report.^{30,31} The same report observes, "Regional disparity is...a major characteristic of poverty" in Lebanon.³²

In turn, feelings of socioeconomic hardship among the members

of Lebanon's Sunni community, particularly those in the country's rural areas, have been exacerbated by a perceived lack of leadership. Since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, the so-called "moderate Sunni leadership" has contended with a political vacuum, which enabled some members of that community to drift toward a more radical philosophy. As Raphael Lefèvre noted in a recent report, "With Hariri's death, the Sunnis were left without a charismatic leader with influence at the top of the state. The subsequent ascendancy of Shia Hezbollah only served to reinforce the anti-statist trend among Sunnis."³³ In addition, Lebanon's Sunnis are militarily weak in the face of Hezbollah's arms and lack a single, powerful state backer.

The influence traditionally exerted by the Hariri family has continued to wane in the face of an ascendant Hezbollah. For instance, the 2008 Doha Agreement was considered a triumph for Hezbollah, which gained veto power in the new Cabinet. In 2011, Hezbollah ousted Rafic Hariri's son Saad, the country's serving prime minister. After a self-imposed, three-year exile in Paris, Hariri returned to Lebanon on August 8, 2014, a few days after the Battle of Orsal, an event that altered the prevailing mood within the Sunni community.³⁴ Criticism of the Hariri establishment

²⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/lebanon-sunnis-alienated-army-actions-2014317115444492619.html>

²⁹ <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/sunni-anger-lebanon-against-army-grows>

³⁰ <http://www.carnegie-mec.org/2014/04/15/roots-of-crisis-in-northern-lebanon/h86r>

³¹ <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbas/report/2008%20en.pdf>

³² Ibid.

³³ Lefèvre, Raphael. "The Roots of Crisis in Northern Lebanon." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. May 7, 2014. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/crisis_northern_lebanon.pdf

³⁴ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/08/08/Former-PM-Hariri-back-in-Lebanon-for-first-time-in-three-years.html>

and its policy of buying its survival and the durability of its interests in Lebanon (a propensity originated by the late Rafic Hariri) is certainly not new. Rather, it can be traced to the Future Movement's muted response to Hezbollah's punitive campaign of May 2008 and shifts in Saudi Arabia's policy in the region, such as the short-lived rapprochement between it and Syria in 2009. A symbolic response to the growing dissatisfaction within Lebanon's Sunni community was evident in video released on January 22, 2014 and titled "A message from the Sunnis of Tripoli to Saad Hariri and the Future Movement." In it, a masked gunman taunts the former prime minister: "You sold the blood of martyrs, you sold the blood of your own father just to reach power."³⁵

From a "field" perspective, the concurrent weakening of the Hariri-based structure and emergence of other poles is made visible by considering the geography in which the LAF faced Lebanese groups that posed a threat to state security and/or the stability of the country. Three regions were involved, but all three, Saida, Tripoli and Orsal, are historically Sunni strongholds. For instance, Saida is the traditional home of the Hariri family while Tripoli, "the capital of the north," gave its full weight to the Future

Movement's parliamentary bloc in the 2005 and 2009 elections. Similarly, Orsal is the sole Sunni pocket in northern Bekaa, an area that is overwhelmingly Shia.

It should be evident that it is not our intent to discuss exhaustively the situation being faced by Lebanon's Sunni community. At the same time, that knowledge is vital to developing an understanding of the interplay between the weakening of its once strong leadership and security conditions within the country from the LAF's perspective. For instance, the LAF has certainly been buffeted by recent events in Lebanon. For example, its rout of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir's movement in Saida (June 2013) spawned three lingering considerations. 1) Until today and despite discussions held by the Lebanese parliament's defense committee, it is unclear what role Hezbollah played in that military action.^{36,37} 2) Though the Future Movement was only too happy to see Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir removed from the political scene, the FM and its allies did not hesitate afterward to advocate some of Assir's perspectives—to the point of using them to negotiate with Hezbollah and the LAF.³⁸ 3) Despite the high casualties the LAF suffered during that

³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EigUDsIf3w>

³⁶ Blanford, Nicholas. "Lebanon hit by the worst fighting since its civil war." *The Times*. June 25, 2013. "Although the Lebanese Army's special forces units spearheaded the attack on Sheikh Assir's compound, they had Hezbollah's battle-hardened fighters to back them up."

³⁷ "Saida incidents: Who dares to ask for accountability?" In this article, Al-Mustaqbal newspaper (a mouthpiece of the Hariri-led Future Movement) relates the principal findings of a report published by a Lebanese human rights organization which proves that the LAF and Hezbollah have colluded. <http://www.almustaqbal.com/v4/Article.aspx?Type=np&Articleid=579800>

³⁸ For instance, in apparent deference to al-Assir's demand, Hezbollah agreed just days after the Abra battle to release to the LAF several apartments it had used previously. Another instance that describes how the FM jumped on some al-Assir-derived, anti-Hezbollah propaganda is apparent in the debates that occurred within the parliamentary defense committee in the aftermath of the Abra clashes. <http://m.naharnet.com/stories/en/88440-hizbullah-vacates-disputed-apartments-in-sidon>

operation, its image was tarnished by accusations that it had engaged in torture.³⁹ According to Nadim Houry, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, "Not only is justice for the victims at stake, but also the army's reputation."⁴⁰ The aftermath of the crackdown on al-Assir further exacerbated tensions in Saida, particularly following the death of Nader Bayoumi (while in military custody) and numerous accusations of mistreatment and beatings. In fact, Human Rights Watch documented those accusations and urged the LAF to "ensure a thorough, impartial, and transparent investigation...following clashes with armed supporters of Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir."⁴¹ The report references a detainee named "Ahmed" who claimed, "the army and members of the "Resistance Brigades" (*Saraya al-Muqawama*, a multi-confessional militia created, armed, funded and run by Hezbollah) beat him severely at a nearby checkpoint."⁴² Without doubt, such accusations have the potential to incite sectarian tension since they appear to compromise the LAF's non-partisanship. Even al-Assir, who went missing after the June 2013 assault (but was finally arrested on August 15, 2015), continued to taunt

and criticize the LAF in videos in which he accuses the organization of using "death squads" to target Sunnis.⁴³ He also released a video critical of Saudi Arabia's pledge to fund the LAF.⁴⁴

The various rounds of violence Tripoli experienced in 2013 and 2014 seem much more difficult to understand and explain than anything else the country has witnessed. While the mutual hatred between the largely Alawi town of Jabal Mohsen and the Sunni majority town of Bab Tabbaneh may have historical roots, it is difficult to conceive of those sour relations degenerating today into armed conflict. Further, the successive rounds of violence (halted in fall 2014 after a large LAF operation) may seem equally confusing. No more so, of course, than the way Hezbollah and the Future Movement, directly or through the military and security agencies controlled by each, offered "assistance" to either side. There are other players involved of course, such as former Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who is considered a benefactor (among others) of the armed groups involved in the fighting. Even the LAF's intelligence branch contributed, seemingly, to the machinations that advanced the bloody game.⁴⁵

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/hezbollah-empties-two-sidon-apartments>
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jun-19/220870-lebanese-army-sets-up-posts-after-sidon-clashes.ashx>
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jun-19/220860-sidon-in-crosshairs-of-syria-crisis.ashx>

³⁹ "Amnesty Calls for 'Transparent' Probe into Death of Sidon Clashes Detainee" <http://m.naharnet.com/stories/en/89876-amnesty-calls-for-transparent-probe-into-death-of-sidon-clashes-detainee>

⁴⁰ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/17/lebanon-investigate-army-beatings-death-custody>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdG5YdDm1c>

⁴⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0sZTvlA7DU>

⁴⁵ Among the tremendous amount of media coverage of the clashes in Tripoli, the most notable examples are al-Akhbar's interview with, and profile of Islamist MP Khaled Daher (December 1, 2014), and its article on General Amer el-Hassan (the head of the LAF's intelligence organization in northern Lebanon) which alludes to the roles he played during the unrest in Tripoli during 2013-2014. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/231977>

Yet, it is important to note that the role played by the LAF (and the ISF's intelligence organization) during those rounds of violence in Tripoli remains unclear. But since a prevalent perception is that its actions there seem uncannily similar to those of other non-state actors on the Lebanese scene, its organizational image—particularly as a model Lebanese institution—was tarnished even further. Still, the presence of that "prevalent perception" must be couched by the fact that it emerged in media reports published later (and cited herein). From August 2014 onward, for instance, negotiated "arrangements" led some Sunni militia leaders to surrender to the LAF (they were tried later by the Military Court). Interestingly, however, Ali Eid and his son Rifaat, main figures in the Alawi pro-Assad/Hezbollah Arab Democratic Party, were "permitted to leave the game" despite having been accused of complicity in the August 23, 2013 bombings of two Sunni Mosques.

From a critical perspective, not even the vagueness of the overall situation can hide its significant importance, particularly that the deadly rounds of violence between Jabal Mohsen and Bab Tabbaneh may well have become the blueprint for increasingly violent Islamist radicalism. Indeed, since the LAF's intercession in Tripoli—following the "arrangements"

mentioned above—the army and other state security agencies focused on Islamist activists who had little if anything to do with those who surrendered. On April 2015, the Military Court began the trials of those militia leaders. Not only did the proceedings disclose the criminal profiles of the leaders involved, but they also ignited "a war between Hariri and Mikati."⁴⁶ Indeed, based on the depositions taken, a key outcome of the trial is that most of the leaders involved have very little to do with the Islamist militants of an-Nusra or ISIL, some of whom were killed or captured by the LAF and other security agencies.⁴⁷

The Direct Effect of Sectarianism on the LAF

While the LAF often describes its June 2013 actions in Sidon (Abra) against Assir's supporters as a "victory" (and its pacification of Tripoli somewhat less so), the third main Sunni hotbed of violence remains exceptionally active due to several factors. For instance, similar to the events that took place in Abra (which raised a host of still-unanswered questions), events in Orsal also prompted comprehensive reviews. In fact, some pro-Hezbollah press outlets urged after the battle of August 2 that an investigative committee be established to conduct just such a review.⁴⁸

Following those actions, sectarian

⁴⁶ Al-Modon website. <http://www.almodon.com/politics/769cd1c1-2683-4efb-87c8-a8dde4d63c36>

⁴⁷ The transcript of the Military Court trial of a Tripoli-based militia leader such as Ziad Allouki (an-Nahar, April 15, 2015) demonstrates clearly that he is completely dissimilar to Oussama Mansour, for instance, an Islamist militant from Tripoli who was killed by ISF intelligence on April 9, 2015. Mansour was eulogized by an-Nusra Front as its "prince" in Tripoli (as-Safir, April 17, 2015).

⁴⁸ On August 22, 2014, as-Safir ran the headline, "As-Safir requests a military investigation commission look into the events in Orsal." Obviously—and as is typical in Lebanon—no action was taken on the request despite the amount of information disclosed by the newspaper known for its close ties to Hezbollah. The questions that followed included what's the message behind this media coup, who's behind it and what is its political purpose?

tensions within the LAF seemed to reach a breaking point. When LAF soldier Atef Saadeddine went missing near the end of July 2014, his disappearance was presumed to have been an abduction. It soon became apparent, however, that he deserted the army in order to join a jihadi group.⁴⁹ Shortly afterwards, another LAF soldier, Abdul Qader Akkoui, announced his defection to the Islamic State jihadist group in a video posted to the Internet.⁵⁰ Then, in early October 2014, Abdallah Shehadeh, a serving LAF soldier, explained in a video that Hezbollah's "manipulation" of the military and its "discrimination" against Sunni personnel prompted him to join An-Nusra Front. "We enlisted in the Army in order to defend the Lebanese people, but we were surprised to see that [the Army] is a tool in the hands of Hezbollah."⁵¹ Ideologically driven defections such as these are unique in the history of the LAF and Lebanon in general. Although certain organizations split away from the core of the army during the civil war to affiliate with individual political actors, the phenomenon of "free agency" is a new twist indicative of the impact sectarianism is having within the ranks of the LAF. "Defections" such as those mentioned above also illustrate that the LAF reflects the Lebanese social fabric from which its soldiers originate.

The failed negotiations to free the

LAF and ISF members taken prisoner at Orsal have become a constant reminder that the battle never really ended. Moreover, the "military security zone" instituted there has not truly pacified the area in terms of normalizing relations between the Sunni and Shia neighborhoods involved. And the news blackout imposed on the situation regarding the refugees from Syria in Orsal and the LAF's self-acknowledged "misbehavior" in the nearby refugee camps has certainly not helped the LAF regain its once vaunted status. Then there are Hezbollah's operations in Qalamoun—the proverbial icing on the cake—to be considered.⁵²

Considering these events, the LAF's "balance of debt," particularly where Lebanon's Sunni community is involved, can only be corrected by reviewing the prodigious factors that add value to the LAF. First, the LAF is the biggest employer in rural areas of Lebanon, especially in Sunni and Christian areas. At least in those areas, no other jobs provider can compete with the LAF. Second (despite some "friendly criticism"), the country's moderate Sunni poles (and not just that represented by the Hariri establishment) see the LAF as their firewall against the radical trends within their respective communities. Third, for a number of reasons, the LAF generally enjoys support from the Christian communities and the Shia community (largely because Hezbollah

⁴⁹ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20859>

⁵⁰ <http://m.naharnet.com/stories/en/150822-lebanese-soldier-announces-defection-to-is-in-internet-video>

⁵¹ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Oct-16/274312-lebanese-army-tool-of-hezbollah-defected-soldier.ashx#sthash.CZu2AFcY.dpuf>

⁵² Following a mid-September 2014 LAF raid against some of Orsal's refugee camps, the secretary general of the Syrian coalition there claimed that a Syrian child had been killed in the melee and called the LAF's actions "abusive." Interestingly, Saad Hariri defended the LAF against those accusations. See: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Oct-28/275602-hariri-warns-those-who-try-to-undermine-lebanese-army.ashx#sthash.xgLVjgg.dpuf>

now sees itself working from the same agenda as the LAF: defending Lebanon and the Lebanese people).

Viewed from a Sunni angle, the LAF seems to have total support from the Shia community, including public and political opinion. With the Hezbollah-contrived motto “the Army, the People and the Resistance” (theoretically appended to all governmental statements since 2005, it has since become indicative of the day-to-day intimacy between Hezbollah and the LAF. In a recent demonstration of that “jointness,” Hezbollah “permitted” the LAF to help it secure Beirut’s southern suburbs following a spate of bombings in 2013. During the chaotic August 2013 – February 2014 period when bombings seemed to occur weekly, the country’s security situation seemed to improve—in parallel with political appeasement and despite some exceptions. That much became clear through increased cooperation between the state’s various security agencies.

As mentioned above, sectarian strife in the LAF is also a potentially troublesome factor that could be exacerbated by the proportions of the different sects. When efforts were being made following the civil war to reconstruct the LAF, several measures were implemented to prevent the army from crumbling as happened during that conflict. These changes

included universal conscription (ended in 2007), the rotation of battalions throughout the country to reduce the risk of forming localized militias and perhaps most prominently, the introduction of quotas for Sunni, Shia and Christian members within each battalion.⁵³ Although officer positions are generally reported to be distributed equitably among Muslims and Christians, Sunnis now make up a disproportionate number of the lower-ranking positions, thus reflecting a wider decline in Sunni fortunes (and the recognition that the LAF is a jobs provider).^{54,55,56} This means that not only is competition for enlistment and advancement intense, but non-Sunnis are also likely to receive certain benefits (e.g., a greater likelihood for promotion) due to the relative scarcity of recruits combined with the need to fulfill sectarian quotas.

Is the LAF Really the Model Institution in Lebanon?

Apparently, improvements in cooperation (primarily between the LAF and the ISF) deserved a public announcement, such as the July 5, 2014 statement in which Sunni Minister of Interior Nouhad Machnouk mentioned, “there is a partnership between the Army and security agencies in confronting terrorism threatening Lebanon.”⁵⁷ In that same speech, however, Machnouk admitted that the cooperation he extolled included Hezbollah. “There

⁵³ Barany, Zolton. 2014. Building National Armies after Civil War: Lessons from Bosnia, El Salvador and Lebanon in The Lebanese Army’s Unique Path. P. 11.

⁵⁴ See Knudsen, Are J. 2014. Lebanese Armed Forces: A United Army for a Divided Country? <http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5284-lebanese-armed-forces.pdf> and <http://www.wsj.com/articles/syria-conflict-puts-lebanese-army-under-pressure-1401229578>

⁵⁵ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/syria-conflict-puts-lebanese-army-under-pressure-1401229578>

⁵⁶ <http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5284-lebanese-armed-forces.pdf>

⁵⁷ In early 2013, Hezbollah ceded responsibility for the security of Beirut’s suburbs to the LAF. Daily Star. September 25, 2013.

shouldn't be any embarrassment over coordination between security and military agencies and any Lebanese party to secure the application of the law."⁵⁸ Apparently, recent cooperative advancements between key organizations have not been restricted to domestic Lebanese agencies. Rather, they include collaboration with foreign intelligence agencies such as the CIA. More specifically, the LAF and the General Security organization (headed by an individual who must have Hezbollah's blessing to serve in that key position) represent the conduit for the enhanced cooperation deemed necessary to maintain Lebanon's stability. It has been suggested that the U.S. and Lebanon are sharing intelligence, and reports indicate for instance that Naim Abbas, an Abdullah Azzam Brigades commander, was captured with help from Western intelligence services.⁵⁹ Aram Nerguizian also stated, "External intel feeds and intelligence sharing" were key factors in the capture of terrorism suspects, and the U.S., UK, France, Germany, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Assad's Syria were listed as some of the sources of that intelligence.⁶⁰ Despite the U.S. government's action to place Hezbollah on its list of foreign terrorist organizations, it appears the country's intelligence agencies are working with Hezbollah (albeit indirectly) to combat Sunni extremism in Lebanon.⁶¹ As with the LAF, Hezbollah and the U.S.

share a common enemy, and that shared opposition to extremist groups, accords neatly with Hezbollah's public discourse and U.S. foreign policy machinations. A July 2014 report suggests that when the CIA uncovered intelligence that suggested al-Qaeda-affiliated groups were plotting attacks against Hezbollah's strongholds in Lebanon, it passed that information on to the Lebanese government with the understanding that it would then be given to Hezbollah.⁶²

Clearly, "Sunni extremism" and the danger it poses has not only changed the LAF's agenda (and those of its beneficiaries), but it has also changed the enduring notion that the LAF serves as the model for the establishment of state institutions in Lebanon. Indeed, in just a single decade we have learned conclusively that despite international support, the LAF alone cannot guarantee that the Lebanese state will reclaim its prerogative as the sole holder of arms and legitimate purveyor of security for the country. Not only is the LAF in no position to challenge Hezbollah militarily, but the very rationale behind any such challenge is no longer relevant. On the contrary, defending Lebanon's borders and maintaining an acceptable level of stability within the country appears increasingly to require coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah—despite all of the risks such coordination suggests, such as

⁵⁸ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jul-05/262748-army-and-security-agencies-united-in-anti-terror-battle.ashx#axzz3AASaMug>

⁵⁹ <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2014/05/13/is-lebanon-winning-against-al-qaeda/hap7>

⁶⁰ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jul-07/262887-western-help-boosted-cooperation-behind-security-successes.ashx#axzz385prlUx6>

⁶¹ U.S. Department of State. List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>

⁶² <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/07/15/196755/lebanese-officials-say-cia-warned.html#.UeXkhNK1Fsk>

estranging a large portion of the Sunni community and all actions related to state building according to generally accepted democratic ideals.

Nevertheless, the emergence of Sunni extremism is not the only causal factor behind the apparent "intimacy" between the LAF and Hezbollah. Even if the LAF were to confront Hezbollah, it is very likely that the significant proportion of Shia soldiers in its ranks could precipitate the LAF's disintegration along sectarian lines. Accordingly, many sources caution against any effort (particularly U.S. aid) intended to help the LAF "overthrow" Hezbollah. In fact, one U.S. Congressional Research Service report published in February 2014 drew a parallel between that notion and U.S. attempts to bolster the LAF to combat the Palestinian Fedayeen—which became a precursor to the civil war.⁶³

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Despite the December 2013 announcement that Saudi Arabia would donate \$3 billion to the LAF, quite some time would pass before any of that assistance became tangible. In fact, the agreement between Saudi Arabia and France was not even ratified until November 4, 2014 (nearly a full calendar year after the announcement was made), and none of the assistance promised actually reached the LAF until April

2015.^{64,65} The delay certainly seemed odd, especially since the threat posed to Lebanon (and the LAF) by radical groups grew substantially throughout 2014. Additionally, during the winter of 2014 – 2015, people from across the political spectrum were predicting major spring clashes between forces from Lebanon (LAF or Hezbollah) and various "spillover militants" from the Syrian war. Many of those individuals suggested reasonably that the Saudis imposed the delay to ensure that the arms destined for the LAF would not fall quickly into the hands of Hezbollah.⁶⁶ Although its receipt of the Saudi funding was indeed delayed, the LAF continued to receive critical support from the United States. Regardless of reservations within the U.S. government, Lebanon was the fifth largest recipient of U.S. military aid in 2014 (\$100 million). In early February 2015, Lebanon received another \$25 million—this time primarily in the form of heavy artillery—that U.S. Ambassador David Hale said would be used to "defeat the terrorist and extremist threat from Syria."⁶⁷

These actions and statements disclosed the wishful thinking of many others (individuals and states) that such generous aid packages (the Saudi gift was the largest the Lebanese state has received it gained independence from France) would finally give the LAF the firepower it needed to defeat Hezbollah militarily.⁶⁸

⁶³ Blanchard, Christopher M. Lebanon: Background and US Policy. P. 12.

⁶⁴ <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/564883-france-to-start-arming-lebanon-in-spring>

⁶⁵ French weapons arrive in Lebanon in \$3 billion Saudi-funded deal. Reuters (UK). April 20, 2015. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/04/20/uk-mideast-crisis-lebanon-army-idUKKBN0NB0GE20150420>

⁶⁶ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/06/the-battle-for-the-qalamoun-mountains-syria-lebanon-hezbollah-isis-al-nusra-front/>

⁶⁷ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/08/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-usa-idUSKBN0LC0LT20150208>

⁶⁸ <http://www.mintpressnews.com/saudi-funded-french-weapons-sent-to-lebanon-to-destroy-hezbollah/202500/>

In the context of worsening “spillover” from Syria, however, the LAF was more unlikely than ever to turn its guns on the powerful Shia militia in 2014 – 2015 since the party had become a strategic partner. But clearly, that never happened.

In the span of a single decade, 2005 – 2010, the LAF experienced dramatic changes. From being little more than an auxiliary actor during the lengthy period of Syrian tutelage, it became a source of hope for many Lebanese (following the Syrians' withdrawal, in the aftermath of the 2006 War and in the wake of the Nahr el-Bared battle) and a promising bet for regional and international actors who hoped to see Lebanon recover some of its original sovereignty and regain its sense of statehood. Today, the LAF is busy defending some of Lebanon's border areas—in full partnership with Hezbollah. It is also engaged with

other state security organizations in policing the country, once again in partnership with Hezbollah. In the meantime, the very notion of genuine political life is disappearing steadily, as is the Taif Agreement-generation of leaders (literally and figuratively). These eventualities are creating the conditions in which the LAF can play a steadily larger role in all aspects of Lebanon national life, to the point that it may be perceived ultimately as an autonomous political stakeholder. While that increasing role may help preserve Lebanon's stability, however, the overall outlook is anything but rosy. After all, current events compel us to assume that the challenges facing Lebanon and the region are heading for a crescendo, which can only mean that continued Lebanese stability will demand the implementation and maintenance of policies that depend on military and security-oriented “muscle.”