



TONY BADRAN

February 7, 2013

Hollow praise for the LAF



On Monday, the US ambassador to Lebanon, Maura Connelly, **called** the Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and expressed condolences for the officers killed or injured in last week's raid on the Beqaa town of Aarsal. "Those LAF personnel lost and injured were engaged in the fight against violent extremists," said an embassy read-out of Connelly's call. The American ambassador further underscored the US's appreciation for the government's efforts and those of the LAF in countering "violent extremists," and reiterated Washington's commitment to "strengthen the capacity of the LAF." US policy is based on the hope that the LAF will one day become Lebanon's "sole legitimate defense force."

Leaving aside the awkwardness of the US expressing support for the Lebanese government's supposed effort against "violent extremists," when a group like Hezbollah controls this

government, the ambassador's remarks are counterproductive. Connelly's comments come at a moment when Hezbollah and its allies are employing this incident in a multifaceted and concerted campaign against the Sunni community and its most prominent political leader, Saad Hariri.

Connelly's statement should raise serious questions about the current US policy of support to the LAF. The Lebanese Army's Directorate of Intelligence (DI) AND Hezbollah media assets appear to have been behind an information operation setting the stage for the assault on Arsal. Over the last month, the DI's allies in the pro-Hezbollah media advanced the claim that certain Sunni border regions in Lebanon have become safe havens for the Syrian jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra. By using words like "extremists" – which, to be clear, is code for Islamists – to describe the angry crowd in Arsal, the ambassador lent legitimacy to this premeditated campaign and played right into the hands of Hezbollah and the Syrian regime.

Details of what happened in **Arsal** remain murky, and there are still many important questions about the DI operation and its objectives that have yet to be answered. What is now known is that a DI force, in two civilian vehicles, went to Arsal, ambushed and gunned down Khalid Hmayyed. The DI maintains it sought Hmayyed for his alleged role in a November 2011 altercation with security forces, as well as other, as of yet unsubstantiated, charges. The DI agents, wearing civilian clothing, grabbed Hmayyed's dead body and sped away. Once the townspeople realized what had happened, they mobilized and pursued the two civilian vehicles, which apparently got caught on a rough side road. Fighting ensued, and a marked Army patrol in the area got embroiled in the battle, resulting in the deaths of two officers.

It appears that no one outside a tight circle in the DI knew anything about the raid. When initially contacted by the town leaders, even the local DI office denied knowledge of a force deployed in the area. Over the past year, the town has been routinely subjected to this type of incursion. In fact, last year Hezbollah **conducted** a similar raid in pursuit of members from the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) who were trying to smuggle weapons into Syria to fight the Assad regime.

Hmayyed was known for his role in support of the Syrian rebels, especially in the nearby region of al-Qusayr across the border. That area is where Hezbollah has deployed most heavily on the side of the Assad regime. It is unclear whether the DI force intended to apprehend Hmayyed, or simply to liquidate him.

This is where the discrepancies in the statements from the LAF **command** and of **DI head** General Edmond Fadel on the Arsal incident become important. Fadel was alone in claiming that Hmayyed worked with Jabhat al-Nusra, the group Washington designated as the Syrian arm of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The LAF statement, on the other hand, made no such claim. The only government official to publicly support Fadel's charge of an al-Qaeda presence in Arsal is

Defense Minister Fayez Ghosn. However, if anything, Ghosn's support only casts further suspicion on Fadel's contention. The Defense Minister belongs to a party led by a personal friend of embattled Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Ghosn has been **singing** this refrain of al-Qaeda in Aarsal since 2011. At the time he was rightly dismissed even by some of his **allies** in government.

Ghosn was peddling disinformation on behalf of the Assad regime, in order to justify a crackdown on Lebanon's Sunni community, especially those actively supporting the Syrian uprising. The campaign Ghosn participated in has included not only political and media attacks, but also targeted killings, such as the **assassination** of Sheikh Ahmad Abdul Wahed – at an LAF checkpoint no less – in May 2012. In the same vein, a few months later, another of Assad's close associates, former minister Michel Smaha, was arrested for plotting several bombings in northern Lebanon, **including** against Sunni political and religious figures who support the FSA.

In the month leading up to the Aarsal operation, the claim that al-Qaeda, or Jabhat al-Nusra, was establishing itself in Lebanon resurfaced at the behest of the DI. The vehicle for this information operation was Jean Aziz, a columnist in the Hezbollah mouthpiece *Al-Akhbar*. Aziz's **slanted take**, however, was published on a US website that partners with *Al-Akhbar*, called *Al-Monitor*. Aziz, along with other *Al-Akhbar* staffers, is now a contributor to *Al-Monitor*. Aziz's sources were "senior Lebanese security officials" – a phrase almost certainly referring to the DI. A few days before the Aarsal operation, a "senior Lebanese security official," – again, most likely DI – **pushed** the same line in *The Washington Post*. The stage for the raid was set.

Immediately after the Aarsal raid, Aziz wrapped up the information operation in a follow-up **article** for *Al-Monitor*, where he more explicitly identified his sources as "military," meaning DI. His article regurgitated, almost verbatim, the language that Edmond Fadel would later use in his press conference.

The emphasis on placing this misinformation in US media indicates that the information operation was aimed principally at Washington. Hezbollah is angling to take advantage of the Obama administration's oft-expressed concern about groups like al-Nusra. Ambassador Connelly's poorly-chosen language, which regrettably appeared oblivious to all the aforementioned issues, will make it seem as though the US is validating DI and Hezbollah propaganda.

Furthermore, the confluence of the LAF Directorate of Intelligence and Hezbollah's media assets sheds some light on Hezbollah's relationship with the military. Consequently, it raises questions about Washington's LAF policy as it's currently designed.

It's known in Lebanon that the Shiite party and its allies maintain considerable influence over DI. Hmayyed's activity in al-Qusayr, where the FSA recently killed a high-ranking Hezbollah officer

who commanded the Shiite militia's forces in that area, is probably not a coincidental matter in his murder. That a branch of the LAF was the tool for his liquidation bodes ill for Lebanon.

Hezbollah is hypocritically leading a political carnival in which it feigns unquestioned support for the LAF, using it as a veneer to hide behind, as well as a means to corner Hariri and the Sunni community. But damage has already been done. Some newspapers are **reporting** that Western diplomatic missions in Beirut are concerned about the repercussions the Arafat incident will have on attitudes toward the LAF.

All this should give Washington pause and spur an overdue rearticulation of its policy toward the LAF. The US cannot simply continue to repeat clichés about the LAF as a **central** national institution, while Hezbollah exerts deadly influence over some of its branches. Like Lebanon, the LAF is a house of many mansions. Hezbollah's sway enables it, among other things, to embroil the LAF in a charged sectarian environment. Tone-deaf comments and hollow platitudes about a shared struggle with the LAF against "violent extremists" – even as the LAF cooperates with Hezbollah and steers clear of its wanted members – can no longer substitute for real policy.

<https://nowmmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/hollow-praise-for-the-laf>