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Is the US inadvertently helping Hezbollah?

America's financial and material support for Lebanon's security forces aims to strengthen them as a national institution and counterpart to Hezbollah's militia. While well-intentioned, this policy is indirectly aiding Hezbollah and ignoring the armed forces' repeated violation of international law.

Lebanon's security forces portray themselves as neutral peacekeepers between the Shia group Hezbollah and its Sunni-led Lebanese rivals, and as apolitical defenders of state sovereignty amid deep domestic political polarization. This narrative has helped the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) access nearly \$1 billion in U.S. support since 2006.

Unfortunately, this narrative is largely a myth. Lebanese security forces have repeatedly violated international refugee law and protected Hezbollah's rear flank from rivals in Lebanon, allowing the militia to concentrate on fighting in Syria. They have not served as neutral arbiters between rival Lebanese factions, or even as agents of the elected Lebanese government.

Below are just a few examples of the security forces' misconduct throughout the conflict in Syria:

- In August 2012, Human Rights Watch reported that Lebanese security forces had deported 14 Syrians back to Syria, directly violating international refugee law and the principle of non-refoulement, which unequivocally outlaws deporting refugees to places where they may be harmed.
- In May 2014, security services deported some 40 Palestinian refugees to Syria, where Palestinian refugees have been bombed, starved, and subjected to other regime atrocities. Authorities have since threatened more stringent measures against Palestinian refugees from Syria.
- In February 2013, security forces arrested and deported a Syrian military defector on the grounds of entering Lebanon illegally, before handing him over to the regime who presumably jailed, tortured, and/or killed him.
- In June 2013, LAF troops fought alongside Hezbollah against a Sunni Islamist militant group in Abra, Sidon. While the LAF claimed it acted alone in response to an unprovoked attack on its soldiers, video footage clearly shows Hezbollah fighters participating. This author's LAF sources confirm that Hezbollah instigated the fighting to draw in the LAF as political cover for an attack on the Sunni group, whose leader was a vocal critic of Hezbollah based in a sensitive geography.

These actions can only be understood in their political context. Important elements of the security forces, including officers in the army, the Directorate of Intelligence, and General Security are the product of more than 20 years of patronage, coercion and manipulation by the Syrian regime during its decades-long occupation of Lebanon, and of Hezbollah's current military dominance.

Assessing the armed forces' behavior can be difficult because it can superficially resemble legitimate state actions, such as border control and counterterrorism. Indeed, an ongoing LAF buildup along the border with Syria appears at first glance to be a border-security effort. However, it is more accurately described as a joint LAF-Hezbollah counterinsurgency campaign targeting the Syrian opposition.

The security forces' actions undermine the Lebanese state sovereignty the U.S. wants to strengthen by making a mockery of Lebanon's public institutions. They have repeatedly violated the previous cabinet's policy of neutrality towards the Syrian conflict, ignored President Michel Suleiman's demand that no refugees be forcibly deported, and damaged Lebanon's standing abroad through their violations of international law.

Paradoxically, U.S. support is also enabling behavior that undermines the armed forces' standing and unity. Sunni Lebanese increasingly resent the LAF's bias towards their coreligionists. This ultimately threatens the cohesiveness of the armed forces — of which a large proportion of are Sunni — and has already provoked several Sunni militant attacks on the LAF.

Under current regulations, the United States would restrict military aid should Hezbollah establish direct control over the LAF. Hezbollah need not control it directly, however, so long as it can rely on well-placed sympathizers in the security services to protect its interests.

The United States should not support parties that violate international refugee law, facilitate the imprisonment, torture and execution of foreign dissidents, and which focus exclusively on fighting militants from one sect with help from a sworn enemy of the United States.

Because the United States gives Lebanon's armed forces much-needed basic equipment and training rather than marginally useful, prestige weapons, it has significant leverage over them. It should demand the fair treatment of refugees in accordance with international law and provide the Lebanese state with financial support given the immense humanitarian and financial burden of hosting the refugees. Also, while the LAF cannot currently win an outright confrontation with Hezbollah, at the very least it should end its de facto intelligence and military partnership with the militia.

If U.S. military support to Lebanon intends to help it become a sovereign state and respectable member of the international community, and to build up an alternative to Hezbollah, the policy is failing. At present, Lebanon's security forces are not a solution to the problem of Hezbollah, massive refugee inflows, or Lebanon's chronic insecurity and instability; they are part of the problem.

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