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ASSESSING US ASSISTANCE TO THE LEBANESE ARMED FORCES

BILAL Y. SAAB
IFI Associate Fellow

ANALYSIS

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ASSESSING US ASSISTANCE TO THE LEBANESE ARMED FORCES

In January 2023, the United States began to [reroute \\$72 million of assistance to Lebanon](#) to support the salaries of Lebanese soldiers and police officers, most of whom could barely make ends meet due to the disastrous economic situation in the country. It took Washington more than two years to make that decision, partly because US laws regarding this type of aid were slightly unclear. But more importantly, the voices inside and outside the US government who argued against further support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), let alone direct cash assistance, succeeded in delaying the process. This was yet another example of how, despite continued US commitment to the LAF through successive administrations, the US military assistance program remains vulnerable to US domestic politics.

There are several reasons why the debate in Washington about US assistance to the LAF is contentious, especially during the Trump administration. Some of it is legitimate and some much less so. With the former set of reasons in mind, I argue that those criticizing US assistance to the LAF fairly have reached inaccurate conclusions, because they have confused overall US policy toward Lebanon with US military assistance to the LAF. The latter is undoubtedly a big part of the former, but they require distinct evaluation.

US policy toward Lebanon has struggled in many respects, but US assistance to the LAF over the past 15 years, if judged by its ability to boost the cohesion and effectiveness of the LAF, has been quite successful. The fact that the LAF has not been able to effectively contain Hezbollah, secure all the country's borders, or enforce United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions related to Lebanon is *not* proof of the failure of US assistance to the LAF. Rather, it is proof of the deep ineptitude of the *entire Lebanese political system*, which itself has hamstrung US policy.

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The LAF does not operate in a political vacuum. It does not decide which military or political battles to fight and which responsibilities to assume. LAF Commander General Joseph Aoun is not an independent operator, or someone whose accomplices run the Lebanese government. He strictly responds to civilian guidance, which barely exists, and he requires the support of the Lebanese cabinet, which is inadequate at

best. So, when the Lebanese government is divided, incompetent, or even nonexistent – all of which has been the case over the years – both the LAF and US policy face tremendous obstacles.

Be it the issue of Hezbollah's arms, the security of the Lebanese borders, or the enforcement of UNSC resolutions, each of these *regional* challenges is the responsibility of none other than the Lebanese government. Like any other regular military worldwide, the LAF receives orders and then executes if it has the necessary resources. It does not formulate policy, nor does it act on its own.

In this new strategic environment of reduced US military posture across the Middle East and renewed US emphasis on security partnerships, a major objective of US military assistance programs in the region is, or at least should be, to help develop the capabilities of the local army or

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security force friendly to Washington. Whether those capabilities are effectively used and leveraged to accomplish shared security objectives is a separate matter, and will depend first and foremost on the political willingness and capacity of the Lebanese authorities.

In other words, the right way to judge US military assistance to the LAF is by measuring improvements to the latter's military effectiveness. Containing Hezbollah, ensuring border security, or enforcing international law are *policy* objectives that should be defined by and require the political consensus of the Lebanese government. However, such a consensus has been lacking due to acute disunity and political dysfunction in Beirut.

Therefore, if enhanced military effectiveness is the more accurate metric of success of US assistance to the LAF, is there enough evidence that the latter is now more capable as a result of the former? The answer is yes. A look at three major battles the LAF fought over the past 24 years – Dinniyeh, Nahr al-Bared, and Fajr al-Jouroud – supports this conclusion. In Dinniyeh and Nahr Al-Bared, the LAF fought without significant US military assistance and the fallout was evident. In Fajr Al-Jouroud, more than 10 years of US support clearly transformed the LAF from a weak force to a professional and competent army, according to public testimony by US military leadership.

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Before discussing all three battles in greater detail, it is important to reiterate and reinforce that the only reason why we are able to assess the performance and military evolution of the LAF over the years is because there was, and still is, sufficient political consensus in the Lebanese government on the issue of confronting the threat of Sunni radical militancy.

DINNIYEH

Since the end of Lebanon's civil war, Sunni extremists have sought to establish themselves in North Lebanon and in several Palestinian refugee camps. The first major encounter between the LAF and Sunni violent extremism occurred on December 31, 1999.

As millennium celebrations were underway in Beirut and across the country, a relatively small and obscure band of Sunni fanatics called al-Takfir wal-Hijra launched an attack on the Lebanese military in the town of Dinniyeh near Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city. It was not immediately clear what the insurgents wanted to accomplish from their deadly assault. Although they probably intended to create an Islamic mini state in the north, they had no heavy weapons, cash, or local support to protect such a caliphate. Within a few days, thousands of LAF troops supported by

tanks and artillery were able to defeat the roughly 200 wildly ambitious insurgents, killing most of them while losing 12 soldiers along with five Lebanese civilians. The insurrection failed, but it was an omen of things to come.

NAHR AL BARED

Once Iraq descended into chaos in 2003 following the US invasion and occupation, triggering the ascendancy of the Shias and their political domination in Baghdad, it was only a matter of time before Sunni violent extremism spread across the region. It quickly reemerged in Lebanon, a deeply penetrated country with porous borders.

On May 20, 2007, exactly two years after Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon, armed jihadists belonging to an al-Qaeda-inspired group called Fatah al-Islam launched a surprise attack on a Lebanese military checkpoint near Tripoli, slaughtering 27 soldiers in their sleep. Like the Dinniyeh fighters, the insurgents sought to lay the foundation for an Islamic Emirate in Tripoli and expand to other parts of the country. However, unlike 1999, the Syrian army was now long gone, leaving an ill-equipped, under-resourced, and badly trained Lebanese military to eradicate the threat on its own. The insurgents, many of whom were battle-hardened and ideologically driven foreigners who had fought in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Iraq, were a sizeable force. They were much better armed and trained, and had enough men, money, and equipment to pursue a long war and impose heavy costs on the LAF. But perhaps most importantly and unlike the Dinniyeh militants who took refuge in valleys and caves, Fatah al-Islam militants had a safe haven in the northern Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared, which made it possible for them to grow in size and strength.

It would take the Lebanese military, a force of some 45,000 at the time, more than 15 weeks of fighting, a 105-day siege and near-total destruction of the camp to defeat the militant group. But victory came with a heavy price: the LAF lost 174 service members (168 were killed in action and an additional six soldiers later succumbed to their wounds). The battle's abysmal kill ratio, which was anywhere from 1.7 to 2 (the total number of militants killed remained unclear), meant that for every 17 or 20 terrorists killed by the LAF, 10 Lebanese soldiers died.

Nahr al-Bared was the first real battle waged by many Lebanese soldiers and conscripts from the post-civil war generation, who had very little combat experience, if any. This was the first battle in the institution's history to involve land, air, and naval forces simultaneously. The LAF's old structure, which the US helped create in the 1980s and was tailored for a heavier army, was not made for special operations and the counter-insurgency warfare that this battle required.

FAJR AL JOUROUD

In 2013, the Islamic State established an insurgent presence along Lebanon's northeastern border. By the summer of 2014, it had increased its foothold and taken over Arsal, a border town that sheltered thousands of Syrian refugees and rebels. From there, it waged attacks against Lebanese army positions, kidnapping and killing dozens of soldiers. For the next three years, the terrorist army would become a more serious threat to Lebanon's northern region.

On August 17, 2017, Operation Fajr al-Jouroud (the name given to the final phase of the battle) was born. Unlike Nahr al-Bared, the LAF was much better prepared on all three levels of war – strategic, operational, and tactical – in large part because of US training, guidance, and advice. Washington had learned from its past mistakes in the country. CENTCOM overhauled the structure of the LAF, transforming it from a heavy force, ill-equipped for a counterinsurgency mission to a lighter, faster, and more special forces-centric army. Thanks to the United States, the LAF bolstered significant air power. It would take the LAF just over a week to defeat its opponent and would do so with minimal casualties, impressing their senior American partners. Although Lebanese were on the ground, the US extended its support in planning, brainstorming, and rehearsing with the LAF before the start of combat operations and providing various forms of non-kinetic support during battle.

The LAF's initial idea was to begin operations in the summer of 2018. However, that date had to be moved back by a year due to an unannounced, joint Hezbollah-Syrian army operation against al-Qaeda-affiliated fighters operating east of Arsal. This planning hiccup notwithstanding, the LAF was still able to rehearse aggressively for its offensive for more than 20 days in mountainous and rugged terrain to mimic, to the extent possible, the movements necessary on the battlefield. A couple of weeks into August, the LAF's planning, informed by US military advice, was complete for an operation of five phases, each of which would be preceded by heavy preparatory fires targeting enemy positions. The LAF established three separate tactical operations centers, each commanded by a designated task force commander. The operations task force comprised the Air Assault Regiment, the First Intervention Regiment, and the Sixth Brigade, all equipped with US weapons.

In preparation for battle, the Lebanese air force, whose pilots had been training in the United States, flew 12,000 flight hours over two years to gather high-quality intelligence on enemy locations, capabilities, and supply routes. For more than a week, the LAF used both its fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft – 141 flight hours – to overpower the enemy. The LAF's Cessna planes were equipped with precision-guided Hellfire missiles, which the United States augmented in the months leading up to the operation. The Puma and Gazelle helicopters were assigned to amplify close air support.

If LAF artillery was supreme in Nahr al-Bared, US-enabled air power, and special forces dominated in Fajr al-Jouroud. Indeed, it would have been virtually impossible for the LAF to destroy the Islamic State's hardened positions and heavy weapons depots without having the

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ability to apply substantial and laser-guided firepower from the air, especially in the final phase of the campaign

Of all the weapons employed by the LAF in Fajr al-Jouroud, the laser-guided Copperhead artillery shells – which the LAF learned how to use after six months of training with the US military before the operation – were the most lethal and effective. Delivered by the LAF's Howitzers and Cessnas, the US-supplied bombs destroyed both moving and stationary targets.

Fire coordination was a vital part of this battle. Synchronized joint fire support was established by assigning separate shooting tasks to forces operating from the air and on the ground. Direct fire support, featuring artillery and mortars, was provided by Battalion 65 companies. Meanwhile general fire support, which is of a longer-range nature, was led by Battalion 95 companies, along with some from the First and Second Field Artillery Regiments and Second Intervention Regiment. Such coordination and integration of fires worked reasonably well and helped prevent fratricide (the accidental killing of Lebanese soldiers) and economize ammunition, partly due to proficient tactical command and control.

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Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, almost entirely built with US assistance including Scan Eagle equipment, allowed for accurate enemy target identification and post-strike battle damage assessments, severely hampering the enemy's movement, operational planning, and ability to hide. Comprehensive and 24/7 visibility, aided by night-vision technology, allowed the LAF to counter nighttime infiltrations by the

insurgents of military bases and positions, especially in the region of Dhour al-Khanzir. Multiple ISR feeds were broadcast through full-motion-video screens to the Lebanese Ministry of Defense and forward operations centers, which allowed for effective tactical command and control.

There was a considerable improvement on the logistical front, the planning for which started jointly with the US military weeks before the start of the operation. The LAF's Logistics Brigade regularly moved ammunition and maintained equipment, provided the troops with fuel, food, and water and identified medical evacuation routes. They also ensured relatively adequate weapons storage.

According to LAF estimates, the battle started with a 95% military readiness level of armored vehicles and the logistics units. Medical support throughout the battle was proficient. Forward-deployed medical teams assisted wounded soldiers and when necessary, transported them to operational hospitals in Ras Baalbek, al-Qaa, and Aarsal. Medical support was based in Wadi Humayyid, only three miles away from the fighting, and as the battle moved, so did the medical team.

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Internal communications in Fajr al-Jouroud had significantly improved compared to Nahr al-Bared. The LAF devised a plan weeks before the onset of fighting, including installing fixed base stations at higher mountain altitudes and employing US-provided frequency-hopping technology that transmits radio signals quickly and securely.

In terms of external information on operations, unlike Nahr al-Bared, the LAF performed significantly better with its outreach. Following US nudging and advice, they proactively contacted local media and engaged the Lebanese population through daily press conferences. As they cleared areas from Islamic State control, Lebanese soldiers simultaneously provided humanitarian assistance for the villages of Aرسال, Laboueh, and al-Qaa. The LAF Orientation Directorate effectively communicated its activities on the ground to domestic audiences to maintain local village support, which remained strong throughout the battle.

As impressive as the LAF's accomplishments in Fajr al-Jouroud are, they should not obscure the fact that there was limited direct and sustained fire engagement with the enemy. The first direct contact took place during preparatory fires on August 15 as the First Intervention Regiment was moving northeast to destroy Islamic State positions. This was due to two factors: (1) the LAF had powerful standoff capabilities (air-to-surface and surface-to-surface fires and snipers) that prevented the insurgents from standing their ground, and (2) the enemy's modus operandi centered on hit-and-run tactics and suicide operations.

After nine days of deliberate maneuver, the LAF prepared for a final assault into the last Islamic State-held position on the morning of August 27. However, the Lebanese government instructed the LAF to execute a cease-fire to allow for information exchange with the enemy regarding the fate of ten missing Lebanese soldiers. During that cease-fire, the Islamic State negotiated a separate deal with Hezbollah and the Syrian army that provided the surviving insurgents and their families safe passage via a bus to Deir Ezzor in Syria. This escape robbed the LAF of a decisive victory, which was arguably Hezbollah's preference all along.

CONCLUSION

When judged by its ability to help form a close bond with and develop the military capabilities of the LAF, US assistance has been an impressive success since 2008. That is precisely the main goal that US security cooperation, with any partner in the world, is supposed to achieve. How a more capable Lebanese Army can directly support *all* US objectives in Lebanon – including diminishing the nefarious influence of Iran and Syria and combating radical Sunni militancy – becomes the responsibility of the Lebanese government, with the help of Washington and other external actors.

Therefore, when assessing, monitoring, and evaluating US military assistance to Lebanon, it is important to use the right metrics. Otherwise, faulty conclusions can be reached. In short, the problem is neither the LAF nor US assistance to the LAF. Rather, it is the feudal, incompetent, and corrupt Lebanese political class, which has failed the Lebanese people and the LAF, and frustrated most attempts by friendly external powers to help.



Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International
Affairs American University of Beirut P.O. Box 11-0236
Riad El-Solh / Beirut 1107 2020 Lebanon



961-1-350000 ext. 4150



+961-1-737627



ifi.comms@aub.edu.lb



www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/



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