

Breaking Point

The Future of the Lebanese Armed Forces, Their Role in Lebanon, and Their Relationship with Hezbollah

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During the summer of 2007, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) was often in the news. In June and July, news about Lebanon often referenced battles between the LAF and Fatah al-Islam in the Palestinian refugee camps. Sprinkled in among the hard news stories of battles, deaths, and displaced civilians were human interest stories and hopeful anecdotes about the role of the LAF as a national institution. News sources such as the *New York Times* and al-Jazeera¹ happily extolled the national pride invested in the LAF, and liberally quoted citizens and soldiers declaring the virtues of Lebanon's "only national institution."² Everyone, it seemed, was looking to the LAF as a symbol of what Lebanon's national institutions could be – unified, non-sectarian, secular institutions working towards the best interests of the Lebanese state. These hopeful essays were backed by hard facts and stories of Lebanese soldiers fighting and dying for the preservation of internal stability. Indeed, during the summer of 2007 it was difficult to read news of Lebanon without at least seeing mention of the LAF.

The summer of 2006 is a far different story. In fact, as conspicuously present as the LAF was in newspapers across the globe during the summer of 2007, it was more conspicuously absent during the summer war with Israel in 2006. That summer, the only Lebanese military group getting the true attention of the international English media was Hezbollah. While Hezbollah launched rockets into Israel and engaged in Southern Lebanon, the LAF received barely a mention.

The difference between these two summers is tied to the relationship between the national institution of the LAF and the largely Syrian and Iranian funded organization of Hezbollah. What is this relationship, and why did it play out the way it did in the summer of 2006? This paper will discuss the relationship between the LAF and Hezbollah from three different angles. First, it will discuss the LAF's perception of itself and Hezbollah's perception of the LAF. Next, it will propose that the LAF and Hezbollah share common defense goals which facilitate a solid relationship. Finally, in light of these two, it will discuss prospects for Hezbollah's disarmament.

This paper and its conclusions are based on readings of Lebanese and

LAF history, news sources, and a series of interviews conducted during the New Initiative for Middle East Peace's fact-finding mission to Lebanon in March 2007. Though research for this paper was extensive, it is by no means exhaustive. This paper is one part of a continuing intellectual journey, not a final product, and should be treated as a mechanism for further research and exploration.

THE LEBANESE ARMED FORCES: A BRIEF HISTORY

In order to examine the relationship between the LAF and Hezbollah, one must first understand the history of the LAF. The LAF's evolution from a colonial tool to a national institution is marked by great successes and also great failures.

The Lebanese Army was created in 1945 and was, like the Lebanese political system, a product of French colonial rule. From its beginnings, the LAF has acted as arbitrator and mediator between various opposing groups within Lebanon,³ rather than engaging other states in external disputes. To this day, the significance of the LAF lies in its internal actions and work.

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The first major test of the LAF's role as internal stabilizer occurred during the 1958 Civil War. The war was fought between then-President Camille Chamoun and opposition factions. Chamoun's foreign policy turned much of the Lebanese population against him. As violent opposition against his administration increased, Chamoun began implementing increasingly harsh measures to put down the agitators. When, citing a rise in sectarianism as a significant and justifying threat, President Chamoun attempted to convince General Fuad Shihab to fully engage the Lebanese army against his opponents, General Shihab refused. Keeping instead "to a policy that distinguished between the interests of Lebanon and those of its president,"⁴ General Shihab sided with Lebanese interests. Author Charles Winslow notes that General Shihab "refused to commit the army to a strategy that might save the regime while destroying the country. He knew that if the army were to try to put down the rebellion, it would, itself, disintegrate. By holding the army together, he held a vestige of the republic together."⁵

Dr. Oren Barak, a research fellow for the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace and lecturer at the Hebrew

University of Jerusalem, claims that in the years 1958 to 1970, the Lebanese Army was the “behind the scenes ruler”⁶ of Lebanon, primarily through its intelligence branch. However, with the outbreak of the civil war the LAF quickly disintegrated into sectarian groupings. As early as 1975, the government sensed the dangerous possibility of disintegration; at the onset of the conflict it hesitated to send units into Beirut, fearing “the distinct possibility of precipitating irreparable fissures throughout the military establishment.”⁷ The withholding of troops from Beirut proved that the government exerted some level of control over a loosely unified army, for although Christians made up 64% of the officer corps, their demand to declare a state of emergency, allowing the army to move freely in Beirut, went unanswered.⁸ However, the defection of several thousand Muslims in June of 1976 sparked the complete disintegration of the LAF.⁹ In response, the commander of the Beirut-based forces, General Azziz al-Ahdab, seized resources that would otherwise have gone to the defectors, staged a military coup, and on March 11 declared himself military governor of the country.¹⁰ The dissolution of the army became a full reality when pro-Presidential officers refused to follow orders. Sectarianism and civil war had claimed the Lebanese army, the conflict escalated further, and Ahdab failed to use the military as a unifying nationalist force.

Although in 1982 the military was “relatively well balanced between Christian and Muslim,”¹¹ by 1983 there existed a “growing dichotomy within the armed forces, reflecting overall Lebanese society, between those who completely and unquestionably supported the government and those who felt either conditional support for or opposed the government.”¹² Had the government recognized this dichotomy, it could perhaps have lessened its demands on the army thus avoiding further stress on a then fragile system.¹³ However, “in pursuing military confrontation with the opposition, the government precipitated the [more significant] split of the army that occurred in February 1984.”¹⁴

It was in this military environment that General Aoun took command in 1984. At this time, military scholar Ronald McLaurin claims, “the army was divided into those units openly responsive to the presidential palace and the headquarters... those whose responsiveness was limited by foreign power, and those who officially refused to take orders from [the ministry of defense].”¹⁵ However, McLaurin contends that General Aoun, through discreet contacts maintained across units, kept the army far more unified than it appeared. Despite the army’s perceived weaknesses, it was still a “potentially powerful political vehicle.”¹⁶ General Aoun quickly took advantage of this potential

in pursuing his own political objectives. The LAF, which had once been “to many (but not all) Lebanese the last symbol of unity and independence of the country... fell victim to...politization around an ambitious commander.”¹⁷ Aoun’s politization of the armed forces “transformed the remnants of the Lebanese army into one more sectarian militia.”¹⁸

Since the latest Civil War, the LAF has been reorganized to create a more national institution. Personnel are assigned to mixed units all over the country, increasing the intermingling of sects and eliminating the possibility that sectarian units will be deployed to their own region of the country and act as militias. While the LAF was virtually non-existent during the July/August 2006 war² (except to issue several public statements in support of Hezbollah), it showed its strength in domestic mediation during the January 2007 University Riots.

When protests against the Siniora government at Beirut Arab University spiraled into violence, the government called on the LAF to intervene and restore order and stability. According to many sources, the LAF wanted nothing to do with such an intervention. Moreover the role of putting down internal disruptions like riots is technically that of the police. However, the Lebanese police force does not have near the credibility with the people that the LAF has, and thus the government called on the LAF to diffuse the volatile situation.¹⁹ According to virtually all accounts, the LAF did a superb job of intervening in a non-violent manner. Some observers noted that the officers involved did not even use weapons.²⁰ This incident, the University Riots, is often heralded as an example of how and why the LAF is highly respected in Lebanon as a national and non-sectarian institution.

THE LAF’S PERCEPTION OF ITSELF AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH HEZBOLLAH

The LAF describes its mission thus:

Facing the Israeli occupation and its perpetual aggression in South Lebanon and West Bekaa and supporting the steadfastness of Lebanese citizens to ensure the complete withdrawal of the Israeli forces to internationally recognized borders; defending the country and its citizens against all aggression; confronting all threats against the country’s vital interests; coordinating with Arab armies in accordance with ratified treaties and agreements; maintaining internal security and stability; engaging in social and development activities according to national interests; undertaking relief operations in coordination with other public and humanitarian institutions.²¹

Anthony Cordesman, who holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, summarizes their mission as being that of “avoiding any further civil conflict, Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs, or clashes with Israel that could affect the country’s recovery and development.”²²

Of all components of its mission statement, the LAF is most effective at preserving internal stability. This point was reinforced during the winter of 2007. As was mentioned previously, much is made of the Army’s role during the University Riots during that time. Timor Goksel, a former UN official and professor at the American University of Beirut, described the LAF’s performance as “amazing,”²³ referring to officers wading in among the protestors and breaking up the demonstration without weapons. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Center in Beirut, also praised the LAF’s performance in the University Riots, while reaffirming that the LAF is most effective when acting as a “stabilizing force”²⁴:

The Lebanese army has taken upon itself to act as an internal, basically a, stabilizing force. In the recent clashes we saw between Sunnis and Shiites, between Michel Aoun’s supporters and those of Samir Geagea, the army without resorting to violence or repression, held both sides back and prevented civil strife.²⁵

In addition to its role as a guarantor of internal stability, the LAF seems very aware of the tenuous nature of its unity. Mr. Goksel explained this fragility well when he commented, “the soldiers at night go home and their brother or something is in Hezbollah or in Amal or in other Lebanese forces. I mean they are all Lebanese; they cannot separate themselves from their environment. And there is a big risk there...If you push them too hard, they are going to take sides.”²⁶

Part of this awareness is reflected in the LAF’s support for Hezbollah during the summer of 2006. Two notable components exist in the LAF’s tacit support of Hezbollah in the July/August 2006 war with Israel. First, the LAF’s reluctance to challenge the loyalty that many Lebanese felt for Hezbollah during that summer. And second, the LAF’s departure from the rest of the government in issuing direct support of Hezbollah. Dr. Saad-Ghorayeb claims that the LAF’s official orders, issued in support of Hezbollah during the summer of 2006 were “very much indicative of where the army stood on this issue. And it actually took a different line from the government.”²⁷

HEZBOLLAH'S PERCEPTIONS OF ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAF

The LAF viewed Hezbollah fighters as “brothers”²⁸ during the July/August 2006 war. And the sentiment was not one-sided. Hezbollah views its relationship with the LAF as a partnership, and seems to hold that partnership in very high regard.

Because the LAF's inability to defend Lebanon from outside invasion is a central component of Hezbollah's refusal to disarm, Hezbollah has produced a great deal of discourse on the LAF and its role in Lebanese society. Hezbollah's relationship with the army, it claims, is “established and old.”²⁹ Much of this belief is based on the way Hezbollah sees itself as part of the state, increasing and solidifying state legitimacy as the resistance.³⁰ Not only does Hezbollah participate in the local and national government,³¹ but it also argues that because the military's strategy is defensive³² and Hezbollah's stated aim is to defend the Lebanese state while resisting Israeli occupation, it enjoys natural collusion of interests and partnership with the LAF.³³

This collusion is most likely true – the LAF mission of “supporting the steadfastness of Lebanese citizens to ensure the complete withdrawal of the Israeli forces to internationally recognized borders.”³⁴ This is a fairly transparent, if not explicit, reference to Hezbollah, a reference on which Hezbollah has been quick to capitalize. Because the military ethos is pro-resistance and anti-Israel, claims Hezbollah spokesman Hassan Haj Hussein, the LAF cooperates with Hezbollah to achieve the shared goal of deterring Israel.³⁵ Such cooperation takes several forms including intelligence sharing, practically ignoring and allowing weapons transfers, and refusing to disarm Hezbollah.

SHARED DEFENSE GOALS

The shared defense goals of the LAF and Hezbollah are wrapped up in the first two components of the LAF's mission statement, “Facing the Israeli occupation and its perpetual aggression in South Lebanon and West Bekaa and supporting the steadfastness of Lebanese citizens to ensure the complete withdrawal of the Israeli forces to internationally recognized borders; defending the country and its citizens against all aggression.”³⁶

Dr. Saad-Ghorayeb characterized the common defense goals of the LAF and Hezbollah as both political and military:

A national army could not possibly counter an Israeli attack. And virtually all Lebanese see Israel as Lebanon's greatest threat...So I think the army is very

much aware that it is not in a position to adequately defend Lebanon and at the same time I do think it shares this political view of Israel as an enemy... in another statement in a newspaper interview, the army general, said something to the effect of, to *Safir* newspaper, if Israel were to attack Lebanon again, we would be joined by or supported by the Resistance, giving them a military role to play. And this was, you know, widely disputed by many. He retracted part of his statement, but essentially that's what he said. So I would say that the army has, you know, it does not see its role in the South of one of deterring the Resistance, but one of deterring Israel.³⁷

For its part, Hezbollah embraces the shared defense goals of the LAF, and even implies that they are the basis of an almost formal relationship between the two, with specific roles for each partner. Hezbollah Parliament

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member, Hussein Haj Hassan, said “If Israel advances or attacks then Hezbollah will appear and will start the resistance. This is the role for us.”³⁸ Hezbollah agrees with the LAF doctrine, but argues that the LAF is not technologically advanced enough to defeat Israel. In the absence of conventional ability, guerilla warfare is necessary;³⁹ and guerilla warfare is

Hezbollah's domain.

Hezbollah's statements and the public statements of the LAF during the July/August war in 2006 also attest to their shared goals and understanding with the LAF. The question is how far this solidifies the strength of the relationship between the LAF and Hezbollah. The power of the unity between the two groups is important as it holds implications for the potential future disarmament of Hezbollah generally expected to be carried out by the LAF.

PROSPECTS FOR DISARMAMENT

It seems highly unlikely that the LAF will be willing to disarm Hezbollah any time soon. Although the Siniora government may face pressures asking the LAF to play a role in disarming Hezbollah, as of now the LAF considers disarmament an important enough issue to be worthy of dissent. When the government asked in August 2007 for the LAF to discuss disarming Hezbollah, the discussion was stalled and stalled again, so that no consensus was reached and no action taken. There are two prominent reasons given for this divergence of interests. One is that the Defense Ministry refused to discuss disarmament because it refused to admit that Hezbollah had

weapons at all.⁴⁰ The Defense Minister is engaged in the unpleasant task of mediating between his sympathies for Hezbollah and his loyalty to the “party line” of the government.⁴¹ The LAF has in the near past balanced adherence to government orders with its own behavior of non-sectarianism and mediation. Looking at this more recent history, it seems unlikely that the LAF would ignore a government-issued order all together.

To a greater degree than the University Riots, disarmament of Hezbollah would be something the LAF views as difficult and perhaps even contrary to its mission. Yet the LAF’s compliance in the University Riots may have set a standard and precedent for future compliance with the government, even on issues involving sharp divergence of opinion. Although the LAF may view disarming Hezbollah as a task both insurmountable and undesirable, it will still be likely to try and compromise between its competing claims than deny an order all together.⁴²

An alternate version argues that the LAF command itself simply refused to disarm Hezbollah, claiming that to do so would be to fill an inappropriate role.⁴³ Dr. Saad-Ghorayeb holds this position:

After the July War the Lebanese government wanted the army to basically go down to the South and disarm Hezbollah. On August 13, the Siniora government right after the [UN] Resolution 1701 was drafted, called on Hezbollah to meet at another cabinet session to discuss its disarmament, and the army general then said, “we’re not going to do that. That’s not a role we’re going to play.”⁴⁴

The Lebanese government treads lightly on the issue. On one side, it has agreed to abide by international agreements, including UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarming of all militias.⁴⁵ On the other, it categorizes Hezbollah as a “legitimate”⁴⁶ and “legal resistance”⁴⁷ group and calls for disarmament through dialogue and national consensus⁴⁸ rather than force.

Dr. Saad-Ghorayeb ties the disarmament issue to the LAF’s adoption of the role of an internal stabilizing force. To disarm Hezbollah would be to accept a civil war, she claims, and thus would be contrary to the LAF’s view of its primary role:

The army’s role is very much one of trying to maintain national unity. Therefore any notion of disarming the resistance would run counter to that because this would lead to civil war. If this is the role the army can, will and has played, then there is no way the army can disarm Hezbollah. The army would be split, and the army has been split in the past in ’85, and it would be split again today. Obviously, soldiers have political sympathies...So this would definitely lead to civil war and I think the army is very wary of leading Lebanon down that road.⁴⁹

This is proven by history, claimed Dr. Saad-Ghorayeb:

Although it is supposed to play a role of intercepting [Hezbollah] weapons, and what have you, in my opinion, the army has and will turn a blind eye, if it ever does come across anything like that. Yes, there have been occasions where they have intercepted weapons, but I think that's because Hezbollah has allowed them to. And I think that's more sort of a display of, 'we're abiding by a resolution,' rather than the army trying to root out Hezbollah's weapons. That would be something of an oxymoron, for a national army to prevent a resistance [to an outside force]. It just doesn't make sense despite the international legality of it...its role is to defend, hence, it's never going to help Israel, by disarming Hezbollah.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A MORE UNIFIED LEBANON?

Not all observers feel that cooperation between Hezbollah and the LAF is beneficial to Lebanon. Anthony Cordesman argues that the relationship is holding back both the LAF and the Lebanese government. Disarmament, he argues, is a necessary step to national sovereignty:

If Lebanon is to be a player, rather than simply played, it must develop capabilities to deal with internal security threats and to deter a limited expansion of a conflict between its neighbors into Lebanese territory, waters, or air space. The key to such success is bringing the Hezbollah under central government control, disarming Hezbollah and the concealed weapons stashes in other militias, and putting Lebanese central government forces truly in control.⁵¹

Due to Lebanon's history, the LAF's desire to maintain internal stability, and the logistical and military difficulties inherent in a disarmament attempt, it is highly unlikely that disarmament will be attempted any time soon. In large part, this is because the LAF views Hezbollah as a partner in a common defense goal. It is also because, as Dr. Saad-Ghorayeb argues, to disarm Hezbollah would be to risk civil war and definitely to cause internal unrest and instability.

Hezbollah reportedly refuses to disarm in large part due to the weakness of the LAF with regards to defending Lebanese borders. Hezbollah argues that the military cannot provide for a strong state in Lebanon, nor can it fulfill its primary responsibilities of defending Lebanon's borders or people. Until these problems are solved, Hezbollah will not accept disarmament. One of Hezbollah's preconditions for disarmament is that the LAF be capable of fully defending the state. "When Lebanon is capable of producing a defense strategy to protect the Lebanese people," stated spokesman Ibrahim Musawi, "Hezbollah will consider disarmament."⁵²

Whether failure to disarm Hezbollah is a positive step towards maintaining internal stability and defensive capabilities, or a backwards step away from achieving true national sovereignty, is beyond the scope of this paper. What is clear, however, is that disarmament is unlikely due to the relationship of shared defense goals between the LAF and Hezbollah, as well as the potential for the move to further spark unstable divisions in the LAF and Lebanese society.

The world watches the LAF, hoping that it can represent the future of a unified, non-sectarian Lebanon. Yet the cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah is often ignored. The relationship is a reminder that the LAF is not strong enough to defend Lebanon's borders on its own, or to maintain internal stability while facilitating the disarmament of another armed group. It is a warning that, while integrated and unified, the LAF cannot stand alone and defend the country, nor can it enforce everything the government wants it to do within Lebanese borders. Though the LAF should be watched as an example of what a crucial Lebanese institution can one day be, an examination of its relationship with Hezbollah, and the facets of that relationship, gives a cautionary note that the LAF and Lebanon have a long and precarious road ahead to complete national sovereignty and independence.

1 Both news sources published essays on the LAF as a national institution in summer of 2007.

2 Timor Goksel, NIMEP personal interview, 21 March 2007.

3 Oren Barak, "Towards a Representative Military? The Transformation of the Lebanese Officer Corps since 1945," *The Middle East Journal*, 60.1 (Winter 2006).

4 Charles Winslow, *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), pg. 117

5 Winslow, *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society*, 113

6 Barak, "Towards a Representative Military? The Transformation of the Lebanese Officer Corps since 1945."

7 Lawrence Whetten, "The Military Dimension," *Lebanon in Crisis: Participants and Issues*, P. Edward Haley and Lewis W. Snider, ed., (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979), pg 75-76

8 Whetten, "The Military Dimension," p. 76.

9 Whetten, 78

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ronald McLaurin, "From Professional to Political: The Decline of the Lebanese Army," *Armed Forces and Society*. Vol 17.4. Summer 1991. pg 560

13 McLaurin, 561.

14 Ibid.

15 McLaurin, 546.

16 Ibid.

17 McLaurin, 545.

18 Ibid

19 Timor Goksel, NIMEP personal interview, 21 March 2007.

20 Ibid.

21 Lebanese Army Website, "Mission," <http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/English/Mission.asp>.

22 Anthony Cordesman, "Lebanese Security and the Hezbollah." Center for Strategic and International Studies. 14 July 2006, Working paper, pg 6

23 Timor Goksel, NIMEP personal interview, 21 March 2007.

24 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, NIMEP Personal Interview, 22 March 2007.

25 Ibid.

26 Timor Goksel, NIMEP personal interview, 21 March 2007.

27 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, NIMEP Personal Interview, 22 March 2007.

28 Lebanese Army Website, <http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb>

29 Hassan Haj Hussein, NIMEP Personal Interview, 26 March 2007.

30 Ibid.

31 Although Hezbollah MPs had stepped down in protest of the Shia's disproportionate lack of representation, our

interviewees still held to this assertion. Additionally, the point was made several times that although not all members of Hezbollah believe the organization should be active in government, it presents a unified front and complies with decisions (regarding government participation) made at the highest levels of the organization.

32 See <http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/English/Mission.asp> (2007, 7 May 2007) for corroboration.

33 Hassan Haj Hussein, NIMEP Personal Interview, 26 March 2007.

34 Lebanese Army Website. "Mission."

35 Hassan Haj Hussein, NIMEP Personal Interview, 26 March 2007. Corroborated by outside observers, LAF website. See non-Hezbollah statements in this section.

36 Lebanese Army Website, <http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb>

37 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, NIMEP Personal Interview, 22 March 2007.

38 Hassan Haj Hussein, NIMEP Personal Interview, 26 March 2007.

39 Ibid.

40 Timor Goksel, NIMEP personal interview, 21 March 2007.

41 Ibid.

42 As many of the interviewees cited in this paper claim

43 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, NIMEP Personal Interview, 22 March 2007.

44 Ibid.

45 US State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 An impressive goal considering the difficulty with which Lebanon attains a national consensus on anything.

49 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, NIMEP Personal Interview, 22 March 2007.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid. Page 34

52 Ibrahim Musawi, NIMEP Personal Interview, 24 March 2007.