

A CUFI PRIMER:

US Aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces

In Brief

Since 2006 the United States has provided over \$2.5 billion in aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). In fiscal year 2020, the United States provided \$216 million in combined Department of State and Department of Defense (DoD) military grant assistance. These taxpayer dollars enable the LAF to procure American military weapons and training. Recent estimates from the LAF suggest that as much as 80% of its military hardware comes from the United States. The reasoning behind this support is explained as follows:

U.S. assistance for the LAF is a key component of our policy to reinforce Lebanon's sovereignty and secure its borders, counter internal threats, and build up its legitimate state institutions. Additionally, U.S. security assistance supports implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1559, 1680, and 1701, and promotes the LAF's ability to extend full governmental control throughout the country in conjunction with the UN Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL).¹



Members of Hezbollah stand on a pick-up truck mounted with a multiple rocket launcher as they take part in a parade

The major challenge to Lebanon's sovereignty and full governmental control comes from the Iranian proxy, terrorist army Hezbollah. One of the most powerful terrorist organizations on the planet, Hezbollah holds seats in the Lebanese parliament and commands what many experts state is the most powerful fighting force in Lebanon.

There is significant evidence which indicates that rather than curtailing Hezbollah's power by disarming the group and removing it from Israel's border - as stipulated by UN resolutions agreed to after the 2006 Second Lebanon War - the LAF has proved ineffective and on many occasions even collaborated with Hezbollah. Evidence demonstrates that instead of US security assistance being used to combat Hezbollah, it is effectively going toward supporting, facilitating, and strengthening the terrorist organization.

Coordination, Infiltration and Influence

In August 2020 Beirut was rocked by a massive explosion that killed over 200 people, injured over 7,000 and displaced over 300,000. While the cause of the explosion was linked to ammonium nitrate being stored at a warehouse, the Lebanese government rejected an external investigation, and their official findings ignored the multiple sources that linked the ammonium nitrate to Hezbollah.

In 2021, Lebanon was thrown into a political and economic crisis, with Hezbollah manipulating the political system to ensure they emerged as the strongest entity. As one Lebanon expert put it, "it should be clear to all observers that the terror group runs the Lebanese political order. And through this government, Hezbollah will now lead Lebanon's engagement with the outside world."²



Hezbollah hold a military parade in Syria

Hezbollah not only controls the new government, as it did for Lebanon's predecessor governments, but the group and its immediate allies also hold two-thirds of the governing portfolios. This gives Hezbollah and its allies effective control of Lebanon's Supreme Defense Council, which oversees the LAF.

Unsurprisingly, Hezbollah has continued to significantly increase its sway over the Lebanese army. They launched joint operations against the Islamic State in 2013 and now Hezbollah and the LAF engage in regular coordination. They exchange intelligence and conduct joint operations where Hezbollah is effectively in command – such as in 2016-2017 operations against the Islamic State in northeast Lebanon. In military parades in 2016, Hezbollah itself showed off US-made armored personnel carriers, presumably taken from the Lebanese military.³

The IDF revealed in September 2018 that Hezbollah and the Lebanese army are operating together in southern Lebanon, and Hezbollah operatives sometimes wear Lebanese army uniforms. This cooperation even includes patrols in shared patrol vehicles.

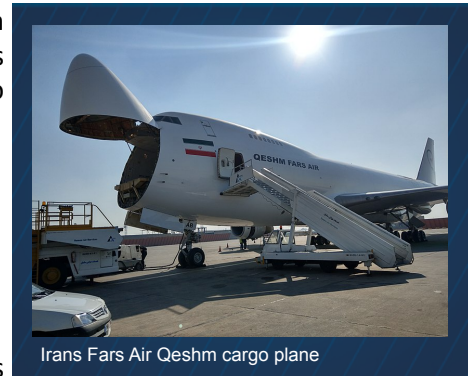
There have been numerous reports of Hezbollah fighters and agents infiltrating the ranks of the Lebanese military as both soldiers and officers.³ In fact, it was discovered that a senior LAF unit commander stationed on the Lebanese-Israeli border was in fact a member of Hezbollah.

The Lebanese army never enters a village in southern Lebanon without permission from Hezbollah. The Lebanese army is therefore a partner in the violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which bars Hezbollah from putting forces south of the Litani River and gives the Lebanese army the exclusive right to keep military forces in southern Lebanon.

In December 2018 Israel uncovered terror tunnels dug by Hezbollah under the Israeli-Lebanese border. The Lebanese military clearly has not fulfilled the mission assigned to it in several UN resolutions: to enforce the prohibition on Hezbollah's presence in southern Lebanon.

Sources within the UN peacekeeping force even accused the Lebanese army in 2018 of helping Hezbollah violate the resolution by preventing the UN inspectors from reaching the border villages in which the organization hides its weapons.

In August 2021 over a three-day period Hezbollah fired multiple rockets at Israel, to which Israel responded with artillery strikes. The fact that Hezbollah was able to fire several rockets over the course of a few days demonstrates, once again, that the LAF have neither the desire nor the will to disarm Hezbollah.



Iran's Fars Air Qeshm cargo plane

Failure to Disarm Hezbollah

According to the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security:

Western intelligence sources revealed in July, August, and October 2018 that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had smuggled weapons and advanced military systems, including technology enabling GPS guided missiles and rockets, into Lebanon. The weapons and equipment were delivered on flights carried out by the Iranian civilian airline Qeshm Air, known for its ties to the IRGC Quds forces, to Beirut International Airport, controlled by the Lebanese army.⁴

Rather than working to disarm Hezbollah, the LAF seems to be completely unwilling to act against the group as it rearms with more sophisticated weaponry from Iran. In general, the LAF has been completely ineffective, as Hezbollah has continued to grow and update its military arsenal.

In late September of 2021, in response to Lebanon's precarious economic situation and fuel shortages, Hezbollah circumvented the government, without state authorization and despite United States sanctions, and arranged for a shipment of Iranian fuel to Lebanon. This consecrated the party's status as the main powerhouse in the crisis-laden country.



Hezbollah missile launchers

The newly formed Lebanese government, headed by prime minister Najib Mikati, described the Hezbollah delivery as “a violation of Lebanese sovereignty,” but the government has shown it is powerless to stop Hezbollah when the terrorist group is doing no less than essentially tramples upon Lebanese sovereignty.

Conclusion

Instead of being used to aid the LAF in reinforcing its borders and safeguarding its sovereignty as envisioned by the State Department, US aid is being used to aid and abet the very terrorist organization that threatens Lebanon’s sovereignty.

The LAF has shown no will to disrupt Hezbollah operations or to enforce the UN resolutions demanding Hezbollah’s disarmament. This powerful Iranian proxy is acting with impunity on Lebanon’s borders while the LAF at best sits idly by and at worst supports a powerful anti-American, anti-Israel, Iranian funded terror organization, all the while receiving millions in American taxpayer dollars.

¹U.S. Security Cooperation With Lebanon Fact Sheet, (May 21 2019), State Department <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-lebanon/>

² *Lebanon’s new Hezbollah government*. (2021, September 16). Newsweek. <https://www.newsweek.com/lebanons-new-hezbollah-government-opinion-1629346>

³ Kershner, I., & Hubbard, B. (2016, December 21). *Hezbollah Is Using U.S.-Made Military Vehicles in Syria, Israel Says*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/21/world/middleeast/hezbollah-us-made-apc-syria-lebanon.html>

⁴ U.S. Security Cooperation With Lebanon Fact Sheet, (May 21 2019), State Department <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-lebanon/>