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## Policy Brief

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### *A Strong Army for a Stable Lebanon*

By Joseph A. Kéchichian

#### *Executive Summary*

*Despite serious shortcomings — notably in terms of limited financial backing, obsolete equipment, and lack of full political support — the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are a viable and even a critical nation-building institution in Lebanon, enjoying strong popular backing. Nevertheless, the LAF faces a number of challenges, including how to eradicate past dilemmas, build on its current pillars, and transform itself into a permanent defense establishment.*

*Although the LAF lost most of its influence during the 1975-1990 civil war, it nonetheless maintained its cohesion and reemerged as an indispensable entity. Senior Lebanese officials, from President Michel Suleiman to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to the Secretary-General of Hizbullah Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, all recognize the value of a strong army to defend the country, prevent foreign attacks, and protect the population from internal schisms. Likewise, Arab and Western supporters of Lebanon acknowledge that the LAF is the only indigenous institution capable of accomplishing essential nation-building tasks in a country that sorely needs political stability. Towards that end, several countries pledged to assist the LAF after the civil war, although much of that assistance was rudimentary at best.*

*This Policy Brief recommends that Lebanon adopt a new national defense policy and appropriate at least 5% of its gross domestic product (GDP) for defense purposes — up from the less than 3% of GDP spent in 2007. It further calls on Beirut's allies, especially the United States and major Western European countries, to supply the LAF with advanced weapons. Finally, it closes with an appreciation of the LAF's unique abilities to transform and modernize Lebanon from a purely sectarian state into a better unified nation under a single flag.*

The trials that have faced a sovereign Lebanon as it emerges from a long and bloody civil war, as well as Syrian and Israeli occupations, have been immense. In 2008, Beirut confronted an existential challenge. After years of conflict, the vast majority of Lebanese citizens clamored for positive change to buttress the state and to facilitate prosperity. In the aftermath of renewed tensions following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005 — as well as dozens of other politicians and civilians since then — and the repercussions of the 2007 Hizbullah-Israel War, the international community voted to assist and strengthen the Lebanese government to exercise its full responsibilities. By reconfiguring the existing United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) — established on March 19, 1978 after the first Israeli invasion — into a more robust force and by extending very large financial aid packages, Arab and Western countries clarified their support to Beirut, even if much of this funding was heavily mortgaged. Given the central government's weaknesses, most of which were intentionally constructed by warring Lebanese factions to deny the state a semblance of independence, Beirut was incapable of withstanding regional pressures from Syria and Israel. The burden to implement this new resolve fell on the Lebanese Army, perhaps one of the few remaining institutions that still functioned after the systematic evisceration of Lebanese authority.<sup>1</sup>

What will it take for Lebanon to equip and train the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and transform it into a strong regional force? What additional capabilities does the LAF need in order for it to secure international borders and to assume a critical national reconciliation role?

Although the LAF roundly defeated the Sunni militant group Fatah al-Islam in 2007 at the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, and was able to restore stability throughout the country, it had been severely tested. While much was anticipated from the army, embarking on a nation-building enterprise remained a complex undertaking that necessitated the complete disarmament of irregular armies, as well as the adoption of a functioning defense policy to defend the country against external foes. In pursuing this effort, the LAF has had to contend with poor civil-military relations and outdated equipment. What was undeniable, however, were the LAF's intrinsic capabilities — not only to impose full state authority throughout the country as well as the complete disarmament of irregular armies, but also to defend the country from numerous foes. Towards that end, the LAF confronted two major challenges: an intrinsic dilemma of poor civil-military relations in a society that had defied authority throughout its his-

1. The idea for this think-piece *Policy Brief*, part of a more detailed paper on Lebanese military questions, germinated from a conversation with then-Army Commander General Michel Suleiman on March 8, 2008 in Beirut, Lebanon. Suleiman, elected President of the Republic on May 25, 2008, invited me to return to Beirut in April 2008 for extensive conversations with senior officers at army headquarters in Yarzé and various bases throughout the country. Over a period of a week, a dozen of the country's leading officers welcomed me and entertained my numerous questions. Several were incredulous that such access would be granted to a scholar, but all tolerated this intrusion after satisfying themselves with my bona fide.

Naturally, while I am solely responsible for what follows, in addition to the President, two individuals deserve special accolades for their gracious hospitality. One is Brigadier General Saleh Hajj Suleiman, the Director of the Orientation Directorate, who honestly shared his views and alerted me to intricate details for which I am grateful. For his time and patience, I also wish to acknowledge Colonel Antoine Bachalany, the Chief of the Department of Press and Public Relations at the Directorate, who kindly escorted me to each of my meetings. This multi-lingual and multi-talented officer, typical of many Lebanese men and women who serve their country with pride and honor, went beyond the call of duty to ensure that my various meetings were substantive. Colonel Bachalany knows how much I appreciate his trust.



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tory, and severe technical shortcomings, including minuscule budgets and outdated equipment, which could only be addressed by healthy foreign infusions of aid. These shortcomings notwithstanding, the LAF acted as an indispensable institution for Lebanon, although how it came to terms with Hizbullah's military might, as well as the significant Palestinian armed presence, posed two major challenges.

### CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

The history of the LAF does not include many *coup d'états*, although the country experienced a few *coup de têtes*.<sup>2</sup> Although its first incarnation started in 1916 when the "country" was still under French mandate, and while the LAF was not formally under Lebanese control on Independence Day (November 22, 1943), a separate military entity commanded by General Fouad Chehab came into being on August 25, 1945. Over the years, it evolved into a genuine state institution while state security organs, including the Internal Security Forces (ISF), were too rudimentary to ensure domestic safety.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, it fell on the army to safeguard internal stability, which contravened its defensive mandate.

Needless to say, the development of the LAF has mirrored Lebanon's political developments, which weakened the army immeasurably and prevented the establishment of a strong force to defend the country from regional foes. While it is often claimed that Lebanon was one of the five countries that invaded Israel in 1948, that participation was infinitesimally small (with less than 200 soldiers participating), and was quickly settled through a cease-fire that has endured ever since. On several occasions, but especially in the 1956-1958, 1969-1973, and 1975-1989 periods, the LAF was used for political ends by elected — and some unelected — officials who perceived advantages in a weak institution. After 2005, however, especially when General Michel Suleiman refrained from turning the army against pro- and anti-government demonstrators who gathered in the center of the capital in huge protests that came to be known as the March 8 and March 14 movements (the latter is also referred to as the "Cedar Revolution"), the Lebanese people once again perceived their army as a valuable part of the executive branch. In fact, they concluded that the army was almost the equivalent of the state itself.

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All of the assassinations, kidnappings, and murders in the post-1989 Ta'if Accord period confirmed a simple truth: that the Lebanese were condemned to live together. The sole remaining issue was whether this undertaking would be harmonious and for the sake of a unified country.

In the often convoluted politics of Lebanon, most parties fell into various traps set by internal rivals or regional hegemons. Lebanese *zu'ama* (leaders) relished the capability to maneuver around perceived traps, as the tortuous process took precedence over offering the hapless population permanent solutions, perhaps for no

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2. Three of the best studies on the history of the LAF are: Adel Freiha, *L'Armée et l'État au Liban [The Army and the State in Lebanon]* (Paris: Librairie Générale de Droit et Jurisprudence, 1980); Major-General Riad Takyeddine (Chief of Staff 1991-1997), *Wujhat Nazar Mashru' Aqidah 'Askariyyah Lubnaniyyah [A Perspective of a Doctrinal Vision for the Lebanese Army]* (Beirut: n.p., 1999?); and Sami Rihani, *Tarikh al-Jaysh al-Lubnani al-Mu'asir, 1916-1947 [History of the Contemporary Lebanese Army, 1916-1947]*, 5 volumes (Beirut: Dar Nublis, 1996). An earlier version of this last title, in 2 volumes, was published in French as *Histoire de L'Armée Libanaise Contemporaine* (Beirut: Imprimerie Rahbani, 1984, 1988). My earlier work on the subject, which offered a few general observations on the LAF at a time of great tensions, also covers some background details. See Joseph A. Kéchichian, "The Lebanese Army: Capabilities and Challenges in the 1980s," *Conflict Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 1985), pp. 15-39.

3. Under the control of the Interior Ministry, the ISF currently is a potent police institution in Lebanon, especially after its reorganization in 1990. A full analysis of its capabilities are beyond the scope of this study, but suffice it to say that if the record was mixed, a renewed effort is underway with current Commander Achraf Rifi, who is gradually professionalizing the institution. For an introduction, see the ISF's website at <http://www.isf.gov.lb/Arabic/Header/Home+Page>.

other reason than to score points. Nearly all of them, including religious figures, appeared on television on a nightly basis to reassure a struggling public. No one was immune to these diatribes, but one party, Hizbullah, remained the focus of attention because of its intrinsic abilities to influence the *status quo* through its superior military strength. Thus, Hizbullah's most significant accomplishment since its 1982 emergence was its leaders' ability to define civil-military relations. Under current circumstances it was unlikely that the Lebanese government would instruct the army to disarm Hizbullah, and it was highly doubtful that the LAF — with or without assistance from UNIFIL troops — would act on the full implementation of Resolution 1701, especially *vis-à-vis* the disarming of all non-government forces in the area south of the Litani River that demarcates the internal borders of the "South." Yet, because the LAF was a symbol of the fragile political unity in Lebanon, the national ethos perceived the army as an organization that could not rise above sectarian divisions.

Notwithstanding the trauma of the Civil War and the tragedy that followed General Michel Aoun's disastrous treatment of the army when he rebelled against Syria in 1989-1990, LAF commanders succeeded in distancing the military from sectarian disagreements.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the army earned a new status as a unifying institution. Contrary to some journalistic fare, the LAF did not fracture along sectarian lines during the civil war. Its soldiers seldom fought each other; on the contrary, in numerous instances they illustrated their commitment to an authority higher than that of party or religious affiliation. Even at the height of the Civil War, LAF officers understood that their institution could not withstand a full-blown confrontation, especially when regional forces used Lebanon as an open arena to settle scores. It was for this reason that LAF officers maintained contact with each other even when they were isolated in remote locations, in preparation for the inevitable day when national leaders would, once again, turn to the army for guidance. Indeed, soldiers and officers who stayed away from internal confrontations reunited in July 1991 rather quickly to defend the southern city of Sidon [Saida] and surrounding localities from Palestinian incursions. LAF leaders, commanders Emile Lahoud and Michel Suleiman in particular, refused to become pawns in Lebanon's system of balances.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the LAF redefined civil-military relations in Lebanon, which was new to Lebanese politicians who were aghast at the last commander's audacity but remained speechless nonetheless.

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Suleiman tirelessly devoted himself to the systematic transformation of the LAF into a professional force and a cohesive institution. He embarked on a sensitive education venture which communicated his vision for the LAF and for Lebanon to officers and soldiers alike.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the army helped reinvent patriotism, despite immense pressures on its leaders to commit the LAF on one side against another.<sup>7</sup>

### TECHNICAL SHORTCOMINGS

Notwithstanding the surge of patriotism that occurred after 2005, the LAF lacked combat experience until the 2007 war for Nahr al-Bared. The LAF was also severely under-resourced, though it still managed to become an increasingly professional and capable military.<sup>8</sup>

4. Major-General Riad Takyyeddine, *Ahya' Jaysh 1988-1994 [The Revival of an Army]* (Beirut: n.p., 1994?), pp. 114-183.

5. Lahoud's stint as LAF Commander was quite different from his rule as President of the Republic between 1999 and 2008. See Joseph Khoury Tawq, *Min Qiyadat al-Jaysh ila Ri'asat al-Jumhuriyyah [From Army Commander to President of the Republic]* (Beirut: Dar al-Jeel, 1999).

6. General Michel Suleiman, *Awamir al-Yawm; Jawlat al-Qa'id; al-Nashrat al-Tawjihiyah; Mahadir al-Ijtima'at, 1999-2003 [Daily Orders, Commander's Tours; Directorate Communiqués; Conference Minutes, 1999-2003]* (Beirut: Lebanese Armed Forces, 2003).

7. Although the officer corps received extensive technical and political education before serving, the LAF did not encourage its rank and file to debate the country's super-sensitive sectarian divisions. It is often mistakenly assumed that the "wisdom" of the Lebanese lay in trying to outsmart their differences, which concluded with Lebanese factions competing with each other to destroy the "state" and eliminate its intrinsic ability to resist all foes. On the contrary, like most enlightened nations that have experienced civil wars, foreign invasions, and Manichean interventions to serve larger interests than those envisaged by a culturally emancipated society, democracy in Lebanon has endured for six decades and it may be argued that the army has helped reinvent patriotism.

8. Nicolas Noe, "A Fair Fight for Lebanon's Army," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/18/opinion/18noe.html>.



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## A Strong Army for a Stable Lebanon

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According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Lebanon's 2007 defense budget stood at \$631 million, up from \$588 million in 2006. These latest figures indicated that defense expenditures represented less than 3% of Lebanon's GDP.<sup>9</sup> In 2007, the United States provided \$220 million to Lebanon in foreign military assistance, a figure that grew close to \$400 million by mid-2008 with additional allocations slated for the immediate future.<sup>10</sup> Yet, were these allocations sufficient to transform the LAF into a modern force?

Washington's latest transfers were indeed useful; they included "285 Humvees, 200 cargo trucks, helicopter repair parts, assault rifles, grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons and urban warfare bunker weapons, with another 300 Humvees, mobile communications systems, and coastal patrol craft to come."<sup>11</sup> While the LAF was grateful for this equipment, especially as it keenly sought to replace its outdated materials, it sorely needed far more advanced weapons. Beirut forcefully argued that the United States, as well as its other traditional Western suppliers, should not worry that the LAF would squander its new acquisitions. To buttress their arguments, LAF commanders pointed to Hizbullah's far more sophisticated arsenal and, perhaps, equally important, their 2007 experience at Nahr al-Bared. Lebanese officers argued that as far as Hizbullah's capabilities were concerned, the LAF could not credibly call for disarming the Party of God's military wing when it lacked the means to defend the country. While everyone understood that Hizbullah's armaments were potential Lebanese assets (though they would need to be legalized), few outsiders understood the immense difficulties that the LAF confronted in liaising with better equipped and battle hardened troops. In the latter engagement, LAF officers argued with American, Jordanian, Egyptian, and Emirati interlocutors that they were badly in need of ammunition, body armor, helmets, night gear, and other basic equipment for LAF helicopters including the French-made Emirati Gazelles that arrived without any weapons.<sup>12</sup> As discussed below, the LAF was operating in an entirely different environment, and required considerable aid if it were not to experience another Nahr al-Bared — a situation in which 30-40% of its total ammunition stocks was exhausted within the first week of fighting, and Syrian fuel was donated to power many of its Syrian-bequeathed Soviet-era trucks and tanks.

It is fair to assume that Lebanon needs to allocate at least \$1.5 billion to the LAF — or roughly double its current expenditures — in order to create a stronger and more efficient institution. This increase would not yield a force that poses a threat to either Syria or Israel, whose defense budgets in 2007 were \$1.46 billion and \$9.45 billion, respectively. Rather, it would allow the army to purchase significantly higher quality arms and provide better services to its men serving the flag (as well as their families). Moreover, with targeted foreign aid finally delivered by the United States, and possibly soon by France and other Western countries, the LAF could potentially allocate enough resources to train a strong defensive force that will defend the country capably.

It may also be useful here to lay to rest the canard that the sectarian composition of the LAF had caused the army to turn a blind eye to Hizbullah activities in the South because its Shi'a component was so sizable that commanders could not possibly risk committing it against the party, or even contemplate a systematic disarmament program.

9. In 2007, Lebanon's GDP was estimated at \$22 billion. See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2008* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 251.

10. David Schenker, "US Support for the Lebanese Army," Middle East Strategy at Harvard Blog, July 14, 2008, [http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/07/us\\_support\\_for\\_lebanese\\_army/](http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/07/us_support_for_lebanese_army/).

11. William Wheeler, "U.S. Aid to Lebanon Army continues," *Ya Libnan*, July 10, 2008, [http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/07/us\\_aid\\_to\\_leban\\_1.php](http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/07/us_aid_to_leban_1.php).

12. Between 2005 and 2008, Washington provided over \$1 billion to Lebanon, including nearly \$400 million in assistance to the LAF. During this time, these disbursements to the LAF made Lebanon the second-largest recipient of US foreign military assistance per capita, after Israel. According to David Schenker, despite grave concerns over the LAF's "long-term prospects for making the military an effective national institution," Washington "fully backed the LAF" and "expedited the shipment of over 40 C-130 transport planes brimming with military materiel to Beirut immediately after the outbreak of fighting in Nahr el Bared." Senior diplomats and military officers in the United States were legitimately concerned "about the utility of funding the LAF, particularly following the organization's actions — or inactions — this past May. Essentially, the LAF was missing in action. At a minimum, the army did not protect national institutions; some accuse the LAF of colluding with Hezbollah in the raid." See Schenker, "US Support for the Lebanese Army."

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Although about 30-35% of the officer corps was Shi'a, the total number of Shi'a soldiers was under 20% in 2008.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the bulk of the LAF was composed of Sunni recruits, predominantly from the northern 'Akkar region (55-60%), followed by Shi'a (18-20%), Christians (15-18%), and Druze (3-5%). In this context, it may be useful to repeat that Lebanon's legendary sectarian divisions never spilled over into the LAF, and there never was a full-fledged desertion that divided the army as it is often claimed. Even at the height of the bloody 1975 civil war, the LAF did not split, although many officers and some soldiers sided with co-religionists.

Although the LAF could deploy as many as 50,000 troops, it faced countless other armed men, predominantly within Hizbullah but not necessarily restricted to it, which placed the LAF at a qualitative disadvantage. Even these impressive figures were not fully indicative of the LAF's capabilities. In fact, the only credible unit was the army's commando component, which was adequately equipped and highly trained to assume its responsibilities. Hizbullah fighters, who numbered around 6,000-7,000 well-equipped and trained combatants, excelled in the far more effective guerrilla warfare. Their proven record between 1982 and 2006 illustrated that they were able to confront a huge Israeli army and inflict serious damage. Though the Lebanese army was frequently accused of lacking "significant combat experience"<sup>14</sup> because they were primarily tasked to provide domestic security, their anti-terrorism triumph at Nahr al-Bared in 2007 restored some credibility.

Therefore, the LAF lacked neither professionalism nor proficiency, but modern equipment, which most friendly countries had denied it for years. Belatedly, the LAF received a few truly required tools, though what was really needed were bombs, night goggles, and intelligence gathering materials. In contrast, Hizbullah deployed thousands of surface-to-surface rockets, as well as some surface-to-air ones, which made its contribution to the defense of the state vital. Indeed, the LAF could not pose a challenge to Hizbullah, though the Party of God could potentially add value to the army by committing its sophisticated weapons to the LAF's needs.

It may thus be accurate to posit that while Hizbullah and the LAF have established a relatively harmonious relationship, this military connection has not translated into sharing the national burden. In 2008, two armies co-existed in Lebanon: the LAF, whose main task before Nahr al-Bared was to disarm sectarian militias, and Hizbullah's military wing, which fought Israel and forced a withdrawal following a 22-year occupation of southern Lebanon.<sup>15</sup> Over the years, Hizbullah troops have operated in secrecy and displayed impressive discipline. To be sure, the Party of God received considerable aid from Damascus and Teheran, while Beirut — then mostly under Syrian control — was forced to acquiesce to its special status in southern Lebanon as well as in the growing southern Beirut suburb of Dahiyah. While the absence of the LAF from South Lebanon was blamed on Hizbullah, in fact it was the direct result of the Israeli occupation and the LAF's inability to adequately defend the land. This awareness has forged a system of understanding between the LAF and Hizbullah, which was necessary and, frankly, inevitable.

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13. These percentages were confirmed by several generals serving in the LAF, as well as by well-placed Sunni politicians, who explained that the shifts occurred in the 1990s. According to Oren Barak, the percentage of Shi'a officers in the LAF stood at 27.2% in 1991-2004, whereas the total percentage of Muslim officers (Sunnis, Sh'ias, and Druze) was 52.9%. The share of Christians, all denominations confounded, stood at 47.1%. See Oren Barak, "The Transformation of the Lebanese Officer Corps since 1945: Towards a Representative Military?" *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter 2006), pp. 75-93, especially p. 89.

14. Dani Berkovich, "Hizbollah's Primary Agent of Change: The Role of the Lebanese Army," *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (November 2006), <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/sa/v9n3p8Berkovich.html>.

15. Israel first occupied portions of Southern Lebanon in 1978, and the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 425 calling for an "immediate withdrawal." Incredulously, Washington tolerated this occupation, which was expanded from the euphemistical "security zone" to a full-fledged occupation of large portions of the country, including Beirut in 1982. Although Israeli troops retrenched from the capital city, they effectively remained in South Lebanon until 2000. It was Hizbullah that mounted an effective resistance movement against Israel and, for a while, the so-called South Lebanon Army. Unlike most militias who disarmed after the 1989 Ta'if Accords, Hizbullah insisted that all Lebanese soil be liberated and Israel expelled before it considered disarmament. Towards that end, it mounted an efficient and bloody resistance, which drained the Israeli army.

*THE LAF AS AN INDISPENSABLE INSTITUTION FOR LEBANON*

The end of the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp siege was a triumph against chaos in spite of the more than 400 casualties. Will it be possible to transform the LAF's tactical accomplishments in the war with elements of Fatah al-Islam into a strategic victory for Beirut?

According to preliminary reports, the military killed an estimated 222 guerrillas and took 202 prisoners. Defense Minister Elias Murr revealed that 163 Lebanese army soldiers died, including two dozen who were murdered in their sleep on May 20, 2008.<sup>16</sup> These figures did not begin to describe the pain and suffering endured by the wounded as well as the estimated 30,000 plus Palestinian refugees who were evacuated in the early days of the confrontation. Yet, even before the fighting stopped, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora declared "victory over terrorists," insisting that it was "the greatest national victory for Lebanon." In a way it was, and the challenge was whether that triumph would be squandered or whether it would be used as a tool to revive the LAF.

Siniora reiterated his earlier pledge to rebuild the devastated area. Importantly, he underlined that "only the Lebanese state" henceforth would exercise legitimate authority over the camp. In other words, the Prime Minister signaled a *de facto* amendment to the 1969 Cairo Accords, which allowed Palestinian troops to carry weapons inside, and which banned the Lebanese Army from entering, Palestinian camps.

Will control over Nahr al-Bared mean that Beirut has taken the first step toward asserting authority over the remaining 11 camps, as well as the Qusayyah and Na'meh training facilities near Damur? This was certainly one of the possibilities in the aftermath of the LAF's military victory over extremist forces — if Lebanese and Palestinian leaders opted to crown a military triumph with political success. Not surprisingly, Defense Minister Elias Murr wished to strengthen the army further, which was necessary given conditions on the ground.

Beirut now faced a conundrum: What to do with a victorious military? Although politicians insisted that there was no room for any military intervention in the democratic plebiscite, everyone waited patiently to see whether the army would pass the unity test, and many ultimately were surprised. Those who stood behind the army also could not stand in front of it, and it may be safe to conclude that Lebanon opened a new chapter of its history at Nahr al-Bared. Then-Commander Michel Suleiman fought with his men nearly alone, maneuvered through the political landmines of the country (going so far as exonerating Syria from sponsoring Fatah al-Islam), and earned the cooperation of Palestinian leaders. His ordeal was to place the army against those who challenged central authority, cooperated with UNIFIL to seal the borders with Syria and Israel and, equally important, offered a solution to Palestinians who wished to live in peace. Upcoming months might well uncover whether Suleiman and Siniora may become the first Arab leaders to treat Palestinians with dignity.

The 2007 battle for Nahr al-Bared, as well as the consequences of the 2006 war between Hizbullah and Israel, created two fundamental Lebanese dilemmas, both placed on the shoulders of the Lebanese army: imposing order and defending the country. As the most important executive arm of the Lebanese government, and perhaps its critical unifying institution, the LAF was tasked to address what appeared to be impossible duties: to re-channel Hizbullah's arms without causing a domestic crisis (i.e., to impose order) and oppose Israel while keeping an eye on the Syrian border (i.e., defend the country). These were not just theoretical questions, because Beirut operated under United Nations

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16. The army published a moving and widely distributed 72-page booklet on its casualties to depict its tremendous losses. See *La Thaman li-Dima' al-Shuhadah ila Baqa' al-Watan: Ma 'rakat Nahr al-Bared* [No Price for Martyrs' Blood Save for the Nation: The Battle for Nahr al-Bared] (Beirut: Lebanese Armed Forces, 2007).

Security Council Resolution 1701<sup>17</sup> guidance, and because the army was mandated to enforce Beirut's authority both with its foe as well as its neighbor. Although the LAF took the first step by deploying in the South, it quickly needed to consolidate its presence and work in tandem with the resistance, while also enforcing a ban on arms smuggling.

These tasks and the LAF's unique abilities to address them — in fact, no one else could — have transformed the army into the indispensable institution for Lebanon. What more could Lebanon do to the LAF to ensure its indispensability?

### A NEW DEFENSE POLICY

With the tragic use of Hizbullah's "weapons" against fellow citizens in the streets of the capital in May 2008, President Suleiman and his government had to act. Although Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak dismissed Resolution 1701, it was, in fact, the only available tool to all parties anxious to fully implement its various clauses.<sup>18</sup> It was the resolution that allowed the LAF to deploy in the South and take various steps to reassert itself throughout the country. The resolution also greatly facilitated the LAF's introduction of serious changes into its doctrine and the initiation of the process of updating national defense policy. It also has helped usher in the gradual and voluntary integration of Hizbullah forces into its ranks, legitimizing its "illegal" weapons and bolstering the national interest. This was important because a new defense policy necessitated coordination at the governmental level, where Hizbullah would add value to that debate — and eventual policy — only if it were part of state authorities. In other words, incorporating its combatants within the Lebanese army was essential for Hizbullah — despite past rejections of this scenario — because defending the country from the Israeli threat carried more legitimacy when that was undertaken under the authority of a legitimate power and by a strong army.

If Hizbullah believed that its deterrence capability within the domestic arena was intact before May 2008 and that the LAF did not pose a significant threat to it, circumstances have changed dramatically since then. Few can now afford to refer to the LAF in patronizing terms, and while the LAF was on a long-term retooling mission, no other institution could compete with its intrinsic legitimacy. That, at the very least, sustained its power.<sup>19</sup> No other military organization enjoyed such legitimacy. As Sayyid Nasrallah's recent pronouncements have illustrated, Hizbullah is well aware that to influence Beirut in the adoption of a new defense law necessitated recognition, as well as an acceptance, of a much stronger army. The Party of God's political leadership further drew the lesson of Nahr al-Bared when it mistakenly warned the LAF not to cross imaginary red lines, because siding against the army was not in its best interests.

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17. UNSCR 1701, unanimously approved by the UN Security Council on August 11, 2006 and by the Lebanese cabinet the next day and by the Israeli cabinet the day after, sought to resolve the Israel-Hizbullah war by calling for the full cessation of hostilities; the withdrawal of Israeli forces and deployment of Lebanese and UNIFIL troops in the South; the disarmament of Hizbullah; and a ban on paramilitary forces south of the Litani River.

18. Barak termed UNSCR a "failure," in the first such direct attack by an Israeli official on the accord, which ended Israel's "rather humiliating confrontation with Hizballah." "UNSCR 1701 did not succeed and would not succeed," Barak reportedly said, adding that "It is a failure because Hizballah persists with bolstering its capabilities with Syria's help." See "Victorious Hizbullah Leads Lebanon in Prisoner Swap Celebrations," Naharnet, July 15, 2008, <http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&C5B0CA7FB44C16BAC2257487001F9D1F>.

19. In the past, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah referred to the Lebanese army in patronizing terms, ostensibly out of "concern" for the army, but recanted such rhetoric in favor of more supportive language. For a flavor of his earlier views, see, for example, Scott Peterson, "The sheikh behind Hizbullah: Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has made Hizbullah a potent military and political force," *The Christian Science Monitor* August 9, 2006, pp. 1, 2. More recently, Sayyid Nasrallah asserted his respect for existing institutions, in particular the Lebanese Army, by declaring: "We are raising the slogan of partnership between the opposition and pro-government forces ... the Army constitutes a genuine national guarantee," although he added: "We have the right to defend ourselves," and "we will cut off the hand" of anyone threatening to take away Hizballah's "resistance weapons regardless of the person it belongs to ... we will not be lenient with anyone no matter who he is." Interview on *Al-Manar Television*, May 8, 2006. See "OSC: Lebanon—Both Sides Take Tough Line, Leave Room To Maneuver," Informed Comment Blog, <http://www.juancole.com/2008/05/osc-lebanon-both-sides-take-tough-line.html>.



the adoption of a new national defense policy. To be sure, part of the LAF's mandate was to disarm militias, even if the army was not ready to assume this major burden. Still, it was crucial to raise this vital question because the balance of power between the LAF and Hizbullah remained superficial. The formation of a new national defense policy demanded agreement on key definitions. What was meant by national unity? Which authority debated and decided on defense matters? Who was mandated to authorize the use of force against foes? Which powers were Lebanon's allies? How were alliances identified, negotiated, and strengthened? How could the LAF defend all of the country? Finally, could the LAF achieve the daunting objective to replace ethnic and religious divisions with nation-building features?

Lebanon needed to define its defense strategy even if it has consciously avoided such a choice for decades. The government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, conscious of the destabilizing potential of so many illegally armed men, was favorably disposed to an opening of the debate, though few wished to repeat the past mistakes that led to the 1975 civil war. Both President Suleiman and Prime Minister Siniora intended to engage in this debate peacefully, probably with an initial discussion of the status of Palestinian arms, while simultaneously working towards the improvement of their legal conditions in Lebanon. At a later stage, various Lebanese objectives would need to be addressed, assuming everyone understood that the latter situation was far easier to resolve if Lebanon settled on a joint defense policy first.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

A stable Lebanon would indeed be possible if the LAF was strengthened to assume national security burdens. Towards that end, and in addition to unabashed popular support, the army would need:

1. A new national defense policy that would be negotiated by all sides to foster service to the nation. To be sure, it is important to be patriotic, but more so to defend the land from alien philosophies that wish to transform it into an arena for perpetual conflict. What Lebanon needs most is an effective defense policy that serves the Lebanese — and only the Lebanese.
2. The allocation of at least 5% of GDP for defense. It is critical for Lebanon to devote a specific percentage of its annual budget to defense purposes, and while doubling current expenditures would accomplish much, most of these new allocations ought to be devoted to purchasing required equipment. In a difficult environment, a relatively weak military would accomplish little and, because of its limitations, Beirut needs to focus on what is achievable.
3. Advanced weapons for the LAF supplied by Lebanon's allies, especially the United States and major Western European countries. It would be entirely redundant for Lebanon to embark on a go-it-alone strategy, since the country is heavily dependent on outside, especially Western, assistance for arms. Yet, few of the weapons that have reached Beirut to date were of a nature to deter aggressors. While European countries also could play vital roles towards that end, in reality the LAF needs modern high-tech equipment that only Washington can provide. Indeed, the United States in particular is called upon to revise its perception of the LAF to accept a strong army in Lebanon.

The LAF possesses unique abilities to transform Lebanon from a purely sectarian entity into a modernizing country, because service to the nation under a single flag is, once again, a worthy goal.

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