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Civil-Military Relations in Arab States

# Playing Politics: International Security Sector Assistance and the Lebanese Military's Changing Role

Hijab Shah and Melissa Dalton

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## + CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Lebanon's Military: Priorities and Performance	1
Military Effectiveness and Leveraging Foreign Security Sector Assistance	5
Recommendations and Conclusion	10
About the Authors	11
Notes	12



## Introduction

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and Lebanon more broadly, is one of the largest recipients of foreign assistance in the Middle East. The United States and allied governments have sought to build the capabilities and professionalism of the LAF since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, focusing primarily on counterterrorism and border security. The LAF stood in stark contrast to other Lebanese security services in their restraint vis-à-vis the civilian population during the 2019 protests. However, recent reported violent incidents against civilians, ambiguity of the role of police forces, and concerns about both recovery efforts following the August 2020 port explosion in Beirut and extended powers under the state of emergency established by the Lebanese parliament have raised international concerns about the role of Lebanon's security services, including the LAF. The LAF has a critical role to play in stabilizing Lebanon through a multi-faceted crisis, but will need to take concrete steps to bolster its professionalism.

Lebanon's modern politics have long been defined by confessionalism, a reality that persists even as the country is engulfed in crisis. International assistance to the LAF over the last fourteen years had intended to support the LAF as a legitimate national institution transcending confessions and supporting a broader sense of Lebanese security and identity. In the midst of the ongoing crisis in Lebanon, political turmoil at the helm of the country, and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, there is an important opportunity for the international community to support a new path for governance in the country—as shaped and envisioned by its populace. This opportunity hinges upon leveraging existing channels of support to the LAF and building in conditionality mechanisms that hold the LAF accountable for its actions, while continuing to promote a clear articulation of priorities for the LAF and a plan to improve military effectiveness through policy and doctrine; training and equipment, education, and exercises; operations; and institutional capacity building.

## Lebanon's Military: Priorities and Performance

Historically, the LAF has played a unique role in Lebanon as an apolitical entity buttressing a political goal of broader Lebanese unity and nationalism. In the midst of the current political turmoil, the LAF will have to reinforce its popular support while extending legitimacy, defending Lebanese sovereignty, and protecting domestic security interests.

## Extending Legitimacy in the Post-Civil War Era

In light of Lebanon's history of confessional conflict and fragmentation, the fact that the LAF is perhaps the only national institution that is broadly respected and supported across the country is nontrivial: Arab Barometer polls from 2019 showed 87 percent of the population trusted the LAF, compared to the 48 percent that trusted the police.<sup>1</sup> Maintaining this legitimacy in the post-civil war era has been a high priority for the LAF, which it has sought to achieve through cross-confessional representation, balance, and neutrality.

The LAF's attention to maintaining cross-confessional representation and balance has historic precedence dating back to the French mandate era of the early twentieth century, when the LAF's predecessor, the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*, focused on the "selective recruitment" of Muslim and Christian soldiers to particular military units as a "political balancing act."<sup>2</sup> In more recent memory, the LAF's prioritization of cross-confessional balance is the direct consequence of its experience in the civil war of the 1970s and 1980s, when the LAF saw mass defections of its Sunni, Shia, and Druze officers and soldiers into militias organized by confession. The shell left behind was populated mostly by Maronite Christian officers and soldiers.<sup>3</sup>

The LAF's efforts to prevent a repeat of such events, and the provisions of the 1989 Taif Accords and UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 1559, 1680, and 1701 that called for the disarming of internal armed groups, have resulted in a more balanced and representative post-civil war force.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly true across its rank and file: the military force is roughly 24 percent Christian, 35 percent Sunni, 27 percent Shia, and 6 percent Druze.<sup>5</sup> The leadership of the LAF, however, tends to skew in favor of Maronite Christian generals, possibly partly as a legacy of the civil war defections of the other confessions and partly as a balancer to Lebanon's other internal security forces—the Sunni-led policing authority known as the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Shia-led internal intelligence service known as the Directorate of General Security (DGS). The LAF has in the past been criticized for its alleged favoring of the Maronite community, not only because the position of LAF commander has historically been a pathway to the presidency in Lebanon, but also because of rumblings of favoritism for Maronites in special forces units.<sup>6</sup> There are also concerns that, although to a much lesser extent than in the 1980s and 1990s, there may be divided loyalties within Lebanon's officer corps.<sup>7</sup> These fissures are particularly worrisome among those who have earned a place in the LAF officer corps through the country's various sectarian and political patronage networks.

In order to tackle this criticism, the LAF's keen focus on cross-confessional balance can lead to some impracticalities. For instance, U.S. officials were reportedly frustrated by how the LAF distributed U.S.-provided materiel—instead of sending the materiel to relevant, strategically placed units, the

LAF opted instead to spread the weapons and equipment thinly across essentially the entirety of its force, so as not to be seen as favoring one unit or confession over another.<sup>8</sup> These impracticalities also exist in the LAF's efforts to abide by strict U.S. end-use monitoring requirements, resulting in LAF reticence to provide certain units in southern Lebanon or the Bekaa Valley with U.S. materiel for fear of being seen as risking the equipment falling into Hezbollah's hands.

### Defending Lebanese Sovereignty

The LAF's stated mission is to “defend the nation, preserve sovereignty and the state's authority, protect the constitution, preserve security and stability, and contribute to providing social stability and development.”<sup>9</sup> Lebanon's sovereignty has historically been a sensitive issue, particularly because its occupation by external state forces from Syria and Israel is within very recent memory, and also because of the outsize influence that another external actor, Iran, has within Lebanese politics through its support for Hezbollah. This is especially complicated because Syria justified its occupation as one to counterbalance that of Israel, while Hezbollah fairly successfully represented itself as the resistance to Israeli occupation and the true defenders of Lebanese sovereignty—where the LAF fell short—against a state widely perceived as the enemy, not just in Lebanon but across the broader Middle East.

The aforementioned Taif Accords and UNSCR 1559, 1680, and 1701 assert the Lebanese government's sovereignty over the country, prohibiting the existence of arms or authority outside of the state and of any foreign occupying entity within Lebanese territory.<sup>10</sup> Despite these provisions, however, the LAF remains helpless in the face of powerful actors such as Hezbollah, regional influencers such as Iran and Syria, and—despite being disarmed and disbanded—the clout of former confessional militia leaders and warlords, many of whom continue to wield sizable influence in Lebanon's politics and economy.

Political sensitivities and civil-military norms prevent the LAF from naming Hezbollah, Iran, or Syria as potential risks to Lebanese sovereignty. Indeed, some military leaders, such as former LAF commander General Jean Kahwaji, have publicly expressed a favorable attitude towards Hezbollah, while others have not been able to convert their criticisms of Hezbollah into concrete policies or posture against the group. The military has been able to more vociferously oppose threats posed by groups such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates.<sup>11</sup> The LAF's focus on defending Lebanon against these groups is reflected in its efforts to enhance professionalization and readiness in this context. The heightened focus on counterterrorism training with partners like the United States and the increase in materiel relevant to these sorts of missions is indicative of the LAF's desire to defend the country from the threats these groups pose to its sovereignty.



## Protecting Domestic Security Interests

Lebanon has outsized domestic security concerns. The history of confessional conflict, the presence of powerful internal actors, both armed and unarmed, and the influence of external actors in the country's domestic affairs have all resulted in a tinderbox of tensions within the country. With the tendency to flare up suddenly, domestic tensions are a significant source of instability in Lebanon. Although domestic security is an atypical responsibility for a national military, the LAF plays a unique role in Lebanese society, which necessitates its focus on the matter.<sup>12</sup>

Hypothetically, the ISF and DGS should lead the effort on maintaining the country's domestic security, but a combination of a lack of capacity, deep-rooted politicization, and lack of public cross-confessional trust prevents the services from playing that role effectively.<sup>13</sup> That is where the LAF comes into play. Lebanon's military has historically been structured with the purpose of upholding domestic security within the country since the French mandate.<sup>14</sup> Nearly a century later, domestic security remains a main military priority because, as discussed earlier, in a country perpetually mired in domestic sectarian tensions, it is seen as the only representative and politically balanced force in the country, one that would tackle arising issues without political motives.<sup>15</sup>

The downside of the LAF's domestic security role, however, is that its reticence to risk its neutral image, coupled with its lack of a monopoly on violence in Lebanon, can translate to inaction. On the one hand, the LAF dealt with protesters in 2019 evenhandedly in comparison to its sister security services. It also has, on the other hand, been criticized for standing by and allowing counterprotesters from Shia-majority groups like Amal and Hezbollah to turn violent.<sup>16</sup>

The LAF's inaction and strategy to "buy time and maintain civil peace long enough to allow for a suitable political settlement" in the 2019 protests is indicative of a larger problem in its domestic security mandate.<sup>17</sup> When sectarian tensions have escalated in post-civil war Lebanon—for instance, during the escalation of Sunni-Shia violence in Beirut in 2007 and 2008—the LAF has hesitated to intervene for fear of being seen as violating its principles of and reputation for neutrality. Some analysts contend that the LAF has feared retaliation by Hezbollah.<sup>18</sup> Others argue that different factors have shaped LAF choices, including that Lebanese government decisions are not always coordinated with the LAF, fears of confronting Hezbollah could lead to divisions with the LAF, and the LAF commander sometimes harbors political ambitions.<sup>19</sup> The insistence on appearing neutral has also, in addition to other factors, provided breathing room for groups such as Hezbollah to operate within Lebanon almost entirely unchecked.<sup>20</sup>

Popular legitimacy is central to the LAF's effectiveness. In the early days of the 2019 protests against bad governance and corruption, the LAF was praised for its neutrality and professionalism in dealing with protesters, taking great care to limit violence, avoid issuing any statements that could be construed as political, and work quickly to rectify any transgressions from within its ranks.<sup>21</sup> Activists at first lauded the military, waving LAF flags alongside the national flag at protests, and posting positive messages and videos about the LAF that went viral on social media.<sup>22</sup>

These positive images were undermined with a much different treatment of protesters following the Beirut port explosion at the hands of the LAF. The LAF, in addition to the ISF and plainclothes police, reportedly responded with excessive force, injuring over 700—including several members of the press. Under the emergency measures implemented by parliament, the LAF had the ability to “impose curfews, ban assemblies and impose censorship on media organizations and publications... and also extend the ability of officials to try civilians in military courts.”<sup>23</sup> While the LAF's role is not to steer the political trajectory of Lebanon, it will continue to be under significant internal and international scrutiny in terms of its conduct in navigating the current political and economic turmoil.

For Lebanon and for the LAF, the trio of challenges—legitimacy, sovereignty, and domestic security—are interdependent. Gains in one area can improve the outlook in the others; conversely, backsliding in another area can negatively affect the other two. Ultimately, the LAF will need to make progress in all three areas in parallel in order to achieve enduring outcomes. This will not be possible without support from international donors and, more importantly, sustained leadership from key institutions in the Lebanese government—for instance, the presidency, the Council of Ministers, and the Higher Defense Council—that have the will and ability to overcome pressures from Hezbollah and others invested in Lebanon's corruption and confessional model. With the ongoing political and governance crisis in the country, however, progress is unlikely in the near future.

## Military Effectiveness and Leveraging Foreign Security Sector Assistance

Over the last fourteen years, the LAF has relied on international donor support to increase its effectiveness, to the extent this is possible, while balancing its trio of challenges. The LAF's military effectiveness can be assessed across four areas: policy and doctrine; training and equipment, exercises, and education; operations; and institutional capacity.

## Policy and Doctrine

Lebanon lacks a comprehensive national security policy or strategy, and beyond the Ministry of Defense there is no civilian body that has oversight and planning authority over the country's security apparatus.<sup>24</sup> The civil-military dynamic in Lebanon contributes to the lack of a cohesive strategy: confessional political dynamics lead a lack of consensus over security priorities, and politicization within the LAF—particularly the perception of the LAF commander role serving as a pathway to the Lebanese presidency—adds to the lack of consensus.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the LAF is unable to focus on strategic planning when its capacity is stretched thin, performing internal missions within Lebanon that should really be in the purview of the ISF.<sup>26</sup> This creates not only readiness issues within the LAF, detracting from core missions, but also prevents the military from having the capacity to contribute toward a national military or security policy. While the LAF represents one of the few truly national institutions in the country, the lack of strong civilian oversight and connection to national policy formulation inhibits the LAF's ability to fully project its example of cross-confessional national identity.

The closest thing to a strategy that the LAF has is the Lebanese Armed Forces Capabilities Development Plan (CDP), a five-year plan “for strengthening security and consolidating the authority of the state.”<sup>27</sup> The first CDP spanned the 2013 to 2017 time frame, while the second CDP spans the 2018 to 2022 time frame. The document is not released publicly and faces some criticism and lack of buy-in from the Lebanese political elite that do have access to it. Nevertheless, it is a significant bottom-up effort to inform the LAF's strategic positioning, focusing on three main mission areas for the military as per the first CDP: “minimum force capabilities, targets in terms of professionalizing LAF standard operating procedures, and linking this overall effort to budgeting and future funding.”<sup>28</sup>

## Training and Equipment, Education, and Exercises

### *Training and Equipment*

The vast majority of foreign security assistance to Lebanon comes in the form of training and equipment, with the United States as its primary partner, followed by the European Union.<sup>29</sup> Although the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump temporarily withheld over \$105 million in security assistance in 2019, the funding has resumed, and the LAF continues to benefit from the significant assistance provided by the United States.<sup>30</sup> In FY 2019, the United States provided \$218 million in military grant assistance, including \$105 million in Foreign Military Financing, \$3 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET), \$110 million in Department of Defense-

authorized funding.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, more than 80 percent of the LAF's equipment arsenal comes from the U.S. government—ranging from guns and grenade launchers to tanks and unmanned aerial vehicles—while a total of over 32,000 LAF soldiers have been trained by the United States.<sup>32</sup>

Historically, U.S. training of LAF personnel has largely focused on foundational professionalization and equipment maintenance. From 2008 onward, the United States significantly increased its training of the LAF's special forces units, including the Lebanese Ranger Regiment, the Lebanese Air Assault Regiment, and the Lebanese Marine Commandos (also known as the Lebanese Navy SEALs).<sup>33</sup> Although there are still shortfalls in their capacity and capabilities, the Lebanese special forces have shown significant gains, particularly as part of efforts to counter the Islamic State in 2017.<sup>34</sup>

U.S. security assistance has been critical to the LAF, which is why the government and military leadership in Beirut were deeply disturbed by the decision to block U.S. security assistance to the country.<sup>35</sup> Although the decision was reversed recently, the lack of transparency around why assistance was withheld in the first place and the reason behind its resumption has left the LAF, the Lebanese government, and the country's citizenry wary of U.S. intentions in Lebanon.<sup>36</sup> It also feeds fears of abandonment of U.S. partners, particularly on the heels of the perceived U.S. betrayal of the Syrian Democratic Forces following Turkey's intervention in northeastern Syria in October 2019.

The European Union has invested more than 85 million euros (nearly \$100 million) worth of security assistance in Lebanon since 2006, including a 50 million euro (\$58 million) package granted in 2018, with 46.6 million euros allocated through the European Neighborhood Instrument toward counterterrorism support until 2020 and the rest allocated through the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace toward improving border security in Beirut's Rafik Hariri International Airport.<sup>37</sup> The United Kingdom, meanwhile, has contributed over 13.8 million pounds (\$17 million) to Lebanon through its Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund (CSSF), aimed primarily at creating and training the LAF's Land Border Regiments, in addition to improving ISF capabilities and facilitating ongoing efforts at countering violent extremism.<sup>38</sup>

### *Education*

Locally, Lebanon has eight military schools within the country. The Military Academy and Fouad Chehab Academy train cadets and junior officers at the foundational professional and tactical levels, while two noncommissioned officer training centers provide similar schooling for enlisted soldiers.<sup>39</sup> The Personnel Training Institute at the Araman Training Camp focuses on providing more advanced training on rule of law, human rights, and military discipline to longer-serving soldiers.<sup>40</sup> There are

also specialized academies like the Special Forces School, which trains units such as the Ranger Regiment, Airborne Regiment, and Marine Commandos; the Ski School, which trains soldiers for combat and rescue missions in snow conditions; and the High Center for Military Sport, which manages and trains military sports teams.<sup>41</sup>

The LAF receives a significant amount of U.S. support for the training and education of its soldiers, primarily by way of the IMET program. Although the United States has maintained some level of IMET support for Lebanon since the 1980s, it increased that support significantly after renewing closer security ties in 2005. Since then, the United States has provided nearly \$30 million through IMET, funding the training of over a thousand LAF personnel.<sup>42</sup>

### *Exercises*

The LAF participates in annual bilateral joint exercises with the United States and France, conducted in Lebanon. These exercises aim to buttress LAF capabilities against conventional as well as unconventional threats—the latter, in particular, dealing with Islamic State and al-Qaeda elements. They also seek to address the LAF's professionalization, ranging from operational and tactical proficiency to the upholding of human rights norms in its operations.<sup>43</sup>

### *Operations*

Although the LAF lacks the ability to post a serious defense against stronger external actors in its neighborhood, such as Israel, it has launched operations against internal actors—although its success has been mixed at best. One such example is Fatah al-Islam, an al-Qaeda-affiliated group birthed in a Palestinian refugee camp in Nahr al-Bared in northern Lebanon. During an escalation of violence in 2007, Fatah al-Islam launched a series of attacks and confronted the LAF. After a three-month-long battle, the militant group was finally defeated. The LAF's performance had been less than stellar due to a combination of capacity and capability issues: it had incurred significant casualties—158 killed—and ultimately had razed the Nahr al-Bared camp to the ground after the evacuation of civilian refugees in order to defeat the militants. Nevertheless, the LAF emerged victorious in the end.<sup>44</sup>

The Nahr al-Bared experience prompted the LAF's international partners to buttress its counterterrorism and urban warfare capabilities through training and materiel assistance. A decade later, the LAF's capabilities were tested yet again in Operation Fajr al-Juroud, the 2017 operation against the Islamic State. With 5,000 troops deployed against 600 Islamic State fighters, the LAF launched what was praised as a sophisticated series of aerial attacks and ground maneuvers, cornering the surviving fighters into a valley adjacent to the Syrian border.<sup>45</sup> The conclusion of the operation, however, was controversial—there was no final, conclusive LAF attack on the remaining fighters. Instead,

Hezbollah and the Syrian government negotiated a cessation of hostilities, allowing some 400 fighters and family members to return across the border.<sup>46</sup> As reports (and criticism) of close collaboration between the LAF and Hezbollah emerged prior to Operation Fajr al-Juroud, another layer of complexity was added to the LAF's success in the operation. Furthermore, the LAF later attempted to distance itself from Hezbollah.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to its counterterrorism operations, the LAF operates alongside the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to reassert the government's authority in south Lebanon following the withdrawal of Israeli forces formerly occupying the region.<sup>48</sup> The LAF also partakes in efforts to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance across the country.<sup>49</sup>

During the 2019 protests in Lebanon, the LAF largely exercised restraint in the face of protesting by civilians and goading by Hezbollah and other spoilers. It took swift action to remove, detain, and prosecute through the civilian judicial system a soldier who shot a civilian protester in November. In contrast, the ISF and riot police have turned increasingly violent against protesters in Beirut, injuring dozens by firing tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons, and drawing criticism from the international community.<sup>50</sup> Although the LAF has largely avoided the same level of criticism, it will be increasingly tested by Hezbollah and other spoilers as the economic and political crisis persists. Reinforcing civilian protection training and doctrine within U.S. programs for the LAF and ISF will be crucial to mitigating these challenges.

### Institutional Capacity: Strategic Planning and Human Rights Norms

Although the LAF has made significant strides to improve its operational and tactical performance and professionalism, its institutional capacity to conduct strategic planning and uphold human rights norms and principles as a professional military remains nascent.

Additionally, the LAF's institutional capacity for strategic planning is fairly weak, due to a combination of lack of capacity within the military, lack of cohesion and technical expertise on defense matters within the civilian government, corruption across the Lebanese government, and influence from external actors.<sup>51</sup> Despite foreign partners' efforts to rectify capacity issues within the LAF, and despite the existence of the Lebanese government's CDP, internal and external political dynamics hinder the LAF's ability to conduct strategic planning in a meaningful way. The lack of political consensus in Lebanon, exacerbated by external pressure from actors such as Syria and Iran, as well as systematic corruption within Lebanon's government, impacts the LAF's strategic development, budgeting process, and future planning and readiness.<sup>52</sup>

The LAF's institutional capacity to protect civilians and respect human rights within the country is limited, and its performance in this area is mixed. On the one hand, the military seems to be making a concerted effort to address human rights concerns as a priority area; on the other, there are still lapses and gaps in implementation that indicate the continued need for support in this area.

January 2019 marked the launch of the Code of Conduct for the LAF in Law Enforcement, a UN-supported initiative to raise standards of professionalism and adherence to human rights norms in security operations.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor published a report that favorably assessed the LAF's performance on human rights in 2018. It detailed the efforts of the LAF's human rights unit to coordinate with international NGOs to conduct internal training for the military, as well as the participation of LAF officers in more intensive bureau-led human rights training.<sup>54</sup>

That same year, however, journalist Haneen Ghaddar was convicted for "defaming" the LAF, a decision that raised censorship concerns and was subsequently reversed.<sup>55</sup> The LAF's mixed performance has also become apparent during the protests, where the military has been both touted and criticized for its treatment of protesters.<sup>56</sup>

Even if the LAF succeeds in closing the gap within its own institutional capacity for upholding human rights norms, it has very little control over other internal security actors who may be responsible for human rights abuses. The ISF and DGS have a less favorable human rights record in Lebanon and are frequently criticized by civil society groups and the international community for their excesses, particularly in their limitations on free speech and recent handling of protesters and activists.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the LAF does not have any institutional or political ability to control or counter actions by Hezbollah and in fact has been accused of turning a blind eye or even being a lackey to Hezbollah as the group operates with near impunity in Lebanon. The United States has been reticent to extend security assistance to certain elements of Lebanon's state security apparatus due to concerns that materiel assistance might be diverted to Hezbollah—mostly due to such occurrences in the past.<sup>58</sup> Although the political dynamics remain murky, recent U.S. end-use monitoring has thus far seen compliance from the LAF, finding no evidence of weapons being diverted to Hezbollah.<sup>59</sup>

## Recommendations and Conclusion

The LAF is a pillar of credibility in the current Lebanese government's corrupt system, far from perfect but far better than any other security institution. The United States and its allies should sustain support to the LAF while urging it to exercise restraint with the civilian population in the



aftermath of the Beirut port explosion. It should build out its program to professionalize the ISF to focus on domestic issues, particularly protecting civilians in the current crisis, providing for inclusive and responsible security for local communities, and reducing the LAF's domestic burden. The United States and its allies should better align their civil-military plans, analysis, and programming in Lebanon to buttress the LAF, as part of a comprehensive strategy for Lebanon. The explosion in the Beirut port on August 4, 2020, and the government's subsequent resignation on August 11, provide a unique opportunity to implement such a strategy. In light of this new political reality, two sets of recommended steps for the LAF will be important to address the immediate crisis in Lebanon and to improve its performance and role over the long term.

Most immediately in response to the current crisis, the LAF, working with the ISF and other security forces, should prioritize reconstruction and civilian protection in their security missions, engaging with local civilian councils and civil society to understand civilian concerns in communities and urban neighborhoods. It should avoid the trap of justifying the subordination of civilian protection principles for the expediency or urgency of counterterrorism objectives. Building trust with local populations is central to an effective counterterrorism and reconstruction effort. Creating additional capacity and building professionalism within the ISF and the judicial sector would help free the LAF for defense and counterterrorism missions where they can provide a critical and comparative advantage and to expand its role in protecting Lebanese sovereignty.

In parallel, the Lebanese government should undertake a broader set of steps to improve the LAF's military effectiveness over the long term, aided by the United States and other donors. The Lebanese government's lack of a national security or defense strategy complicates the LAF's ability to plan and budget. In the near term, creating such a strategy would require a narrow definition of interests, threats, and priorities to address Sunni terrorism and border security. Fully defining national interests and threats would necessarily include listing Israel as a threat—a non-starter to sustain U.S. support—and the role of Hezbollah and other Lebanese militias—a non-starter from a domestic Lebanese perspective. Because of this dilemma, there will be limits to the strategic plans the LAF can develop absent broader domestic reforms, reconciliation and disarmament, and regional peace.

It would be dangerous and misguided to expect the LAF to lead the charge on tackling these politically sensitive issues. The Lebanese people themselves need to decide the course of their political future through governance and economic reforms that address the roots of corruption, inequity, and insecurity. Putting the LAF out ahead of these reform efforts could prompt retaliation by Hezbollah and other actors invested in the status quo, reduce its legitimacy, and disrupt its efforts to extend Lebanese government sovereignty and protect domestic security. It would also undermine civil-military norms important for Lebanon's democratic health. In short, the LAF can be a means for and contribute to furthering Lebanon's national political identity and security. But it cannot be expected



to be the primary way to achieve these goals or to be an end in itself. The LAF can play a critical role in stabilizing and protecting communities, building competencies for strategic planning, countering extremist threats, and deepening its professionalism through training and scenario-based exercises. Like this, the LAF can prepare for the day when Lebanon's governance and prospects for peace improve and a broader approach to strategic planning and national integration is possible.

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