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What's Next For Lebanon? Stability and Security Challenges

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Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Near East, South and Central Asian Affairs and Counterterrorism

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me here today. I would like to submit for the record both my full testimony and an article I and a colleague wrote last week, entitled “Lebanon is Boiling. Thousands of Americans Could Get Stuck in the Middle of a War.”

Mr. Chairman, Lebanon has at least since 2008 been in the grip of Hezbollah, a terrorist organization backed by Iran. In my view, U.S. policy fails to acknowledge that fact—and we continue to act as if Lebanon were a friendly, sovereign, and independent country whose government can actually set its foreign and defense policy. But that is an illusion: that Lebanon no longer exists.

I'd like to discuss Lebanese politics first, and then the Lebanese army.

In May 2008, Hezbollah ended a government crisis over its own powers by using its weapons—allegedly meant only to protect the country from Israel—to seize control of Beirut's streets and effectively of the entire state. *The New York Times* back then quoted one expert on Hezbollah concluding “This is effectively a coup.”¹

In the near decade since, Hezbollah's power has grown and so has its domination of Lebanon. During the war in Syria since 2012, Hezbollah has served as Iran's foreign legion and sent thousands of Lebanese Shia across the border to fight. A story in *The New York Times* last August summed up the current situation:

Hezbollah has rapidly expanded its realm of operations. It has sent legions of fighters to Syria. It has sent trainers to Iraq. It has backed rebels in Yemen. And it has helped organize a battalion of militants from Afghanistan that can fight almost anywhere. As a result, Hezbollah is not just a power unto itself, but is one of the most important instruments in the drive for regional supremacy by its sponsor: Iran.

¹ Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, “Hezbollah Seizes Swath of Beirut From U.S.-Backed Lebanon Government,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/middleeast/10lebanon.html>.

Hezbollah is involved in nearly every fight that matters to Iran and, more significantly, has helped recruit, train and arm an array of new militant groups that are also advancing Iran's agenda.²

That story concluded that "few checks remain on Hezbollah's domestic power" in Lebanon.

And throughout 2017, Israeli officials have been warning that the distinction between Hezbollah and "Lebanon" can no longer be maintained. Hezbollah is quite simply running the country. While it leaves administrative matters like paying government salaries, paving the roads, and collecting garbage to the state, no important decision can be taken without Hezbollah's agreement. Tony Badran, a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies who specializes in Lebanon, summed up the current situation: "In terms of the actual balance of power, the actual power on the ground, regardless of the politics, regardless of the Cabinets, regardless of the parliamentary majorities: it's Hezbollah."³

Lebanon's constitution provides for a division of power by sect, with a Shia parliamentary speaker, Christian president, and Sunni prime minister. But today, there is no such division or balance of real power. Hezbollah prevented the selection of a president for more than two years, until it could force acceptance of the Christian closest to it, Michel Aoun. As an analyst at the Institute for National Security Studies in Israel put it, "Hezbollah has been very squarely backing Aoun for president and this was always the deal between Aoun's party and Hezbollah. Hezbollah has upheld its end of the deal. With this election...you can see Hezbollah being consolidated in terms of its political allies as well as its position in Lebanon."⁴

Similarly, today the Sunni prime minister, Saad Hariri, provides cover to Hezbollah's domination of the state rather than a counterbalance to that power. Hezbollah is part of Hariri's coalition government—but Hezbollah, not the government, dominates.

Parliamentary elections will be held on May 6, and they will most likely help Hezbollah consolidate power—because challenging Hezbollah and running against it are simply too dangerous. The issues that should be under debate, primarily how to recover Lebanon's sovereignty and prevent Hezbollah from involving Lebanon in foreign wars, cannot be mentioned. Some will argue that fear is not the only motivating factor, and that apathy and fatigue also play key roles. The result is the same: Hezbollah today faces no real opposition from Christian, Druze, or Sunni party leaders.

Sadly, there is another way to measure Hezbollah's domination of Lebanon: its ability to use the institutions of the state to punish even rhetorical challenges. Hanin Ghaddar, an analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, has been convicted by a Lebanese military court for the "crime" of "defaming" the Lebanese army. The sad story is told in full by the Washington Institute, and relates to comments she made at a conference in Washington in 2014. What did she say? That the Lebanese military targets Sunni groups while showing preference to Shiite groups, such as Hezbollah. After a closed trial held in absentia, she was sentenced to six months imprisonment. So much for freedom of expression in Lebanon.

I would like now to turn to the Lebanese Armed Forces or "LAF."

² Ben Hubbard, "Iran Out to Remake Mideast With Arab Enforcer: Hezbollah," *New York Times*, August 27, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/27/world/middleeast/hezbollah-iran-syria-israel-lebanon.html?_r=1.

³ Jenna Lifhits, "Lebanese PM's Resignation Magnifies Congressional Scrutiny of Hezbollah," *Weekly Standard*, November 7, 2017, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/lebanese-pms-resignation-magnifies-congressional-scrutiny-of-hezbollah/article/2010377>.

⁴ Reuters et al., "Lebanon's New Pro-Hezbollah President Vows to Retake 'Israeli-Occupied' Land," *Jerusalem Post*, October 31, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Hezbollah-ally-Michel-Aoun-elected-President-of-Lebanon-471301>.

US assistance to the LAF is based on UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701, which call for the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon and the affirmation of state sovereignty and independence. If the LAF were implementing 1559 and 1701, it would be intercepting Hezbollah weapons shipments coming from Iran via Syria. It would be securing Lebanon's borders. It would be preventing Hezbollah from parading its military equipment and maintaining fixed bases. It would be preventing Hezbollah from placing military equipment at civilian sites like homes and schools. But in real life, the LAF does none of these things.

If the LAF were doing these things it would certainly deserve the \$1.7 billion in aid that the United States has given it. That amount includes \$123 million in FY2017, and Lebanon is the fifth largest recipient of foreign military financing (FMF). Our ambassador to Lebanon, Elizabeth Richard, said publicly on October 31 of last year that total support for the LAF from State Department and Defense Department accounts totaled \$160 million over the previous year.⁵ The State Department's proposed budget for FY2018 zeroes out FMF for Lebanon, which may suggest some doubt within the administration regarding the LAF's achievements.

But on January 31, Acting Assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield stated that "We will sustain our efforts to support legitimate state security institutions in Lebanon, such as the Lebanese Armed Forces, which is the only legitimate force in Lebanon." And on March 15, at a conference on Lebanon held in Rome, the State Department "renewed its support" and said that the aid we provide is "enabling the Lebanese government to...assert its authority throughout all of Lebanese territory."

That statement is a fantasy. A far more realistic view of the situation is offered by Israel's Minister of Defense, Avigdor Liberman, who recently stated that "today, the Lebanese army has lost its independence and is another unit in Hezbollah's apparatus, and therefore, as far as we are concerned, the infrastructure of the Lebanese army and the Lebanese state is one with the infrastructure of Hezbollah."⁶

The relationship between the LAF and Hezbollah appears to be growing and the notion that Hezbollah is a legitimate power is getting ensconced in LAF doctrine. The analyst Tony Badran described this development:

The LAF's synergetic relationship with Hezbollah isn't haphazard. It's a reflection of the power configuration and the Hezbollah-dominated political order in Beirut. It's also codified in the LAF's doctrine. Namely, the LAF's doctrine adopts Hezbollah's formulation and vocabulary about the group's role and position in the state: "This Resistance, which has been supported by the government, the army and the civilians, has led to the defeat of the enemy on Lebanon's land." The combination of "Resistance" (that is, Hezbollah), "Army," and "civilians" is an adaptation of Hezbollah's so-called "Army-People-Resistance" doctrine, the embodiment of the Iranian revolutionary template, which in turn is adopted by the Lebanese government in its official policy statement. This doctrine licenses the LAF's joint deployment and extensive coordination with Hezbollah. It fosters not just toleration but also legitimization of so-called "resistance" militias and paramilitary groups operating under Hezbollah's wing. And overall, it instills the pro-Hezbollah culture in the LAF officer corps.⁷

The LAF is increasingly intertwined with Hezbollah. David Schenker of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy described the situation this way:

⁵ Jack Detsch, "US Sticks by Lebanese army despite Hariri Resignation," *Al-Monitor*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/us-support-lebanon-army-hariri-resignation-saudi-arabia.html>.

⁶ Eldad Shavit, *Insight No. 1027: Israel's Position on US Military Aid to the Lebanese Army* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2018), <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/israels-position-us-military-aid-lebanese-army/>.

⁷ Tony Badran, "American Policy in Lebanon Isn't Policy. It's Poetry," *Tablet*, October 27, 2017, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/248071/american-policy-in-lebanon-isnt-policy-its-poetry>.

In April 2017, Hezbollah brought more than a dozen international journalists on a tour of Lebanon's frontier with Israel, breezing through several checkpoints manned by national intelligence organs and LAF units, suggesting a high degree of coordination. The next month, Hezbollah turned over several of its Syria border observation posts to the LAF...Finally, in late June, the LAF sent 150 officer cadets to tour Hezbollah's Mleeta war museum, near Nabatiyah, a shrine to the organization's 'resistance' credentials vis-a-vis Israel.⁸

As a Center for American Progress report stated, "The Lebanese government has repeatedly denied any coordination with Hezbollah. However, events along the border make these claims increasingly implausible. Reports of such coordination undercut the LAF's standing and raise vexing questions for policymakers regarding the utility of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon."⁹ The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, himself "characterized the LAF as a 'partner' and a 'pillar' in what Hezbollah has described as the 'golden formula, which means the resistance, the Army, and the people'" in the words of a recent Congressional Research Service report.¹⁰

It is worth noting that in the face of Hezbollah's increasing domination of the Lebanese state, Prime Minister Hariri last week referred to Israel as "the primary threat to Lebanon."¹¹ That is an adoption of the Hezbollah line and a justification for Hezbollah's and Lebanon's absolute failure to implement Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701.

All of these developments should explain the tougher line toward Lebanon being taken in the last year by Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are no longer willing to prop up Lebanon while it serves as the base for Hezbollah's military and terrorist activities in league with Iran. Instead, they are asking what it will take for Lebanese to pressure Hezbollah to cut back on its actions and to allow the Lebanese state to govern again. What the Saudis are saying is, Enough—let's start describing Lebanese reality instead of burying it. Let's stop financing a situation that allows Hezbollah to feed off the Lebanese state, dominate that state, and use it as a launching pad for terror and aggression in the Middle East, all on Iran's behalf. Similarly, Israeli officials and analysts are noting Hezbollah's increasing domination of Lebanon and the great danger it creates—for Israel and for Lebanon. And meanwhile, as I've noted, American officials appear determined to avoid stating the facts and instead speak about Lebanon as if this were not 2018 but the days right after the Cedar Revolution when true national independence and sovereignty appeared possible.

There is of course no guarantee that this tougher approach will succeed: Lebanese may be too terrified of Hezbollah. And success will require action by the United States and its allies, particularly France. If all of Lebanon's friends take the same approach, demanding that Hezbollah's grip on the country and the state be limited, we may embolden Lebanon's citizens and its politicians to protest Hezbollah's chokehold. Economic assistance to Lebanon and military assistance to its army should be made dependent on pushing back on Hezbollah and regaining Lebanese independence. The price Lebanon pays for Hezbollah should be made far clearer, and the advantages Hezbollah gains from its control of Lebanon should be reduced—and made far more controversial.

⁸ David Schenker, *PolicyWatch 2840: U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon at Risk* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-security-assistance-to-lebanon-at-risk>.

⁹ Hardin Lang and Alia Awadallah, *Playing the Long Game: U.S. Counterterrorism Assistance for Lebanon* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2017), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/08/30/437853/playing-long-game/>.

¹⁰ Carla E. Humud, *Lebanon* (CRS Report No. R44759) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 11, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44759.pdf>.

¹¹ Steve Scherer, "Lebanon plans to boost army presence on Israel border," Reuters, March 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-italy-conference/lebanon-plans-to-boost-army-presence-on-israel-border-idUSKCN1GR2P0>.

Lebanese sovereignty and the prevention of Hezbollah domination of the state are in fact demanded by UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted in August 2006 to end the war between Hezbollah and Israel. It's worth recalling what started that war: an unprovoked attack by Hezbollah into Israel, killing and kidnapping Israeli soldiers.

Resolution 1701 includes these provisions:

Emphasizes the importance of the extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory [and] for it to exercise its full sovereignty, so that there will be no weapons without the consent of the Government of Lebanon and no authority other than that of the Government of Lebanon...

Calls for... the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that, pursuant to the Lebanese cabinet decision of 27 July 2006, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State...¹²

Now, Hezbollah is once again thrusting Lebanon into deadly conflicts in the region—including the risk of another war with Israel. These dangers will not be avoided by burying our heads in the sand, nor will Lebanon's sovereignty be restored by ignoring Hezbollah's destruction of that sovereignty. A better way forward is to tell the truth about the situation in Lebanon, and use both diplomatic and economic pressure to undermine Hezbollah's iron grip.

The United States should reassess our military assistance and our entire policy. After all, if our strategy has been aimed at strengthening Lebanon's independence, we have failed. If our goal has been to limit the power of Hezbollah and its integration into Iran's regional system of military aggression, we have failed. If our goal has been to strengthen Sunni, Druze, and Christian minorities in Lebanon, we have failed. If we have tried to make the LAF a counterbalance to Hezbollah, we have failed. Perhaps things would be even worse today without our aid and our efforts, but that is a proposition that should be examined and tested.

Is Lebanon closer to meeting the demands of Resolution 1701 than it was a decade ago—closer to exercising sovereignty over its territory and disarming militias and terrorist groups? I think not. And that's why American strategy for Lebanon requires a careful reassessment.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

¹² United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1701, Middle East, S/RES/1701, ¶3, ¶8, <https://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2006.shtml>.