



Missing the Mark

Reassessing U.S. Military Aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces

David Kilcullen

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Introduction

The United States has funded, trained, and equipped the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to ensure “they serve as an institutional counterweight to Hezbollah,” a senior State Department official testified last August.¹ Since 2006, American taxpayers have paid more than \$2.5 billion in security assistance to Lebanon in pursuit of four goals, according to the State Department: “to strengthen Lebanon’s sovereignty, secure its borders, counter internal threats, and disrupt terrorist facilitation.”² The primary (though not the only) source of these internal threats is, of course, Hezbollah.

The LAF is contending with sharp cuts to the Lebanese defense budget, spurred by an economic meltdown that the World Bank says “is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top three, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century.”³ In 2020, the LAF stopped serving meat to its troops amid widespread food shortages. The salaries of junior soldiers fell to only \$100 a month, one-eighth of their pre-crisis value.⁴

To help, the French government convened an international donor conference last July to “bolster the cohesion, resilience, and stability of the LAF” as

scholar Aram Nerguizian put it.⁵ The United States added \$15 million to the \$105 million military aid package already in the pipeline for 2021 and announced another \$67 million in September. The White House has also requested \$160 million for the current fiscal year.⁶

International donors seem committed to continuing or reinforcing their previous policies despite, or because of, the unprecedented nature of Lebanon’s ongoing crisis. Donor states are doing more of the same even as opportunities arise to increase their leverage, alter the political dynamics inside Lebanon, and potentially break the cycle of exploitation, corruption, and violence that has left the Lebanese people impoverished and insecure.⁷ Rather than doubling down on the status quo, donors should question the basic assumptions behind their policies.

The time has therefore come for a close examination of whether 15 years of substantial American support have enabled Lebanon’s armed forces to serve as an institutional counterweight to Hezbollah. To that end, this monograph examines the LAF’s operational performance since 2006, with an emphasis on the four goals the State Department identified: defense

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1. Mira Resnick, “U.S. Security Assistance in the Middle East,” *Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism*, August 10, 2021. (<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/08%2010%2021%20U.S.%20Security%20Assistant%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf>). This paper uses the English-language abbreviation LAF to refer to the joint (army, navy, and air) forces of the Lebanese Republic, known in Arabic as القوات المسلحة اللبنانية and in French as the *Forces Armées Libanaises* (FAL). The term “Lebanese Army,” when used, refers only to the LAF Ground Forces and to elements of the LAF special forces subordinate to the Ground Forces.
 2. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Fact Sheet, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Lebanon,” May 21, 2021. (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-lebanon>)
 3. World Bank Group, Global Practice for Macroeconomics, Trade & Investment, Middle East and North Africa Region, “Lebanon Sinking (To the Top 3),” *Lebanon Economic Monitor*, Spring 2021, page xi. (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/394741622469174252/pdf/Lebanon-Economic-Monitor-Lebanon-Sinking-to-the-Top-3.pdf>)
 4. Ellen Francis, “Lebanon’s collapse piles strain on army, security forces,” *Reuters*, March 9, 2021. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-crisis-security-crime-int/lebanons-collapse-piles-strain-on-army-security-forces-idUSKBN2B11D3>); Joyce Karam, “US to help cash-strapped Lebanese military as desertions mount,” *The National* (UAE), February 1, 2022. (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/us-news/2022/02/01/us-to-help-cash-strapped-lebanese-military-as-desertions-mount>)
 5. Michael Young, “A Military Lifeline,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 16, 2021. (<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/84756>)
 6. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, “Media Availability with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland,” *Remarks to the Press*, October 14, 2021. (<https://lb.usembassy.gov/media-availability-with-under-secretary-of-state-for-political-affairs-victoria-nuland>)
 7. See: United Nations, “\$383 million humanitarian plan to address ‘living nightmare’ in Lebanon,” October 1, 2021. (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1101962>)

of sovereignty, border security, internal security, and counterterrorism. The evidence strongly suggests a correlation between increased U.S. assistance and greater LAF effectiveness in counterterrorism, but not in the other areas. Yet this constitutes only a partial answer, since improved combat performance is not the same as counterbalancing Hezbollah.

The theory of change animating U.S. military assistance is that “building the security apparatus of the Lebanese state will improve internal stability and public confidence in the LAF,” in turn “creating political space for the Lebanese government to address more complex, politically sensitive issues.”⁸ This monograph finds that such space has not grown but has instead contracted during the period of enhanced U.S. security assistance, which has coincided with a significant increase in Hezbollah’s influence. The argument for strengthening the LAF rests in part on the assumption that the LAF is in competition with Hezbollah for prestige and influence.

“Washington should move beyond crisis-driven thinking about Lebanon. The crisis there has lasted more than two years and will likely persist. Instead, now is the time to revisit the framework of U.S. support for the LAF, which a different administration conceived under radically different circumstances some 15 years ago.”

In fact, the two are conjoined at the highest levels because Hezbollah’s influence over Lebanon’s civilian authorities is so extensive. The terror group has effective veto power over the choice of prime minister and the actions of the Lebanese Cabinet. Hezbollah’s

coalition holds a majority in parliament, and its allies serve as president and speaker.⁹

These findings suggest that Washington should move beyond crisis-driven thinking about Lebanon. The crisis there has lasted more than two years and will likely persist. Instead, now is the time to revisit the framework of U.S. support for the LAF, which a different administration conceived under radically different circumstances some 15 years ago. It is clear that aid for the LAF has not enabled it to serve as an institutional counterweight to Hezbollah. The time has come to redesign aid programs to keep pace with Lebanon’s rapidly evolving political and economic landscape.

Aim, Scope, and Methodology

This paper explores two related questions that bear directly on congressional decisions regarding the appropriation of military assistance for the LAF and on the coherence of U.S. policy toward Lebanon as a whole:

- (A) **How effectively is the LAF performing the functions for which U.S. assistance is provided?** Is there evidence that enhanced U.S. assistance, particularly since 2006, has improved LAF performance in the domains of counterterrorism, border security, internal security, and the defense of sovereignty?
- (B) **Has the LAF become more effective as a counterweight to Hezbollah?** To the extent LAF performance has improved, does such improvement help it serve as a counterweight? Does the LAF cooperate with Hezbollah, and if so, in what ways does that collaboration occur and at what level of command is it authorized?

8. Casey L. Addis, “U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon,” *Congressional Research Service*, January 19, 2011, page 1. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R40485.pdf>)

9. Lebanon’s May 2022 general election, in which Hezbollah and its allies lost their parliamentary majority, saw the rise of the Lebanese Forces party under Samir Geagea. However, Hezbollah’s ongoing parliamentary presence and deep involvement with the Lebanese administrative state suggest that the longstanding pattern of Hezbollah influence is unlikely to shift, at least in the medium term. See: Laila Bassam, Timour Azhari, Maya Gebeily, and Tom Perry, “Lebanon’s Hezbollah, allies likely to lose parliamentary majority,” *Reuters*, May 16, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/anti-hezbollah-lebanese-forces-party-says-it-has-won-least-20-seats-2022-05-16>)

Part 1 of the monograph examines the first question by synthesizing open-source reporting from multiple Lebanese and international sources as well as key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with individuals in Lebanon, the United States, and Europe.

Part 2 addresses the second question, regarding the LAF's ability to counterbalance Hezbollah. It begins with a close examination of the theory underlying U.S. military assistance for the LAF. How and why do U.S. policymakers expect the LAF's improved performance to bring about a reduction of Hezbollah influence? After clarifying the premises of U.S. assistance for the LAF, Part 2 employs two distinct forms of evidence to assess whether the LAF now serves as a restraint on Hezbollah. First, it synthesizes open-source reporting in the same manner as Part 1. Then it draws on a body of anonymized, commercially available cellphone location data that show mobility patterns for electronic devices linked to Hezbollah and LAF personnel.

The appendix provides a full technical description of the data and associated method of analysis and explains how the data are sanitized to protect the identity of individual users. In brief, the data allow objective comparison of the patterns of movement of LAF and Hezbollah personnel, enabling insights into how the LAF's observed behavior (as distinct from its stated policies) confirms or contradicts the expectation that the force serves as a counterweight to Hezbollah. For example, do LAF personnel maintain freedom of movement, or can Hezbollah effectively exclude them from certain areas? The monograph concludes

with a section that summarizes key observations, aggregates them into a set of conclusions, and offers recommendations for U.S. policy toward Lebanon.

Part 1: Does U.S. Assistance Improve LAF Effectiveness?

While not the LAF's only foreign benefactor, the U.S. government (USG) has been by far its largest, particularly since 2005, when the Cedar Revolution forced an end to Syria's occupation of Lebanon and created opportunities for enhanced U.S. engagement with Beirut. At the same time, regional instability emanating from the Iraq War convinced U.S. policymakers that deeper engagement was needed.¹⁰ U.S. troops had been part of a multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon from August 1982 until their withdrawal in February 1984, four months after a Hezbollah truck bomb killed 241 troops at the Marine barracks in Beirut.¹¹ (Hezbollah denies responsibility for the bombing.) During the 1980s and 1990s, modest USG support for the LAF gave Washington access to Lebanese decisionmakers as well as insight into dynamics in Lebanon that would otherwise have been difficult to achieve.¹²

Amid the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of Syrian forces in 2005, Washington sought to strengthen the secular Lebanese state against the growing power of Iran's proxy, Hezbollah.¹³ One long-time observer suggested that "the struggle over post-Syria Lebanon has also been a contest over the future mission and ideological direction of the LAF."¹⁴

10. See: Rudy Jaafar and Maria J. Stephan, "Lebanon's Independence Intifada: How an Unarmed Insurrection Expelled Syrian Forces" in *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East*, Ed. Maria J. Stephan (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), page 169ff.

11. Brigadier General (Ret.) Nizar Abdel-Kader, "US Military Assistance to Lebanon: Equipping LAF Not Transforming It," *National Defense*, Issue 82, October 2012. (<https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/us-military-assistance-lebanon-equipping-laf-not-transforming-it>)

12. For background on the history of U.S. security assistance for Lebanon, see: Casey L. Addis, "U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon," *Congressional Research Service*, January 19, 2011, pages 2-5. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R40485.pdf>)

13. Nicholas Blanford, "Why US may slash military aid to an ally it helped build up in Lebanon," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 18, 2017. (<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/0718/Why-US-may-slash-military-aid-to-an-ally-it-helped-build-up-in-Lebanon>)

14. Aram Nerguizian, "The Lebanese Armed Forces: Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Syria Lebanon," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2009, page 7. (https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/090210_lafsecurity.pdf)

The U.S. objective was to build a viable secular (or at least multi-confessional) Lebanese state and a capable LAF loyal to that state.

Following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War¹⁵ — and despite Hezbollah’s increasing influence within the Lebanese government, partly as a result of that war — the George W. Bush administration asked Congress to provide increased funding for the LAF and for Lebanon’s police service, the Internal Security Forces (ISF).¹⁶ Congress approved the request as well as subsequent increases, which enjoyed bipartisan support. On average, since 2006, Washington has provided Beirut with \$200 million per year in military and economic assistance, making the United States Lebanon’s largest official donor. On the unofficial side of the ledger, however, Iran sends Hezbollah an estimated \$700 million per annum.¹⁷

According to the State Department, Washington’s cumulative investment of more than \$2.5 billion has helped the LAF achieve the program’s four key objectives, namely, “to strengthen Lebanon’s sovereignty, secure its borders, counter internal

threats, and disrupt terrorist facilitation.” More broadly, the department writes, “The U.S.-LAF partnership builds the LAF’s capacity as the sole legitimate defender of Lebanon’s sovereignty.”¹⁸ The program’s specific successes, according to the USG, have included:

- Enabling the LAF to defeat ISIS in Lebanon, “carry out operations against Al Qaeda and expand control over Lebanese territory along its border with Syria”;
- Increasing LAF presence “in southern Lebanon to coordinate with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and support the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1559, 1680, and 1701”;¹⁹ and
- Enabling the LAF to clear hazards “emplaced by ISIS to harm civilians along Lebanon’s border with Syria, remove explosive hazards along the Blue Line, in North Lebanon, and in Mount Lebanon, and provide crucial physical security and stockpile management upgrades to ammunition depots for the LAF.”²⁰

Each of these claims requires objective evaluation. Counterterrorism is the first and most important

15. This paper refers to the conflict of 2006 as the Israel-Hezbollah War, in accordance with U.S. practice. The war is known in Syria and Lebanon as the July War (حرب تموز) and in Israel as the Second Lebanon War (מלחמת לבנון השנייה).

16. Brigadier General (Ret.) Nizar Abdel-Kader, “US Military Assistance to Lebanon: Equipping LAF Not Transforming It,” *National Defense*, Issue 82, October 2012. (<https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/us-military-assistance-lebanon-equipping-laf-not-transforming-it>). Note that the ISF (المديرية العامة لقوى الأمن الداخلي, *Forces de Sécurité Intérieure*) serve both a general public-order policing role and a counterterrorism and police intelligence function. The ISF maintains a special forces unit, the Black Panthers. The ISF’s role thus partially overlaps with that of Lebanon’s intelligence service, the General Directorate of General Security (الامن العام, *Sûreté Générale*).

17. Robert Springborg, F.C. “Pink” Williams, and John Zavage, “Security Assistance in the Middle East: A Three-Dimensional Chessboard,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, February 6, 2020, page 10. (<https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/02/06/security-assistance-in-middle-east-three-dimensional-chessboard-pub-80993>)

18. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Fact Sheet, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Lebanon,” May 21, 2021. (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-lebanon>)

19. UNSCRs 1559 and 1680 relate to Lebanese internal security, border delineation, disarming of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias inside Lebanon, and control by the Lebanese government over all of its territory. UNSCR 1701, adopted after the Israel-Hezbollah War of 2006, calls on the Lebanese government and UNIFIL to “deploy their forces together throughout the South.” The resolution also calls on the Lebanese government “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.” See: UN Security Council, Resolution 1559, 2004. (<http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1559>); UN Security Council, Resolution 1680, 2006. (<http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1680>); UN Security Council, Resolution 1701, 2006. (<http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1701>)

20. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Fact Sheet, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Lebanon,” May 21, 2021. (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-lebanon>). The Blue Line is the UN-monitored disengagement line between Lebanon and Israel.

mission, according to many U.S. analysts, so the evaluation begins there.²¹

LAF Counterterrorism Performance

Since 2006, the LAF has conducted three major combat operations against terrorist groups inside Lebanon. These were the campaign against the al-Qaeda-linked organization Fatah al-Islam (FAI) from May to September 2007; the August 2014 Battle of Aarsal against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat an-Nusrah (JN); and the Qalamoun campaign against ISIL and JN's successor, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), from July to August 2017. These three campaigns offer an opportunity to evaluate whether increased U.S. assistance since 2006 has correlated with detectable improvements in LAF performance over time.

The LAF's 2007 campaign against FAI was an intensive urban warfare engagement lasting 15 weeks. It involved nine LAF ground assaults, using armor, engineers, artillery, and air support, against a network of heavily fortified insurgent strongpoints in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, the second-largest Palestinian camp in Lebanon, near the northern coastal city of Tripoli.²²

The 105-day campaign saw some of the heaviest and most destructive ground combat in Lebanon since

its civil war ended in 1990. According to Nizar Abdel Kader, it represented “the fiercest battle fought by the LAF since its foundation. It formed a real test of the LAF's unity, military professionalism, and its ability to fight, with limited resources,” against heavily armed insurgents dug into multi-story buildings with tunnels, rooftop, and underground fortified positions, “seemingly endless amounts of rockets, guns, explosive devices, and a distinct experience in booby-trapping everywhere and everything.”²³ LAF losses were heavy: FAI killed or wounded 576 LAF servicemen. For its part, FAI suffered 471 militants killed or captured. At least 67 civilians were killed and an unknown number wounded, while the Nahr el-Bared camp suffered massive damage and the fighting displaced more than 30,000 civilians.²⁴

While several observers praised the LAF's will to fight at Nahr el-Bared, the battle exposed multiple LAF operational and tactical weaknesses.²⁵ These included a lack of experience in high-intensity combat; ammunition shortages;²⁶ poor maintenance on, and a lack of fuel for, the LAF's 1950s-vintage armored vehicles; a lack of air-to-ground weapons for the LAF's few helicopters; a limited casualty evacuation capability; a lack of artillery and targeting systems; poor intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities; a lack of precision-guided munitions (PGMs), night-vision equipment, and sniper weapons;

21. See, for example: Hardin Lang and Alia Awadallah, “Playing the Long Game: U.S. Counterterrorism Assistance for Lebanon,” *Center for American Progress*, August 2017. (<https://cf.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/LebanonCounterTerror-report1.pdf>)

22. See: Nayla Moussa, “L'Armée Libanaise: Une Exception Dans Le Paysage Militaire Arabe [The Lebanese Army: An Exception in the Arab Military Landscape],” *Les Champs de Mars*, 2012, Volume 1, Number 23, page 71. (<https://www.cairn.info/revue-les-champs-de-mars-ldm-2012-1-page-57.htm>); Major Jean Dagher, “The Lebanese Armed Forces Engaging Nahr Al-Bared Palestinian Refugee Camp Using the Instruments of National Power,” Master's Thesis, *U.S. Army Command and General Staff College*, 2017, page 5. (<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1038628.pdf>)

23. See: Nizar Abdel Kader, *Maarakit Nahr Al-Bared Wa Intisar Al-Watan [The Battle of Nahr Al-Bared and the Victory of the Nation]* (Beirut: Lebanese Armed Forces, 2015), page 73. See also: “Lebanese troops battle militants,” *BBC* (UK), May 20, 2007. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6673639.stm)

24. For two somewhat differing accounts of casualties at Nahr el-Bared, see: Marcy Newman, “The Ongoing Nakba in Lebanon: The Case of Nahr el-Bared Refugee Camp,” *Al Majdal*, Summer 2010, Volume 44, pages 29–35. (<https://search.emarefa.net/en/detail/BIM-615766-the-ongoing-nakba-in-lebanon-the-case-of-nahr-el-bared-refug>); Joseph A. Kéchichian, “A Strong Army for a Stable Lebanon,” *Middle East Institute*, September 1, 2008. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/strong-army-stable-lebanon>)

25. Author interviews with a French military-political analyst, September 13, 2021, and with two former USG officials responsible for LAF assistance, September 20 and 23, 2021.

26. The LAF expended 30 to 40 percent of its total stocks during the battle's first week.

and insufficient helmets and body armor.²⁷ Indeed, the LAF was both outgunned and outfought by FAI at various stages during the battle.

Despite the LAF's eventual success in clearing FAI from the camp, international donors increased assistance afterward to address these weaknesses.²⁸ Washington ramped up its efforts to train, equip, and fund the LAF and established a small special operations presence in Lebanon.²⁹ Nevertheless, few improvements were evident during the LAF's next major combat engagement seven years later at the Battle of Arsal.

In early August 2014, the LAF fought a brief but intense battle against JN and ISIL at Arsal, a mid-sized town eight miles from the Syrian border in the Baalbek district of northeastern Lebanon.³⁰ The area had emerged as a weapon-smuggling route into Syria after the Syrian civil war began in 2011. In September 2012 and February 2013, the LAF clashed in Arsal with the Free Syrian Army, an anti-Assad rebel organization, and, separately, with FAI.³¹ In 2013, a combined offensive by Hezbollah and Syrian government troops cleared rebel strongholds on the Syrian side of the border, pushing insurgents and refugees across the frontier into the

Arsal enclave. This turned the area into a support zone for anti-Assad groups, including Sunni jihadists, and a staging ground for attacks into Syria.³² At the same time, Sunni jihadist groups in Syria, including al-Qaeda and ISIL, exploited the Arsal corridor to smuggle car bombs into Lebanon for use against Lebanese civilians in Shiite-majority urban areas.³³

The Arsal enclave thus posed a threat both to the Lebanese government and to the interests of Hezbollah and its allies in Damascus.³⁴ The enclave also served as a launchpad for attacks on Iranian interests, which jihadists intended as retribution for Tehran's support for Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian leader. These attacks included a double suicide bombing against the Iranian Embassy in Beirut in November 2013 and the bombing of an Iranian cultural center in the Beirut suburb of Bir Hasan in February 2014, both of which were claimed by a Lebanese ally of al-Qaeda, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades.³⁵ Facing a common threat, the LAF, Hezbollah, and Syrian intelligence coordinated closely from 2012 into 2014. Their efforts encompassed both a public information campaign directed at Lebanon's Sunni community to discourage support for terrorism, as well as military efforts that included targeted killings in and near Arsal.³⁶

27. Major Jean Dagher, "The Lebanese Armed Forces Engaging Nahr Al-Bared Palestinian Refugee Camp Using the Instruments of National Power," Master's Thesis, *U.S. Army Command and General Staff College*, 2017, page 58. (<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1038628.pdf>)

28. *Ibid.*, pages 59–60.

29. Joseph Trevithick, "The Pentagon's Not-So-Secret Commando Army," *War on The Rocks*, August 30, 2016. (<https://warisboring.com/the-pentagons-not-so-secret-commando-army>)

30. Maria Abi-Habib, "Jihadists Extend Control into Lebanese City," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2014. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/jihadists-extend-control-into-lebanese-city-1407109896>)

31. See: "Sleiman praises Army response to FSA attack," *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), September 24, 2012. (<https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2012/Sep-24/189008-sleiman-praises-armys-response-to-fsa-attack.ashx>)

32. Logan Brog, "The Battle for Arsal," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 7, 2014. (<http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-battle-for-arsal.html>)

33. Nicholas Blanford, "The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah's Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants," *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Number 8, September 2017. (<https://ctc.usma.edu/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunni-militants>)

34. Logan Brog, "The Battle for Arsal," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 7, 2014. (<http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-battle-for-arsal.html>)

35. Anne Barnard, Thomas Erdbrink, and Rick Gladstone, "Beirut Bombs Strike at Iran as Assad's Ally," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2013. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/20/world/middleeast/blast-hits-shiite-area-of-beirut.html>)

36. See: Tony Badran, "Hollow Praise for the LAF," *NOW Lebanon* (Lebanon), February 7, 2013. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op-eds/2013/02/07/hollow-praise-for-the-laf>)

In July 2014, the LAF struck the jihadists near Arsal in concert with Hezbollah and Syrian government forces. Hezbollah blocked routes east of Arsal and deployed forces into Shiite settlements west of the town, while the Syrian Air Force launched cross-border air strikes into Lebanon and the LAF moved in to clear the area. As one observer noted, the “combination of movements by the LAF, Syrian regime, and Hezbollah forces suggests a coordinated, cross-border effort to isolate rebels in the town of Arsal. Coordination between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah is also confirmed in a video showing a convoy of Hezbollah vehicles passing through a LAF checkpoint en route to Arsal without being stopped or searched.”³⁷ This evidence contradicted claims by the Lebanese Defense Ministry that the LAF was working alone.³⁸

ISIL and JN responded with a full-scale assault on Arsal. On August 2, 2014, more than 700 fighters attacked and captured the town, supported by ISIL terrorist attacks in Tripoli.³⁹ On the heels of ISIL’s *blitzkrieg*-like offensive across Iraq and Syria from May to July 2014, the LAF framed the seizure of Arsal as a potential first step of ISIL expansion into Sunni-majority areas in Lebanon. LAF commandos, along with members of the LAF’s 8th Infantry Brigade and the ISF, fought for five days to recapture the town,

sustaining 20 killed, 85 wounded, and 49 captured — of whom 13 were executed by the militants.⁴⁰ The LAF eventually reoccupied Arsal after Sunni religious leaders brokered a deal that led to the evacuation of the rebels and the release of some surviving LAF prisoners.⁴¹ Other prisoners remained unaccounted for.

While the Arsal operation ultimately achieved its objective, LAF losses were relatively severe for the scale and duration of the engagement, and the LAF re-occupied the town only after Hezbollah brokered an evacuation agreement. Overall, the battle suggested the LAF was only slightly more capable in tactical terms than in 2007 and was doing nothing to counterbalance Hezbollah in terms of political influence. Indeed, LAF-Hezbollah cooperation against Sunni militants continued from 2015 to 2017.⁴² For example, during this period, the LAF constructed multiple observation posts and fortified positions across the region to help control terrain and prevent cross-border movement.⁴³ This improved Lebanon’s border security but also assisted Hezbollah’s efforts to support the Assad regime, by clearing a threat from Syria’s western border.

The events at Arsal also reinforced Hezbollah political narratives. As leading regional analyst Lina Khatib noted at the time, the LAF fought anti-Hezbollah

37. Logan Brog, “The Battle for Arsal,” *Institute for the Study of War*, August 7, 2014. (<http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-battle-for-arsal.html>)

38. Maria Abi-Habib, “Jihadists Extend Control into Lebanese City,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2014. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/jihadists-extend-control-into-lebanese-city-1407109896>)

39. See: Nicholas Blanford, “The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah’s Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants,” *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Number 8, September 2017. (<https://ctc.usma.edu/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunni-militants>). See also: U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2014,” June 2015, page 188. (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/239631.pdf>)

40. The Commando Regiment (فوج المغاورين, *Fawj al-Maghaweer*) is the oldest and one of the best-known special operations units in the LAF and had been heavily engaged in the Nahr el-Bared campaign in 2007.

41. See: Mariam Karouny and Tom Perry, “Ceasefire agreed in Lebanese border town battle,” *The Star* (Lebanon), August 6, 2014. (<https://www.thestar.com.my/News/World/2014/08/06/Two-Lebanese-soldiers-killed-in-clashes-near-Syrian-border-sources>); “Deal reached: ISIS to leave Arsal, soldiers to be released,” *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), August 6, 2014. (<https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Aug-06/266224-large-numbers-of-militants-withdraw-from-arsal-official.ashx#axzz39B6nb6Tv>); Nidal al-Solh, “Lebanese Army enters Arsal in full force,” *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), August 9, 2014. (<https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Aug-09/266620-lebanese-army-regain-control-over-arsal-post.ashx#axzz39tkQeIHh>)

42. See, for example: Alessandra Masi, “Lebanese Army, Hezbollah Shell Jabhat Al-Nusra Militants In North Lebanon,” *International Business Times*, September 15, 2015. (<https://www.ibtimes.com/lebanese-army-hezbollah-shell-jabhat-al-nusra-militants-north-lebanon-2217699>)

43. Nicholas Blanford, “The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah’s Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants,” *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Number 8, September 2017. (<https://ctc.usma.edu/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunni-militants>)

Sunni groups, thereby framing those groups as the primary threat while ignoring Hezbollah's role as a magnet attracting Sunni jihadists to Lebanon. Khatib added that because of the LAF's weakness, "Hezbollah upheld the legitimacy of its weapons, depicting them as a prerequisite for Lebanon."⁴⁴ Thus, rather than serving as a counterweight, the LAF amplified Hezbollah's influence.

The most recent major tactical engagement between the LAF and Sunni terrorist organizations occurred during the Qalamoun offensive from May to August 2017, during which the LAF and Hezbollah conducted parallel operations to clear Sunni militants from areas around Arsal and the broader Baalbek-Hermel and Beqaa governorates. Simultaneously, Syrian government troops mounted an offensive in the Qalamoun hills on the Syrian side of the border.⁴⁵ Hezbollah, through one of its allies in the Lebanese security services, eventually sponsored a cease-fire deal that saw JN (rebranded as HTS) and ISIL militants withdraw into Syria, while Lebanon secured control of its contested border region for the first time since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.⁴⁶

During this campaign, the LAF operated on a large scale, committing as many as 7,000 troops, and at a high level of sophistication, conducting combined-arms maneuver warfare across complex mountainous and populated terrain. One experienced observer described the battle as the LAF's "most proficient [counterterrorism] operation since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war, [which] demonstrated the extent of its improved capabilities since its last major counterterrorism engagement in 2007" at Nahr el-Bared.⁴⁷

LAF commanders and Lebanese political leaders recognized the 2017 campaign as an opportunity to showcase the LAF's improved capabilities after a decade of enhanced U.S. security assistance. Yet Hezbollah again played a pivotal role. The group launched its own campaign against HTS in July, coordinating with Syrian forces on the other side of the frontier. HTS controlled 35 square miles inside Lebanon to the east and southeast of Arsal, with 400 fighters dug into defensive positions, caves, bunkers, and mountaintop observation posts. Hezbollah's offensive — employing special forces, infantry, engineers, and artillery — defeated HTS in a five-day battle, bringing a political-military victory for Hezbollah while largely leaving the LAF on the sidelines. LAF artillery units did use U.S.-provided howitzers to engage HTS militants fleeing into Arsal, which only underscored the LAF's supporting role.⁴⁸

The sidelining of the LAF worried international sponsors, especially the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Perhaps as a result of this concern, the LAF mounted an assault on a major ISIL defensive complex during the second phase of the Qalamoun campaign. The LAF employed air assault and commando troops, PGMs, extensive ISR, aircraft, artillery, and modern armored vehicles, including armored bulldozers, in a combined-arms maneuver. The combination of air and ground ISR with PGMs proved effective, as both international and local observers noted. The PGMs included 155mm Copperhead guided artillery rounds and AGM-114 Hellfire missiles launched from Cessna AC208

44. Lina Khatib, "لبنان: تداعيات سياسية وأمنية لمعركة عرسال" [The Political and Security Fallout of the Battle in Arsal], *Al-Hayat* (UK), August 14, 2014. (Available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2014/08/16/ar-pub-56387>)

45. "Hezbollah makes gains in Syria-Lebanon border assault," *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), July 22, 2017. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/22/hezbollah-makes-gains-in-syria-lebanon-border-assault>)

46. See: Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "Hezbollah, Syria army launch offensive at Syrian-Lebanese border," *Reuters*, July 20, 2017. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-lebanon-idUSKBN1A608S>); Angus McDowall, "Islamic State leaves Syria-Lebanon border zone," *Reuters*, August 28, 2017. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-syria-idUSKCN1B80PR>)

47. Nicholas Blanford, "The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah's Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants," *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Number 8, September 2017. (<https://ctc.usma.edu/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunni-militants>)

48. Ibid.

aircraft, targeted by LAF special operations forces on the ground.⁴⁹

However, the appearance — deliberately encouraged by Hezbollah — of coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah fighters undercut claims by Lebanese leaders that the military was restoring state sovereignty and securing the country’s borders. Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah, praised the LAF after the operation, describing it as a partner of Hezbollah and a pillar of Lebanese security. Nasrallah patronizingly noted that the LAF had played an essential supporting role in “scoring this victory.”⁵⁰ Hezbollah reinforced the impression of being in command when one of its allies in the Lebanese security services brokered deals with HTS and ISIL that allowed the militants to escape into Syrian territory.⁵¹

“Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah, praised the LAF after the operation, describing it as a partner of Hezbollah and a pillar of Lebanese security. Nasrallah patronizingly noted that the LAF had played an essential supporting role in ‘scoring this victory.’”

On the battlefield, U.S. assistance clearly made a difference. Yet improved LAF combat performance redounded to Hezbollah’s benefit. The LAF cooperated with Hezbollah, often playing the role of junior partner. LAF counterterrorism focused

almost entirely on Sunni jihadist groups, with little effort to confront or compete with Hezbollah. The LAF’s subordinate role becomes even clearer in relation to the second mission set associated with U.S. aid — that of border security and enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs) in cooperation with UNIFIL.

Border Security and UNSCR Enforcement

Under a series of UNSCRs, the LAF is tasked with working with UNIFIL to secure Lebanon’s disputed southern border with Israel. The LAF’s mission is to maintain an area “free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL” between the Blue Line (the UN-monitored disengagement line) and the Litani, the southernmost major river in Lebanon.⁵² This provision seeks to stabilize the UN-brokered cease-fire that ended the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 by creating a buffer zone across southern Lebanon free of Hezbollah presence.⁵³ A significant portion of U.S. assistance for the LAF is tied to this mission. As noted earlier, the State Department claims improved cooperation with UNIFIL as a noteworthy success of the assistance program. Yet the evidence suggests otherwise.

After the war in 2006, UNSCR 1701 authorized a six-fold increase in UNIFIL’s ground component, directed the establishment of a new maritime force under the UNIFIL mandate, and created an expectation that the LAF would significantly increase

49. Nicholas Blanford, “Why US may slash military aid to an ally it helped build up in Lebanon,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 18, 2017. (<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/0718/Why-US-may-slash-military-aid-to-an-ally-it-helped-build-up-in-Lebanon>). See also: “ISIL mine kills three Lebanese troops on Syrian border,” *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), August 20, 2017. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/8/20/isil-mine-kills-three-lebanese-troops-on-syrian-border>); Joseph Trevithick, “Lebanon Gets Bradley Fighting Vehicles as it Continues to Battle ISIS,” *The Drive*, August 14, 2017. (<https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/13492/lebanon-gets-bradley-fighting-vehicles-as-it-continues-to-battle-isis>)

50. Carla E. Humud, “Lebanon,” *Congressional Research Service*, November 9, 2017, pages 11–12. (<https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=805912>)

51. See: Walid al-Nofal and Tariq Adely, “HTS to leave mountain region along Syria-Lebanon border as part of truce agreement,” *Syria Direct*, July 27, 2017. (<https://syriadirect.org/hts-to-leave-mountain-region-along-syria-lebanon-border-as-part-of-truce-agreement>); Angus McDowall, “Islamic State leaves Syria-Lebanon border zone,” *Reuters*, August 28, 2017. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-syria-idUSKCN1B80PR>)

52. See: UN Security Council, Resolution 1701, 2006. (<http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1701>)

53. Colonel Fawaz Arab, “UNIFIL Peacekeeping and Lebanese National Security,” Master’s Thesis, *United States Army War College*, 2012, page 8. (<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA560849.pdf>)

its presence in the buffer zone. LAF troops were to patrol alongside the newly expanded UNIFIL, establish joint checkpoints and control measures, and thereby prevent infiltration by Hezbollah fighters or the introduction of Hezbollah weapons into the area.⁵⁴ The new mission created “competing priorities for the LAF which [is] traditionally constrained both in terms of available personnel and equipment... Consequently, the Resolution 1701 mandate [required] a redirection of the LAF priorities ... despite the existing scarcity of personnel numbers and equipment.”⁵⁵

As the war in Syria spilled over into Lebanon from 2011 to 2017, the LAF was indeed stretched to achieve its simultaneous counterterrorism and border security missions. Arguably, increased U.S. support allowed the LAF to deploy additional vehicles, weapons, aircraft, and ground units for the counterterrorism mission while preserving its presence alongside UNIFIL. Yet the available evidence suggests the LAF’s increased presence in the UNIFIL area resulted in worse, not better, implementation of UNSCR 1701. The LAF has repeatedly turned a blind eye to Hezbollah activity in the buffer zone, colluded with Hezbollah, and blocked UNIFIL from investigating illegal armed activity.

In late 2018, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched Operation *Northern Shield* to destroy tunnels dug by Hezbollah from Lebanon into northern Israel, ultimately exposing six tunnels.⁵⁶ A UN report details an illustrative example:

On 24 December, the Israel Defense Forces neutralized the tunnels in Metulla, south of Kfar Kila, by pouring liquid cement through the shafts [that emerged in IDF-controlled territory] south

of the Blue Line. Two days later, UNIFIL and Observer Group Lebanon observed liquid cement seeping from premises (formerly a concrete factory and currently a poultry farm) in Kfar Kila, some 100 metres north of the Blue Line. As the cement became visible north of the Blue Line, roads leading to the premises were blocked by individuals in civilian clothes, hindering UNIFIL from properly observing the location...

Entry to the premises was subsequently denied however by the Lebanese Armed Forces on the basis that it constituted private property. Despite repeated requests to the Lebanese authorities, [UNIFIL] has not been granted access to the premises. On 29 December, UNIFIL confirmed in a statement that the factory had an opening to the tunnel, which crossed the Blue Line [in] violation of resolution 1701... UNIFIL urged the Lebanese authorities to ensure immediate follow-up actions in accordance with Lebanon’s responsibilities pursuant to resolution 1701 (2006). To date, there has been no demonstrated follow-up action by Lebanese authorities in relation to the tunnels.⁵⁷

This incident is a particularly clear example of a broader pattern that UNIFIL personnel and others familiar with the area have reported over many years. As Israeli analyst and former IDF Brigadier-General Assaf Orion noted regarding the cement pouring incident, UNIFIL “coordinates its operations with the Lebanese Armed Forces, which in turn coordinate with Hezbollah.” UNIFIL’s “access to illicit sites, both in populated areas and in ‘nature reserves,’ is prevented by the Lebanese government on the pretexts of ‘private property’ and individual rights.” The LAF plays “an active part in concealing Hezbollah’s prohibited military operations.”⁵⁸

54. Ibid., page 14.

55. Ibid., pages 20–21.

56. Israel Defense Forces, “Operation Northern Shield,” January 27, 2019. (<https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/wars-and-operations/operation-northern-shield>)

57. UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General, “Implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) during the period from 27 October 2018 to 17 February 2019,” S/2019/237, March 14, 2019, page 2. (<https://undocs.org/S/2019/237>)

58. Assaf Orion, “On attack tunnels from Lebanon, a UN report hides more than it reveals,” *The Times of Israel* (Israel), April 2, 2019. (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/on-attack-tunnels-from-lebanon-a-un-report-hides-more-than-it-reveals>)

LAF units also prevent UNIFIL investigators from investigating incidents, including several — dating from 2007, 2011, and 2014 — in which UNIFIL peacekeepers were injured or killed.⁵⁹ More recently, LAF commanders blocked UNIFIL from installing camera systems at static observation posts, citing “local concerns.”⁶⁰ Under these circumstances, greater LAF presence in the border zone, courtesy of enhanced U.S. assistance, may be making things worse, not better.

“As Hezbollah’s missile capability grows, so does its ability to engage Israeli targets on land or at sea — including, potentially, with PGMs — without entering the UNIFIL-patrolled buffer zone south of the Litani. This undermines the rationale for UNSCR 1701.”

Finally, as Hezbollah’s missile capability grows, so does its ability to engage Israeli targets on land or at sea — including, potentially, with PGMs — without entering the UNIFIL-patrolled buffer zone south of the Litani. This undermines the rationale for UNSCR 1701. During the 34 days of the Israel-Hezbollah War in 2006, the group fired 4,000 rockets into Israel from a total stockpile that numbered approximately 15,000.

Since then, Hezbollah — the most heavily armed non-state actor in the world and a designated terrorist group according to 26 countries and multiple international institutions — has increased its stockpile more than eight-fold, to at least 130,000 missiles.⁶¹ Hezbollah’s arsenal now includes anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank missiles, and land-attack missiles of increasing range and precision.⁶²

Several key sites for Hezbollah’s expanded missile capability lie north of the Litani and therefore outside UNIFIL’s area of responsibility.⁶³ Precision-guidance systems for Hezbollah rockets are manufactured in Beirut, according to Israeli analysts, while launch sites for the group’s Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles are located in the northern Beirut suburbs.⁶⁴ Israel regards Hezbollah’s possession of PGMs capable of striking Israeli territory or interdicting its seaborne trade as a “red line.”⁶⁵ Since Hezbollah can now build and launch such missiles without entering the zone south of the Litani, continued U.S. support for the LAF’s mission under UNSCR 1701 does little to reduce the risk of another war, even if the LAF were upholding its obligations. In other words, U.S. support for the LAF and UNSCR 1701 may simply have bought time and political cover for Hezbollah to develop a missile capability that renders the post-2006 agreement obsolete.

59. Ibid.

60. Carla E. Humud, “United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon,” *Congressional Research Service*, August 26, 2021, page 2. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/IF11915.pdf>)

61. “Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 10, 2021. (<https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/hezbollahs-rocket-arsenal>)

62. Tal Beeri, “Hezbollah’s Missile and Rocket Arrays: A Tough and Complex Challenge for Israel,” *Alma Research Center*, May 2021. (<https://israel-alma.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Hezbollahs-Missile-and-Rocket-Arrays.pdf>)

63. Tal Beeri, “Exposé – Hezbollah’s six military sites in southern Lebanon,” *Alma Research Center*, May 2021. (<https://israel-alma.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Hezbollahs-six-military-sites-in-southern-Lebanon.pdf>)

64. Tal Beeri, “Hezbollah’s Missile and Rocket Arrays: A Tough and Complex Challenge for Israel,” *Alma Research Center*, May 2021. (<https://israel-alma.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Hezbollahs-Missile-and-Rocket-Arrays.pdf>)

65. Yoav Limor, “Israel’s red line: 1,000 precision missiles in Hezbollah’s hands,” *Israel Hayom* (Israel), February 25, 2021. (<https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/02/25/israels-red-line-1000-precision-missiles-in-hezbollahs-hands>)

Explosive Remnants of War and Conventional Weapons Destruction Programs

The State Department identifies programs for the removal of Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) and Conventional Weapons Destruction (CWD) as the third main success for which U.S. aid for the LAF is responsible. The LAF's role in these programs is limited, since the State Department funds and trains multiple non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups across Lebanon to implement them and to provide medical assistance and vocational training to landmine survivors. The United States is the largest donor to CWD and ERW programs in Lebanon, spending \$82 million since 1998. Annual funding grew significantly after 2015 in response to the spillover of violence — including proliferation of unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices — from Syria into Lebanon.⁶⁶

According to the State Department, the LAF portion of the program has provided “facility upgrades and emergency repairs at LAF ammunition depots, trained ammunition management staff in stockpile management best practices, and assessed sites for possible future assistance.” It has also “trained and provided 13 mine and explosive detection dogs for the LAF.”⁶⁷ Such assistance has allowed LAF military engineers and mine detection dogs to assist communities and NGOs in clearing or disposing of ERW. While relatively small in

scale, ERW and CWD programs have been beneficial. The LAF's mine-clearing capability has improved; LAF dog handlers train with UNIFIL and support civilian mine action programs; the Lebanese territory affected by mines has diminished; and improvements in ammunition storage and handling have arguably reduced the risk of accidents at, and theft of explosives from, LAF facilities.⁶⁸

However, some analysts argue that the LAF's center for action on landmines and cluster munitions — an indirect beneficiary of U.S. funding — collaborates with Hezbollah mine-clearing organizations. These Hezbollah-linked organizations allegedly provide cover for the collection and stockpiling of ammunition and support Hezbollah's “human shield” strategy of placing military installations and weapons storage sites in populated areas.⁶⁹ Given the relatively small scale of U.S. assistance for Lebanese CWD and ERW programs and the dispersal of this assistance across multiple organizations, neither the programs' apparent benefits nor their alleged exploitation by Hezbollah should weigh heavily in the evaluation of U.S. military assistance for the LAF.

Overall Impact of American Assistance on LAF Effectiveness

The evidence suggests a correlation between increased American funding and improved LAF effectiveness. Yet this improvement may not serve American interests.

66. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Fact Sheet, “U.S. Conventional Weapons Destruction Program—Lebanon,” April 5, 2021. (Archived version available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210406194531/https://www.state.gov/u-s-conventional-weapons-destruction-program-lebanon>)

67. Ibid.

68. See: UN Interim Force in Lebanon, Press Release, “UNIFIL peacekeepers and LAF train together on detecting mines and explosives,” October 1, 2021. (<https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-peacekeepers-and-laf-train-together-detecting-mines-and-explosives>); “Mine Detection Dog Partnership Program Lebanon Update: MDD Atos,” *American Task Force for Lebanon*, March 2018. (<https://www.atfl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Lebanon-March-2018-Atos.pdf>); “Lebanon Mine Action Strategy 2011-2020,” *Lebanon Mine Action Center*, September 2011, pages 4–5. (https://www.lebmac.org/en/images/Publications/LongStrategy/130819011741008_LMAC%20Strategy%202011-2020%20.pdf)

69. See: Tony Badran, “New Explosion in Lebanon at Site That Belongs To Affiliate of Hezbollah,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 23, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/09/23/new-explosion-lebanon-hezbollah-site>); “Expose: As a result of the explosion of Hezbollah's weapons depot in South Lebanon — the ‘Peace Generations Organization for Demining’, owned by Hezbollah, is apparently a disguise for Hezbollah's ‘human shield’ tactic,” *Alma Research and Education Center*, October 2020. (<https://israel-alma.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ALMA-demining-Report-9.10-Version-NEW.pdf>)

During the Qalamoun campaign of 2017, the LAF carried out a large-scale combined-arms maneuver in difficult terrain, in sharp contrast with its performance at Arsal in 2014 and Nahr el-Bared in 2007. Yet, during the 2017 campaign, the LAF operated in parallel with Hezbollah and Syrian regime forces, as it had three years earlier at Arsal. Also in 2017, a Hezbollah ally concluded the agreements with Sunni militants that ended the engagement.

Regarding border security, enhanced assistance helped the LAF manage its competing missions of deploying in southern Lebanon while conducting counterterrorism operations along the Syrian border. However, the LAF has repeatedly obstructed UNIFIL activities, thereby advancing Hezbollah’s interests. LAF mine-clearance efforts help protect civilians but may also contribute to Hezbollah’s use of human shields.

Therefore, whereas the State Department contends that Washington’s partnership with the Lebanese military “builds the LAF’s capacity as the sole legitimate defender of Lebanon’s sovereignty,” strengthening the LAF has indirectly enhanced Hezbollah’s ability to exercise authorities that should belong to a sovereign power.

Part 2: Does U.S. Assistance Help the LAF Counterbalance Hezbollah?

A well-planned assistance program should specify the theory of change (TOC) that links the observable impact of assistance to broader political outcomes. Part 2 begins by examining the TOC that connects

improvements in LAF capabilities to the strategic goal of turning the LAF into a more effective counterweight to Hezbollah. After clarifying the TOC, Part 2 draws on expert interviews and open-source reporting to assess the theory’s validity. The monograph then turns to a new body of evidence — anonymized cellphone location data — that provides a unique perspective on the LAF-Hezbollah relationship.

What Is the U.S. Theory of Change for the LAF?

Building actions around a clear TOC is best practice for foreign assistance programs. For example, the TOC for the UN Stabilization and Recovery Program for Lebanon states, “If the Government of Lebanon is supported to deliver enhanced access to basic services, economic opportunities and security, at both the national and subnational level, *then* the capacity of Lebanon to cope with the [current economic] crisis will be enhanced and social stability maintained because the needs of vulnerable communities will be met” (emphasis in original).⁷⁰ Likewise, the State Department requires contractors for its rule-of-law and civil society programs in Lebanon to propose a “cogent [TOC] that directly links activities to the intended results of the project.”⁷¹ The department also employs TOC analysis in evaluating Anti-Terrorism Assistance programs.⁷²

What, then, is the theory of change that underpins USG assistance for the LAF as a counterweight to Hezbollah? While not explicitly stated, one can deduce it from various official statements.

In 2011, the Congressional Research Service noted that “over the long term, U.S. officials hope that

70. UN Development Program, “Lebanon Stabilization and Recovery Programme – 2017,” February 24, 2017, page 9. (<https://www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/CrisisPreventionRecovery/Publications/UNDP%20Lebanon%20Stabilization%20and%20Recovery%20Programme%202017.pdf>)

71. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Funding Opportunity Announcement, “Support for the Rule of Law, Independent Media, and Civil Society in Lebanon,” April 7, 2021. (<https://www.state.gov/statements-of-interest-requests-for-proposals-and-notices-of-funding-opportunity/support-for-the-rule-of-law-independent-media-and-civil-society-in-lebanon>)

72. U.S. Department of State, Office of Foreign Assistance, Foreign Assistance Evaluations, “Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) Program (Summary),” July 26, 2017. (<https://www.state.gov/anti-terrorism-assistance-ata-program-summary>)

building the security apparatus of the Lebanese state will improve internal stability and public confidence in the LAF and ISF, creating political space for the Lebanese government to address more complex, politically sensitive issues ranging from political reform to developing a national defense strategy.”⁷³ A decade later, in August 2021, Mira Resnick, deputy assistant secretary of state for regional security in the State Department’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, testified that “without the LAF, Hezbollah fills the void. And that is exactly the opposite of what we would like to see in Lebanon.” Resnick added, “The LAF is really the sole legitimate defender of Lebanese sovereignty, the sole legitimate defender of the Lebanese people. And they serve as an institutional counterweight to Hezbollah, which continues to put Israelis and Lebanese at risk with their irresponsible rocket attacks.”⁷⁴ Similarly, in June 2021, French Defense Minister Florence Parly argued that “the LAF remain an essential pillar of the Lebanese state,” whose “cohesion and ... professionalism remain essential to preserve stability.”⁷⁵

The implicit TOC: *If* the LAF becomes stronger, enabling it to deliver improved stability and security for the Lebanese people independently of Hezbollah, *then* public support for the Lebanese government will increase, Hezbollah’s claim to serve as Lebanon’s primary defender will be undermined, and Hezbollah will lose influence relative to the legally constituted government. There are four problems with this theory.

First, and most important, this TOC treats the Lebanese government as an entity that is separate from, and in competition with, Hezbollah. In fact, Hezbollah and its allies hold a majority of seats in Lebanon’s parliament, fill key ministerial appointments in the Cabinet, and have played a central, perhaps even decisive, role in selecting prime ministers. In the years before Hezbollah emerged as kingmaker, the group twice showed that it could bring down Lebanese governments that opposed it, granting Hezbollah an effective veto over government policy.⁷⁶

“Hezbollah and its allies hold a majority of seats in Lebanon’s parliament, fill key ministerial appointments in the Cabinet, and have played a central, perhaps even decisive, role in selecting prime ministers.”

Second, the American TOC assumes Hezbollah would accept a loss of influence relative to a strengthened LAF rather than moving against the LAF, co-opting it, or seeking additional assistance from Iran to improve its own capabilities. As demonstrated during the Aarsal and Qalamoun campaigns, Hezbollah has integrated the LAF’s operations into its own battlefield plans. The terror group has coordinated activity between its own forces and the LAF, allowing Hezbollah to claim credit for LAF successes against Sunni militants. Meanwhile, Hezbollah co-opted the LAF in southern Lebanon to undermine UNIFIL and support its own anti-Israel operations. In the broadest terms, Hezbollah has consistently exploited the LAF’s operations for its own purposes, yielding strategic outcomes that

73. Casey L. Addis, “U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon,” *Congressional Research Service*, January 19, 2011, page 1. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R40485.pdf>)

74. Mira Resnick, “U.S. Security Assistance in the Middle East,” *Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism*, August 10, 2021. (<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/08%2010%2021%20U.S.%20Security%20Assistant%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf>)

75. “Donor nations agree to provide emergency aid to Lebanon’s army,” *The Arab Weekly* (UK), June 18, 2021. (<https://thearabweekly.com/donor-nations-agree-provide-emergency-aid-lebanons-army>)

76. In 2008, for example, Hezbollah weaponized months of street protests and a six-day armed takeover in Beirut to prevent the majority government from forcing the group to disarm. In 2011, the withdrawal of Hezbollah and its allies from Lebanon’s governing coalition brought down the Lebanese government amid a dispute over U.S. assistance for the LAF. See: Krista E. Wiegand, “Reformation of a Terrorist Group: Hezbollah as a Lebanese Political Party,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Volume 32, Number 8, pages 669–670. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100903039320>); Casey L. Addis, “U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon,” *Congressional Research Service*, January 19, 2011. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R40485.pdf>)

chiefly benefit Hezbollah while also benefitting the Lebanese government. Essentially, the LAF works for Hezbollah, since, as Lina Khatib notes, Hezbollah “has the military capability and coercive power to take over the Lebanese state.”⁷⁷ The LAF can act when doing so benefits Hezbollah, but not when their interests clash.

Third, the theory assumes that the optimal way to lessen Hezbollah’s influence is by building up a competitor in the form of the LAF. The United States does not appear to have a parallel plan to diminish Hezbollah by, say, imposing stricter sanctions on Iran that would limit its capacity to help Hezbollah, interdicting Iranian support as it enters Lebanon, or taking direct action against Hezbollah itself.

Finally, the theory presumes that the Lebanese people perceive Hezbollah and the LAF in the same way that U.S. policymakers do or would come around to that point of view if the LAF were more capable. As Resnick testified, the United States considers the LAF to be “the sole legitimate defender” of Lebanon, while viewing Hezbollah as an “irresponsible” actor that endangers its fellow citizens by constantly provoking its Israeli neighbor.⁷⁸

By contrast, public opinion data from 2016 and 2017 showed that a majority of respondents in Lebanon regarded Israel as the principal outside threat and saw Hezbollah as the country’s main defender against *external* threats. Meanwhile, they regarded the LAF as a kind of “super-police” whose role, in conjunction with the ISF, is to provide *domestic* security against threats such as terrorism and to prevent sectarian or

civil unrest.⁷⁹ This is a longstanding perception: The Congressional Research Service noted in 2011 that “statements from Lebanese leaders across the political spectrum suggest that most perceive Israel to be the primary external threat to Lebanon’s security.”⁸⁰ All of this means that even if U.S. assistance has strengthened the LAF, it may not counterbalance Hezbollah, since the Lebanese people tend to believe that the two forces ought to complement each other.

This leads to the second question: Is there evidence that enhanced U.S. assistance for the LAF since 2007 has indeed reduced the relative influence of Hezbollah within the Lebanese state?

Has Assistance Strengthened the LAF Relative to Hezbollah?

U.S. security assistance, as noted in Part 1, has enhanced the LAF’s counterterrorism capabilities. However, the LAF fought all its major engagements since 2007 against Sunni militant groups that were opponents of Hezbollah. Likewise, almost all the behind-the-scenes counterterrorism work in which the LAF, ISF, and the General Directorate of General Security (Lebanon’s intelligence service) are continuously engaged is directed at Sunni militants. In southern Lebanon, where the LAF’s mission is to prevent Hezbollah from engaging in illegal armed activity or infiltrating the buffer zone, the LAF has instead cooperated with Hezbollah. The LAF’s intelligence and security services reportedly share information and collaborate closely with

77. Lina Khatib, “How Hezbollah Holds Sway Over the Lebanese State,” *Chatham House*, June 2021. (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state>)

78. Mira Resnick, “U.S. Security Assistance in the Middle East,” *Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism*, August 10, 2021. (<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/08%2010%2021%20U.S.%20Security%20Assistant%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf>)

79. See: Tine Gade and Nayla Moussa, “The Lebanese Army After the Syrian Crisis: Alienating the Sunni Community?” in *Civil-Military Relations in Lebanon: Conflict, Cohesion and Confessionalism in a Divided Society*, Eds. Are John Knudsen and Tine Gade (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), page 27; Oren Barak, *The Lebanese Army: A National Institution in a Divided Society* (New York City: SUNY Press, 2009), page 22.

80. Casey L. Addis, “U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon,” *Congressional Research Service*, January 19, 2011, page 6. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R40485.pdf>)

Hezbollah while allowing it de facto control over key government functions.⁸¹

More broadly, far from reducing Hezbollah's power within the state, the era of enhanced U.S. security assistance has coincided with significantly increased influence for the group. Hezbollah candidates first won election to parliament in 1992, Lebanon's first election following its civil war. Having originated as one among several sectarian militias in Lebanon's civil war, Hezbollah's close relationship with Iran (and, to a lesser extent, Syria) made the group not only a powerful military player but also the center of a broader religious, social, and political movement, using a range of welfare services and other economic and political tools to cement the support of Lebanese Shiite communities.⁸²

By the late 1990s, Hezbollah had become an important force in the Lebanese government. Since 2005, the group has held an average of three seats in every Cabinet. It has allies across the political spectrum, including Shiite and Christian parties, and enjoys close relationships with senior political leaders, including President Michel Aoun and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, who also heads Hezbollah's parliamentary ally, the Amal Movement.

Thus, the notion that strengthening the LAF might bolster the national government and reduce Hezbollah's influence is not supported by the evidence, which suggests the opposite. As noted above, the TOC at the center of U.S. military assistance presumes that Hezbollah and the national government are separate

and opposing entities. In fact, they are conjoined at the highest levels, with Hezbollah members in Lebanon's parliament and Cabinet and Hezbollah allies as president and speaker.

In this sense, looking for a "smoking gun" of direct LAF-Hezbollah cooperation or intelligence sharing misses the point. Any given LAF commander or unit could be loyal to the national chain of command, follow orders only from the Lebanese government, observe the principle of civilian control over the military, scrupulously avoid cooperation with members of Hezbollah, and yet still serve Hezbollah's interests, since the terror group is an integral part of the national government.

To be sure, political conditions can change. The crisis that began in 2019 unleashed anger directed at the entire ruling elite, including Hezbollah.⁸³ The drivers responsible for this change included Hezbollah's adventurism in Syria, involvement in corruption and misrule, and failure to mitigate the impacts of Lebanon's ongoing economic and energy crises.⁸⁴ The October 17 Movement — a mass opposition movement that arose during the enormous anti-corruption protests that brought down the Lebanese government in 2019 — has attacked all establishment groups, including both the pro-Syria, pro-Hezbollah March 8 Coalition and its opponents in the March 14 Coalition.⁸⁵ Throughout 2021, October 17 gained significant support among the Shiite working class, Hezbollah's traditional base, even as the movement presented a radical critique of Hezbollah's role within

81. Author interviews with a former IDF intelligence analyst, a former USG official responsible for Lebanon policy, and a former U.S. Department of Defense official on September 20, 21, and 23, 2021, respectively.

82. See: David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerilla* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2013), pages 141–144; David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2020), pages 99–110.

83. Hanin Ghaddar, "Hezbollah's Grip on Lebanon Is Weakening. Here's How Washington Can Help," *Politico*, September 21, 2021. (<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/09/21/biden-lebanon-government-hezbollah-513165>)

84. Bassem Mroue, "Hezbollah Hammered with Criticism Amid Lebanon's Crises," *Associated Press*, September 1, 2021. (<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-religion-lebanon-beirut-hezbollah-93e21ba43a0f64198ca3726d3284ad39>)

85. Sam Heller, "Lebanon Is in Free Fall. Opposition Groups Have Radically Different Ideas about How to Save It," *Century International*, September 14, 2021. (<https://tcf.org/content/report/lebanon-free-fall-opposition-groups-radically-different-ideas-save>)

the cozy institutionalized sectarianism of Lebanon’s political and economic establishment.⁸⁶

In this sense, Hezbollah’s post-1992 strategy of penetrating, participating in, and influencing establishment politics backfired, inextricably linking the group to the corruption of the establishment.⁸⁷ This undermined Hezbollah’s populist credentials, rendering it vulnerable to the post-confessional critique of groups such as October 17. The collapsing credibility of the Lebanese state may thus pose a greater threat to Hezbollah’s influence than any American assistance for the LAF. Hezbollah and its allies’ loss of their parliamentary majority in the May 2022 election suggests that public distrust of the establishment is undermining the group’s hold over the government.

“The collapsing credibility of the Lebanese state may pose a greater threat to Hezbollah’s influence than any American assistance for the LAF.”

Nevertheless, given Hezbollah’s deep involvement in many aspects of the Lebanese administrative state, along with its ongoing influence — both directly and through allies — in the parliament, Hezbollah may again prove able to consolidate its political power despite widespread popular anger. Perhaps equally importantly as a measure of Hezbollah’s influence within the state, no competing political faction has comparable military power or a foreign sponsor that provides as much support as Iran, while Shiites remain a plurality of the Lebanese population.

What the Cellphone Movement Data Reveal

While qualitative, open-source analysis remains indispensable, remotely observable data may independently confirm (or refute) conclusions based on a more traditional approach. The data collected for this report lean toward confirmation. The anonymized movement data provide objective information about the locations frequented by LAF and Hezbollah personnel, showing how the movement patterns of known LAF electronic devices overlap with those of known Hezbollah devices.⁸⁸

What the cellphone data show is a LAF whose members shop in the same markets, visit the same cafés, and swim at the same beaches as Hezbollah fighters. The data also show how the LAF allows Hezbollah fighters to move freely throughout its territory while itself being constrained to specific movement corridors through Hezbollah-controlled areas. The data show a LAF that permits Hezbollah virtually uncontested control over key air and sea points of entry into Lebanon, notably Beirut’s Rafic Hariri International Airport and the Port of Beirut. These data, covering a two-year period from early 2020 until late 2021, depict a situation that follows 14 years of enhanced U.S. security assistance. LAF capability improved during that time, yet these data indicate no enhanced ability to compete with (let alone confront) Hezbollah.

The appendix describes in more detail the methodology applied for this analysis. Altogether, the author analyzed 178,486 data points. In light of technical limitations described in the appendix, the findings below should be considered illustrative but not definitive.

⁸⁶. See: Nada Maucourant Atallah and Omar Tamo, “Dangerous liaisons: How finance and politics are inextricably linked in Lebanon — part I of II,” *L’Orient Le Jour* (Lebanon), January 15, 2021. (<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1248323/dangerous-liaisons-how-finance-and-politics-are-inextricably-linked-in-lebanon-part-i-of-ii.html>); Nada Maucourant Atallah and Omar Tamo, “Dangerous liaisons: How the ‘system’ got the better of the ‘technocrats’ — part II of II,” *L’Orient Le Jour* (Lebanon), January 15, 2021. (<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1248324/dangerous-liaisons-how-the-system-got-the-better-of-the-technocrats-part-ii-of-ii.html>)

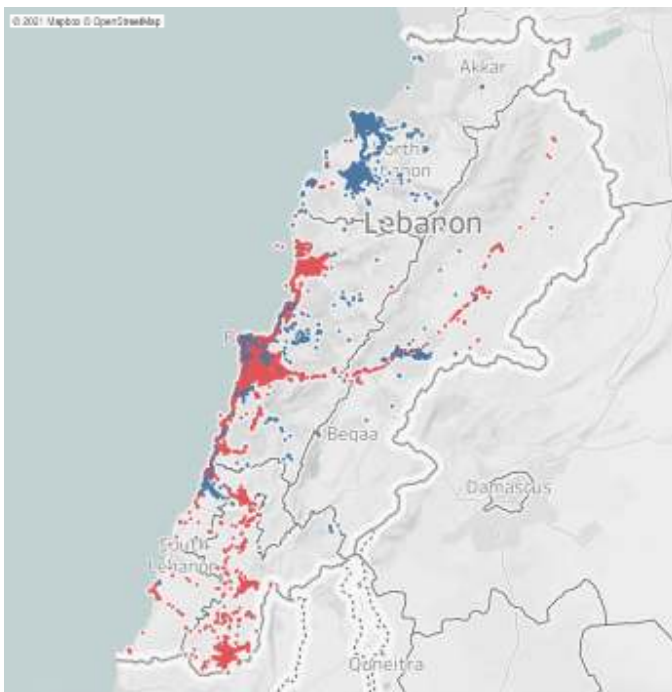
⁸⁷. Dale Gavlak, “In Lebanon, Discontent Grows With Hezbollah’s Political, Military Might,” *Voice of America*, August 9, 2021. (https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_lebanon-discontent-grows-hezbollahs-political-military-might/6209358.html)

⁸⁸. Alex Pentland, *Honest Signals: How They Shape Our World* (New York City: Penguin Random House, 2010).

Conclusion 1: LAF Has Limited Presence on Lebanon’s Southern and Eastern Borders

Although border security is one of the four stated goals of U.S. assistance, the data suggest the LAF is not heavily present in the border regions in Lebanon’s south and east. This is consistent with qualitative evidence showing the LAF is not upholding its obligations pursuant to UNSCR 1701 in Lebanon’s southern border region. As one can see on the heat-map overlay of all LAF and Hezbollah device locations (Figure 1), the southern region shows heavy Hezbollah presence but almost no LAF presence. Likewise, the Baalbek-Hermel and Beqaa regions along Lebanon’s eastern border with Syria show Hezbollah presence in key valleys, a dense concentration of LAF presence in northern Beqaa, and four LAF outposts in the border region but no significant LAF presence on the border itself. This is consistent with the operational history presented in Part 1, which noted that Hezbollah tends to dominate the actual border due to its relationship with the Syrian Arab Army and Iranian forces on the Syrian side of the frontier.

Figure 1. Overall Map of LAF and Hezbollah Movement in Lebanon



Note: Hezbollah devices in red; LAF devices in blue

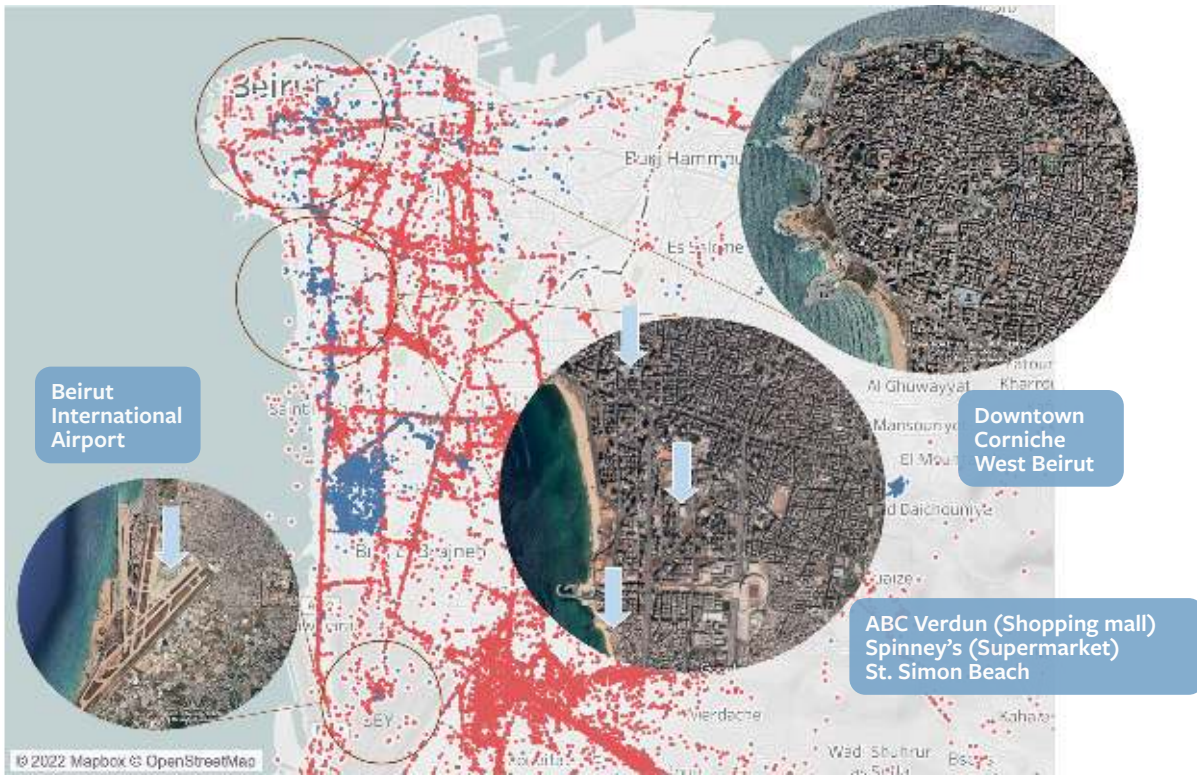
Conclusion 2: Hezbollah and the LAF Are Not Socially Separate

The overall countrywide movement patterns shown in Figure 1, along with the city-specific movement patterns displayed below (see Figure 2 for Beirut and Figure 3 for Tripoli), indicate considerable overlap between the LAF and Hezbollah in social settings. As the Beirut data indicate, LAF members shop in the same markets, visit the same cafés and cinemas, travel the same streets, and swim at the same beaches as Hezbollah members. This is consistent with the finding above that Hezbollah is not a separate and distinct entity that competes for influence or control with the LAF and the national government. On the contrary, Hezbollah is integrated across Lebanese society and government.

Conclusion 3: No ‘Smoking Gun’ of Hezbollah-LAF Collusion

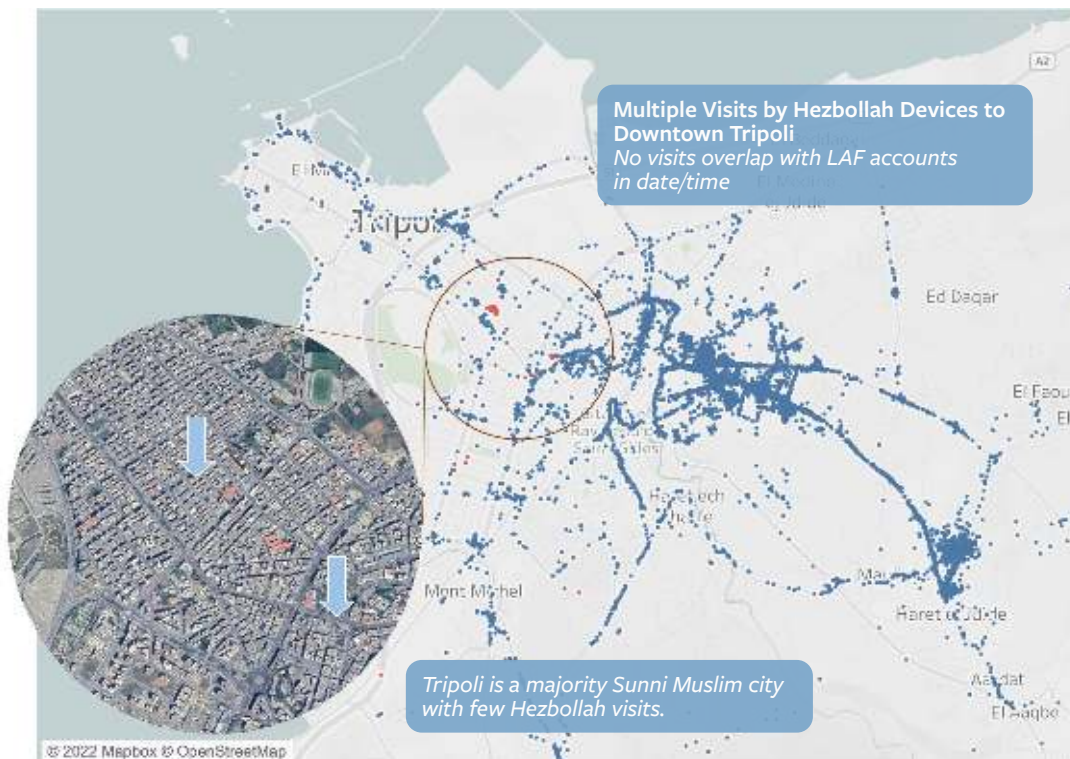
Despite the co-location of LAF and Hezbollah devices in social settings, the devices do not generally overlap at the places and times of known combat events or other security incidents. Thus, one cannot infer LAF-Hezbollah cooperation from the available movement data (at the current level of fidelity, discussed in the appendix). This does not mean such collusion is not occurring. As noted above, during the Battle of Aarsal in 2014 and the Qalamoun campaign in 2017, field reports and media coverage suggested collusion. In 2018, UNIFIL reported LAF-Hezbollah collusion to prevent UN investigation of Hezbollah’s cross-border tunnels. It is possible that a future incident might provide evidence of collusion through movement-data analysis. Yet, for now, it is the qualitative evidence that favors a collusion hypothesis.

Figure 2. LAF and Hezbollah Movement in Beirut



Note: Hezbollah devices in red; LAF devices in blue

Figure 3. LAF and Hezbollah Movement in Tripoli



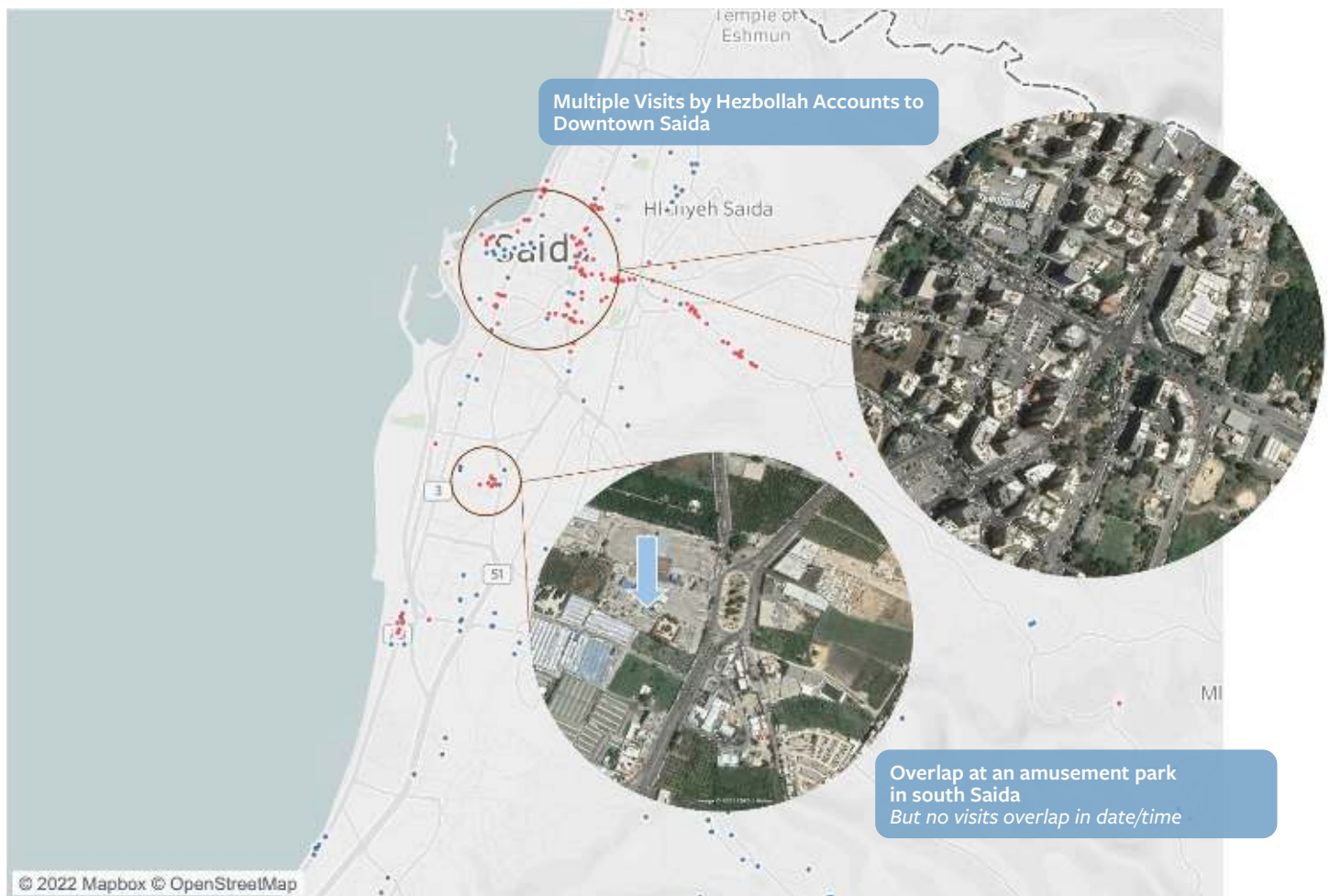
Note: Hezbollah devices in red; LAF devices in blue

Conclusion 4: Hezbollah Appears to Have Greater Freedom of Movement Than the LAF

The movement data suggest that Hezbollah devices travel more freely throughout Lebanon than LAF ones. Notice, for example, that Hezbollah devices regularly visit Tripoli (Figure 3) and Saida (Figure 4), both Sunni-dominated locations with a high LAF presence. By contrast, LAF devices are absent across large swaths of Hezbollah territory, such as in southern Lebanon.

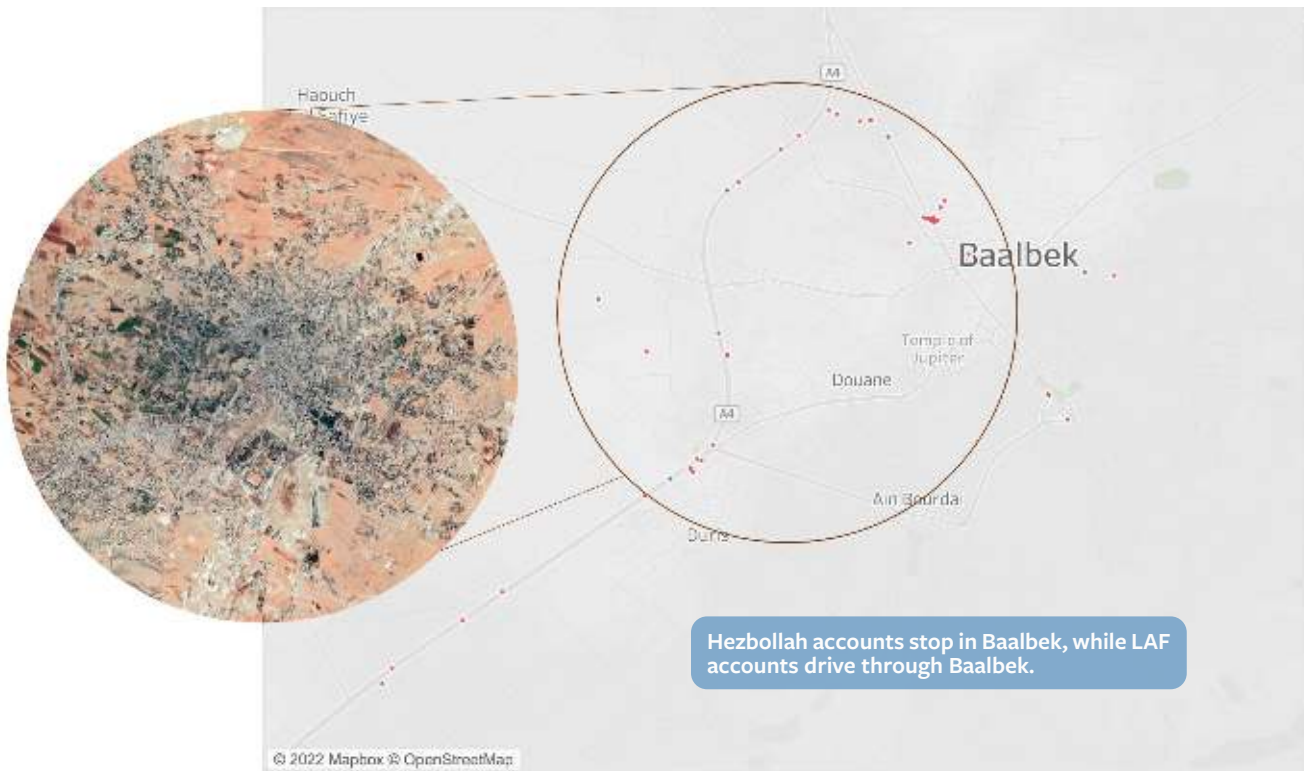
In other Hezbollah strongholds, such as Baalbek, the location of a major Hezbollah headquarters (Figure 5), LAF devices are identifiable only on highways. Notice also the high density of Hezbollah presence at Beirut’s Rafic Hariri International Airport and on the surrounding roads and perimeter areas, compared with the extremely limited LAF presence in these areas (Figure 2). This observation reinforces reportage that suggests strong Hezbollah control of the airport despite attempts (including U.S. pressure) to encourage the LAF to rein in Hezbollah.

Figure 4. LAF and Hezbollah Movement in Sunni-Majority Saida



Note: Hezbollah devices in red; LAF devices in blue

Figure 5. LAF and Hezbollah Movement in Hezbollah-Dominated Baalbek



Note: Hezbollah devices in red; LAF devices in blue

Overall, the movement data strongly suggest the LAF is neither confronting nor competing with Hezbollah. Both organizations overlap considerably in terms of movement across Lebanon, but whereas the LAF has an extremely limited presence in areas critical to Hezbollah — such as the border zones, the airport, and the areas near Hezbollah’s headquarters in Baalbek and Beirut — Hezbollah is able to move freely in areas dominated by the LAF. Members of both organizations shop, socialize, and live in the same areas, and there is no indication of conflict or competition between them in a social sense. Despite the absence of incontrovertible evidence demonstrating collusion between the LAF and Hezbollah, these data therefore suggest the “counterweight” theory underpinning U.S. assistance is unsupported by evidence.

Part 3: Implications for Future U.S. policy

Lebanon remains in crisis, which constrains the possibility of improved outcomes irrespective of changes in U.S. policy. Rather than holding fast to its existing policy, Washington should retire the counterweight theory that has prevailed for 15 years.

Lebanon’s Crisis Evolves

The protests that brought down the Lebanese government in 2019 also generated violent clashes that put the LAF in the unenviable position of enforcing public order against its own population. During the protests, the ISF struggled in its policing role and Hezbollah mostly hung back, letting the LAF bear the brunt of the clashes.⁸⁹ The crisis deepened throughout

89. Nicholas Blanford, “Weapons or food? Lebanon’s Armed Forces risk going hungry,” *MENASource*, March 23, 2021. (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/weapons-or-food-leb>)

the winter of 2019-2020, with Lebanese political elites repeatedly failing to reach consensus on economic and political reforms. COVID-19 brought further disruption in 2020. The enormous explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, killed 200 people, wounded thousands, and devastated the port and surrounding areas. It was a catalyst for major unrest and helped expose Hezbollah's de facto control of the port and the massive corruption and incompetence involved in the group's control of the facility. The explosion's aftermath brought down another Cabinet, and Lebanese politicians took more than a year to form a new government.

In October 2021, Hezbollah and its ally Amal incited protests in an attempt to force the dismissal of a judge whose investigation into the 2020 port explosion was likely to implicate Hezbollah and other members of the government. Sectarian clashes broke out between Hezbollah and Amal militia members, their political opponents, and an anti-Hezbollah Christian militia, killing six and wounding at least 30. After hours of gunfire and street fighting, LAF troops stepped in to secure the area and raided several locations in Beirut in search of militants. The LAF also sought to mediate between the armed parties. President Aoun condemned all parties to the violence (including his parliamentary ally Hezbollah) and announced that the investigation into the explosion would continue.⁹⁰

Prior to the outbreak of sectarian violence, President Joe Biden in September 2021 authorized the release of an additional \$47 million "to provide immediate assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces."⁹¹ When the violence broke out in mid-October, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland happened to be in Beirut to announce further assistance for the LAF,

bringing the total for 2021 to \$187 million.⁹² Further assistance followed over the winter of 2021-2022, with \$67 million in Foreign Military Financing allocated to support the LAF.⁹³

The Risks of an Incremental Approach

The U.S. government has taken an indirect approach to dealing with the Lebanon crisis, relying heavily on France, the Gulf States, Jordan, and Egypt as well as on international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. However, this approach risks producing an incremental, reactive response to the crisis rather than addressing Lebanon's issues as part of a longer-term solution. Now is therefore an excellent time to revisit U.S. support for the LAF, especially the enhanced security assistance conceived under radically different circumstances some 15 years ago.

Making policy amid crises is inevitable in foreign policy. Security assistance, in particular, helps partners deal with issues beyond their capacity, which often emerge through crises. Still, it is essential to step back from the immediate concerns of the 2019-2021 crisis, evaluate the outcomes of enhanced U.S. assistance since 2007, and assess U.S. assistance for the LAF within a broader strategy for Lebanon and the region.

As noted, U.S. assistance programs in Lebanon seek primarily to reinforce entities that could help counter Iran, mitigate the risks posed by Hezbollah, and stabilize Lebanon's economy and government. The State Department pays close attention to end-use monitoring (EUM) to "verify the end-use, accountability, and security of defense articles, services, and training provided under grant-based assistance and FMS [Foreign Military Sales] programs, from delivery through their employment and eventual disposal."

⁹⁰. "Beirut News: Sectarian Gun Battles Leave Six Dead," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2021. (<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/10/14/world/beirut-lebanon-clashes>)

⁹¹. Joseph Haboush, "US President Biden announces close to \$50 mln in aid for Lebanon's army," *Al Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia), September 7, 2021. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/09/07/US-President-Biden-announces-close-to-50-mln-in-aid-for-Lebanon-s-army>)

⁹². Joyce Karam, "US boosts support to Lebanese army as Beirut violence overshadows diplomat's visit," *The National* (UAE), October 14, 2021. (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/us-news/2021/10/14/us-boosts-support-to-lebanese-army-as-beirut-violence-overshadows-diplomats-visit>)

⁹³. "US plans to reroute \$67m in aid towards Lebanon's armed forces," *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), January 29, 2022. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/29/us-plans-to-reroute-67-mln-in-aid-towards-lebanons-armed-forces>)

The department claims that even amidst the current crisis, the “LAF continues to comply fully with all EUM reporting and security requirements.”⁹⁴ At the same time, the risk that U.S. weapon systems intended for the LAF might be diverted to Hezbollah or other terrorist groups in the event of a government collapse or wider unrest remains real. Whatever other decisions are made, the annual EUM certification requirements that Congress mandated for U.S. assistance for Lebanon will remain critical.

Obviously, however, the worst thing that could happen in terms of weapons diversion or proliferation — as recent experience in Afghanistan proves — would be a full or partial collapse of the Lebanese state, leading to a flood of weapons and trained personnel from a fragmenting LAF to sectarian militias. While such a collapse did not occur during the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990, preventing it was a key USG goal throughout that conflict. After 15 years of enhanced assistance and significant transfers of advanced weapon systems to the LAF, and against the backdrop of a stronger Hezbollah, the risk of a state collapse is even more important today.

Retiring the ‘Counterweight’ Theory of LAF Assistance

It is critical to recognize that the theory of change underpinning U.S. assistance — that enhanced support for the LAF will improve the LAF’s combat performance and enable it to serve as a counterweight to Hezbollah — has been only partially validated, at best. LAF combat performance, as noted in Part 1, has indeed improved over time, and that improvement is closely correlated with enhanced U.S. security assistance. But this applies across a narrow range of missions — primarily, confronting Sunni terrorist groups that also oppose Hezbollah. In tasks that run counter to Hezbollah’s interests (such as working with UNIFIL to secure the Blue Line), the LAF is far less effective and has shown little or no improvement.

The harsh reality is that far from counterbalancing Hezbollah by strengthening the Lebanese state, enhanced U.S. assistance since 2007 has coincided with a significant increase in Hezbollah’s influence, to the point where the terrorist group is now embedded at the highest levels within that state. A stronger LAF that serves the Lebanese Republic cannot counterbalance Hezbollah if that republic operates under an effective Hezbollah veto or is paralyzed by the group’s influence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A decade and a half of enhanced U.S. military assistance has improved LAF combat performance, particularly in counterterrorism. That progress is visible in the contrast between the difficult and drawn-out campaign of Nahr el-Bared in 2007, the partial success at Arsal in 2014, and then finally the LAF’s competent combined-arms maneuver and effective counter-ISIL operations during the Qalamoun campaign in 2017. Likewise, in dealing with explosive remnants of war, including demining and ordnance disposal, U.S. assistance has improved LAF performance and enhanced civilian safety in key parts of the country.

However, LAF efforts under UNSCR 1701 show the limits of military assistance: The LAF has demonstrated a clear pattern of covering for Hezbollah infiltration, hampering UN efforts to monitor Lebanon’s southern border, and blocking UNIFIL from investigating Hezbollah activity. The dysfunctional LAF-UNIFIL relationship illustrates how, contrary to the “counterweight” theory, U.S. assistance for the LAF does little to strengthen the Lebanese state to the detriment of Hezbollah. Hezbollah’s influence over the institutions of government ensures the LAF does not threaten the group’s vital interests. Thus, LAF counterterrorism operations focus on Sunni jihadist groups that also oppose Hezbollah; LAF operations around Arsal and during the Qalamoun offensive were likely coordinated

⁹⁴ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Fact Sheet, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Lebanon,” May 21, 2021. (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-lebanon>)

with Hezbollah. In the final analysis, the theory on which enhanced U.S. assistance was based — strengthening a non-sectarian Lebanese state to compete for influence with Hezbollah — is no longer valid, if it ever was.

Hezbollah has endured significant setbacks, yet they have mostly been self-inflicted rather than the result of American support for the LAF. In the process of co-opting the Lebanese government, Hezbollah became part of the corrupt establishment that people on the streets (including many former Hezbollah supporters) are now protesting. The group’s military adventurism in Syria after 2013 showed Hezbollah to be an Iranian proxy rather than a defender of all Lebanese against Israel. Hezbollah rocket attacks on Israel, far from garnering popular support, led local residents to beat and detain a Hezbollah rocket team in August 2021 as punishment for risking Israeli retaliation. In that incident, the LAF had to step in and rescue the hapless Hezbollah crew.⁹⁵

Since the onset of Lebanon’s multi-stage crisis in 2019, the LAF has borne the brunt of public anger against the entrenched elites (including Hezbollah) that triggered the crisis. Thus, far from helping counterbalance Hezbollah, U.S. assistance for the LAF since 2007 may merely have helped Hezbollah avoid some of the worst consequences of its own ill-judged decisions.

With these conclusions in mind, the following recommendations seem appropriate:

(1) Maintain the requirement for an annual certification pertaining to the diversion and proliferation of U.S.-provided weapons to ensure they are not diverted to Hezbollah or other terrorist organizations. Whether or not the USG continues providing weapons to the LAF, the force’s existing stocks will require continued end-use monitoring, and Congress may wish to consider asking the

Government Accountability Office to review the effectiveness of that monitoring.

- (2) Consider refocusing assistance away from LAF units in the UNIFIL area of responsibility that are seen as covering for Hezbollah**, and put that assistance to more effective uses.
- (3) Continue ERW disposal** and related activities that benefit the Lebanese people, but condition future aid on independent monitoring to validate that the LAF is not cooperating with Hezbollah-linked organizations that may be stockpiling munitions under the cover of demining.
- (4) Abandon the LAF counterweight theory** and focus instead on directly weakening Hezbollah by interdicting Iranian and Syrian support for the group; by maintaining or increasing sanctions on Iranian sponsorship of Hezbollah; by allying with anti-corruption, non-Hezbollah, and anti-Hezbollah components of the civilian government; and by amplifying anti-corruption voices within the opposition movement, whose protests target Hezbollah as much as other elements of the Lebanese establishment.

As a frontline state in the ongoing conflict with Salafist-jihadist terrorism in Syria and elsewhere, Lebanon is an important regional player. And with Hezbollah increasing its reach and continuing to expand its arsenal, the risk of another Israel-Hezbollah war or broader regional conflagration remains real. For both these reasons, U.S. military-to-military engagement with the LAF makes sense and should continue because it provides insight into Lebanese decision making and access to influential leaders. But as noted in this monograph, the evidence suggests mixed outcomes at best for the enhanced assistance program as it has existed since 2007. Amid the extended crisis of 2019-2021, the time is right to review and refocus key elements of the program.

⁹⁵. Nicholas Blanford, “Rockets were fired from Lebanon into Israel again. Another game of brinkmanship?” in *MENASource*, August 11, 2021. (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/rockets-were-fired-from-lebanon-into-israel-again-another-game-of-brinkmanship>)

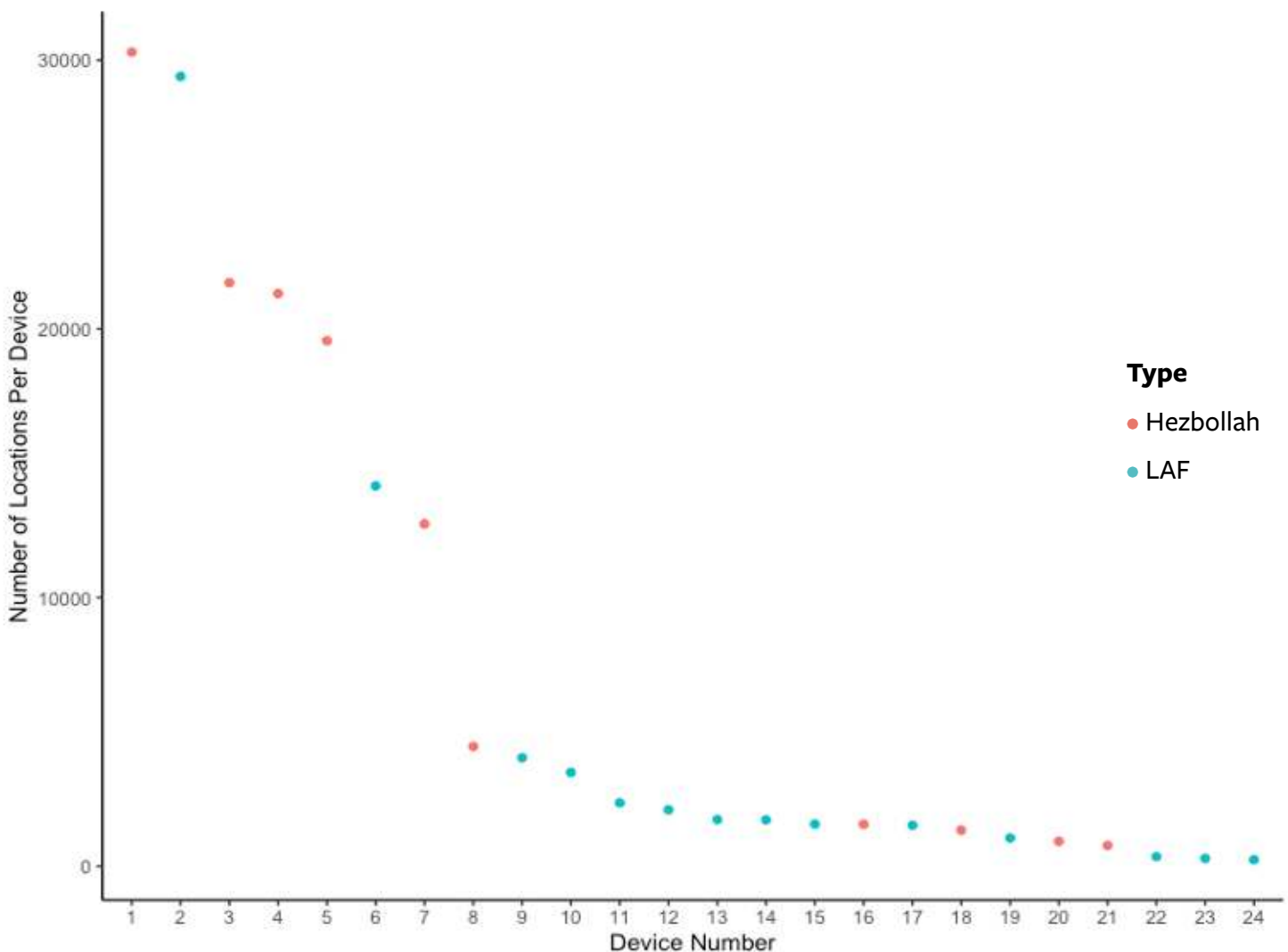
Appendix: Movement-Pattern Analysis Methodology

The movement intelligence analysis in this study utilizes a tool that integrates location services from smartphone applications and internet protocol (IP) addresses. The tool requires at least one known location for a specific device along with collateral movement information or pattern-of-life data. It can track a given device’s movement back in time (within the past 1.5 years) to the present. It can also monitor a device’s current location in near-real time (up to approximately 24 hours behind the time a search is conducted). The analysis examines 178,486 data points associated with 24 Lebanese

devices over two years. Figure 6 shows the number of data points for each of those devices.

The tool allows analysts to determine directional movement data showing point of origin, direction of movement, and pauses or stops along a route of travel. It can search within single or multiple geofenced locations, each with a maximum radius of 2,500 meters. Fenced searches detect and flag any devices present within the predetermined geofence during a particular timeframe. The tool allows analysts to set “Signal Filters” to narrow searches, and to identify the latitude and longitude, the user’s advertising ID number and IP address, the date and time, and any anomalies noted for a particular device at that location.

Figure 6. Distribution of Location Data by Device Examined



For this study, the author used the geofencing and filter-setting functions in a three-step process to triangulate the locations and movements of mobile devices that collateral data indicate likely belong to Hezbollah or LAF personnel.

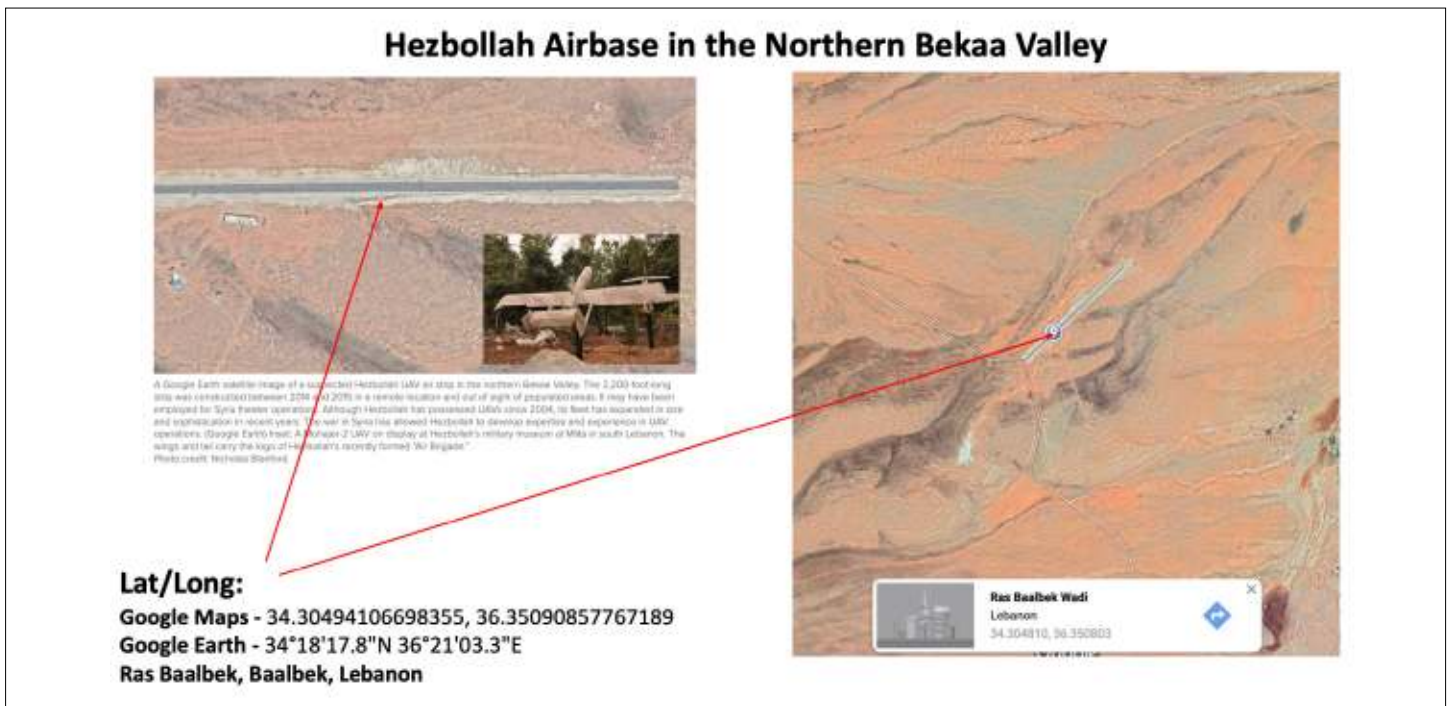
The first step was to identify locations where one could be reasonably confident that any mobile device present during certain time periods would be a Hezbollah- or LAF-linked device. For the LAF, those locations included Lebanese Army and Air Force bases as well as the known LAF headquarters in Yarze, a suburb southeast of Beirut. For Hezbollah, because the locations of most of the organization’s bases are secret, and because there is such a dense pattern of Hezbollah sites across some parts of Lebanon, the process was more complicated. Using collateral data, analysts identified several bases (including the one shown below in Figure 7, which media reporting identified), but there were almost no devices detected (“hits”) at these bases. This suggests Hezbollah operatives at these locations were surveillance-aware and had discarded or masked their mobile devices before approaching these sites.

In addition to Hezbollah bases, the author also geo-located places where Hezbollah activity was known to have occurred at specific dates and times over the prior 18 months. This event-data analysis included attacks, demonstrations, funerals, and locations drawn from a leaked database of purported Hezbollah missile production and storage facilities in Beirut. In total, the author identified 79 events involving Hezbollah members and an additional 18 Hezbollah-related locations (such as bases, production facilities, or other Hezbollah sites).

The second step was to identify all mobile devices known to have visited these locations. In some cases, such as for LAF and Hezbollah bases, the author’s protocol was to treat as an associated device any account that visited those locations at any time. In other cases, such as for events (for example, funerals), our geo-location criteria searched the location in question for hits during the time period when an event of interest had taken place.

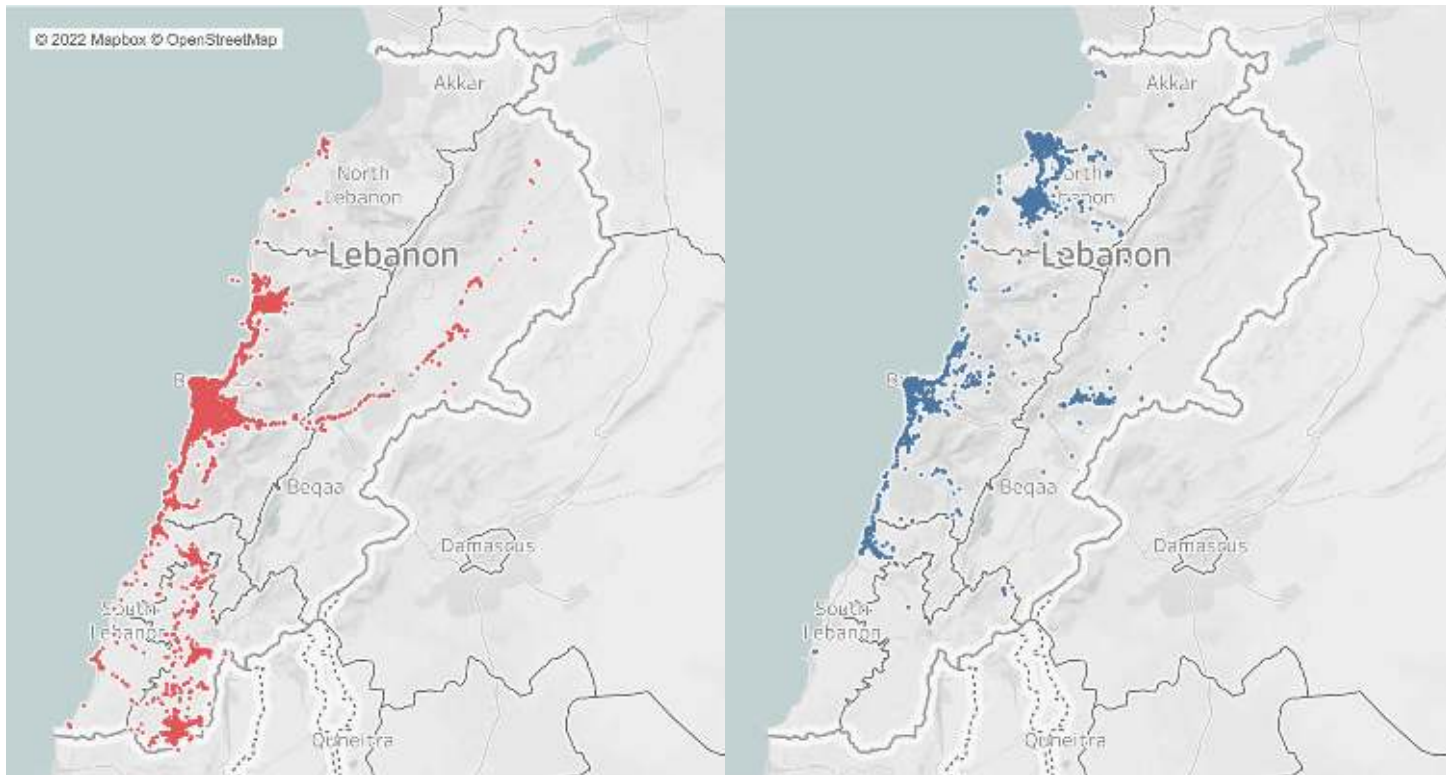
The third step was to investigate any account that was present in those locations within the time frame in question. This was straightforward for LAF accounts: The author identified 14 mobile devices that had

Figure 7. Geo-Locating Hezbollah Activity to Identify Hezbollah-Linked Devices



A publicly reported Hezbollah airbase in the northern Bekaa Valley (photo and caption by the Atlantic Council, left) and the geolocation of that base via Google Earth (right). Located over 90 miles north of the Litani River, the base is well beyond UNIFIL’s area of responsibility.

Figure 8. Reviewing Results for Movement Patterns of the Total Sample



Note: Hezbollah devices in red; LAF devices in blue

been located within LAF bases for a lengthy period, indicating they belonged to LAF personnel. For Hezbollah, the author identified 104 devices that were present in certain Hezbollah-related locations, but eliminated 94 of those devices after a preliminary analysis because their movement patterns suggested they could have passed through those locations for reasons unrelated to Hezbollah activity.

The resulting movement patterns for Hezbollah-linked and LAF-linked devices provided confirmation regarding the affiliation of those devices. As shown in Figure 8 above, Hezbollah-linked devices concentrated in regions that are known Hezbollah strongholds (such as the suburbs south of Beirut and Beqaa in southern Lebanon), while LAF-linked devices were present in regions in which one would expect LAF accounts to travel (such as Saida, downtown Beirut, downtown Tripoli, and the LAF headquarters area near Zahle). These results provided an initial coarse-grain validation of the preliminary analysis identifying likely Hezbollah and LAF devices.

These results are *suggestive*, not *definitive*. It is technically feasible to definitively identify each one of these devices as belonging to a Hezbollah or LAF member and to identify specific members by linking their known residential locations (represented by the mean midnight location for each device over the observed time period) with additional collateral information (address records, vehicle licensing, or social media) for that location. However, given that Lebanon is a current and potentially future conflict zone in which both terrorists and state actors are likely to target individuals whose affiliations are published in this way, the ethical determination was made not to connect devices to the specific individuals who own them. Furthermore, the data are presented here in the form of heat maps showing the concentration of Hezbollah and LAF devices rather than specific device movement tracks. This is to prevent any individual or device from being targeted as a result of this research.

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