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Holding Lebanon Together: The Lebanese Armed Forces

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Middle East events, particularly in Syria, are impacting Lebanon. Unrest in Tripoli has recently exposed Lebanon's tenuous and often changing political alliances that can make for strange bedfellows as seen in the Iran/Hezbollah March 8 Alliance and Western/Gulf Cedar Revolution backed March 14 Alliance. Since an unwritten interpretation of the Lebanese constitution has certain sects heading the highest offices of government, i.e the President is Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister is Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament is Shiite, the regional—and sectarian—implications of regime change in Syria are acutely felt within and among the Lebanese political elite. On 21 May, [Western newspapers highlighted the complex landscape of Lebanon's political map by interpreting the killing of a prominent Sunni sheikh at a military checkpoint in north Lebanon](#) as an omen that [sectarian violence](#) would possibly begin in this religiously diverse country.

Responding, the Lebanese Armed Forces launched an open investigation and have taken measures to defuse any further sectarian flare-up. This small Mediterranean country's military – the Lebanese Armed Forces - has shown a remarkable ability to remain apolitical, non-sectarian and open, and will continue to do so as articulated by [President Sleiman](#) in recent press reports. More importantly, it is trusted by the Lebanese people more than any other state institution.

The composure of the Lebanese Armed Forces in 2011 helped Lebanon weather the storm of the [UN Special Tribunal](#) investigating the Hariri murder. Some Western analysts assumed instability would result because the Tribunal exposed senior members of Hezbollah. Many feared fragmentation within the government over Tribunal funding. Additionally, others worried that the [Arab League suspension of Syria](#) and the [U.S. Spy-Gate catastrophe](#), in which Hezbollah apparently rolled up a network of CIA informants, would cause disruption. Throughout, Lebanon and its armed forces stood firm.

[Concerns](#) in Congress over selling more lethal weapons to the Lebanese Army come from a fear that those weapons might or will end up in the hands of Hezbollah, to be used against Israel. Hezbollah has a political party within the national government and also has significant influence in local governance in southern Lebanon. Those concerned believe a stronger and more capable Lebanese Army reliant on US weapons but under the sway of Hezbollah could complicate any Israeli reaction to future Hezbollah aggression.

However, we posit this reasoning overlooks a fundamental aspect of the Lebanese Army–Hezbollah relationship. Commentators assume that as the Lebanese Army gets stronger, so too does Hezbollah. However, the relationship is the opposite. The Lebanese Army has an inverse relationship with Hezbollah; the stronger and more capable the Army, the weaker Hezbollah. The same balance analogy can be equally applied to Lebanese institutions versus Lebanese armed factions and militias.

The case for disarming Hezbollah is based on four fundamental conditions. Although not in the open press, these conditions are discussed in Lebanon. First, the Palestinian militias in Lebanon must disarm before Hezbollah. Second, there must be a credible solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in southern Lebanon. Third, Israel must withdraw from the [Shebaa Farms](#). Fourth, the Lebanese Armed Forces need greater defense capabilities than Hezbollah.

The refugee issue and the Shebaa Farms requirement will likely prove difficult (or impossible) to resolve without a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement, but disarming the Palestinian militias within Lebanon and strengthening the Lebanese Armed Forces' defense capabilities are maybe more doable. Addressing any of these issues weakens Hezbollah's claims of the need to remain armed and could be used to start further informal and maybe formal talks about disarming. Moreover, the situation in Syria will likely weaken the militia's linkage to Iran providing a better environment to help Hezbollah's military wing move from violence to politics. Syria's border with Lebanon is essential for transporting arms from Iran to Hezbollah. Additionally, Hezbollah's unequivocal support of the Assad regime during its continued violence against Syrians has already damaged its image among Sunni Arab supporters who tended to see Hezbollah as a force against Israel, rather than a pawn for Iran.

The Lebanese Army is not Hezbollah's quartermaster. Without some lethal weapon capabilities the Army will never be in a position to secure its border as any sovereign state should be able to do. So far we see no evidence that any weapon support to the Lebanese Army has ended up with Hezbollah.

The U.S. has provided around \$700 million in security assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces since 2007 including the Internal Security Forces. Recent events and the Arab uprisings, the changing situation in Syria, and the [performance of the Lebanese Armed Forces in Tripoli](#) might provide a catalyst for a change in the level of support. In seeking regional partners, the Lebanese Armed Forces offers a tried, tested, and credible candidate that can keep a country held together in changing times.

The persistent divisions in Lebanese society, most recently highlighted by the pro-Syrian March 8 and pro-Western March 14 Alliances' stances with respect to the situation in Syria and also the situation in north Lebanon have shown that Lebanon is not immune to the sectarian ills resulting from change in the [Arab world](#). Lebanese Armed Forces are proving to be the country's greatest stabilizing force, and their professionalism should be matched with appropriate lethal capabilities, which will be key for them to become the only armed force in Lebanon. The Lebanese Armed Forces remain the Rock of Lebanon. Resourced for success, the Lebanese Armed Forces would be a significant factor for peace in the region.

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