

Alma Report

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Are Units in the LAF in Danger of Becoming a Proxy of Hezbollah?

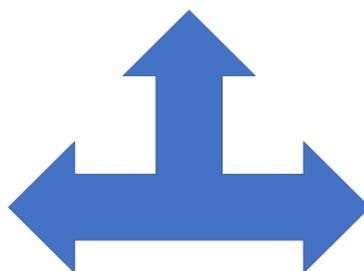
By: Tal Beerli & Sarit Zehavi



The Lebanese people



Lebanese Armed Forces



Hezbollah

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Introduction

Last month, US government officials announced a reassessment of its \$105 million security assistance package granted to Lebanon. This announcement initiated a discussion within the US administration and Congress regarding the effectiveness and purpose in assisting the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The LAF is perceived by many of the decision makers in the United States as one of the only institutions in the country capable of defending the diverse communities in Lebanon whilst simultaneously being a future alternative to Hezbollah as a cooperative force should Hezbollah fall. As of today, it has been decided to transfer the \$ 105 million aid.

The following key questions remain:

1. can the LAF serve as a counter-force and an alternative to Hezbollah?
2. Is the tripartite principle "people-army-resistance" equation just a state-of-mind narrative or is there a deep and dangerous connection between the LAF and Hezbollah?
3. Is the LAF on the path of Shiiteization to becoming a Hezbollah proxy?
4. What are the risks and opportunities in the US assistance to the LAF?

First, it must be addressed, that the usage of the word proxy in the article, refers to Hezbollah's embedment in the LAF in a bottom-up approach. Meaning, that the influence of Hezbollah comes from soldiers and

officers – mainly serving in south Lebanon – who are supportive of Hezbollah's ideology, and even, part of Hezbollah itself. These soldiers and

officers use the LAF as a platform to conduct operations that serve Hezbollah's interest, as directed by high officials within Hezbollah.

This article's aim is to highlight that the Shiiteization ongoing in the LAF has the potential to turn whole units in the LAF, not only specific soldiers or officers, into proxy of Hezbollah.

The Shiiteization of the LAF

Since the signing of the Ta'af agreement, which marked the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1989, great efforts were put in place in order to blur the sectarian divide across the LAF and maintain a sectarian balance among the various religious denominations living in Lebanon: the Sunnis, Shiites, Christians and Druze. (Danny Berkowitz - Hebrew translation; "The main change agent facing Hezbollah – the role of the LAF" pg. 28-30).

Detailed official data regarding the sectarian division in the LAF has never been published. Nerveless, the percentage of Shiites serving in the LAF is steadily rising even though their percentage in the army does not match the Shiite percentage in the population. The current estimate is that the Shiite community today is the largest of all the communities in Lebanon and perhaps even larger than all the other communities put together.

The source of this estimate derives from research prepared at institutes in the United States and Lebanon yet as stated above no official Lebanese official has accurate information on the demographic distribution of the various communities in Lebanon. (Regarding the sectarian division of Lebanese residents, see; "International Science Society" research 'independent research and statistics company

founded in Beirut in 1995', published at the end of 201 in Al-Shahariya magazine).

In addition, the steady rise of the Shi'ite head count in the army also stems from the process of the deepening of the Shi'ite community's identity, connected with the Lebanese state. (Oren Barak "the transformation of the Lebanese officer corps since 1945 towards a representative military?" the middle east journal 2006-p.91).

The repeal of the conscription law in 2007 also contributed to this process and, according to IDF intelligence estimates from November 2011, since the repeal of the law there has been a clear downward trend in military recruitment from among the Christian community and an increase in military recruitment among the Shiite community in contrast. One possible explanation for this trend may be that the Christians see themselves as an elite community and therefore they are not in a hurry to volunteer into the military.

In the past, most of the senior officers in the LAF belonged to the Christian community. The figures from 2010 showed that 55% of all officers in the LAF were Christian and 22% were Shi'ite with a similar number of Sunni officers. However, updated figures from April 2014 show a clear trend of decline in the number of Christians in the army opposed to a significant increase in the number of Muslims. As of 2014, out of 64,592 conscripts in the LAF, 35% are Sunnis (22,931), 27% are Shiites (17,674), 6% are Druze (3,651) and only 24 percent are Christians (15,267). Another 8 percent are considered "other / undefined" mainly because of mixed marriages between religions and communities. If we segment this group, it is likely that close to one third of them are regarded as Shi'ites, so in fact as of 2014, the

total Shi'ite population in the LAF was about 30%.

From this data, we may be concluded that the Shiite community is the second largest community in the LAF and that over the years, there has been a clear rise in the number of Shiites serving in the LAF.

This trend is even more prevalent once we examine the segmentation of the number of combatants in the fighting units from different religions and communities. As of April 2014, the fighting force in the LAF numbered 33,546 soldiers and officers (i.e. units defined as combat units): with 43% of them being Sunni, 40% of them Shiites, and only 14% Christians. ("The politics of sectarianism in postwar Lebanon" – "between sectarianism and military development: the paradox of the LAF" chapter 7).

However, we do not have up-to-date data on the percentage of Shiite commanders compared to Christian commanders in the LAF.

Today, about 12 years after the repeal of the Compulsory Law, the natural increase among the population and the increase in the percentage of Shi'ites in the army, especially in the fighting force, can be deemed an advantage for Hezbollah. Hezbollah has a clear interest in staffing the army with "members of its community", many of whom are naturally affiliated and sympathetic to Hezbollah ideals.

LAF personnel serving Hezbollah's interest

During August 2017, the IDF revealed that Shiite Major, Yahya Hussein, serving as a commanding officer in the southern Lebanon army command,

is actually operating in Hezbollah ranks. In our estimation, Israel turned a spotlight on this officer with the intent of pointing out a widespread phenomenon of the exploitation and use of LAF personnel as Hezbollah operatives. Many officers and soldiers from the LAF have been recruited by Hezbollah (the vast majority being members of the Shi'ite community) and are working for the organization's interests, with an emphasis on activity against Israel. It is our belief that Shi'ite officers and soldiers, when the time comes, will place themselves directly under Hezbollah's command and carry out their missions against Israel with ideological, sectarian and even a family-based commitment.

Therefore, family ties between Hezbollah operatives and LAF officers and soldiers increases the potential for using the LAF, especially in southern Lebanon, as a corroborating platform or even as potential new proxies for Hezbollah to carry out offensive operations against Israel, both in routine times and in war. For the time being however, these conscripts are aiding and concealing Hezbollah's activity in southern Lebanon, violating the UNIFIL forces mandate.

LAF cooperation with Hezbollah

With the above in mind, we can query whether Hezbollah is engaging in a thorough, gradual and long-term process aimed at transforming the military from a state and national military that is outside of the sectarian dialogue into an army that, on command, will become another operative of Hezbollah? Or in the alternative, can certain LAF units be defined as part of Hezbollah?

During July 2016, Nasrallah stated that the LAF is a partner and a pillar in the tripartite principle; the army, the people and the resistance ("Al-Manar", 26 July 2016). Nasrallah's statement is validated by the close cooperation that exists between the LAF and Hezbollah, particularly in southern Lebanon, facing the Israeli border. According to IDF estimates, most of the stationed LAF soldiers in southern Lebanon are Shiites, while other members of the community

(Christians and others) serve in units located in central / northern Lebanon.

In addition to defending the country, the army sees as part of its mission to prevent a new civil war. As far as the army is concerned, clashing with Hezbollah would only drag the nation into such a conflict. As a result, the LAF appears to have adopted an approach to contain Hezbollah rather than confront it. An example of this approach can be found in the events of May 2008, as Hezbollah initiated violent clashes in Beirut.

Hezbollah justified this move by claiming it was responding to what it believed were hostile measures by then-Prime Minister Fuad Al-Siniora's government, including its decision to dismantle Hezbollah's private communications network and their attempt to dismiss a senior security officer (and ally of Hezbollah) at Lebanon's international airport. The army entered the city, declaring itself neutral in the crisis. This decision was heavily criticized by the March 14 Alliance party leaders who were allies of Hariri, the current Prime Minister, accusing the army of cooperating with Hezbollah.

In southern Lebanon today, there is increasing visibility of cooperation today between the LAF and Hezbollah. For example:

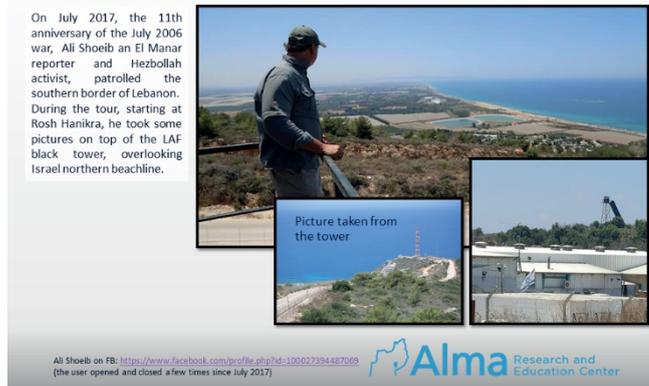
- (i) There are joint patrols existing in southern Lebanon merging the LAF and Hezbollah.
- (ii) Hezbollah members periodically use LAF army uniforms to disguise their activities.
- (iii) The LAF enables the deployment of the organization's military infrastructure, as revealed by the IDF, in the form of observation towers along the border under the pretense of a green "Without Borders Environmental Organization", or joint military observation towers used by both Hezbollah and the LAF.

A further example of Hezbollah's use of Lebanese military facilities can be observed in the village of Marauhin. In this village, located in southern Lebanon, near the border with Israel, opposite the Israeli community of Zarit, there is a LAF base in which Hezbollah has placed an

antenna for radio broadcasts. This antenna is used by the "Voice of al-Aqsa" radio station, operated by Hezbollah in cooperation with Hamas for propaganda purposes and incitement against the State of Israel.

Hezbollah access to LAF infrastructure

Ali Shoeib on the LAF tower facing south (Israel)



In early October 2006, the LAF completed its deployment in most of the area south of the Litani River in southern Lebanon in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

The main tasks of the LAF in this context are to protect Lebanon from violations and aggression from the Israeli side, and not to allow attacks on Israel from Lebanese territory. According to the European interpretation of the decision, the LAF, assisted by the United Nations (UNIFIL), is responsible for enforcing the resolution, specifically in the area south of the Litany River as a zone free of illegal weapons.

However, contrary to its main task under Resolution 1701, the LAF does not prevent or even attempt to prevent attacks on Israel from the Lebanese territory and certainly does not enforce the illegal weapons issue. A recent example of this was on 1 September 2019 when Hezbollah fired an anti-tank missile from the Lebanese village of Marun Al-Ras towards an Israeli vehicle and an IDF position just a few meters from the Israeli community "Avivim". This is of course was not the first time.

UNIFIL Commander General Stefano Del Cole described the Hezbollah attack as "a clear violation of Security Council resolution 1701 and an undermining of the stability in the region", Nevertheless, the LAF on its part referred

only to the IDF's response firing, claiming that Israel was the only party that fired, causing fires in southern Lebanon. However, Hezbollah had lit these fires in the cultivated fields near the border some days before the attack in order to hide its deployment there.

Hezbollah's Attack on Avivim Targeting an IDF Vehicle



The fact is that the LAF is actually acting against UN resolution 1701. As such, increased coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah is an attempt to diminish UNIFIL freedom of action from enforcing its mandate.

So far, neither UNIFIL nor the LAF have visited Hezbollah's border crossing tunnels into Israeli territory, those tunnels prepared by Hezbollah in order to attack Israeli border communities and IDF positions. On the occasions where Hezbollah's munitions warehouses exploded in southern Lebanon the LAF did not assist in uncovering the military infrastructure at the site, rather they avoided entry, and did not assist UNIFIL to locate the military infrastructure in real time. This allowed Hezbollah to vacate the exposed sites before any visit by UNIFIL.

In the end, despite much information revealed by Israel and the media regarding Hezbollah's military deployment (both in southern Lebanon, Beirut and in the Beqaa valley), contrary to UN resolutions 1701 and 1559, stating that Hezbollah should be disarmed, the LAF did nothing in the past 13 years, sometimes even impairing that effort.

Therefore, we have reached a situation that today in Lebanon there are 100,000 Hezbollah rockets deployed. 40% of those rockets are concealed in civilian infrastructures, in the area of southern Lebanon where the LAF is supposed to enforce a non-possession of illegal weapons

zone.

Who is behind the Shooting incidents against the IDF?

Several events taking place along the border in recent years indicate circumstantial links between Hezbollah's interests and the actual attacks carried out by the LAF against Israel. It is difficult to explain these events unless we presume Hezbollah initiates them or at the very least, they display a willingness by the LAF to assist Hezbollah.

For example, in August 2010, the LAF carried out a planned attack as a LAF sniper shot at IDF forces who were on the Israeli side of the border near the Lebanese village of Adisa. This incident resulted in the death of an Israeli Lieutenant Colonel Battalion Commander, and seriously wounded a Captain Company Commander. In response, two Lebanese soldiers were killed as part of the Israeli retaliation.

In spite of attempts by the Lebanese officers in the field to portray the shooting as a local initiative, the LAF decorated the soldier guilty of the shooting.

We estimate that the planned shooting of the IDF officers was executed according to an explicit directive from a local Company Commander in the LAF. Some days later, a Lebanese General by the name of Abed A-Rahman Shtli, a member of the Shiite community (originally from the city of Ba'albak in the Lebanese Beqaa, and at the time serving as a Liaison officer to UNIFIL) even admitted "the shooting took place

according to an explicit order" ("A-Safir", 5 Aug.2010).

We do not have information on whether Hezbollah explicitly instructed this shooting; however, it is our assessment that the shooting was carried out with the desire to act in Hezbollah's clear interests, contrary to the

Lebanese government's interest in keeping the border quiet.

The above incident serves as an example of one of the Hezbollah's main interests. Hezbollah does not allow to solve any land or maritime border disputes between Israel and Lebanon. The location of the shooting is defined by the Lebanese as; "contested territory" and therefore they do not recognize the area as Israeli territory, despite the fact that it is situated within the "blue line", the internationally recognized border and in spite of the UN's clear stance on the issue.

Furthermore, the shooting took place in the Shiite village of Adisa that is famous for its support of Hezbollah. On another occasion, the IDF revealed a Hezbollah military position in the same village; hence, the village leader admitted the fact that "every third house has Hezbollah infrastructure."

Speaking of which, in the same village there is a monument mutually commemorating LAF soldiers and the resistance fighters as one.

Monument Commemorating LAF and Hezbollah Martyrs from the Clash with IDF in 2010



In addition, it was apparent that the incident served Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah well, emphasizing his narrative. Referring to the incident in his speech, Nasrallah described the Lebanese military's moves as heroic moves, claiming that the event "was immersed in blood", reinforcing the reckoning of the tripartite principle "people-army-resistance" and that Hezbollah forces worked fully united with the LAF ... ("Al-Manar", 03 Aug. 2010).

On 4 Dec. 2013, Hassan Allelakis was the subject of a targeted assassination. Allelakis served as

senior military commander in Hezbollah and was in charge of the technology unit. An unknown assailant carried out the assassination and Hezbollah immediately attributed the action to Israel promising to inflict revenge. This promise created great tension on the border with Israel. On 15 Dec. 2013, ten days after the above assassination, a Lebanese soldier named Hassan Adel Ibrahim, fired a shot near the Israeli community of Rosh Hanikra killing an Israeli soldier. The Lebanese soldier, a member of the Sunni community (not a member of the Shiite community), was a 10-year veteran in the LAF, married with children, and originally from the village of Milba in northern Lebanon, ("Al-Arabia net").

We estimate that this was likely an act of revenge directed by Hezbollah using a LAF soldier as a proxy. In the Middle East, nothing is accidental. Hezbollah, like its Iranian boss, uses proxies to carry out attacks against Israel, also using non-Shi'ite players.

Evidence of this can be found via the words of Commander of the General Security Service and former Justice Minister General Ashraf Riffy ("Al-Ganobeia" website 22 Sept. 2019) where he stated "Hezbollah trains an army of Christians and Sunnis sending them to Iran for training by Revolutionary Guards".

Furthermore, the fact that this was a very rare incident of shooting and killing of an IDF soldier suggests that the timing was not accidental at all. In contrast to the August 2010 incident, this was not related to a border dispute.

We believe that, like the 2010 incident, Hezbollah's goal was to convey a clear message to Israel, declaring that harming Hezbollah activists endangers IDF soldiers on the Lebanese border. This notion repeated itself in the summer of 2019 when an anti-tank missile-shooting was carried out as revenge for the killing of Hezbollah operatives in Syria. In this case, Hezbollah was the one who fired while the LAF sat on the sidelines.

Is the LAF still separate and independent, and can serve as a counter-force to Hezbollah?

As seen throughout the recent weeks of protests in Lebanon, the LAF has emerged as an effective policing body keeping the peace and order while still maintaining a national approach devoid of support for any of the rival sides. Unlike those in Iraq and Iran, these protests usually have not been violently suppressed; many may remember the image of the Lebanese soldier crying in front of the protesters who in return hugged him.

The LAF, as perceived in the Lebanese society has been able to avert from the sectarian diversity remaining a force supported by all sections of society. Protesters in the demonstrations made it clear that the LAF is not their enemy and although they want to replace the government, they have nothing against the army. Some were handing out flowers to the LAF soldiers as part of the protest.

These images sparked hopes among many in the United States that this may be proof that the LAF could serve as an alternative to Hezbollah. However, during these protests there were several violent incidents that included shooting live ammunition at the protesters, causing three fatalities so far. Over the past two weeks it has become evident that the LAF's attitude towards the protesters has become more aggravated and some argue that this trend is due to the Hezbollah's inspiration hovering above.

The LAF has extensive public support. More than 40 support groups have been identified on Facebook, with around 600,000 followers' total. Given the fact that Lebanon has a population of 4.5 million citizens, this is a significant number. Yet, this public support for the army does not contradict the support for Hezbollah and its ideology of resistance. Thus, Hezbollah has succeeded in assimilating the tripartite principle: the army, the people, and the resistance (Hezbollah). As a result, many Lebanese do not see a contradiction between the existence of an official LAF and the existence of an armed resistance, even if the resistance is stronger than

the official army.

As the Lebanese President himself made clear when he stated; "As long as the army is not powerful enough to face Israel, this weapon (of Hezbollah) must exist, since it is complimentary to the army".

Since the LAF is the Lebanese national army, it cannot refrain from fighting against Israel in any scenario of a future war between Israel and Hezbollah. Hezbollah and the Shiites have become part of the Lebanese state and its mechanisms, furthermore is displayed in the fact that Hezbollah is a political party, which until recently was also a member of the Lebanese government. The LAF will strive to maintain and strengthen its status, competing with Hezbollah on the title of "the defender of Lebanon". It is our belief that the LAF will take an active part in any future war against Israel. The reason it did not happen in previous wars is the fact that the LAF deployed in southern Lebanon only after the last conflict in 2006.

In such a scenario, and consequently, it may be assumed that US military aid transferred to the LAF and deployed in southern Lebanon may be used against Israel.

In the battles that took place on the Lebanese-Syrian border, full cooperation existed between the LAF and Hezbollah. The LAF and Hezbollah closely cooperated in the defending and containing battles of August 2017, against ISIS, in the territories ISIS captured within Lebanon in the Arsal region.

Following is a photo regarding the fighting in Arsal, showing the flags of Lebanon and Hezbollah flying together adjacent to Hezbollah combatants.



This photo is taken from the Lebanese Christian based political party and former militia website (lebanese-forces.com), where they stated that Hezbollah conquered the territory from ISIS and transferred it to the control of the LAF. From this, we can understand the division of labor between the two organizations. Since the LAF was too weak to fight against Dahesh, eventually in Lebanese public opinion the credit for removing ISIS from Lebanon was ascribed to Hezbollah.

Arguably, this seems to indicate a positive trend as part of the integration of Hezbollah and Shiites into the Lebanese national state. However, as long as Hezbollah is not disarmed, the LAF remains weaker than Hezbollah. US aid cannot change that because Hezbollah has a great influence on the LAF and especially over its commanders and soldiers as mentioned above.

This puts the aforementioned aid at risk of falling into Hezbollah hands or put to use by the LAF at the will of Hezbollah and its interests. As long as the Lebanese, led by the Lebanese government and the Lebanese President do not change their perception on Hezbollah, and as long as they do not want to disarm and see Hezbollah as an illegitimate militia that undermines the sovereignty of the Lebanese state, the situation will not change.

Another image shown in an article by the official Lebanese news agency "Alwatania" in September 2017 shows an official military funeral of a Shiite officer from the LAF in the town of Shamistar in the southern region. It is hard to ignore the Hezbollah yellow flags hoisted along the funeral procession, attended by official representatives from both the LAF and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah Embedded within the LAF: Participates at Shiite LAF Soldier's Funeral



Israel will not come to terms with the reality that the LAF or parts of it serve as a support platform or proxy for Hezbollah's offensive interests and the organization's terrorist activities against Israel. Such a situation would place the LAF in a worst-case scenario as an enemy of Israel.

Risks and Opportunities Regarding Military Assistance to Lebanon

The assumption is that in a time of crisis, the LAF will be involved in fighting against Israel, and that first and foremost the LAF can't afford to not be portrayed as the "defender of Lebanon", leaving the title only to Hezbollah. In addition, and in the light of the above, it is our estimation there is a possibility that Hezbollah will use US

military aid transferred to the LAF. That is why it is important to work, primarily among the political and military leadership in Lebanon, towards dismantling the integration between the LAF and Hezbollah, and dismantling the tripartite principle; "the people the army and the resistance".

Although, it is obvious that the Lebanese government is hesitant to act intensively, comprehensively and resolutely to disarm Hezbollah due to its fear of a new civil war.

On the other hand, a complete cessation of US aid to the LAF would significantly reduce the US influence on Lebanon thus allowing Russia, that has already imbedding itself in the Middle East through its involvement in Syria, to enter the Lebanese arena as well. In an even more dangerous scenario, the LAF will receive assistance from Iran. All of this, in a way that would not allow any oversight of the types of munitions originating from these two countries. Therefore, it is worth

Conditional assistance would enable controlled pressure on the Lebanese government compelling implementation of UN resolutions, increased border control and cessation of cooperation with Hezbollah "dividing the task" of defending Lebanon.

Limiting the military aid to types of weapons that do not endanger the IDF is also paramount in any scenario of a future conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

The effect of the aid assessment can take place at predetermined scheduled periods assessing a cost benefit analysis as to whether or not it is appropriate to continue the transfer of military aid after a predetermined period.

considering a scaled policy, defined by schedules and terms in order to continue the providing of military aid and that only after seeing very clear results on the ground while taking into account the intelligence already presented regarding Hezbollah's military deployment in southern Lebanon, Beirut and elsewhere.

If US aid to Lebanon were limited, conditional, and exclusive, this would be an opportunity for the United States to preserve a minimal influence in Lebanon. This is especially required in light of the fact that Iran and Russia have already achieved great influence in Iraq and Syria (where the US withdrew some of its forces) and are seeking to strengthen their influence in Lebanon.

