

American Aid to the Lebanese Army Won't Help Cut Hezbollah Down to Size

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In mid-May, it looked as if the \$90 million in military aid that the Pentagon wanted to supply the Lebanese Army would, as it has since 2007, once again be approved. The money has been supplied, over more than a decade, to help the LAF disarm Hezbollah. But a lot has happened in Lebanon that should cause the Pentagon to rethink that aid. Hezbollah has not only not been disarmed, but has grown inexorably in military might; it is now the most powerful military force in Lebanon. [According to Ron Prozor](#), a former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, Hezbollah is “now more militarily powerful than most North Atlantic Treaty Organization members.”

Hezbollah is now “10 times as strong now as it was in 2006, and its military infrastructure permeates Lebanon.” It is much more powerful than the Lebanese Army. And not all the Shi’a

soldiers in Lebanon join Hezbollah; others have joined the Lebanese army in sufficient numbers to make it an ally in fact, if not in name, rather than an enemy of, Hezbollah.

What this means is that American military aid that was first given on the assumption in the Pentagon that the Lebanese Army would use it to keep Hezbollah contained has nothing to show for it. The Lebanese army has received \$1.7 billion in total aid from the American government since 2007, but has been unable either to disarm Hezbollah by so much as one rifle, or to get it to pull back from southern Lebanon, where it threatens Israel and hence, peace in the region.

The Israelis, for their part, are no longer being silent about the ineffectual Lebanese army and the power of Hezbollah. This May, at an Israeli conference which happened to follow the first Lebanese elections since 2009, Israel's defense minister Avigdor Lieberman said that Hezbollah – the Iran-backed militia, political party and terror group – had effectively taken control of the state. He said that Hezbollah was now “in complete control not just of the Lebanese [government], but also its army.”

Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon has steadily grown over the past decade. The May 9 elections consolidated its power, because the main bloc that opposed Iranian and Syrian influence – and hence Hezbollah, which is linked to both – underperformed.

Sometimes military aid helps to build useful ties to formerly hostile countries; such has been the case with American military aid to Egypt. In the case of Lebanon, the record of military assistance is less clear. U.S. military leaders have praised the relationship in recent years, assuring Congress, for example, that U.S. equipment has not ended up in the hands of Hezbollah. That's not much of an endorsement. In February, the head of U.S. Central Command, General Joseph Votel, publicly acknowledged for the first time that American special

operations forces have worked alongside the LAF in fighting against Sunni jihadis in the Islamic State. That's fine, but it still misses the point: there has still not been a word from the Pentagon about the LAF efforts at disarming Hezbollah.

Congress has not been as optimistic as the Pentagon. Congressmen such as Ted Cruz note that the LAF was, according to U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, supposed to disarm the militias. In the case of Hezbollah, that has not happened; its arsenal has only grown larger, and it now controls both the Lebanese government and that very army, the LAF, that was supposed to control it. In the past 11 years, the LAF has not managed to disarm a single soldier of Hezbollah. It long ago stopped trying.

Fed up with this state of affairs, this May Republican Senator Ted Cruz attached an amendment to the Senate defense authorization bill; it requires both the Pentagon and the State Department to assess how well the LAF is meeting the terms of Resolution 1701. For Cruz, who reportedly had wanted to end all American aid to the LAF without requiring such a review, this represented a compromise.

For more than a decade the Lebanese Army has received nearly two billion dollars from the Americans; "free money with no accountability" is what Tony Badran, a research fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, has called it.

Any fair review by the Pentagon will show that the LAF has been completely unable to disarm Hezbollah. Not only that: Hezbollah is "now ten times" more powerful than it was in 2006, stronger than some NATO armies.

So it is now up to the Pentagon. Will it continue to behave as the public-relations agent of the LAF, pretending the Lebanese army has been effective in curbing Hezbollah, and therefore deserving of continued American aid, or will it admit that the

LAF has failed to disarm a single Hezbollah soldier in more than ten years? Perhaps if Congress, tired of the excuses being made for the LAF, will at long last decide not to waste more American money on the Lebanese Armed Forces, but instead will redirect it to the only Western military that has shown itself both willing and able to take on Hezbollah – the Israel Defense Forces.

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