



U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon

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Summary

Since 2005, the United States has provided over \$600 million in security assistance to the government of Lebanon to increase the capacity of its various security forces to combat terrorism and secure Lebanon's borders against weapons smuggling to Hezbollah and other armed groups.

The recent increase in U.S. security assistance to Lebanon is an extension of a long-standing commitment on the part of the United States to foster a friendly and independent Lebanese government. The Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) was punctuated by targeted bombings against U.S. and Western interests and kidnappings of U.S. and Western civilians in Lebanon. At times, the violence threatened to spill over into adjacent areas of the Middle East, demonstrating the dangers to U.S. interests posed by instability in this small country.

A war between Israel and Hezbollah in mid-2006, subsequent clashes between radical Palestinian militia and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and ongoing sectarian conflict complicate U.S. support for Lebanon. In a broader sense, ongoing conflict not only jeopardizes the long-term stability of Lebanon, but also presents the United States with a number of pressing policy questions, including how to manage a long-standing commitment to Lebanon with other regional challenges.

Many observers believe that U.S. policy toward Lebanon has succeeded diplomatically in bringing France, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni Arabs together in order to thwart Iranian and Syrian influence through their proxy, Hezbollah. Critics, however, charge that U.S. policy has inflamed sectarian tensions and strengthened the resolve of Iran and Syria to maintain their influence in Lebanon.

As Lebanon approaches parliamentary elections, scheduled for June 7, 2009, attention has focused on the future of U.S. policy toward Lebanon and, in particular, the viability of U.S. security assistance as a tool of that policy. This report discusses the variety of current U.S. security assistance programs to Lebanon including objectives, vetting processes, end-use monitoring, and issues for Congress. The last section of this report discusses the upcoming elections and the future of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon. See also CRS Report R40054, *Lebanon: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Casey L. Addis.

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Background

The United States has historically sought a stable, democratic Lebanon free from Syrian and other foreign influence. In 2005, after the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon prompted Syrian withdrawal from Lebanese territory and brought an anti-Syrian and pro-Western government to power, the United States initiated a program of assistance to support Lebanon's government. After the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the United States refocused its policy toward supporting the Lebanese government along with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and enabling them to assert control over the entire territory of the country.¹ To that end, the Bush Administration requested and Congress appropriated an expanded program of security assistance to the LAF and ISF. Since then, U.S. policy and, in particular, U.S. security assistance to Lebanon, has been designed to increase the operational capacity of the LAF and ISF so that they can maintain law and order in times of political turmoil and secure Lebanon's borders against smuggling and, in particular, against the flow of weapons to Hezbollah and other non-state actors.

U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon

The Bush Administration's 2006 request for increased U.S. military assistance to Lebanon marked the third time in the last 25 years that the United States has sought to expand military cooperation with the Lebanese government. In the early 1980s the United States provided between \$145 and \$190 million in grants and loans to the LAF, primarily for training and equipment during the civil war. In the early 1990s, at the end of Lebanon's civil war, the United States again provided military aid, primarily in the form of non-lethal equipment (such as armored personnel carriers and transport helicopters) through the U.S. Department of Defense's sale of Excess Defense Articles (EDA).

For the first time since 1984, President Bush requested Foreign Military Financing (FMF) grants to Lebanon in the FY2006 foreign affairs budget. Originally, he sought approximately \$1.0 million in FMF for FY 2006 and \$4.8 million for FY 2007 to help modernize the small and poorly equipped LAF following Syria's withdrawal of its 15,000-person occupation force in 2005. However, the summer 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah spurred Western donors to increase their assistance to the LAF. Drawing from multiple budget accounts, the Bush Administration ultimately reprogrammed an estimated \$42 million to provide spare parts, technical training, and new equipment to the LAF.²

¹ The LAF is responsible for border security, counter-terrorism, and national defense. The ISF, or police force, is responsible for maintaining law and order in Lebanon.

² According to the U.S. State Department, the \$42 million in FY2006 military assistance to Lebanon was reprogrammed from several accounts, including \$10 million from Department of Defense Section 1206 funds, \$2.7 million from FMF, \$28 million from the Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) account, and \$1.2 million total from the Economic Support Fund (ESF) and International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Account (INCLE).

The FY 2007 Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 110-28)³ included over \$220 million in FMF for Lebanon, a significant increase from previous levels. The request also included an additional \$60 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement assistance (INCLE) to train and equip Lebanon's ISF. In addition, Section 1206 assistance to Lebanon increased in FY2007 to \$30.6 million from the FY2006 level of \$10.6 million (See "Section 1206" below). According to the U.S. State Department, U.S. security assistance would:

promote Lebanese control over southern Lebanon and Palestinian refugee camps to prevent them from being used as bases to attack Israel. The U.S. government's active military-to-military programs enhance the professionalism of the Lebanese Armed Forces, reinforcing the concept of Lebanese civilian control. To foster peace and security, the United States intends to build upon welcome and unprecedented Lebanese calls to control the influx of weapons.⁴

Members of the 111th Congress have continued to support the long-standing goals of independence and stability for Lebanon through ongoing assistance to the LAF and ISF in the Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009 (P.L. 111-8).

Table I. U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon, FY2006-FY2009

Regular and supplemental foreign operations and defense appropriations; current year \$U.S. in millions

Acct.	FY2006	FY2007	FY2007 Supp.	FY2008	FY2009 Bridge	FY2009	FY2009 Supl	FY2010 Request	Total
IMET	\$0.75	\$0.91	--	\$1.20	--	--			\$4.73
I206	\$10.6	\$30.60	--	\$15.10	--	--			\$56.3
FMF	\$30.00*	\$4.80	\$220.00	\$6.94	\$32.50	\$58.2	\$74.00	\$100.00	\$526.4
I207	\$10.0	--	--	\$10.0	--	--			\$20.0
INCLE	--	--	\$60.00	\$0.50	--	--		\$20.00	\$80.5
Total	\$51.35	\$36.32	\$280.00	\$34.74	\$32.50	\$58.2	\$74.00	\$120.00	\$688.62

Source: U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations, includes funds from the following accounts: Foreign Military Financing (FMF), International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Assistance (INCLE), International Military and Education Training (IMET). Funding for 'I206' refers to the Department of Defense Global Train and Equip program, authorized by Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006 (P.L. 109-163). Funding for 'I207' refers to the Department of Defense Security and Stabilization Assistance program, authorized by Section 1207 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006 (P.L. 109-163).

Notes: *includes reprogrammed funds.

³ Also known as the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act, 2007.

⁴ See Department of State FY2008 International Affairs (Function 150) Congressional Budget Justification, February 16, 2007.

U.S. Military Assistance to the LAF

International Military and Education Training (IMET)

The International Military and Education Training (IMET) program funds military education and training activities on a grant basis to foreign military and civilian officials from allied and friendly nations. Unlike FMF and INCLE, the U.S. has provided IMET grants to Lebanon every fiscal year since 1959, with the exception of 1991 and 1992. According to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, IMET training in Lebanon is designed to reduce sectarianism in the LAF and develop the force as a unifying national institution (see “The LAF as a National Institution”). U.S. Professional Military Education (PME) courses help foster one-on-one relationships with U.S. counterparts to improve interoperability, access, coordination, cultural sensitivity, and mutual understanding.⁵

Section 1206⁶

In 2005, Congress provided the Department of Defense (DOD) with authority and funds for a major DOD-run train and equip program. Established by Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 109-163, adopted January 6, 2006), as a pilot program, this foreign military capacity building authority allows DOD to transfer to partner governments funds to train and equip foreign militaries. According to the Department of Defense, traditional security assistance can take three to four years from concept to execution. Section 1206 allows a response to urgent and emergent threats and opportunities in six months or less. In Lebanon, Section 1206 funds have been used to move rapidly vehicle spare parts, ammunition, and other basic supplies to the LAF to assist in establishing a stronger stabilizing presence throughout the country.⁷ In particular, equipment provided under Section 1206 was used to restock the LAF arsenal with basic ammunition after the 2007 siege at Nahr al Bared Palestinian refugee camp and to build the LAF’s first secure communication system.⁸

Foreign Military Financing (FMF)

According to the State Department, FMF assistance to Lebanon supports LAF implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 which, among other things, calls for the

⁵ CRS consultation with Defense Security Cooperation Agency official, September 10, 2008.

⁶ See also CRS Report RS22855, *Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2006: A Fact Sheet on Department of Defense Authority to Train and Equip Foreign Military Forces*, by Nina M. Serafino.

⁷ FY2009 DoD Summary Justification, p. 103.

⁸ On May 20, 2007, Lebanese police conducted raids against suspected terrorist organization Fatah al Islam hideouts in Tripoli, Lebanon, reportedly in pursuit of bank robbers. Fighting between Fatah al Islam militants and Lebanese army and police units spread to the nearby Nahr al Bared Palestinian refugee camp and echoed in smaller clashes in the Ayn al Hulwah refugee camp in southern Lebanon. Prohibited by a 1969 agreement from entering Palestinian camps, the Lebanese Armed Forces besieged the camp and shelled militia positions in an effort to force the group out of Nahr al Bared. Fighting continued for three months until September 3, 2007, when the Army announced that it had taken control of the camp. By the end of the hostilities, 168 Lebanese soldiers and 42 civilians had died in the fighting. The refugee camp itself was left badly damaged, and as many as 30,000 Nahr al Bared residents were displaced.

disarmament of Hezbollah's militia, by enabling the LAF to establish a weapons-free zone south of the Litani River and to prevent weapons smuggling across the Lebanon-Syria border. Another primary objective of FMF is support for the Lebanese government in its fight against other terrorist groups in Lebanon.⁹ Since 2006, FMF assistance has been used to provide tires for tactical vehicles, spare parts for helicopters, small arms, and small arms ammunition.¹⁰ Most recently, the FMF program provided Lebanon with 60 HMMWVs (humvees) and 12 HMMWV ambulances. According to the Department of Defense, requests are currently being processed to provide the LAF with Tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) IIA launchers/missiles, communications equipment, Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) equipment, night sights/binoculars, towed howitzers, and small naval craft. Also in the planning stages is an overhaul of helicopters, and a number of construction projects.¹¹ See "Vetting and End-Use Monitoring" below for information on equipment security. On April 8, 2009, the Defense Department announced that it would provide to Lebanon Cessna close-air-support aircraft with precision Hellfire missiles, unmanned Raven aerial vehicles and M60 Abrams tanks. The equipment is more advanced than what has been previously provided. The deliveries are expected ahead of the election in June.¹²

U.S. Military Assistance to the ISF

U.S. security assistance to the ISF of Lebanon is provided primarily through the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). The INL program is funded through a combination of Section 1207 and INCLE accounts.¹³ The program is designed to increase the operational capacity of the force to combat crime, prevent and respond to terror attacks, monitor Lebanon's borders, and combat the infiltration of weapons and terrorists into Lebanon. These goals fit into the larger U.S. objective to provide political support for the independent Lebanese government that was established after Syria withdrew in 2005. The training, equipment, infrastructure, and institutional capacity that this program seeks to provide to the ISF are also intended to advance implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701, which call for the disarming of all groups outside of the Lebanese government and for improving border security to prevent the smuggling of weapons.

Training

Since funding was first appropriated for these purposes in FY2007, the United States has provided specialized training in counter-narcotics, intellectual property rights, cybercrime, and border security to over 1,000 ISF police officers, with the goal of training 8,000 police officers

⁹ Report from the Secretary of State to Chairwoman Nita Lowey, Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, "Certification on Foreign Military Financing and Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism, De-mining, and Related Programs Assistance for Lebanon," August 18, 2007.

¹⁰ CRS consultation with Defense Security Cooperation Agency official, September 10, 2008.

¹¹ CRS consultation with U.S. Defense Department official, January 30, 2009.

¹² "Gates, Lebanese Defense Minister Explore Expanding Bilateral Relations," *American Forces Press Service*, April 8, 2009. Available online at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=53846>.

¹³ CRS consultation with U.S. State Department official, March 3, 2009.

over a five-year period. The program has supported the training of 109 instructors for the police academy in Beirut as well as 54 first-level supervisors and mid-level officers to improve the leadership of the ISF. Future training planned for FY2009 includes community and proximity policing training to prepare the ISF for its new security role in Nahr al Bared Palestinian refugee camp.¹⁴

Equipment

U.S. equipment deliveries to the ISF include 4,000 sets of basic duty gear,¹⁵ 3,000 sets of riot control gear, 360 police vehicles, and materials used to refurbish 21 armored personnel vehicles. The ISF used this equipment to contain street protesters in May 2008, among other actions.

Infrastructure

Currently, INCLE and Section 1207 funds are also being used to refurbish the ISF academy and firing range in Beirut. Future plans include the refurbishment of 11 command and control centers throughout Lebanon and the installation of a secure national communications system to improve coordination and communication among ISF police forces operating in different areas of Lebanon.

Issues for Congress

The increase in U.S. security assistance to Lebanon has called attention to overall U.S. goals and objectives in Lebanon as well as the viability of U.S. assistance programs. The FY2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-8) includes language to this effect. Section 7044 (a) stipulates that:

Funds appropriated under the heading “Foreign Military Financing Program” in this Act for assistance for Lebanon shall be made available only to professionalize the Lebanese Armed Forces and to strengthen border security and combat terrorism, including training and equipping the Lebanese Armed Forces to secure Lebanon's borders, interdicting arms shipments, preventing the use of Lebanon as a safe haven for terrorist groups and implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701.

The Act also stipulates that none of the appropriated funds may be made available until the Secretary of State provides to Congress a detailed spending plan, including a strategy for professionalizing the LAF, strengthening border security, and combating terrorism. Progress toward meeting the goals of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon centers on a few key issues, including vetting and end-use monitoring, the integrity of the LAF, and the effectiveness of U.S. security assistance in advancing U.S. policy goals in Lebanon.

¹⁴ CRS consultation with U.S. State Department official, March 3, 2009.

¹⁵ According to the Department of State, “basic duty gear” includes all police gear except lethal weapons.

Vetting and End-Use Monitoring

Critics of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon have expressed concerns that the equipment provided could be mismanaged by the LAF or ISF or that it could fall into the hands of non-state actors, like Hezbollah, and ultimately be used against Israel. In order to minimize these risks, the United States has a number of vetting requirements for individuals receiving training under IMET and INL programs as well as end-use monitoring requirements for all equipment provided under U.S. security assistance programs.

Because IMET grants are low-cost programs administered to friendly and allied nations and because of the history of IMET program success in Lebanon, candidate selection for IMET training begins with input from the LAF. The LAF identifies and requests training based on the greatest added value to the overall force. Once the LAF submits training requests and the U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation in Lebanon requests and then receives authorization to place an LAF student in a particular course, the LAF selects the appropriate candidate. The candidate is subject to a background check to ensure an appropriate match for the training. Candidates also are subject to the vetting process for human rights abuses specified in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.¹⁶

All ISF candidates selected for U.S. sponsored training are first vetted for human rights abuses in accordance with the Leahy Amendment by the Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) as well as for connections to Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) through a process coordinated by the Terrorist Screening Center.¹⁷

The Lebanese government agrees to end-use, security, and retransfer obligations concerning military equipment and training transferred to Lebanon. The Lebanese government is responsible for maintaining the security of military equipment and training. Equipment and training are also subject to regular end-use monitoring by the U.S. Embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation, including visual inspections of LAF depots, serial number checks for equipment, and close monitoring of in-country, U.S.-sponsored training. According to the Department of State, the Lebanese government has readily agreed to extensive end-use monitoring procedures at the request of the U.S. government for sensitive equipment such as night vision devices and sniper rifles. According to the State Department, the government of Lebanon is a "model" in end-use monitoring cooperation.¹⁸

INL requires end-use monitoring agreements for all equipment delivered and facilities refurbished under the INCLE program. Monitoring is conducted by U.S. Embassy Beirut. All information is compiled into INL's annual End-Use Monitoring Report which includes information on location, use, condition, and program impact of the equipment provided. The reports also contain information on any problems encountered during the monitoring period and any program changes

¹⁶ Section 6205 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 USC 2378d) was for some years enacted in annual foreign operations appropriations. Popularly cited as the "Leahy Amendment," the law prohibits U.S. military assistance to foreign military units that violate human rights. The provision was put into permanent law in FY2008.

¹⁷ CRS consultation with Department of State official, September 9, 2008.

¹⁸ Testimony of Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman to Congress, March 24, 2009.

implemented. INL secures relevant binding commitments from the government of Lebanon through Letters of Agreement, setting forth extensive end-use, retransfer, and human rights related commitments, which the Lebanese government undertakes as a condition for receiving assistance.¹⁹

The LAF as a National Institution

When considering the possibility of providing more sophisticated weapons to Lebanon, the integrity of the LAF as a national force is an important factor. The LAF enjoys a positive image among a wide spectrum of Lebanese citizens. Observers say that most Lebanese, regardless of their affiliation, perceive the army as defending the country against foreign elements, particularly Israel. Many Lebanese view the LAF as the only national institution left in the country.²⁰

On the other hand, recalling that the fracture of the Lebanese army along sectarian lines was a key moment in Lebanon's collapse into civil war in 1976, some observers have expressed concerns about the character of the LAF and its viability as a unified, national force. While the officer corps and civilian leadership of the LAF are primarily Sunni Muslims loyal to the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora or the March 14 coalition, the rank and file of the force is comprised mostly of Shiite Muslims who may or may not be sympathetic to the Shiite opposition (which includes Hezbollah).

Also of concern is the notion that while the United States aims to improve the operational capacity of the LAF to counter internal threats to stability like terrorism and arms smuggling at the borders, and to build a national force to counter the militant wing of Hezbollah, the United States might also inadvertently be providing assistance to a force hostile toward its allies in the region, namely Israel. During a visit to a command camp in the southern border village of Ayn Ibil, in his first address to LAF troops, newly appointed LAF commander Jean Qahwaji stated that "there is an enemy lying in wait for the entire homeland at our southern border, and he has been reminding us for six decades - through his actions, violations, and ambitions, that he has been and continues to be our principle enemy."²¹ Critics of this position argue that, even if the LAF were hostile towards Israel, the force itself is no match for Israel's military apparatus and therefore this argument should not be employed to halt or limit U.S. security assistance to Lebanon.

Israel has also expressed concerns about U.S. assistance to the LAF. For example, Israel reportedly disapproved of the potential U.S. sale of M60 tanks to Lebanon because it feared that the weapons could fall into the hands of Hezbollah.²² In support of this position, Israel cited reports that that Hezbollah continues to receive arms through unsecured borders and that the government of Lebanon includes members of Hezbollah.²³ In response to such concerns, a U.S.

¹⁹ CRS consultation with Department of State official, September 9, 2008.

²⁰ Hassan M. Fattah, "Army Provides a Sense of Unity in Fractured Lebanon," *New York Times*, June 20, 2007.

²¹ U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document - GMP20080912611002, "Lebanese Army's New Commander Qahwaji Views Army's Tasks, Needs; Defense Strategy," September 12, 2008.

²² "Israel Worried Over Proposed U.S. Tank Sale to Lebanon," Israel National News Online, November 23, 2008.

²³ Firas Miskad, "All of Lebanon is not Hezbollah," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, August 21, 2008.

Department of Defense official said that the United States does not provide assistance to Lebanon without “considering the concerns of Israel and Israel’s qualitative edge,” adding that U.S. military aid to the LAF is designed to “strengthen the army domestically, not regionally” and that M60 tanks would be “no match” for Israel’s Merkava 4 tanks.²⁴

While the United States has offered support to train and equip the LAF, the Lebanese government has worked to define the role of the LAF and other militias in Lebanon through a series of discussions on Lebanon’s national defense policy. Following the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, and the months of political gridlock that followed, Hezbollah styled itself as the Lebanese “resistance” against Israeli aggression, and gained popular support through its relief and reconstruction efforts following the war. If a goal of U.S. policy is to increase the capacity of the LAF to such a size that it could compel Hezbollah to give up its weapons, then the LAF would first need to pass the political test of convincing the Lebanese that it could credibly defend the country against regional threats. This political reality raises questions about whether U.S. security assistance to the LAF is consistent with expressed U.S. policy goals in Lebanon, and whether U.S. policy fully considers the political position of the Lebanese and their elected leaders on issues of national defense.

The Effectiveness of U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon

The United States faces a number of challenges to reaching the goal of professionalizing the LAF. The force itself is small (about 70,000 persons) and the training and advancement of the LAF has historically been stymied by years of Syrian dominance. During Syrian occupation, the Lebanese government, under Syrian influence, largely neglected the LAF as a budgetary priority. While these challenges are surmountable, critics of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon have said that U.S. equipment provided to the LAF is inadequate to meet the goals of preparing the force to secure the borders, combat terrorism, and implement United Nations Security Council resolutions.

According to some critics of the U.S. assistance program, equipment has been slow to arrive and insufficient to counter the threats of internal instability facing the LAF. Timor Goskel, former senior advisor to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), criticized U.S. assistance, stating that the U.S. government is “not helping its own cause because it is coming in bits and pieces,” adding that “what [the LAF] needs is a bit more clarity, a bit more comprehensive package announced.”²⁵ Criticism that U.S. assistance to the LAF and the ISF falls short of the needs of the forces is sharply countered by U.S. officials. According to Defense Department officials, the equipment delivered in 2007 during the Nahr al Bared crisis included “the same frontline weapons that the U.S. military troops are currently using including assault rifles, automatic grenade launchers, advanced sniper weapons systems, antitank weapons, and the most modern urban warfare bunker weapons.”²⁶

²⁴ Andrew Wander “U.S. Mindful of Israel When Aiding Lebanese Army,” *Daily Star* (Beirut), December 3, 2008.

²⁵ U.S. Open Source Center (OSC) Document –GMP 20081021966009 – “U.S. Approach to LAF is Chaotic, Analysts Say,” October 21, 2008.

²⁶ David Schenker, “The Future of U.S. Military Aid to Lebanon,” *Policy Watch* #1407, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 3, 2008.

Following the siege at Nahr al Bared, the Bush Administration reportedly received requests from the Lebanese government for Cobra attack helicopters to facilitate more effective counterterrorism operations. Reports indicate that the LAF has fewer than a dozen operational helicopters. During the fighting at Nahr al Bared, the LAF had to retrofit old Huey helicopters to target rebel Fatah al Islam bunkers, resulting in limited accuracy in targeting and possibly causing civilian casualties.

Also at issue is the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, particularly UNSCR 1701, adopted on August 11, 2006, which called for an immediate cessation of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah. Section 14 and other language in the resolution that bans the delivery of weapons to “any entity or individual” in Lebanon, except the Lebanese Army, have been interpreted as a call for Hezbollah to disarm and a mandate for the Lebanese government to prevent the flow of weapons to Hezbollah.²⁷

During the Gaza conflict in December 2008-January 2009, attention focused again on armed groups in Lebanon and the ability of the LAF to fulfill its mission. Rockets were fired from Lebanon into northern Israel on January 8 and January 14, 2009, raising concerns about the possibility of a second front in Israel’s war against Hamas in Gaza. While Hezbollah denied responsibility, some analysts question whether the organization orchestrated or at least consented to the attacks. In the days following, the LAF and UNIFIL²⁸ reported finding and dismantling another launch site and seizing caches of weapons in the area;²⁹ even so, the incidents led some observers to question the role of UNIFIL and the effectiveness of the LAF in preventing the smuggling of arms from Syria to Hezbollah and other groups.

2009 Parliamentary Elections and the Future of U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon

The outcome of the June 2009 Lebanese parliamentary elections may be critical in determining the future direction of U.S. assistance to Lebanon. For the first time, polls will be held on the same day in all electoral districts, a result of a new electoral law passed in late September 2008 following an agreement to redraw the electoral districts. Lebanese government officials hope that this change will prevent the outcomes from any one district from affecting voting patterns in the rest of the country. If Syria’s allies secure a parliamentary majority, continued U.S. support for

²⁷ See statement of U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice to the U.N. Security Council, August 11, 2006. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8808.doc.htm>.

²⁸ The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was originally deployed in 1978 to guarantee Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and to assist the Lebanese government in maintaining stability and security. Its mandate was expanded in 2006, pursuant to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, to include assisting “the Government of Lebanon, at its request, in securing its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry in Lebanon without its consent of arms or related material.” UNIFIL consists of 12,542 troops from 29 countries, supported by 321 international civilian staff, 640 local civilian staff, and approximately 50 military observers. The force is deployed alongside the LAF, and operates between the Blue Line (UN border demarcation between Lebanon and Israel) and the Litani River in southern Lebanon, near the Israel-Syria-Lebanon tri-border area.

²⁹ United States Open Source Center (OSC) Document GMP-2009011966011—“Lebanese Army, UNIFIL Unearth Arms Cache Near Northern Israel,” January 19, 2009.

Lebanon's economy, civil society, and armed forces, which has been substantial since 2005, could be in jeopardy.

The March 14 coalition, a largely Sunni bloc that holds a slim majority in parliament (68 out of 127 seats), is struggling to reinvent itself in the wake of changing regional dynamics. The coalition, which gained control of Lebanon's government on a pro-independence, anti-Syria platform after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, is hoping to maintain its slim majority after the June elections. The opposition coalition, which includes the March 8 bloc, led by Hezbollah and Amal (Lebanon's largest Shia party), together with the Reform and Change bloc led by Maronite Christian Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), holds 56 seats in the parliament.³⁰ The narrow margins in parliament and sectarian tensions fueled 18 months of political stalemate marked by targeted assassinations, a general strike, and a siege of Beirut by Hezbollah, as each group fought for political influence that matched its perceived popular support. The outcome was a May 2008 agreement, brokered in Doha, Qatar, that granted the opposition minority a blocking one-third plus one of cabinet seats, which serves as an effective veto power over government decisions.

As the June 7, 2009 election date approaches, initial fears that sectarian violence would preclude the possibility of elections have somewhat diminished. Since each side perceives that the election is very close, and perhaps even that it holds a slight advantage, prospects for stability in the months leading up to the election appear good. Political identity tends to fall along sectarian lines, particularly among Sunnis and Shiites.³¹ Given this reality, the election, most observers agree, will likely be decided by Christian voters in a few key battleground districts.

Despite efforts on the part of both the March 8 and March 14 blocs to court Christian voters, many analysts have speculated that March 8 and its allies hold a slight advantage at this stage of the campaign. March 8 has taken advantage of changing regional dynamics to reinvent itself as the party of nationalism and independence, pointing to U.S. and Saudi support for the March 14 camp as proof that March 14 represents a future of Lebanon under foreign tutelage rather than Lebanon for the Lebanese. Increased U.S. engagement with Syria and the normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon, marked by the exchange of ambassadors and the opening of embassies, have left March 14 searching for a new message. Regardless, the election will likely result in a narrow margin for the winning camp, and only a few possible scenarios for governance after the election.

Since neither group has the demographic or ideological legitimacy to govern alone, the outcome in either case will likely be some form of unity government, perhaps not unlike the existing government in which March 14 holds a slim majority of seats in parliament, key ministries like defense, and the office of Prime Minister, but governs by consensus with the other parties and coalitions in the parliament. It is also likely that the March 8 alliance would be reluctant to give up its minority veto power, especially if the election margin is narrow.

³⁰ The remaining three seats in parliament are held by independents unaffiliated with either the March 8 or the March 14 bloc.

³¹ Because no census has been conducted in Lebanon since 1932, the proportion of Shiite to Sunni Muslims is uncertain. The latest *CIA World Factbook* estimates that Lebanon's population is 35% Shiite Muslim, 25% Sunni Muslim, 35% Christian, and 5% Druze and other groups. Other estimates suggest that the Sunni-Shiite ratio is more narrow.

Some Lebanese observers have speculated that March 14 parties might withdraw from a new government or not participate in its formation, which could lead to political stalemate and perhaps sectarian violence, if the March 8 coalition attempts to govern without Sunni representation. Others have speculated that some, but not all, March 14 parties would participate in a government in which March 8 had a slim majority, even though prospects for protracted political stalemate would still be high.

In his testimony to Congress on March 24, 2009, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman stated that decisions about the shape and composition of Lebanon's next government can and should be made by the Lebanese themselves, for Lebanon, free from outside interference. Acting Assistant Secretary Feltman added that he anticipated that the shape of the United States' assistance programs to Lebanon will be evaluated in the context of Lebanon's parliamentary elections results.

At issue is the role of Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), in the Lebanese government. In the current government, Hezbollah is a member of the opposition and holds one cabinet seat: the Minister of Labor. If the March 8 coalition, which includes Hezbollah, wins a majority of parliament seats in the June election, the Hezbollah's role in the cabinet could expand as a result. The Lebanese constitution grants to the Council of Ministers (the cabinet) authority over the civil, military, and security operations of the government as well as extensive control over the government's policies and personnel. A strong showing for March 8 on election day could lead to the formation of a cabinet that includes more members of Hezbollah, thereby expanding the organizations' control and influence. Since the cabinet has authority over the armed forces of the country, the United States might be reluctant to continue to support a military over which Hezbollah and its political allies might have some influence.

Others would argue that Hezbollah's influence does not depend on election outcomes. Since the Doha Agreement³², the Lebanese government and Hezbollah representatives have been engaged in a dialogue to determine a national defense strategy that addresses the issue of Hezbollah's weapons. While no official resolution has been articulated, recent reports suggest that intelligence-sharing between the Internal Security Forces (ISF) of Lebanon and Hezbollah has taken place.³³ Since January 2009, 17 suspects accused of spying for Israeli Mossad reportedly have been arrested in Lebanon. Reports say that the arrests were made by a special unit of the ISF and that for the first time, Lebanese officials publicly acknowledged that the arrests were made in part due to intelligence-sharing between this particular ISF unit and Hezbollah.³⁴

Some analysts have warned that if the United States were to halt aid to Lebanon if March 8 wins the elections, it would send the message that the United States only supports democratic institutions and elections when it approves of the outcomes. The U.S. State Department has repeatedly expressed its commitment to promoting a democratic, independent Lebanon. Critics of

³² The narrow margins in parliament fueled 18 months of political stalemate from 2006 to 2008 as each group fought for political influence that matched its perceived popular support. The outcome was a May 2008 unity agreement, brokered in Doha, Qatar, (the Doha Agreement) that granted the opposition minority a blocking one-third plus one of cabinet seats, which serves as an effective veto over government decisions.

³³ Andrew Wander, "New ISF Unit Behind Arrests of Alleged Mossad Agents," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), May 11, 2009.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

U.S. policy say that the United States supports the March 14 coalition, not democracy. Reducing U.S. assistance could reinforce this perception among the Lebanese.

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