



**Statement before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central
Asian Affairs**

“LEBANON AT THE CROSSROADS”

A Statement by:

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Lebanon has been the chronic problem child in US foreign policy in the Levant since the Eisenhower Administration. However, given the country's centrality to regional security politics and Iran's support for the Shi'a militant group Hezbollah, the US cannot avoid looking at Lebanon as yet another arena of competition with Iran in the broader Levant.

There is no single set of Lebanese interests and imperatives in how to approach foreign policy-making, be it on the Syria conflict or any other set of issues. In the wake of the 1975-1990 civil war and the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005, official state institutions are not the epicenter of political power. Instead, competing sectarian factions caught in a "zero sum" struggle for power have regained their primacy as the true center of political gravity and decision-making in Lebanon.¹

With none of Lebanon's leading communities or factions able to shape events on their own, partnering with competing external patrons across a range of geopolitical contests is seen as one way to tilt the scales in the quest for power in Beirut.² Time and again since independence in 1943, Lebanon's internal divisions and attempts to leverage this "two level game" have drawn countries that include Egypt, France, Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia the US and others.³ In the post-2005 period, Iran and Syria have continued to back key factions, while others sought the support of the US and the Southern Gulf states.

Syria's civil war has complicated this pattern of competition in ways that neither the Lebanese nor their regional and international allies seem to have fully accounted for. In terms of the impact of regional unrest and the Syria conflict on security, inter-factional or inter-communal violence, socio-economic and demographic pressures, few countries in the region face as many challenges at the same time as Lebanon.

Despite all of the risks and uncertainties surrounding Syria, however, Lebanese factions – divided in part along pro and anti-Assad lines – continue to maneuver in a bid to leverage the conflict to reshape the internal balance of power in their own country.

US Policy Towards Lebanon & Iran's Response

While Lebanon's warring factions may think that the US and Iran have their core interests at heart, it is important to remember that US-Iranian strategic competition is not driven by the internal political goals of any faction in regional states. In the post-Iraq invasion period, US policy focused on denying US regional opponents, such as Syria and Iran, the means to undermine US strategic interests in the region. As was mentioned throughout this report, these include preserving a regional order that favored broader US interests in the region and second that safeguarded Israel's national security.

When it sensed an opportunity to reshape the regional balance of power in the Levant in 2003, the US began to call for Syria's exit from Lebanon. In the wake of the popular upheaval of 2005 following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Syria withdrew its forces from Lebanon and the balance of power within the country began to tip in favor of the West and the US.

Since 2005, the US has sought to consolidate its gains by trying to ensure that Lebanon following Syria's exit would not become an arena for proxy competition yet again. After Syria left in 2005, Iran began to play a more proactive role in Lebanon. While Iran has always had a vested interest in defending Shi'a interests across the Middle East, there is

little indication that Iranian foreign policy-making is that different from the US in terms of a desired end state. Iran's ambitions in Lebanon are simply to secure its regional hegemonic interests and to continue to act on the Arab-Israeli stage as means of shoring up its broader regional position in a mainly Sunni Arab Middle East. Having a role to play in Lebanon also meant that Iran could use the small country as a means of foiling US strategic and political interests in the broader Levant.

This aspect of US-Iranian competition in Lebanon led to the emergence of two cross-confessional political forces: one group aligned with the US and the West and the other aligned with Syria and Iran. The US supported the so-called pro-US and pro-Western "March 14 Alliance," a cross-sectarian grouping of Lebanese political actors that included much of the country's Maronite Christian community, most of the country's Sunni representatives and, at one time, the Druze led by Walid Joumblatt. The Alliance also maintained strong ties to US Gulf ally Saudi Arabia and did not include any truly representative Shi'a political forces.

Iran supported Lebanon's leading Shi'a political-sectarian forces, which were Hezbollah and Nabih Berri's Amal movement. These, along with a large segment of the country's Maronite community led by former Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) commander General Michel Aoun and other smaller forces, formed the so-called "March 8 Alliance." In contrast to March 14, this grouping enjoyed favorable ties to both Assad's Syria and Iran, and did not include any truly representative Sunni political forces.

While both the US and Iranian-backed groups were cross-confessional – and included members from all of the country's leading communities – neither was viewed as truly representative by the other. This in turn impacted the pace and scale of US-Iranian proxy competition in Lebanon, as neither group commanded an overwhelming majority in power. Who could win in Lebanon would be determined by a two level game that includes a domestic contest for power backed by the support and resources of external actors championing either alliance.

It is unclear who will win this struggle within Lebanon and in terms of US and Iranian influence. Alliances in Lebanon are ever-changing as sub-national sectarian groups jockey for political position. Meanwhile, it is difficult to predict the impact of continued instability in Syria. It is all too easy to assume that a collapse in the Assad regime will lead to a stable pro-Western Lebanon. It could mean the downgrading of Iran's ability to influence both Lebanese and Palestinian elements in its contests with the US.

What is less likely, however, is that it will resolve the problems caused by Lebanon's fundamental Sunni-Shi'a dividing lines. These have been further aggravated by indictments of Hezbollah members by the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) in connection to the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. A post-Assad Syria could see Lebanon's Sunni community grow far more assertive if not aggressive in its dealings with the country's leading Shi'a forces. Given the degree of sectarian polarization in Lebanon, this could make the risk of internal conflict that much more significant.

The Hariri Assassination and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) investigating the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri has also become a key arena for US-Iranian competition in Lebanon. The Tribunal was established in 2007 with the expectation that the Assad regime in Damascus – Iran’s sole strategic Arab state ally – would be found culpable in the assassination. The US and France hoped that the Tribunal would undermine Syria’s regional role and strengthen the position of Lebanese allies of the West in Beirut.⁴

On June 30, 2011, the STL issued indictments against four members of Hezbollah in connection to the assassination.⁵ The prospect that members of Lebanon’s leading Shi’a political force had a potential hand in the killing of Lebanon’s leading Sunni political figure served to further aggravate Sunni-Shi’a tensions that have been growing in intensity since the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war.

It is difficult to rely on Lebanese public opinion polling, let alone polling in the broader Levant. Sectarian politics can heavily color results, while ambiguities and obstacles in polling methodology can also serve to complicate an already challenging political landscape. That some 60% of Lebanese were claimed to support the STL in one 2010 poll,⁶ versus another claiming the exact opposite months later⁷ is reason enough to be wary of any polling data on the STL – or anything else in Lebanon.

What is clear is that one prevailing pattern continues to hold: most Sunnis support the STL while most Shi’a and many Christians oppose or distrust it.⁸ The US has been a strong proponent of the STL, going so far as linking future bilateral ties (at least in part) to whether current and future Lebanese government chose to honor financial commitments to the UN-backed court. By contrast, Iran has publicly criticized the STL as a political tool of the US and its allies in an effort to defend Hezbollah.

It is unclear how far the US can go in using the STL as a means of winning ground in the US-Iranian competition in Lebanon. First, the US has pushed ahead with its support for the Tribunal at a time when it has become increasingly difficult to disentangle discrete Lebanese Shi’a interests in post-war Lebanon from the interests of those supporting Hezbollah in the wake of Syria’s 2005 withdrawal. Consequently, the US position on the Tribunal will continue to make it difficult to “win over” Lebanon’s Shi’a – the country’s best organized and, by some estimates, most numerous community.

Another challenge to the STL’s utility in competing with Iran is the intersection of politics and untested judicial processes. Local and regional opponents of the STL have repeatedly criticized it as politicized in favor the US and its regional allies, a message that has hurt the Tribunal’s credibility at home and abroad.⁹ Meanwhile, the Tribunal’s unique character – predicated on prosecuting one politically motivated assassination in Lebanon and not others – has been another source of contention by critics and supporters alike.¹⁰

A third obstacle is that turmoil in Syria and across the Middle East has taken much of the US policy focus away from the STL. This is not to say that the Tribunal is no longer important to US policy in the long-term, and should the Assad regime destabilize further in a way that does undermine regional stability, the Tribunal’s future role could still be important. However, the prospects of civil strife in Syria and security spillover effects in Lebanon continue to dominate much of the focus and concern of US policy planners.

Iran's allies and legal counsel have privately welcomed the opportunity to discredit the Tribunal, either in the media or through future court proceedings.¹¹ However, Iran also faces challenges in how it and its ally Hezbollah handle the STL. Mirroring the US's problems, Iran also cannot "win over" a majority of Lebanon's Sunni community. Iran's approach to the STL can be further aggravated by declining perceptions of Iran. Tehran has been losing support in a largely Sunni Arab Middle East during a period of unrest where Iran is increasingly linked to Shi'a unrest in Bahrain and the repression of Sunnis in Syria.

New Patterns in US Military Aid to Lebanon

It is not easy to draw lessons from the achievements and limitations of the US security assistance and cooperation programs in Lebanon, or to tie it to US competition with Iran – and Syria and Hezbollah. What is clear is that from a US perspective, military aid to Lebanon was expected to help reduce the country's footprint in regional instability and its role as a regional confrontation state against Israel. In short, military assistance to Lebanon became the latest addition to US-Iranian proxy warfare in the Levant.

Much of this analysis is based on field research in Lebanon and conversations with US and Lebanese political and military personnel involved in the broader effort to build up the LAF. It is significantly abridged and is not intended to give a more detailed window into the patterns of systems deliveries, qualitative development and other data collected in Lebanon by the author over the past four years. It also does not consider US efforts to build up Lebanese police and internal security units.

As the previous section attempted to articulate, US policy towards Lebanon is a function of far broader US strategic imperatives in the Middle East, including the regional contest with Iran. How the US goes about providing security assistance to its Lebanese allies is also dependent on, and held back by, this overarching top-down approach to security politics in the Levant.

In the wake of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and spurned on by the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) counter-terrorist efforts against the Al-Qaida inspired Fatah El-Islam terrorist group, the US decided to support its allies in Lebanon, principally the March 14 Alliance, by providing security assistance to build up Lebanon's national military. At the level of the US government, it was hoped that the LAF, which was popular across the country's sectarian divisions, could gradually take on an increasingly important national security role, largely at the expense of Iran's main non-state regional ally Hezbollah. Many in the US Congress supported US efforts to build up the LAF based on the hope that the military could one day confront Hezbollah and serve as a bulwark against Iranian influence along Israel's northern flank.

The patterns involved may be summarized as follows:

- There is a general consensus both within the LAF and among US security assistance personnel familiar with Lebanese civil-military dynamics in post-Ta'if Lebanon that US military aid to Lebanon did not realistically translate into military support for the March 14 Alliance. A great deal of the LAF's popularity does not come from its self-styled narrative as a national institutional above the sectarianism that defines modern Lebanon.
- The LAF's legitimacy and popularity is principally a byproduct first of the LAF's cross-sectarian character, and second of its aversion to undermining the interests and core prerogatives of the

country's leading sectarian groups and communities – especially the Shi'a, the Sunni and the Maronites.

- It is also clear, however, that many in the US security assistance community were very much aware that such a dynamic was at work. The Lebanese often forget that most alliances to control and shape Lebanon are short-lived. Ultimately, US support for Lebanon through the LAF rather than one or another sectarian faction is a more pragmatic approach to projecting US influence. However, how the current US approach can strengthen weak Lebanese state-society and civil-military dynamics in the future is unclear.
- **Figure VIII.38** shows funding levels allocated towards Lebanese military development, in particular over the 2006 to 2014 period. The US has provided Lebanon with more than \$959 million in FMF, IMET and “Section 1206” counter-terrorism funding over the FY2006 to FY-2014 period.
- **Figure VIII.39** shows a breakdown of how US counter-terrorism funding has been allocated to Lebanon. Funding sources such as the Section 1206 grant authority were crucial in building up the LAF's special operations forces (SOF) quickly in the wake of a costly battle with Sunni militants at the Nahr El-Bared refugee camp in 2007. The bulk of US assistance obligated between 2006 and 2010 has focused principally on the most urgent needs of the LAF, which tend to be the basics of mobility, command & control, communication, personnel equipment, light weapons for infantry and other forms of equipment with limited lethality.¹² While all of these systems were urgently needed, their impact on positive perceptions of LAF development in Lebanon remained limited. While Section 1206 aid levels for FY2013 and FY2014 may appear more modest, they are more focused on LAF efforts to manage and police the border region with Syria.
- While this aid has been helpful in building up the LAF, seven years of significantly increased military aid to Lebanon have so far had limited impact on the balance of force between the LAF and Hezbollah, the US-Iranian contest in the country, or shaping positive local perceptions of the US effort in Lebanon. It is still too soon to extrapolate a long-term future pattern of US assistance, or assess how future aid efforts may affect future US interests and the contest with Iran.
- Lebanon is too internally divided and too prone to complicating the foreign policy priorities of regional and international powers such as the US. The 2011 collapse of the March 14-led government of Saad Hariri was also a cause for concern, principally due to the fact that from some US congressional standpoints, a government not led by March 14th should not be privy to US military or economic support. The US interagency, however, remained largely confident that the US could support and sustain future levels of assistance, and US confidence continued to grow in Prime Minister Najib Mikati's ability to chart a path for Lebanon that did not lead to a major break with the international community. However, whether aid will remain at current levels is up for debate in no small part thanks to proposed congressional cuts in foreign assistance programs.
- **Figure VIII.40** shows the number of LAF troops trained by the US over the 1998 to 2011 period. Despite challenges in shaping how US aid to the LAF could play a role in the contest with Iran, US aid has positively impacted security politics along the UN Blue Line separating Lebanon and Israel.
- **Figure VIII.41** shows the LAF's broader force deployment in early 2014. Prior to US security assistance programs and the expansion of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon's (UNIFIL) mandate and force structure, the LAF did not maintain significant forces in South Lebanon or areas controlled by Hezbollah. In 2011 and at least since late 2009, the LAF has deployed some 8 mechanized infantry brigades south of an imaginary “Beirut parallel.” This constitutes the bulks of the LAF's conventional heavy units, with a deployment of some 14,000 troops south of the “Beirut Parallel,” including 6,000 to 8,000 troops south of the Litani River.
- **Figure VIII.41** also shows the general disposition of LAF forces in UNIFIL's area of responsibility in early 2014. While the LAF's southern deployment is an important milestone in and of itself, US assistance has yet to meaningfully compensate for the fact that LAF units in the

south are still little more than an expeditionary force in their own country. The LAF still lacks infrastructure in the south with few barracks, training facilities and well-defended command and control posts.

- The experience of UNIFIL over the past three decades is critical and should inform US thinking about future aid patterns. LAF units and positions, like those of UNIFIL, should gradually become increasingly entrenched in the socio-economic tapestry of South Lebanon. Such an effort is unlikely to be rejected by the region's mainly Shi'a population, who – while supportive of Hezbollah – continue to maintain positive views of the LAF and remain keen to see it play a more muscular national defense role.

Paradoxes of Building Lebanese Military Capabilities

While the US-LAF relationship is generally positive, a number of obstacles remain on both the US and the Lebanese sides of the security assistance equation, and they have severely limited US ability to compete with Iran and Syria in Lebanon, as well as efforts to strengthen Lebanon's moderates and its democracy.

Some of these problems are the result of US policies and expectations. First, the US continues to feel the need to have the LAF present it with a clearly defined national defense strategy which in turn not only identifies the threats the LAF faces, but also characterizes why certain systems and not others are needed to sustain future Lebanese security needs. Given the polarized nature of Lebanese politics and the general absence of post-Ta'if (let alone post-independence) civil-military coordination, it will be difficult for the LAF to produce such a strategy in the short term.

Second, the US continues to struggle with the reality that it cannot significantly modify Lebanese civil-military dynamics, given the primacy of sectarian politics in the wake of Syria's withdrawal in 2005. US difficulty in accepting Lebanese internal dynamics for what they are, and then failing to extract the outcome most favorable to Washington's interests, is not new to how the US deals with Lebanon. There is something to be said about making the same hopeful choices with little to show for it.

Third, the quality of US assistance will continue to be determined by pre-existing core US interests. Chief among them is the US commitment to maintaining Israel's qualitative edge. What this means in the real-world is that US security assistance professionals understand that the only way they can "stand up" the LAF is by turning it into a force that the Shi'a can respect and that can dissuade Israel from future military confrontations. They also understand, however, that such an effort would create an untenable policy paradox as far as US regional interests are concerned.

Lastly, the US Congress is playing a growing role. Administration arguments in favor of continued support to the LAF are increasingly falling on deaf ears. This reflects a deepening domestic political polarization in the lead-up to the 2012 presidential elections and the frustration of a congressional body with a country that continues to be a source of difficulty for US policy in the Levant. The fact that aid to Lebanon has done little to shift the balance of forces in favor of the US against Iran in the Levant is another core driver. However, how the US can suspend military aid to Lebanon without handing over the country to Syria and Iran remains unclear.

The Lebanese and the LAF also present challenges in maximizing their bilateral military relationship with the US. First, there is often a disconnect in the way the LAF and the US

interpret the military's mission priorities. While the US has often considered demarcating the Lebanese-Syrian border a unilateral Lebanese issue, the LAF has traditionally consider it a Lebanese-Syrian bilateral issue. While keen to be the dominant security actor in Lebanon, the LAF cannot easily meet congressional expectations that it should do more to confront Hezbollah without risking sectarian divisions and all-out civil strife.

Instead, the LAF, which considers Hezbollah a legitimate political-sectarian actor in Lebanese politics, focuses more on dealing a decisive blow to Sunni Lebanese and Palestinian militants – a position that is palatable to the country's Shi'a community and many Christians – while it tries to build up its capabilities and insulate itself from sectarian politics. As for the matter of the LAF's national defense role, the US considers only Syria to be a threat to Lebanon. In contrast, the LAF finds that in the absence of meaningful Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian peace efforts, the LAF should be ready to address potential security risks from both Israel and Syria.

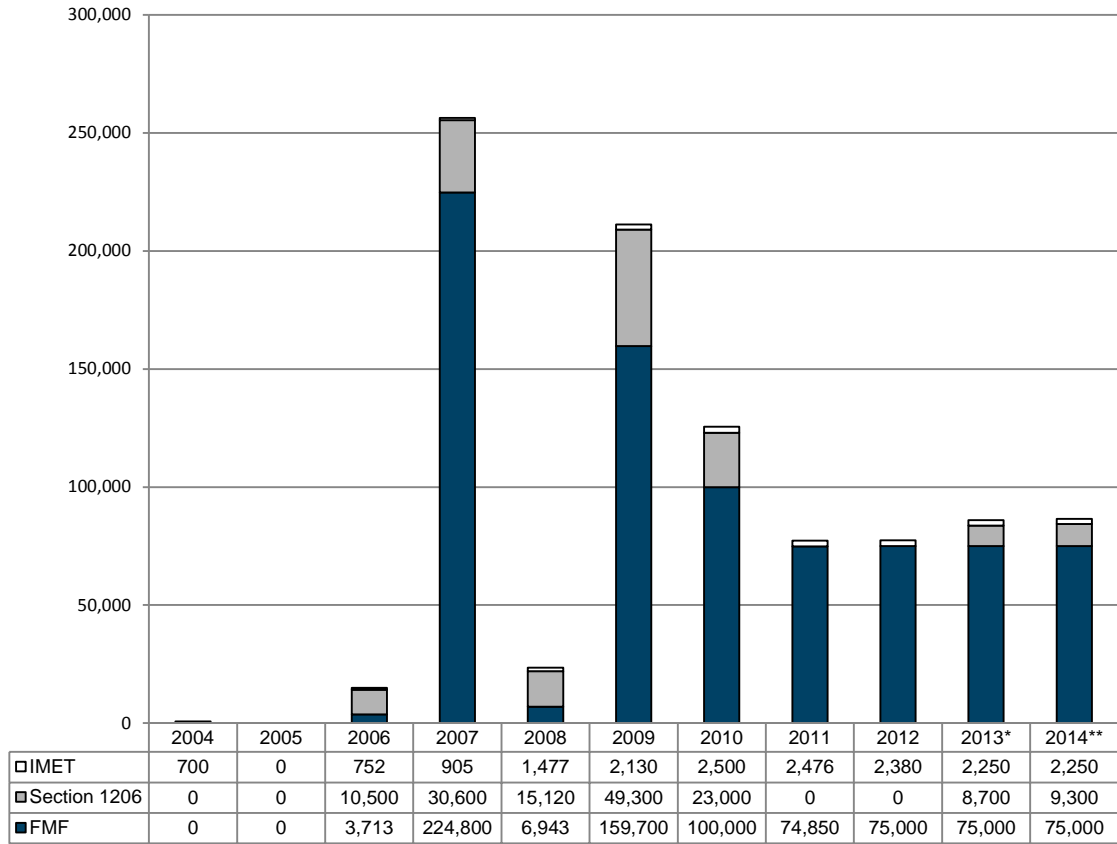
Second, the LAF deliberately avoids dealing with the key failures in Lebanon's dysfunctional civil-military effort and chooses to focus more on its own frustration with US demands for a clearly articulated national defense strategy. The LAF expected that US security assistance would be far more accommodating of Lebanon's civil-military paralysis and lead to far more coordinated military-to-military mentorship.¹³

Lastly, the LAF and the Lebanese, while cognizant of the US commitments to Israel's QME and comfort with friendly ruling alliances like the March 14 Alliance, expect the US effort to benefit the country as a whole. In light of a change in the political balance of power in early 2011, this would include working vigorously with the Lebanese government under Prime Minister Mikati to ensure that Lebanon does not become yet another source of regional instability – potentially to the benefit of Iran and its regional allies.

The risk of escalation along the Blue Line has intensified in the wake of continued instability in Syria. In mid-2011, Hezbollah assured the LAF that it would send minders to prevent Palestinian protests commemorating the *Nakba* ("catastrophe") and the *Naksa* ("the setback") from reaching the Blue Line of demarcation between Israel and Lebanon. However, given the absence of Hezbollah minders during the May 2011 *Nakba* protests, LAF troops in South Lebanon were instrumental in containing Palestinian protestors trying to enter Israel, averting a major cross-border incident. Given that some 11 Palestinians were killed during the May 2011 incident, the LAF, supported by UNIFIL, would go on to declare the area along the Blue Line a closed military zone, preventing any *Naksa* protesters from approaching Israel at all. While some in the LAF reported that the move upset Hezbollah, there was little the group could ultimately do, and the military seemed keen to minimize spillover effects that could impact security politics along the Blue Line.¹⁴ With continued tension in Syria and an Iran hard pressed to reshape regional events in its favor, the LAF may still have an important role to play as a regional stabilizer.

**Figure VIII.38: The Impact of U.S. Military Assistance to Lebanon
2004 to 2014**

(In thousands of current U.S. Dollars)



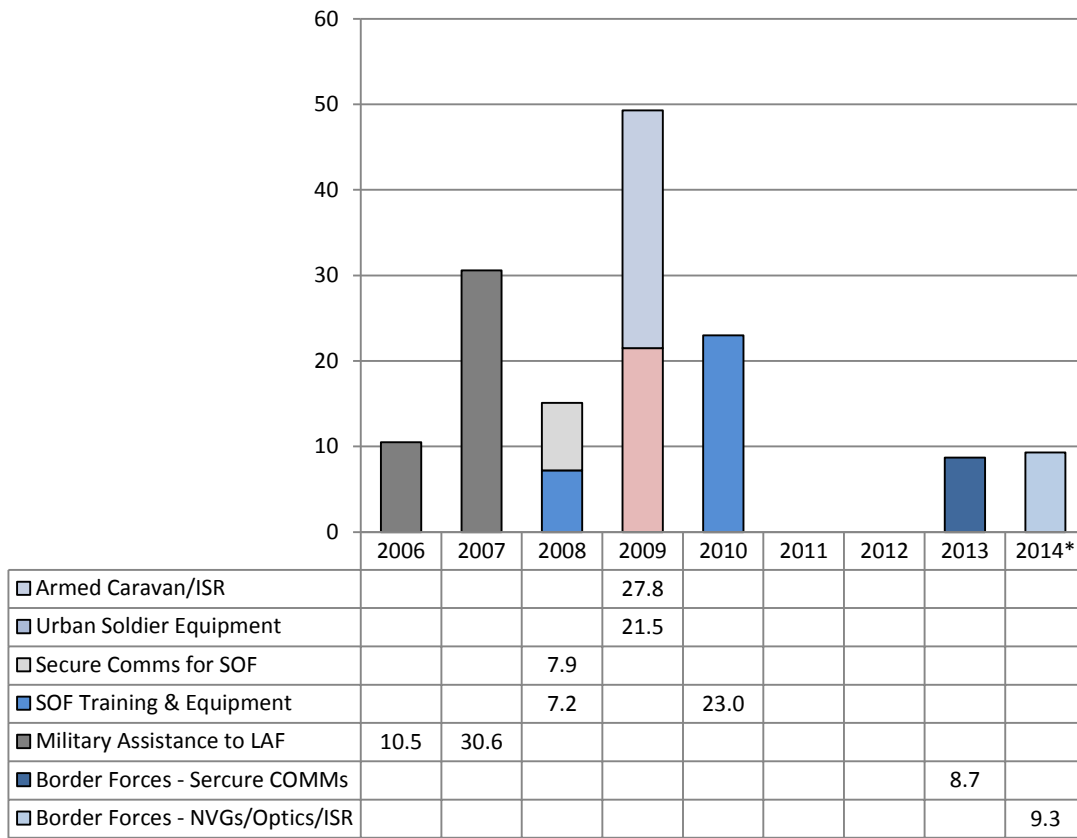
*: Estimates **: Requested

Note: 2013 numbers are U.S. Government programmed estimates and 2014 numbers are projected U.S. Government estimates. 2014 numbers are subject to change.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations*, various fiscal years, the *DSCA Historical Facts Book 2007*, Christopher M. Blanchard, “Lebanon: Background and U.S. Policy,” *CRS Report for Congress*, R42816, February 14, 2014, Nina M. Sorafino, “Security Assistance Reform: “Section 1206” Background and Issues for Congress,” *CRS Report for Congress*, RS22855, April 19, 2013 and discussions with U.S. government Experts.

**Figure VIII.39: Breaking Down “Section 1206” Assistance to the LAF
2006-2014**

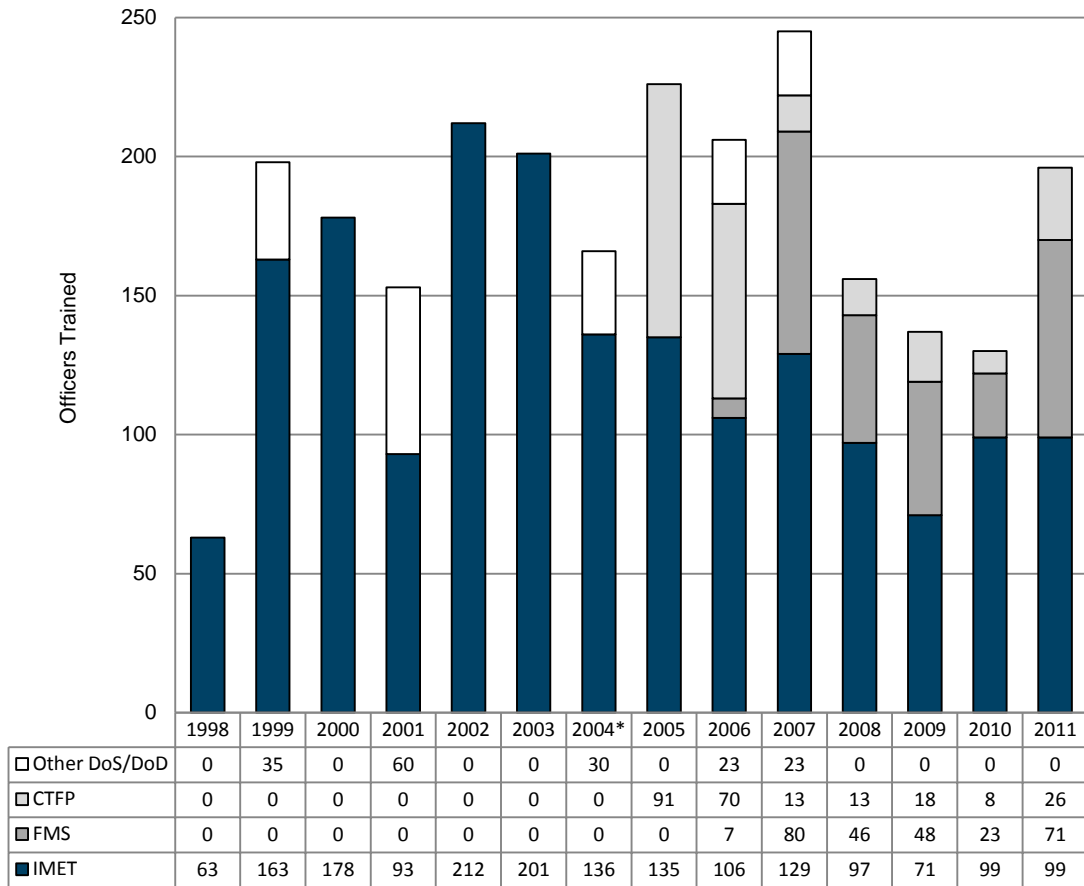
(In millions of current U.S. Dollars)



Note: 2014 numbers are U.S. Government programmed estimates and 2013 numbers are projected U.S. Government estimates. 2014 numbers are subject to change.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations*, various fiscal years, the DSCA *Historical Facts Book 2007*, Nina M. Sorafino, “Security Assistance Reform: “Section 1206” Background and Issues for Congress,” *CRS Report for Congress*, RS22855, April 19, 2013 and discussions with U.S. government Experts.

Figure VIII.40: LAF Personnel Receiving U.S. Training 1998-2011

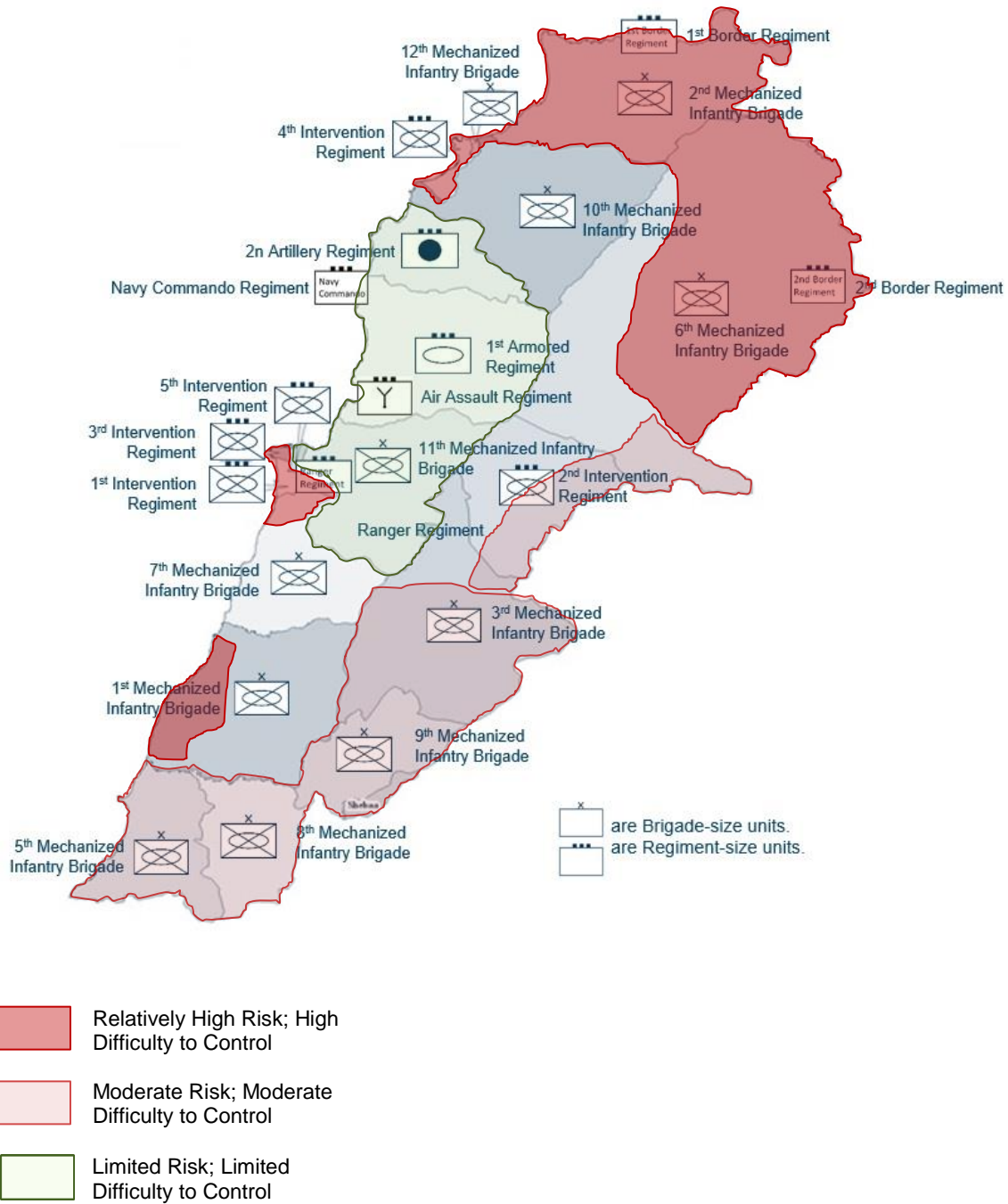


* FY2004 includes INL maritime law training for 30 members of the Lebanese Navy. 2010 numbers are U.S. Government programmed estimates and 2011 numbers are projected U.S. Government estimates. Both 2010 and 2011 numbers are subject to change.

Note: All activities are listed by the fiscal year (FY) in which the training occurred, not by the FY in which the funding for the training was provided. Data does not include 287 LAF personnel trained in demining under DoD Non-Security Assistance Combatant Command funding for FY2005.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from “Foreign Military Training and DOD Engagement Activities of Interest,” various editions, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs and interviews with U.S. Government experts.

**Figure VIII.41: Assessing Relative Risk and Insecurity in Lebanon:
LAF Ground Force Deployment in February 2014**



Note: Deployment does not reflect forward deployed units, including SOF detachments in functional AORs. Areas without a risk rating do not imply an absence of risk.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and U.S. government Experts.

Lessons from Iran's Military Support for Hezbollah

The previous sections in this report have summarized depth and breadth of Hezbollah's importance to Iranian geopolitical aspirations in the Levant. However, the Iranian model of "security assistance" also bears important lessons for any future US engagement with Lebanon – particularly in the context of the problems in US efforts to build up the LAF:

- First, the US is invested in Lebanon as part of a broader multifaceted effort to shape stability and outcomes from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Iran looks at Lebanon and Hezbollah as central to its prerogatives, not only in the Levant but also the broader Arab Muslim Middle East. Prior strategic commitments and policy choices make it difficult for the US to bring its tremendous national resources to bear effectively. The US is concerned with maintaining Israel's military edge and ensuring that no regional player poses an imminent threat to its regional ally. Iranian policy towards Lebanon is not burdened by competing geopolitical priorities, which means unlike the US, it can provide its allies with as much assistance as they need.
- Second, despite its revolutionary rhetoric, Iran recognizes that Lebanon's sectarian system is to Hezbollah's advantage, given the group's level of organization, its unique military capabilities, and unrivaled intelligence gathering capabilities. Iran does not need to "capture the state" or build a "state within a state" in Lebanon in order to further its interests. The same goes for Hezbollah as well, which has increasingly accepted the benefits of the autonomy granted by eschewing the fragile and hollow post-war Lebanese state structure.

In contrast, the US continues to focus on trying to rehabilitate Lebanese state institutions that, by virtue of the primacy of sectarian politics in the post-Syria period, are very resistant to change or reform. The US also continues to face difficulties in dealing with sectarian and feudal rather than true reform-minded national leaders. Pursuing US policies predicated on dealing with Lebanon for what it is will allow the US to recalibrate its reform agenda to find more meaningful avenues for future reform.

- Lastly, time is a critical factor in building up truly capable regional allies. Iran has spent the past 25 years building up Hezbollah and it has done so without any qualitative reservations and without the burden of a transparent bureaucratic interagency process. The US has been conducting security assistance to the LAF for seven years under the watchful eye of an often cumbersome and ill-directed interagency effort. The US, as was mentioned above, is largely unable or unwilling to provide the LAF with capabilities and training that could change the balance of force between it and Hezbollah.

Is it unclear how well and how many of these lessons can be integrated in future US efforts in Lebanon or elsewhere to build up and support local allies. What is clear is that the Iranian approach has been successful while the US effort has been defined more by good intentions than measurable geopolitical outcomes.

Addressing Refugee Pressures from the Syria Conflict

As **Figures VIII.46** through **VIII.51** show, Lebanon is facing unprecedented levels of pressure from the influx of Syrians refugees. Other regional states like Jordan certainly face major challenges as well, but Lebanon's mix of pre-existing refugee demographics, sectarian in-fighting, regional penetration and weak state structures make it uniquely vulnerable.

Lebanon – a country of 4.1 million¹⁵ – officially hosts 931,567 (registered) displaced Syrians and some 203,619 households as of February 18, 2014.¹⁶ However, the Lebanese government estimated in October 2013 that the number of Syrian nationals in Lebanon

had already exceeded one million; this estimate includes Syrian guest workers and their families, as well as other Syrians of means not registered with any UN agency.¹⁷

While the socio-economic, demographic and other pressures tied to the Syria conflict and the scale of displaced Syrians in Lebanon will be discussed later, it is important to highlight that these patterns have become the most recent addition to US foreign policy priorities both in Lebanon and the broader Levant. In 2012, the US provided some \$18.1 million in supplemental humanitarian assistance to Lebanon, but the sheer scale of Syrian displacement to Lebanon as a result of fighting in Syria has served to dramatically expand aid levels to Lebanon.¹⁸ Commitment levels in 2013 to Lebanon included some \$114 million as of August 15, 2013. These represented roughly 25 percent of overall funding and grant aid from all donors,¹⁹ and the US is likely to continue to focus on aid and other mechanics to alleviate internal pressure in Lebanon as one part of a long term response to regional instability.²⁰

Iran has also sought to provide aid and support to Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, including reported contributions in 2014 of some 150 tons of cargo that included 3,000 tents and 10,000 blankets from the Iranian Red Crescent Society.²¹ However, given Iran's and Hezbollah's active support for the Assad regime, Iranian efforts face real challenges in expanding their aid response in parts of Lebanon that have grown increasingly hostile to Iran, Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shi'a community more broadly. Meanwhile, Iran faces other pressures should it wish to do more, including pressure at home stemming from the need to focus on its own economy and deal with the current broad spectrum of international sanctions.²²

The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus

In the two years prior to the start of protests in the Arab world, Syria and Iran played an increasing role in terms of influence in Lebanon.²³ This coincided with the failures of US and Saudi allies in Lebanon, Israeli-Syrian secret negotiations brokered by Turkey and separately US efforts to pursue a policy of outreach toward Damascus.²⁴ However, some three years after the start of protests in the south-western Syrian city of Dar'a, the conflict in Syria now defines both instability in Lebanon and how the US and Iran deal with their respective sets of interests in the country and the region.

Lebanese Sunni-Shi'ite Competition in Syria

The anti-Assad and pro-Western March 14 forces – a cross-sectarian grouping of Lebanese political actors that includes the bulk of the country's Sunni representatives and part of the country's Christian factions – were pushed to the margins in January 2011 with the collapse of the government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri.²⁵ However, the growing cycle of unrest and international isolation of Syria has prompted members of the collation to capitalize on Syrian instability in a bid to reverse their political fortunes.²⁶

There have been growing accusations of involvement by Sunni political figures with ties to the March 14 forces in helping to arm and finance Syrian insurgent groups as early as 2011. There have also been increasing reports of Lebanese Sunni militants and Islamist fighters crossing into Syria to join the battle against Assad.²⁷ The country has experienced a resurgence of Sunni-Alawite violence in the northern city of Tripoli, mirroring sectarian dividing lines in Syria.²⁸ As of January 2014, Lebanon's Sunni

community – especially in Akkar and North Bekaa – continues to be a source of political and military support to forces battling Assad, although there are no reliable estimates on the number of Lebanese Sunni fighters currently active in Syria.²⁹

The March 14 forces have since shown an increasing willingness to capitalize on Syrian instability. There were indications in 2011 and 2012 that the predominantly Sunni Future Movement was keen to streamline its foreign policy orientation in line with the broader Sunni Arab regional order centered on Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in the expectation that the Assad regime will eventually fall.³⁰

By contrast, members of the pro-Syrian March 8 alliance – another cross-sectarian coalition led by the majority of the country's main Shi'ite factions, including Hezbollah, and part of the country's Christians – have largely remained strong supporters of the Assad regime. While there are concerns that Assad might not survive the current cycle of unrest, there are many that continue to believe that the Alawite-led regime – aided by Iran at the regional level and Russia and China at the international level – can weather the storm and rebuff both internal and external challenges to its autonomy and ability to rule Syria.³¹

While Hezbollah initially counted on a swift Assad victory over the opposition in 2011 and sought to mitigate its footprint in Syria, this changed starting in early 2012. The group initially sent limited military forces to support the following efforts: defend the Sayyidah Zaynab Shrine (one of Shi'a Islam's holiest sites on the outskirts of Damascus); protect Lebanese Shi'a villages east of the Bekaa; offer counter-insurgency training to pro-Assad forces; secure key road networks linking Lebanon to Syria; combat support operations in Zabadani between Damascus and the Lebanese border. By early 2013, Hezbollah's priorities had significantly shifted to its combat and combat support roles with Assad's forces east of the Bekaa valley.³²

There is no way to determine how power and politics will ultimately evolve in Syria, let alone whether or not the Assad regime could find the means to survive. However, this has not prevented either pro- and anti-Assad Lebanese political forces from escalating their roles in the Syria crisis in their respective efforts to reshape the internal balance of power in Lebanon. Beyond their discreet domestic political considerations, local forces – especially Hezbollah – are expected to obey the geopolitical prerogatives of their regional allies, even if that costs them their broader national appeal.³³

What became clear by early 2013 was that Lebanon would see growing instability along sectarian and regional lines long before a decisive outcome could be reached in the battle for power in Syria. The assumption that Assad's rule may be finite and the role Hezbollah is believed to be playing in support of that rule has led to growing calls for Hezbollah's disarmament, a de facto call for shifting the internal political and security balance of power in Lebanon. By contrast, the Sunni community's emerging role in the Syria conflict has been interpreted by Damascus as a de facto declaration of war on the Assad regime.

Assessing Communal Dividing Lines

The US, its European allies, the Southern Gulf states, Iran and the now-beleaguered Assad Regime are all regional and international partners of Lebanon's competing cross-

sectarian alliances. However, dividing lines pitting Lebanon's Sunni and Shi'a communities against each other, their diverging views on Assad and the competition between their chief regional sponsors – Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively – in Syria and the broader Middle East now define insecurity and escalatory violence in Lebanon.

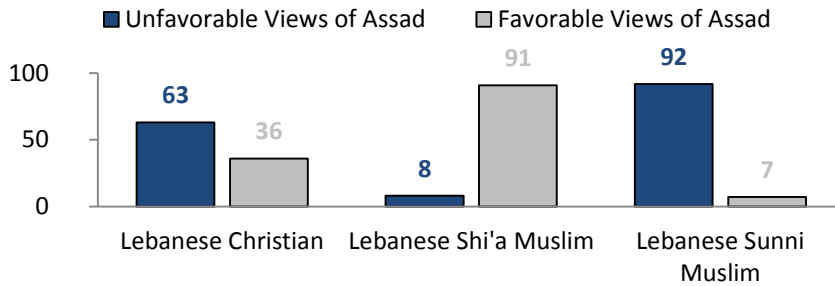
While regional public opinion surveys in the Middle East are always going to be uncertain and anecdotal at best, they can still help to contextualize key regional trends. In 2013, a series of *Pew Research Center* polls found that a majority of regional states had broadly negative views of the Assad Regime and Iran – a finding that both reflected popular sentiment and government policy in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories and Turkey.³⁴

Figure VIII.42 which shows data collected on Lebanese public opinion showed that Lebanon breaks sharply with this regional pattern in 2013. More specifically, the Lebanese remained deeply divided along communal lines when it concerned Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.³⁵ While 92% of Lebanese Sunnis had an unfavorable view of the Assad regime, 91% of Lebanese Shi'a had favorable views. Views are similarly divided on Iran, where 93% of Lebanese Sunnis had unfavorable views compared to 89% favorable. This trend carries over to Hezbollah as well, where 94% of Sunnis have unfavorable views, unlike 89% of Shi'a who continued to have favorable views of the Shi'a militant group.³⁶ Lastly, the pattern broadly reverses when it comes to views of Saudi Arabia: some 93% of Lebanese Shi'a held unfavorable views of the Kingdom; by contrast, 82% of Sunnis remained favorable.³⁷

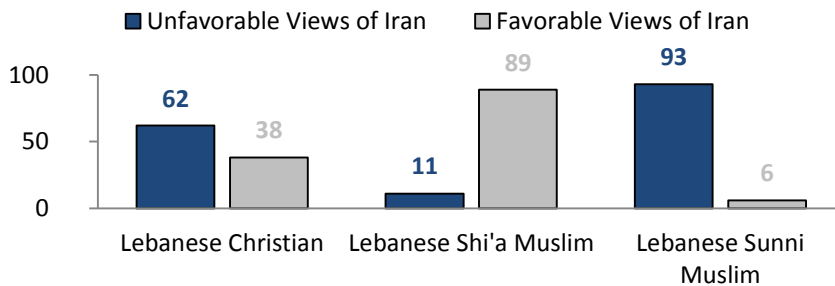
While Lebanon's Sunni and Shi'a communities may have diametrically opposing views of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two communities share the view that both regional powers have either a great deal or a fair amount of influence in Lebanon. **Figure VIII.43** shows Lebanese communal views on the levels of Saudi and Iranian influence in Lebanon and whether any such influence is broadly positive or negative. 85% of Christians, 85% of Shi'a and 81% of Sunnis feel that Iran has a great deal or a fair amount of influence in Lebanon. Similarly, 86% of Christians, 77% of Shi'a and 83% of Sunnis feel that Saudi Arabia wields either a great deal or a fair amount of influence in their country. Where Sunni and Shi'a do diverge, however, is on whether either country is playing a positive or a negative role in Lebanon. **Figure VIII.43** shows that 87% of Shi'a view Iranian influence as positive, whereas 91% of Sunnis feel that Iran's influence is largely negative. Similarly, while 71% of Sunnis view Saudi influence in Lebanon as positive, 87% of Shi'a feel that the Kingdom's influence is broadly negative.³⁸

Figure VIII.42: Lebanon and Regional Public Opinion I
(Percentage)

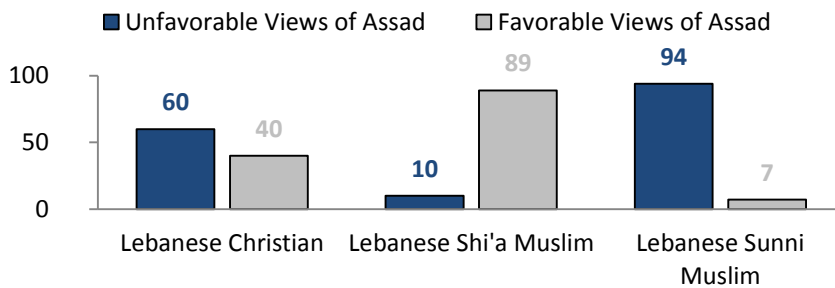
Lebanese Communal Views on Assad:



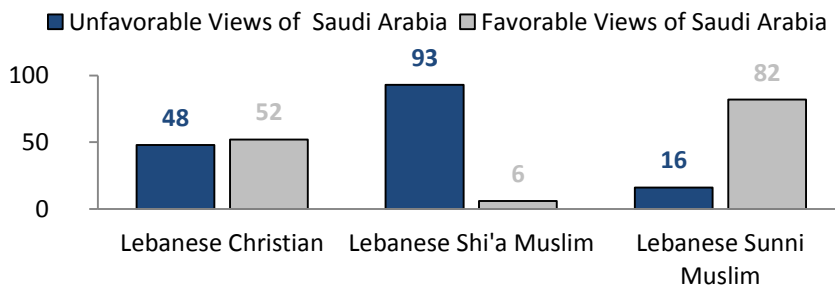
Lebanese Communal Views on Iran:



Lebanese Communal Views on Hezbollah:



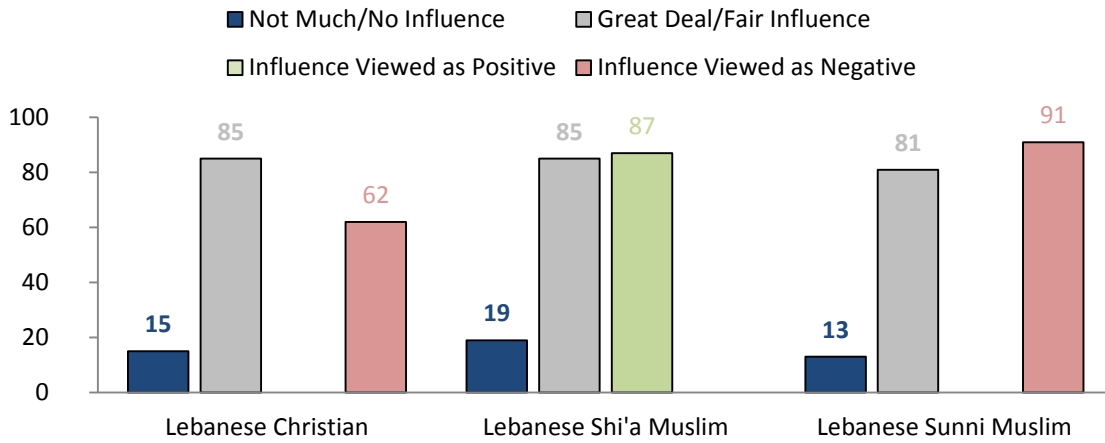
Lebanese Communal Views on Saudi Arabia:



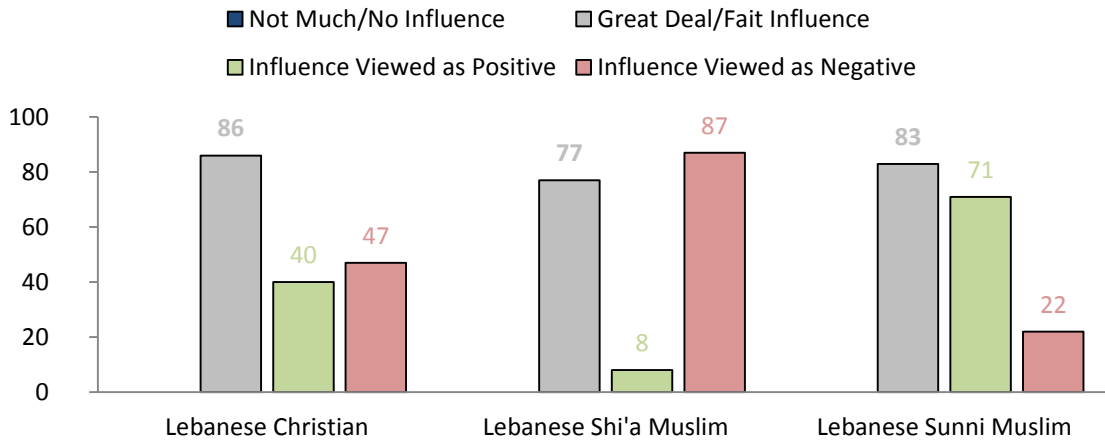
Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from “Global Views of Iran Overwhelmingly Negative,” Pew Research Center, June 11, 2013; “Saudi Arabia’s Image Falters among Middle East Neighbors,” Pew Research Center, October 13, 2013; Bruce Drake, “As It Fights in Syria, Hezbollah Seen Unfavorably in Region,” June 7, 2013; “Widespread Middle East Fears that Syrian Violence Will Spread,” Pew Research Center, May 1, 2013.

Figure VIII.43: Lebanon and Regional Public Opinion II
(Percentage)

Lebanese Communal Views on Iranian Influence:



Lebanese Communal Views on Saudi Influence:



Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from “Global Views of Iran Overwhelmingly Negative,” Pew Research Center, June 11, 2013; “Saudi Arabia’s Image Falts among Middle East Neighbors,” Pew Research Center, October 13, 2013; Bruce Drake, “As It Fights in Syria, Hezbollah Seen Unfavorably in Region,” June 7, 2013; “Widespread Middle East Fears that Syrian Violence Will Spread,” Pew Research Center, May 1, 2013.

Hezbollah's "Necessary War of Choice" in Syria

As previous sections showed, Hezbollah's decision to commit to offensive military operations inside Syria in concert with Assad's forces has heightened precarious Sunni-Shi'a tensions in Lebanon exponentially. The move also undermined the country's efforts to disassociate itself from the Syria conflict under the auspices of the so-called June 2012 "Baabda Declaration," a pledge that includes noninterference in Syria's conflict and was signed by all leading factions in Lebanon, including Hezbollah.³⁹ To many Lebanese, such a projection of military force outside of Lebanon by Hezbollah or any other group is without precedent.

Hezbollah's choices reflect its own narrow set of overlapping priorities in Syria: the primacy of preserving the "Resistance Axis with Iran," Hezbollah's sense that it can neither appease increasingly militant Lebanese Sunni political forces nor reverse deepening regional Sunni-Shi'a tension, and that Shi'a communal fears as a regional minority group increasingly inform a need to create strategic depth in Syria. Taken together, these factors have led Hezbollah to a bitter conclusion: it can choose to fight mainly Sunni militant forces in Syria today or fight Sunni militant forces in Lebanon tomorrow, should Assad fall.⁴⁰

Hezbollah is now engaged in what it considers to be a preemptive war of choice in Syria, albeit one that many within the group and the broader Shi'a community view as both necessary & inevitable. However, such a war also presents the group with very real long term risks and challenges. It endangers Shi'a communities in the Gulf, further alienates regional Arab public opinion,⁴¹ and pushed the US and its allies to consider providing anti-Assad rebels with weapons in order to "rebalance" the conventional and asymmetric military balances in Syria.⁴² It also may be a prelude to a much deeper change for Hezbollah, whereby it becomes less of a "resistance" organization against Israel and more of a sectarian tool in the service of increasingly narrow Lebanese Shi'a interests.⁴³

Hezbollah's Shifting Military Posture in Syria

In the spring of 2012, Hezbollah initially sent limited military forces to support the following efforts in Syria: defend the Sayyidah Zaynab Shrine (one of Shi'a Islam's holiest sites on the outskirts of Damascus); protect Lebanese Shi'a villages east of the Bekaa; offer counter-insurgency training to pro-Assad forces; secure key road networks linking Lebanon to Syria; combat support operations in Zabadani between Damascus and the Lebanese border.⁴⁴

By early 2013, however, Hezbollah's priorities had significantly shifted to its combat and combat support roles with Assad's forces east of the Bekaa valley with a focus on strategically significant terrain such as the town of Qusayr and Al-Qalamoun mountain range. Both were critical to supply routes and defending against flanking maneuvers to whomever could control them.⁴⁵ **Figure VIII.44** is a broad and anecdotal depiction of where Hezbollah was focusing its efforts in Syria in February 2014.

Reports from Lebanon and Europe place the estimated number of Hezbollah fighters within Syria at up to 4,000 in support of Assad's forces. It is worth noting that other estimates on Hezbollah fighters in Syria vary from as little as 2,000 to as much as 10,000. The disparities reflect the challenges of getting an accurate picture of Hezbollah's force

commitment level, never mind the current disposition of its overall fighting strength. However, it is important to remember that many of these estimates of Hezbollah's manpower levels in Syria are "guesstimates."⁴⁶

In 2013, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria helped shape regime victories in areas opposite the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, especially in and around the town of Qusayr. Strategically significant as an opposition lifeline for aid, weapons, and fighters from Lebanon, the retaking of Qusayr secured the regime's western flank as it pushed to consolidate its hold on Homs and access to the mainly Alawite coast, cut off rebel supply lines, and signaled to the international community that the Assad regime was far from beaten.⁴⁷

However, Qusayr may have been even more important to Hezbollah. Qusayr sits on a direct road link to the mainly Shi'a Lebanese town of Hermel, a north-eastern stronghold of the Shi'a militant group and a key pipeline for overland weapons transfers from Iran via Syria. Qusayr is also ringed by Shi'a Lebanese villages inside Syria which Hezbollah feels both obligated and under pressure to protect.

From a military standpoint, Hezbollah's engagements east of the Lebanese Bekaa Valley have not been without cost. According to press, diplomatic, Syrian opposition and both pro and anti-Hezbollah Shi'a sources, the number of Hezbollah fighters killed in the first week of the main offensive to retake Qusayr was between 70 and 110.⁴⁸ This may have reflected in part the reality that although well trained, many of Hezbollah's fighters in Qusayr were largely untested in combat. The high initial death toll may have also pointed to the Syrian rebels' use of some of Hezbollah's own sniping and booby-trapping techniques; techniques that the Shi'a group shared in joint training exercises with Hamas and that the Palestinian militant group may have passed on to the rebels in turn.⁴⁹

While these military commitment levels are significant, Hezbollah can continue to absorb more combat deaths, largely thanks to the dramatic expansion of the group's armed wing in the wake of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war. Compared to some 3,000 fighters in 2006, Hezbollah's current fighting strength may be estimated at around 20,000-30,000, of which some 25 percent may be full-time active duty personnel.⁵⁰

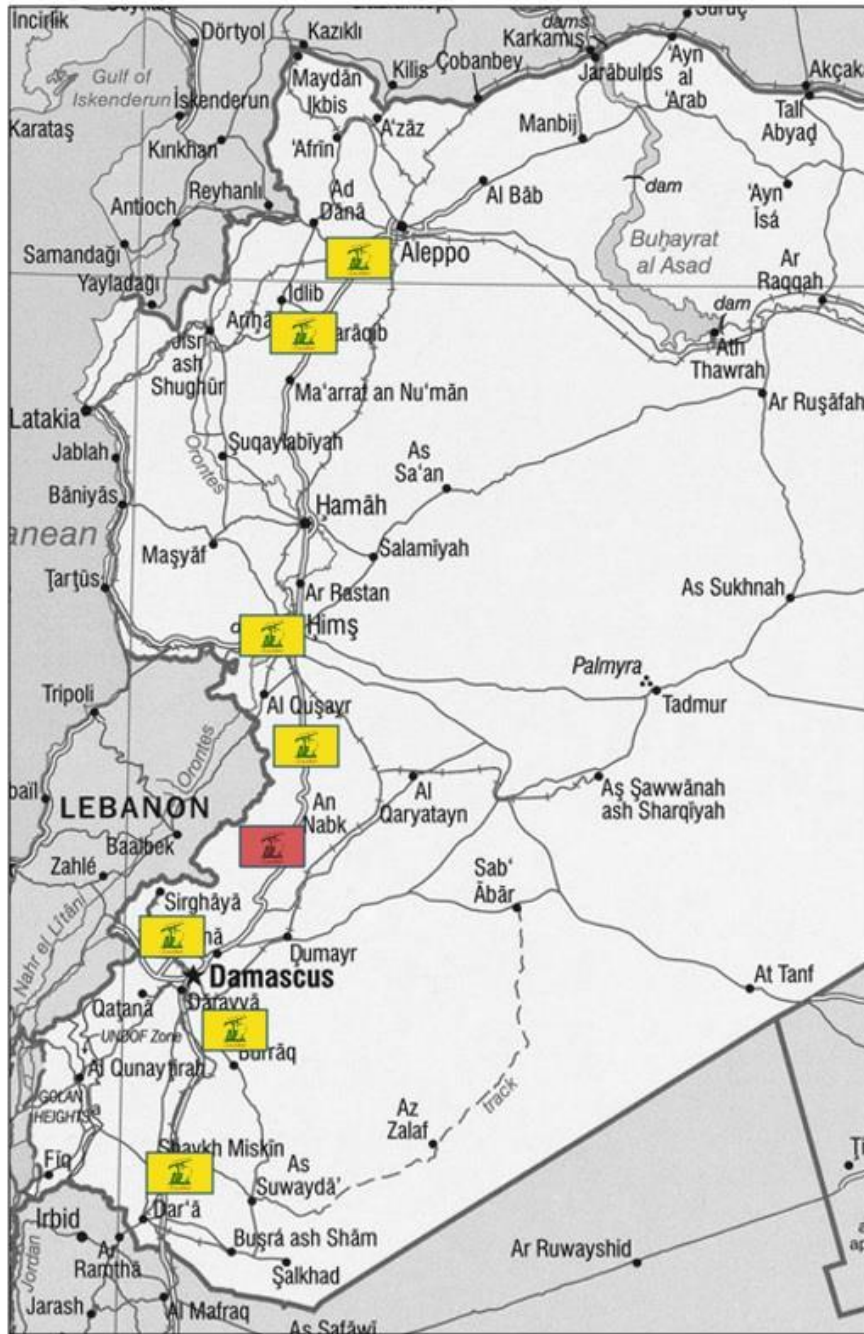
As **Figure VIII.44** shows, Al-Qalamoun is the current focus of Hezbollah kinetic military operations. While Hezbollah and its Syrian allies were successful in decisively containing, countering or defeating opposition forces in and around al-Zabadani and Qusayr – thus cutting key supply lines in north-eastern Lebanon – securing the strategic Al-Qalamoun mountain range would have a decisive impact on the flow of fighters, money and weapons across the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.⁵¹

Securing or pacifying Al-Qalamoun may also prove crucial in stemming the flow of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), vehicle borne IEDs (VBIEDs) and suicide VBIEDs (SVBIEDs) that targeted southern suburbs, the north-eastern town of Hermel and other so-called Shi'a or Hezbollah strongholds in 2013 and 2014. There was growing evidence in early 2014 that the town of Yabroud in the Al-Qalamoun range was a key assembly point for IEDs, VBIEDs and SVBIEDs bound for Lebanon often via the predominantly Sunni town of Aarsal on the Lebanese side of the border with Syria.⁵²

While preliminary reports indicated that Hezbollah's forces in Al-Qalamoun – not unlike in Qusayr – continued to be far more disciplined and employed superior tactics, communications, and were better coordinated than their Syrian rebel opponents, fighting there favors defensive military operations and may be more challenging. 2014 estimates of the number of opposition forces in Al-Qalamoun range from 5,000 to 30,000 fighters – including fighters from leading Islamist and radical jihadist groups that included Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrah al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Liwa al-Tawhid and Liwa al-Islam.⁵³

Difficult battles like the one in Qusayr and Al-Qalamoun against similarly committed and ideological opposition fighters, in addition to shifts in how Hezbollah conducts both operations and training for urban warfighting ensure that tomorrow's veterans from the war in Syria will form a combat-tested Hezbollah fighting core that may complicate future engagements against the IDF, to say nothing of Lebanese or Syrian Sunni militants.

Figure VIII.44: Hezbollah's Uncertain Syria Deployment in 2014



Note: Area marked in red depicts current focus of kinetic operations in the Al-Qalamoun region.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and U.S. government experts and from reporting and analysis by Nicholas Blanford.

The Mainstream Sunni Response to the Syria Conflict

While Hezbollah's role in Syria has important ramifications for Lebanon, Syria and how the US and Iran compete in the Levant, the responses of – and shifts within – Lebanon's Sunni community are at least as important.

Lebanon's Sunni community – including the mainstream Future Movement led by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri – has been largely supportive of the mainly Sunni opposition since the start of popular unrest in Syria in 2011. This led to recurring allegations that Lebanon's Sunni political and communal leadership may have been facilitating the flow of weapons, money and other aid to fledgling rebel groups.⁵⁴

Hezbollah's active military support for the Assad regime has only served to escalate pressure within the Lebanese Sunni community to provide support for the opponents of the Assad regime.⁵⁵ However, there appear to be real limits in terms of what mainstream and mainly urban Sunni groups like the Future Movement are willing or able to do.

First, there is no real-world martial tradition among Lebanon's Sunnis; time and again the community sought to leverage other internal forces – such as militant Palestinian groups during the 1975-1990 civil war – or external allies – like Saudi Arabia – to shape favorable outcomes.⁵⁶ Lebanese Sunnis have also traditionally eschewed military service – a pattern that only started to shift in the last decade. The limitations of so-called Sunni militias were all too apparent during street clashes with Hezbollah in May 2008. The Future Movement's military advisors expected pro-Future Movement fighters to hold off Hezbollah and their allies for days, if not defeat them. However, the Shi'a militant group routed its Sunni opponents in West Beirut in less than a day.⁵⁷

Beyond the events of May 2008, Lebanon's mainstream and more moderate Sunnis face other obstacles to mounting a military response to Hezbollah in Lebanon or Syria. As previous sections showed, Hezbollah has the benefit of three decades of lead time in terms of totally focused Iranian “security assistance”. Lebanon's Sunni community does not have an external patron that is either able or willing to duplicate that level of military support, even if such an effort could disregard the effects of lead time. Lastly, mainstream groups such as the Future Movement remain sensitive to how the US and the West perceive them, and are reluctant adopt more militant tactics and strategies as means of competing with or curtailing Hezbollah.⁵⁸

Northern Poverty & the Sunni Militant Response to Hezbollah

Hezbollah may have accurately calculated that moderate and urban Sunni factions would not or could not escalate in Syria, or with direct attacks against the group or the Shi'a community. However, the rural Sunnis in the north and the Bekaa have always been a separate demographic and Hezbollah actions in Syria may also have dramatically accelerating major shifts currently under way within the Sunni community.

The failure of moderate Sunni leaders to champion their interests in the wake of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 has left Northern and rural Sunnis feeling unrepresented. **Figure VIII.45** effectively describes key socio-economic trends in Northern Lebanon relative to the rest of the country. In 2014, the predominantly Sunni and rural North remains the poorest governorate in Lebanon with more than twice the

national average in terms of both overall and extreme poverty. The North also has the lowest levels of per capita nominal expenditure by governorate.

Poverty in Northern Lebanon exists in parallel to a long tradition of both Salafism and Salafi jihadism.⁵⁹ Salafi groups and anti-Syrian Lebanese Islamists were aggressively suppressed by the Syrian army during the 1980s – a pattern that carried over to Syria's hegemony over Lebanon from 1990 to 2005.⁶⁰ While the withdrawal of Syrian forces removed one source of pressure on Lebanon's northern Salafi groups and Islamists, it was the Syrian uprising of 2011 that accelerated their mobilization in general, and those of Salafi jihadi groups in particular.⁶¹

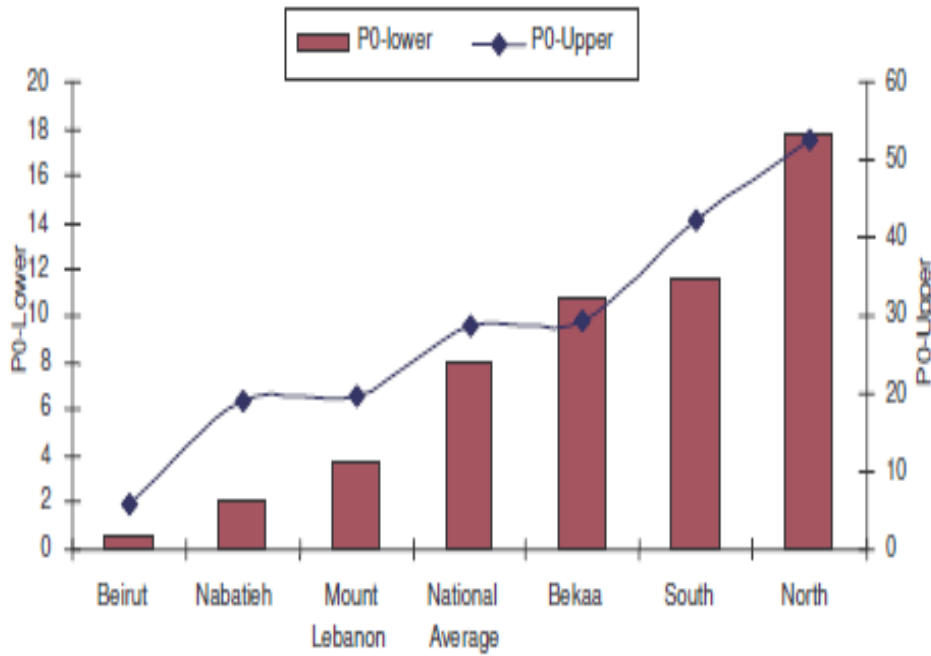
Salafi jihadists actively fought against both forces loyal to the Assad regime and their allies – including Hezbollah – in Syria over the 2011 to 2014 period. Lebanese Salafi groups have also actively supported Syrian opposition groups that have come to rely on Northern Lebanon and the Bekaa as critical supply lines. In addition, given shared ideology and common animosity toward Hezbollah, many Salafi Jihadis have also welcomed the expansion of groups tied to Al-Qaeda in Lebanon, including the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).⁶²

Regional Sunni-Shi'a tension, the perceived power of Hezbollah, the emergence of new and more sectarian Sunni political figures, and the emergence of a mainly Sunni opposition in Syria are all serving to mobilize the poorer rural Sunnis. This is not without precedent; similar patterns decades earlier led to the founding of the Shi'a Amal movement in 1974.

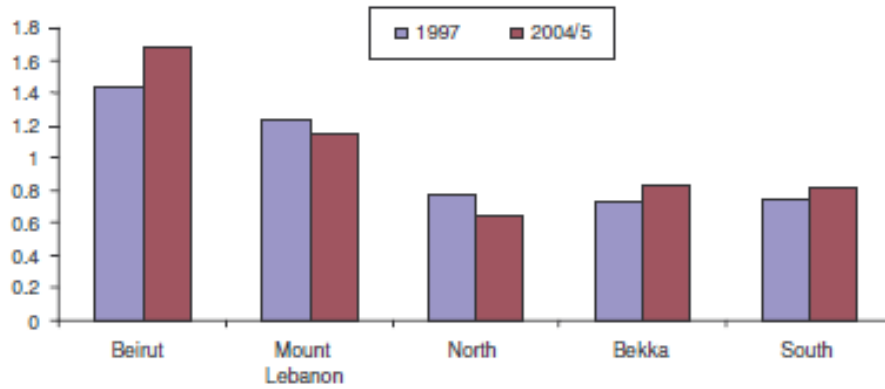
Hezbollah's actions contributed to escalating levels of hostility and a willingness to engage in armed violence that it would not otherwise expect to see from Lebanon's Sunni community. However, socio-economic and demographic changes within Lebanon's Sunni community may be part of a larger shift that goes beyond either Hezbollah or the scope of the Shi'a militant group's role in the Syria conflict.

Figure VIII.45: The Socio-Economics of Northern Lebanon

Extreme Poverty & Overall Poverty by Governorate 2004-05:



Per Capita Nominal Expenditures by Governorate 2004-05:



Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from Heba Laithy, Khalid Abu-Ismaïl & Kamal Hamdan, "Poverty, Growth and Income Distribution in Lebanon," Country Study, No. 13, IPC, 2008, p. 6, 10.

Assessing the Impact of the Syria Conflict on Lebanon

Saudi-Iranian regional competition, Sunni-Shi'a tension and all of the economic, societal, demographic and security pressures have all expanded to the point that no regional country has been so adversely affected by three years of conflict in Syria.

Figure VIII.46 illustrates *International Institute of Finance* data on existing, estimated and forecasted economic metrics in Lebanon over the 2010 to 2014 period. **Figure VIII.46** also shows the impact of regional instability and the Syria conflict on GDP growth in Lebanon. While the Lebanese economy continued to grow over the 2011 to 2013 period, growth was not estimated to exceed 1.8 percent in 2011 – a level far below 2010's 7 percent in GDP growth – and the economy was estimated to have lost a cumulative \$9.7 billion in trend growth. Other indicators have also suffered, including the rate of foreign direct investment as a percentage of GDP, the fiscal deficit and the government debt-to-GDP ratio.

The effects of the Syria crisis on Lebanon and the metrics of **Figure VIII.46** are best reflected in the decline in revenue from tourism. **Figure VIII.47** shows the relative year-on-year change in the levels of tourists and occupancy levels at hotels in Lebanon. Tourism has traditionally been a key source of central government revenue, and the decline in tourism is one of the factors that have negatively impacted the economic indicators in **Figure VIII.46**.

Another source of pressure from the Syria conflict that has impacted both rents from tourism and the broader national economy is the scale of the influx of displaced Syrians to Lebanon. **Figure VIII.48** presents a stark illustration of just how much of an impact more than 900,000 Syrian refugees have had on Lebanon – a level of displacement that roughly equates the total population of Poland moving to the US in under two years. **Figure VIII.48** also shows that not all host population groups in Lebanon have faced one common set of pressures from the arrival of displaced Syrians; Tripoli, Zahle, Akkar and the Bekaa have all contended with refugee-driven population growth between 30 and 55 percent.

Figure VIII.49 shows just how much worse off Lebanon is relative to other refugee host populations in the Levant. What the figure does not explain, however, is the impact of political and sectarian divisions on crafting an effective policy response the influx of displaced Syrians. The failure early in the Syria crisis to come up with a strategy – regardless of whether it could or should have been centered on establishing refugee camps – led to the proliferation of more than 1,000 separate Syrian population groups across Lebanon. **Figure VIII.50** shows in turn that many of these refugee population groups have formed in some of Lebanon's poorest districts and governorates, placing additional pressures on education, healthcare, and socio-economic structures.

While the pressures described in **Figures VIII.46** through **VIII.49** are significant on their own, they are made all the more dire by the impact of regional Saudi-Iranian and Sunni-Shi'a tensions. **Figure VIII.50** shows estimates of Suicide attacks, VBIEDS, IEDS, inter-factional fighting, clashes with security forces and the number of dead over the 2011 to 2014 period based on data derived from *IHS Jane's*, *IHS Country Risk Daily Report*, *IHS Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor* and *IHS Terrorism Watch Report*. The real impact of

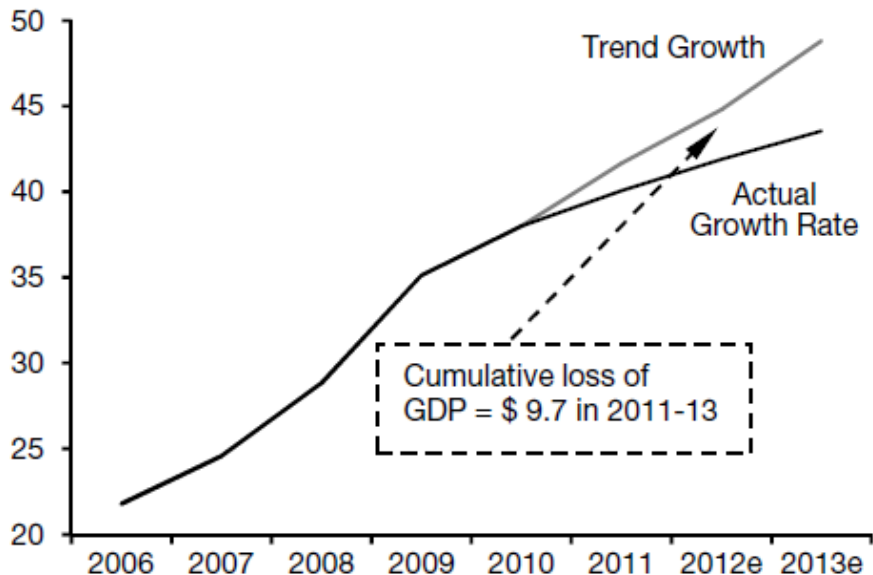
the Syria conflict on Lebanon is higher than the data shown in **Figure VIII.50**. However, even low-end estimates are tragic in terms of their scale and impact on Lebanese stability.

Figure VIII.46: The Long Term Challenge of Economic Stability in Lebanon

Assessing the Impact of Instability on the Lebanese Economy:
(Percent Change)

	2010	2011e	2012e	2013f	2014f
Nominal GDP, \$ billion	37.1	39.3	41.1	43.6	46.1
Real GDP Growth, %	7.0	1.8	1.1	0.7	2.7
CPI Inflation, average, %	6.1	6.7	4.6	5.3	3.7
Current Account Bal., % GDP	-20.3	-12.4	-4.0	-8.7	-7.6
FDI, % GDP	10.2	7.0	7.6	3.9	5.6
Official Reserves*, \$ billion	31.5	33.7	37.2	37.6	38.1
Fiscal Deficit, % GDP	-5.7	-6.0	-8.9	-11.3	-9.5
Primary Balance, % GDP	5.5	4.2	0.4	-2.2	-0.8
Government Debt, % GDP	142	136	140	143	142

Assessing the Impact of Regional Instability on GDP Growth:
(Percent Change)

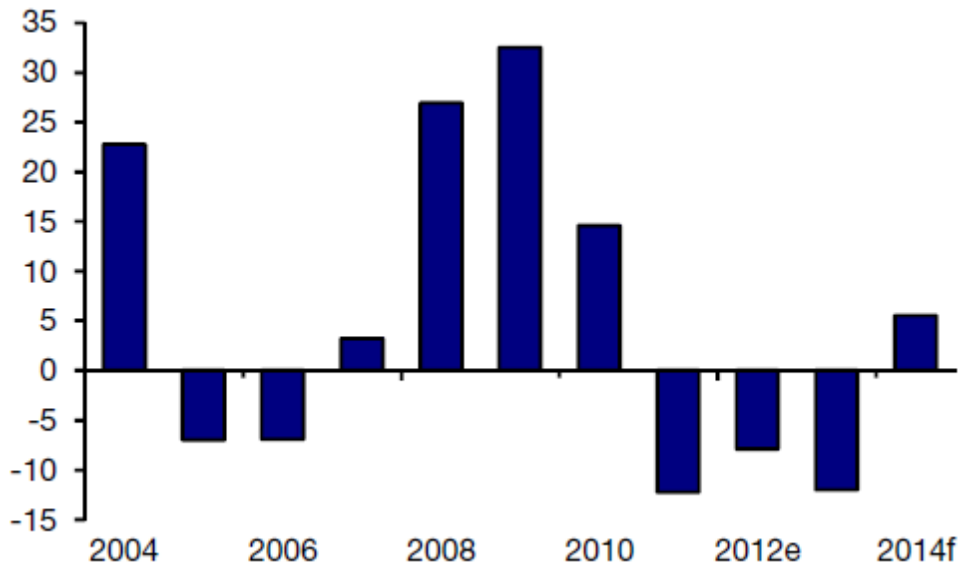


Note: "e" are IIF estimates. "f" are IIF forecasts.

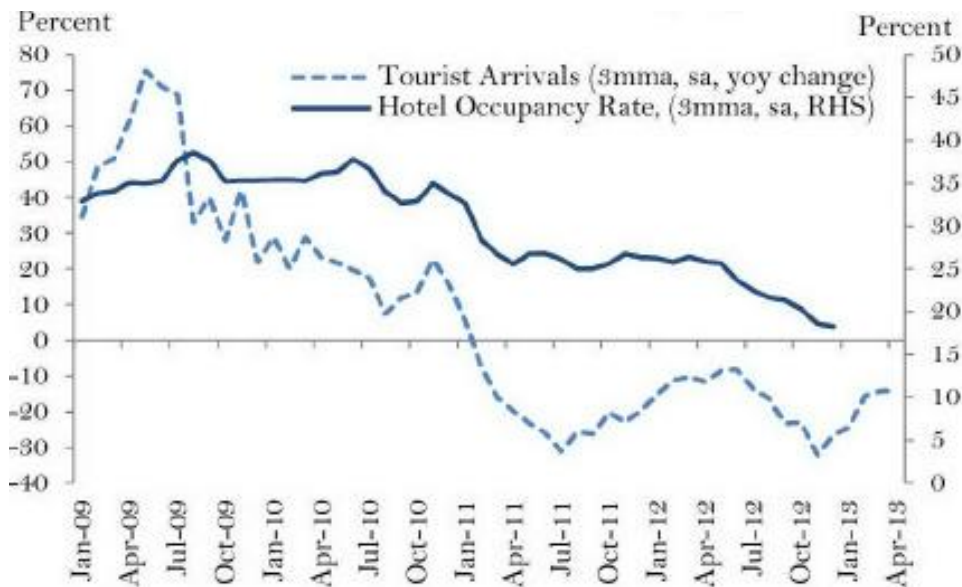
Source: Adapted from "IIF Regional Overview on Middle East and North Africa: "Arab Spring" Countries Struggle, GCC Prospect Favorable," the International Institute of Finance p. 16; "Lebanon: Improved Security Key to Growth Revival," *IIF Research Note*, January 22, 2014, p. 3.

Figure VIII.47: Lebanese Socio-Economic Vulnerability to the Syria Conflict: Syrian Refugees by Country
(As of January 28, 2014)

Assessing the Impact of Instability on Tourism:
(Percent Change)



The Impact of Instability on Tourist Arrivals and Hotel Occupancy:

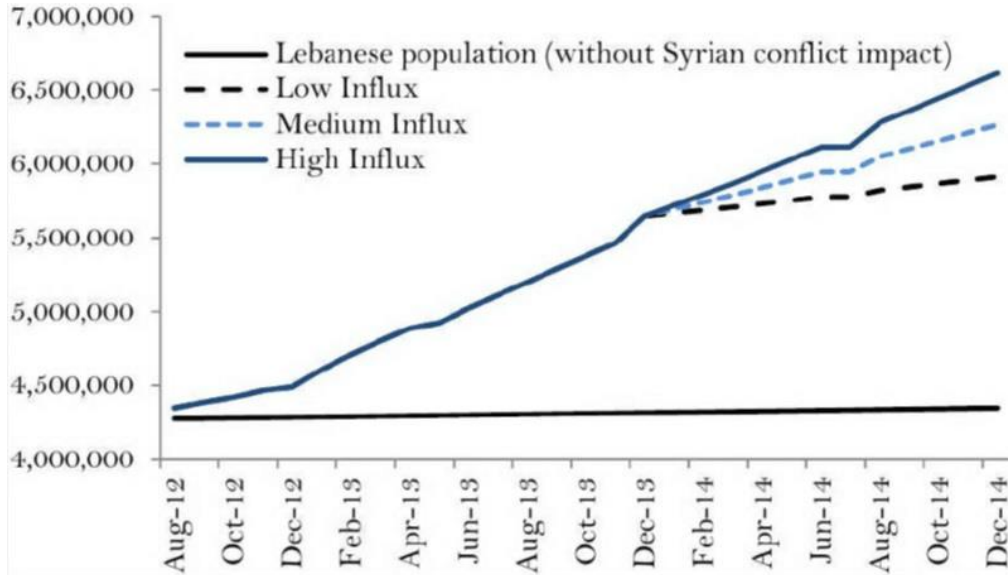


Note: 2011 and 2012 economic figures are IIF estimates. 2013 and 2014 economic figures are IIF forecasts. 2012 tourism figures are estimates and 2014 tourism figures are forecasts.

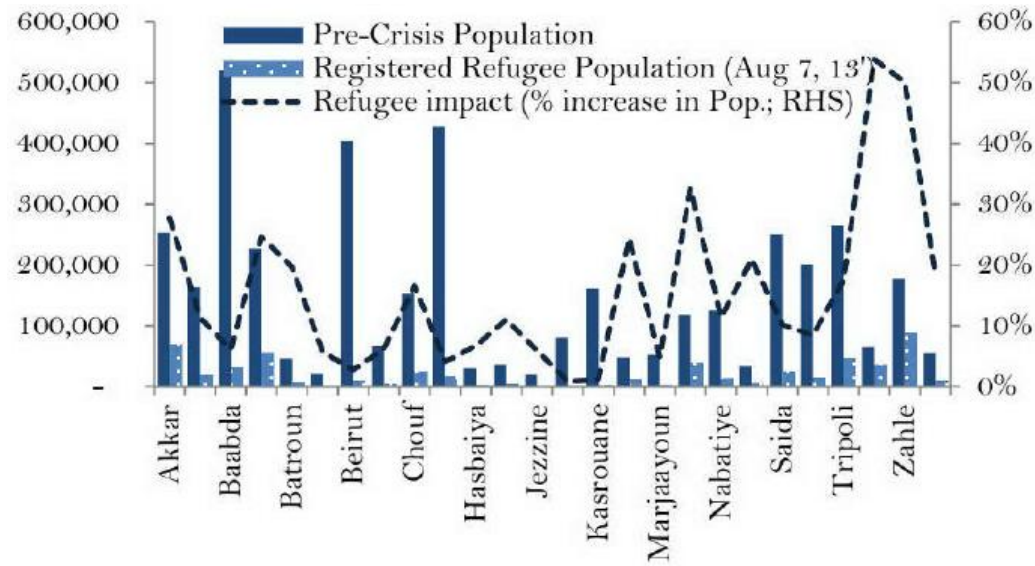
Source: Adapted from “IIF Regional Overview on Middle East and North Africa: “Arab Spring” Countries Struggle, GCC Prospect Favorable,” the International Institute of Finance p. 16; “Lebanon: Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict,” The World Bank, Report No. 81098-LB, September 20, 2013 p. 4

Figure VIII.48: Lebanese Socio-Economic Vulnerability to the Syria Conflict: Assessing the Impact on Demographics

The Impact of Syrian Refugees on Population Growth:



District Level Impact of Syrian Refugees on Host Populations:

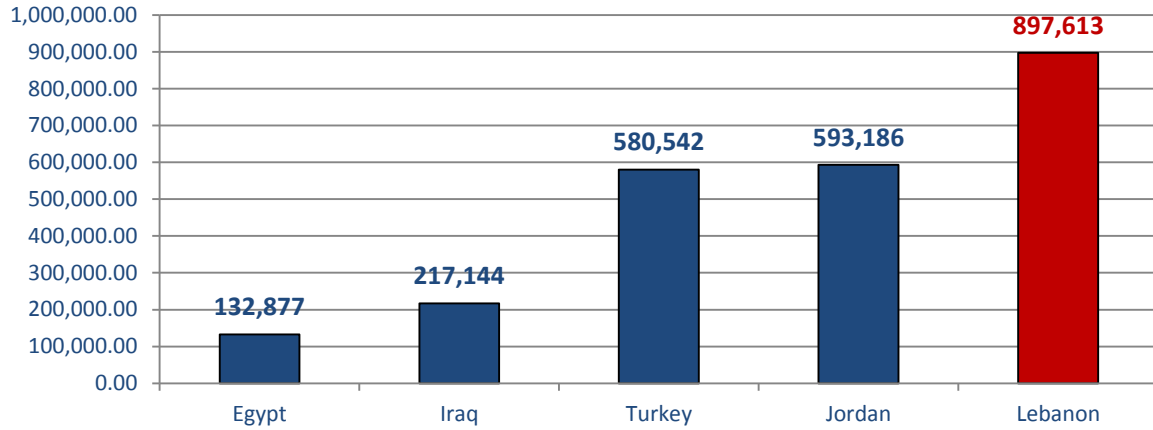


Source: "Lebanon: Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict," Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Department, Middle East and North Africa Region, the World Bank, September 20, 2013, Report No. 81098-LB, p. 27; UNICEF, UNHCR, CDR and World bank Staff.

Figure VIII.49: Lebanese Socio-Economic Vulnerability to the Syria Conflict: The Scale of the Refugee Crisis

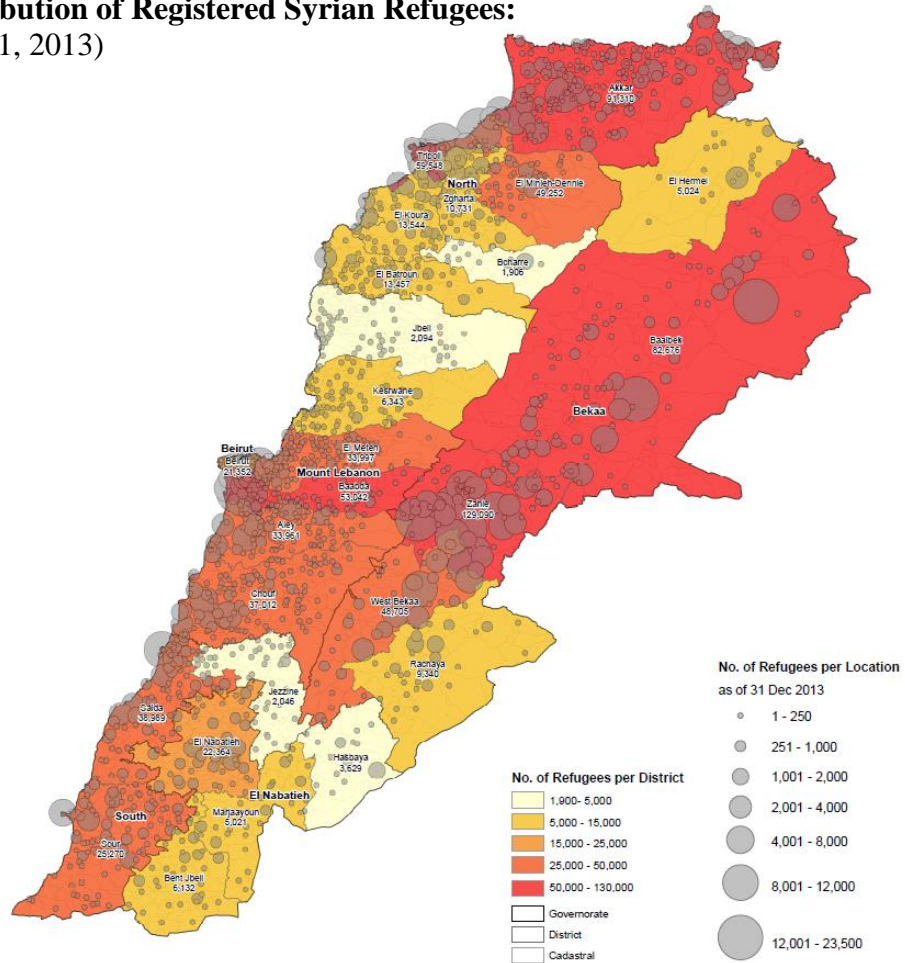
Syrian Refugees by Country:

(As of January 28, 2014)



Geographic Distribution of Registered Syrian Refugees:

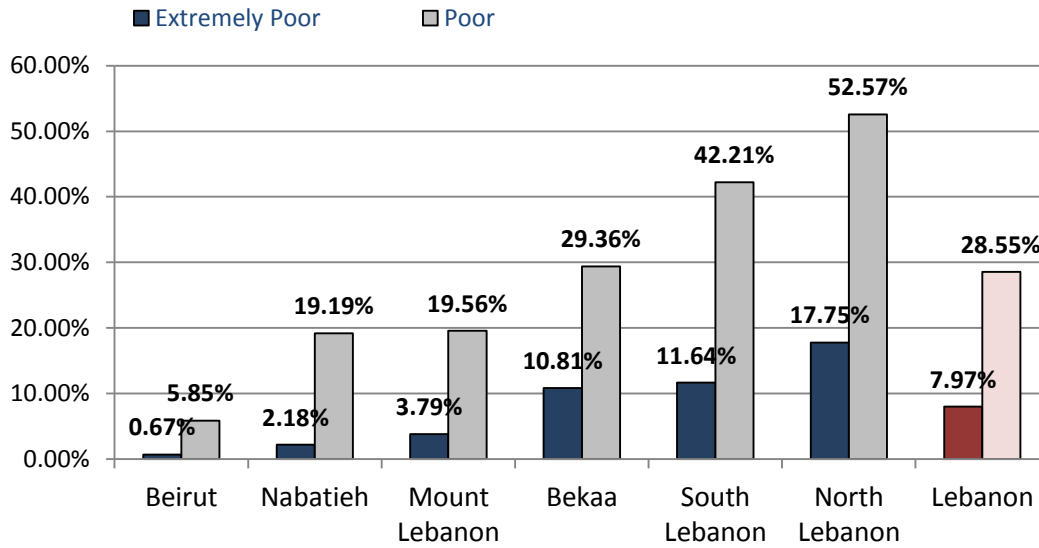
(As of December 31, 2013)



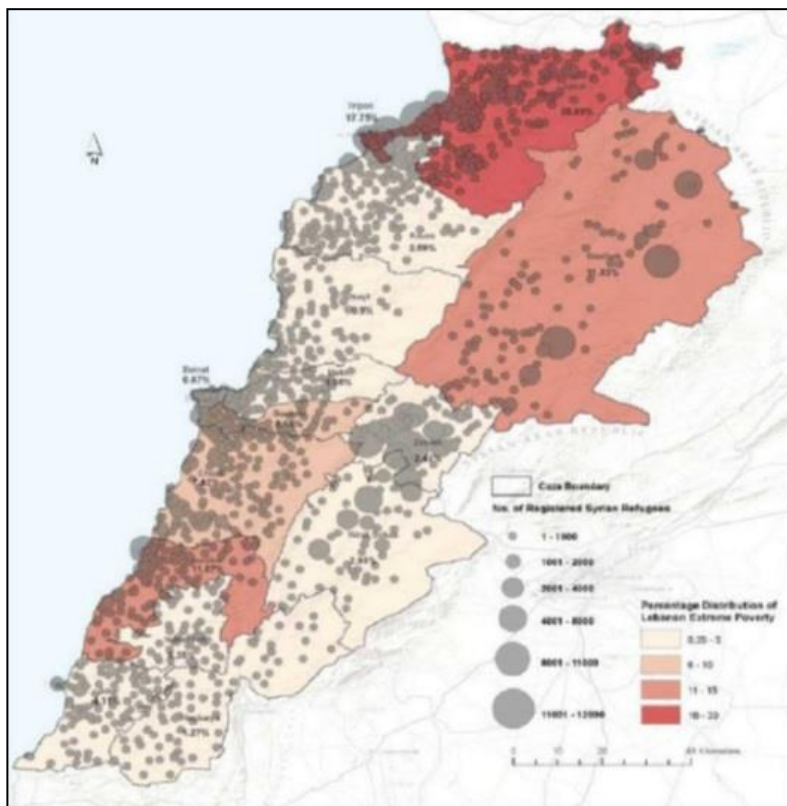
Source: "Lebanon: Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict," Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Department, Middle East and North Africa Region, the World Bank, September 20, 2013, Report No. 81098-LB, p. 96; PCM, UNICEF, UNHCR, 2013.

Figure VIII.50: Lebanese Socio-Economic Vulnerability to the Syria Conflict: Poverty & the Geographic Distribution of Syrian Refugees

Poverty Rates in Lebanon by Governorate in 2011:

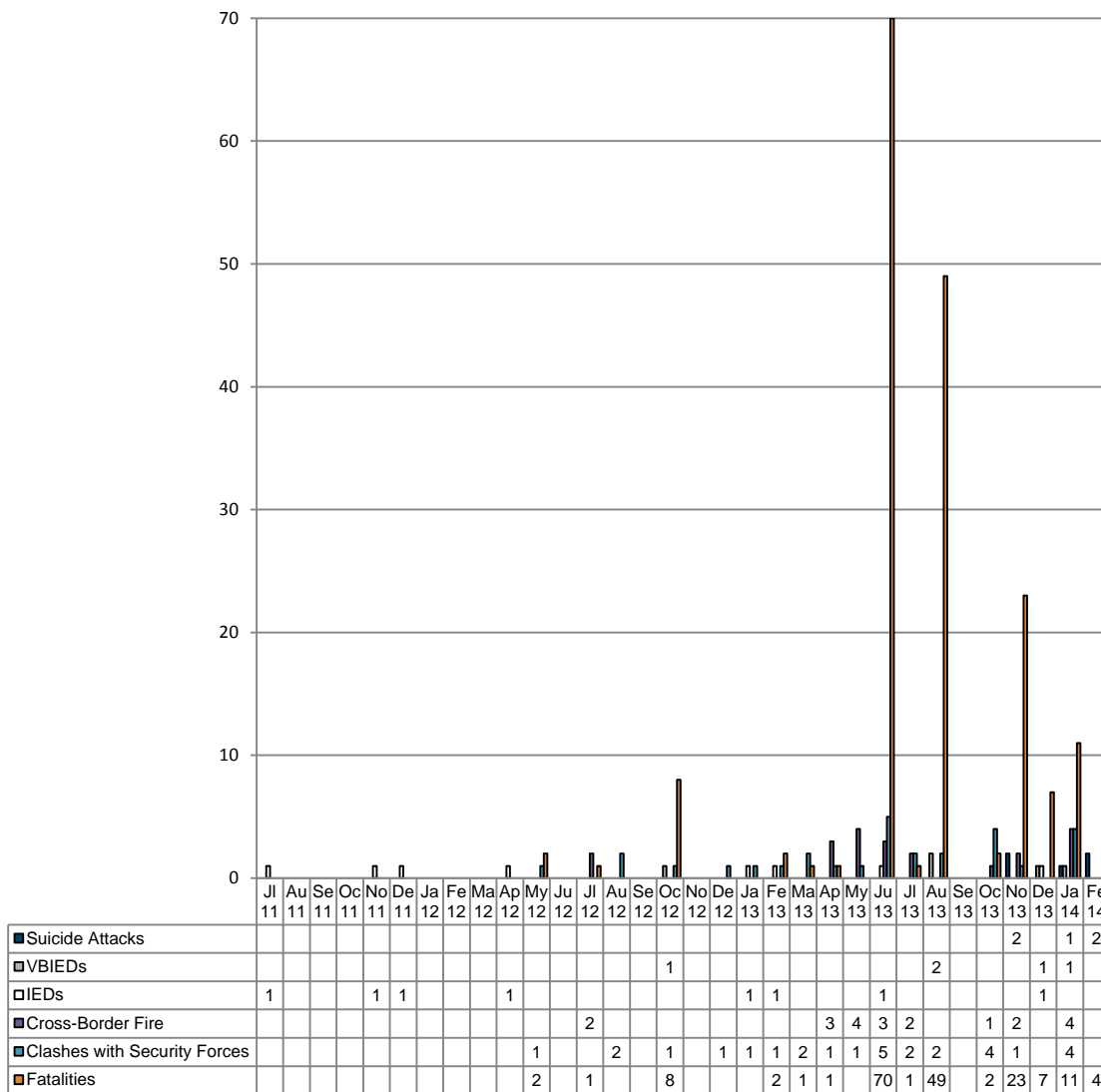


Extreme Poverty & Geographic Distribution of Refugees:



Source: “Lebanon: Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict,” Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Department, Middle East and North Africa Region, the World Bank, September 20, 2013, Report No. 81098-LB, p. 96; PCM, UNICEF, UNHCR, 2013.

Figure VIII.51: The Impact of the Syria Crisis on Lebanese Security: Suicide Attacks, VBIEDs, IEDs, Attacks on Security Forces & Infrastructure 2011-2014



Note: Figures not intended to be an accurate or complete account of selected indicators or events.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from data collected by *IHS Jane's*, *IHS Country Risk Daily Report*, *IHS Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor* and *IHS Terrorism Watch Report*.

The Search for a Stable Middle

While the Syria crisis has exacerbated Sunni-Shi'a tensions and violence in Lebanon, a number of factions continue to vie for a middle ground at a time of growing local and regional polarization.

The country's depleted Christian political forces – divided between the two coalitions – and the Druze are wary of any Lebanese intervention in Syria's internal conflict. This is in part due to the reality that the political tug-of-war in Beirut, the struggle for Syria, and broader regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran all straddle Sunni-Shi'ite dividing lines. Beyond discreet corporatist communal groups, key state institutions – including the Presidency and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) – sought to mitigate domestic instability as a result of Syria conflict.

Hezbollah's Christian allies are uneasy about the group's evolving and increasingly aggressive role in supporting the Assad regime.⁶³ Christians in the March 14 alliance are not faring much better: Lebanon's northern districts – a hotbed for Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other militant cross-border activity – and the growing stature of the country's Sunni Salafists have made them similarly uncomfortable.⁶⁴ This pattern has been further compounded by concerns surrounding what some view to be the mainly Sunni Future Movement's intermittent political, financial and military support for increasingly radical Sunni forces in Syria.⁶⁵

As ever, polling data in Lebanon remains anecdotal at best. However, the Pressures that Lebanon's Christians they feel as a result of local and regional tension is visible in **Figure VIII.42** and **Figure VIII.43**. Whether it is on Assad, Iran, Hezbollah or Saudi Arabia, a significant portion of Christians remain divided about whether any of these regional and local actors can be viewed favorably. These figures also show the doubts Christians had about whether either Saudi Arabia or Iran could be trusted to make good use of their influence in Lebanon.

Not unlike Lebanon's Christians, the Druze community led by Walid Joumblatt is similarly wary of any Lebanese involvement in Syria's internal conflict.⁶⁶ This is driven in part by the reality that the political tug-of-war in Beirut, the struggle for power in Syria, and broader regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran all straddle increasingly unstable Sunni-Shi'a dividing lines; all of which threaten the safety and autonomy of regional minority groups.⁶⁷ In the end, the Druze and other minority sects find themselves in similarly untenable positions between a proverbial Sunni rock and a Shi'a hard place.⁶⁸

Former LAF commander President Michel Sleiman has been a proponent of the so-called "National Dialogue" process, which was initiated in 2006 to the end of normalizing Lebanese-Syrian relations, tackling the challenges of any potential disarmament of Hezbollah, and streamlining other core areas of discord between "March 14", "March 8" and other Lebanese factions.⁶⁹ He is also one of the chief architects of the so-called Ba'abda Declaration.⁷⁰ Signed on June 13, 2012 and officially endorsed by all of the country's leading factions – including Hezbollah – the Declaration was intended to "disassociate" Lebanon from the Syria crisis and included a pledge that all Lebanese groups or factions would support state security institutions and avoid getting involved in the conflict.⁷¹

Interim Prime Minister Najib Mikati also repeatedly sought to play a stabilizing and centrist role on the increasingly divisive internal debate on responding to the Syria crisis. This included strongly backing the currently suspended National Dialogue process,⁷² repeated calls for the Ba'abda Declaration and its disassociation clause to be respected,⁷³ and working closely with President Sleiman and the leadership of the LAF to garner support in a divided Lebanese Parliament for the military's capabilities development plan – which is informed at least in part by pressures tied to the Syria conflict.⁷⁴ Prime Minister Tamam Salam – who formed a “consensus” government on February 15, 2014 after some 11 months of political deadlock – is expected to be similarly pragmatic with regards to both key internal divisions and the broader challenge of managing the Syria crisis.⁷⁵

Throughout the crisis, the LAF has walked a fine line on the Syria conflict, seeking to secure the “least bad common denominator” interests of Lebanon's competing communities by limiting the risk of escalating violence.⁷⁶ Over time, the LAF's efforts to insulate Lebanon from the Syria conflict have moved to center-stage in the LAF's latest revision of its five year capabilities development plan.⁷⁷ Containing deepening communal fault lines has meant prioritizing what the LAF describes as “high intensity internal security and counter-terrorism operations.” The military has also sought to build up its ability to address other critical mission areas, including deploying troops to the Lebanese frontier with Syria while maintaining troop levels in the South Litani sector – the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)'s area of responsibility – in support of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.⁷⁸

The Lebanese Military Response to Syrian Instability

Since the start of the Syria conflict in 2011, no national institution has contributed more to relative stability than the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The LAF also remains the principal national security partner of the US in Lebanon – albeit one that has had to manage the paradoxes and contradictions of both US-Iran and Saudi-Iran regional competition.

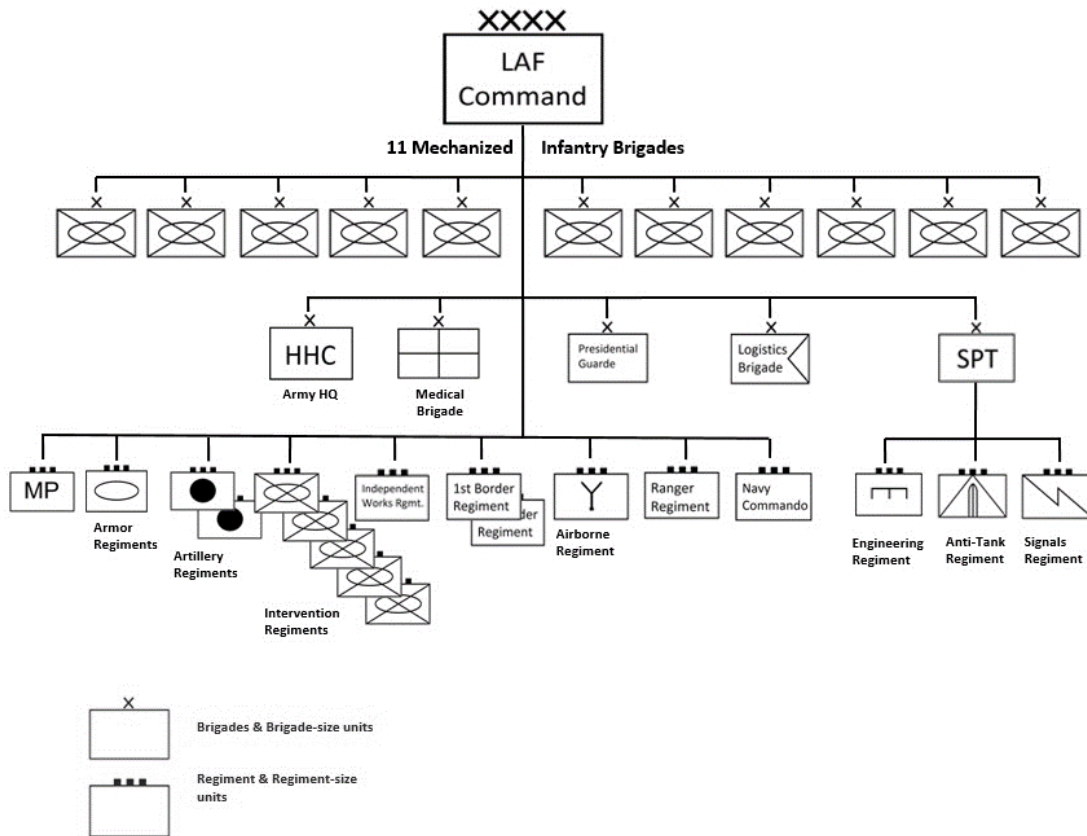
A force of some 59,000 in 2010,⁷⁹ the LAF grew to some 65,500 by 2014 driven largely by the need to expand border protection forces to deal with pressures from Syria, stand up the Lebanese Navy and begin the lengthy process of rehabilitating the Lebanese Air Force.⁸⁰

Figure VIII.52 shows the command and control structure of the LAF in 2014. The LAF is a joint force without an independent or separate structure at present for either the Lebanese Navy or the Air Force. The Lebanese Army – which stands at some 61,400 men under arms – includes 11 mechanized infantry brigades (MIBs), 5 intervention regiments (IRs) and three elite special operations units (SOF).⁸¹

The LAF's major combat units remained undermanned per unit in 2014, with each MIB and IR standing at some 1,750-1,870 men and 900-980 men respectively. However, the under-manning of conventional units has become a necessary evil to ensure as broad a national deployment as possible, a roughly 1:2 deployment rate for a total of 24,000-30,000 troops in the field, and the allocation of manpower to new and emerging units.⁸²

These patterns are also compensated for – at least in part – by LAF SOF units. Combined, the 1,500-man Ranger Regiment, the 1,100-man Air Assault Regiment and 1,080-man Navy Commando regiment give the LAF an elite reserve force of some 3,700 men that can be rapid-deployed to flashpoints across the country.⁸³

Figure VIII.52: The Lebanese Armed Forces Command & Control Structure in 2014



Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and U.S. government experts

LAF National Security Priorities in 2014

As **Figure VIII.41** showed early on, the 2014 deployment of the LAF is a byproduct of increasing sources of risk, instability and violence that mirror the escalation of the crisis in Syria. Areas the LAF considers especially high risk or difficult to control include the Lebanese-Syrian frontier from the Arida crossing in the north-west down to the Bekaa, in addition to Tripoli, Akkar, Hermel, the southern suburbs of Beirut and the mixed Sunni-Shi'a city of Sidon. In a twist of irony, the UNIFIL area of responsibility and the South have become relatively low-to-moderate theaters for the LAF compared to the period prior the Syrian uprising.⁸⁴

The LAF continued to face multiple challenges in dealing with these pressures at the start of 2014. As a result the force continues to assess the viability of a range of national security prerogatives. On the one hand, deterring Israel or Syria, establishing a definitive monopoly on the use of military force and achieving lasting border demarcation and control remain unsustainable either in terms of national policy, or in terms of resourcing. On the other hand, the LAF is able to deal more effectively with efforts to generate internal security, conduct counter-terror operations against Salafi jihadi groups and Al-Qaeda affiliates, and efforts to boost border management along both the UN Blue Line and the frontier with Syria.⁸⁵

These constraints and opportunities shape the LAF's national security priorities in 2014. The LAF's primary focus is to contain the effects of the Syria crisis. This has meant focusing on an area that successive Lebanese governments have ignored since independence in 1943: creating a real-world security and border regime along the Lebanese Syrian border. To that end, the LAF stood up two border regiments along the Syrian frontier totaling some 2,600 men. The LAF hopes to stand-up at least another two border regiments, assuming it can secure funding and manpower for the effort over time.

Second, the LAF seeks to manage the risk of on-again-off-again volatility along the UN Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon. A key tool in managing risks along the Blue Line in the wake of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war is regular meetings between the LAF and the IDF as part of a tripartite framework under the auspices of UNIFIL at its Naqoura headquarters just north of the line of demarcation between Israel and Lebanon. The "Naqoura framework" – and the LAF's role in it – enjoys the support of all of the country's major communities when it comes to ensuring that stability reigns in the South. The IDF was also reported to favor the framework.⁸⁶

The third core national security focus is tied to internal stability in what the LAF describes as "high intensity internal stability and counter-terrorism operations." This includes making use of forward-deployed and rapid-deployable SOF units in an effort to manage heightening insecurity, growing Sunni-Shi'a and Sunni-Alawite tension with a focus on Beirut, Tripoli, Hermel, North Bekaa and Sidon.⁸⁷

In many ways, the LAF's growing counter-terrorism capabilities and the central role of LAF military intelligence and counter-intelligence efforts increasingly define the US-Lebanon military-to-military relationship. The LAF's growing ability to act on external intelligence, focus on dismantling groups like the Abdallah Azzam Brigades and similar militant and jihadi organizations, and the military's interdiction of IED, VBIED and SVBIED attacks are key sources of even limited stability in a region in turmoil. As a result, Lebanon and the LAF increasingly find themselves at the forefront of regional efforts to combat growing jihadism in the broader Levant.

Policing an Uncertain Border Region: Challenges & Opportunities

Figure VIII.53 shows the 2014 deployment of the LAF's 1st Border Regiment, which is deployed broadly between the Arida crossing to the west and Wadi Khaled to the east. The 2nd Border Regiment is gradually building up its on AOR, which will extend from Wadi Khaled down to south of the town of Khribet Younen. The 2nd Border Regiment was brought online in 2013 thanks in part to aid from the United Kingdom both in terms of equipment and training.⁸⁸

As **Figure VIII.53** shows, three key features complicate the LAF's efforts to rapidly build up its security presence along the border with Syria. First, while the LAF does maintain some 7,200 troops in the North, Hermel and North Bekaa, the force is only now beginning to deploy along a border that has been porous for years. Second, the LAF has to contend with all of the pressures described earlier tied to Lebanese, Syrian and regional Sunni-Shi'a tension – especially in and around towns like Arsal or Hermel that are either with or against the Assad regime, Iran and Hezbollah. Third, as the “red zones” in **Figure VIII.53** show, large sections of the border remain disputed with Lebanon and Syria having at times very different official interpretations of where the border is.⁸⁹

In addition to these pressures, the development of the LAF's border forces presented other opportunities and challenges. Building up border and northern military forces is gradually allowing the LAF to be more than an expeditionary force in a part of Lebanon that has seen little in terms of a national security presence beyond an often-contentious Syrian military deployment between the mid-1970s and 2005.

Second, the pressures from Syria and the quest for any kind of measurable stability has pushed the US and the UK to provide the LAF with at least some of the resources it needs in 2014 to better manage the border with Syria. As **Figure VIII.53** shows, the LAF built four fixed observation posts along the northern part of the border with Syria in 2013, with an additional eight planned by the end of 2014 – of which five are currently under construction.⁹⁰

Each of these fixed “Sangar”-style hardened observation posts will be equipped with day and night electro-optical surveillance systems, anti-RPG netting and protection along with other defensive countermeasures. The towers are located close enough to each other to allow for overlapping fields of view to boost LAF situational awareness along key smuggling and trafficking routes. Each Sangar is capable of supporting roughly a company's worth of LAF troops and is intended to be both defensible and provide real capability in terms of overlapping overwatch of the border.⁹¹

Lastly an opportunity still remains for the LAF to reverse growing negative public sentiment among northern Sunnis driven by the perception that the LAF is either “colluding” with Hezbollah and the Shi'a against Lebanon's Sunnis, or focusing the bulk of its counter-terrorism efforts on Sunni groups. Many in the LAF remain unhappy with the negative effects on Sunni public sentiment in Lebanon in the wake of LAF operations in Sidon against militants tied to Salafi Sheikh Ahmad Al-Assir.⁹² The LAF also has to contend with negative sentiment in mainly Sunni and anti-Assad towns like Arsal.⁹³ As LAF border forces swing south past Arsal, the LAF leadership wants to build up a pattern of partnership rather than confrontation with the local population – especially given the reality that radical Sunni groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS present as much of a threat to mainstream Sunnis as they do Hezbollah and the Shi'a.⁹⁴

In addition to these opportunities, the LAF also faces key challenges along the border. The first key challenge is Hezbollah's deployment in Syria and the group's weapons smuggling routes. In the short term, LAF efforts west of the Al-Qalamoun mountain range have not been opposed as the Shi'a militant group felt that it could benefit from robust security structures on either side of the border. However, there is only so long that

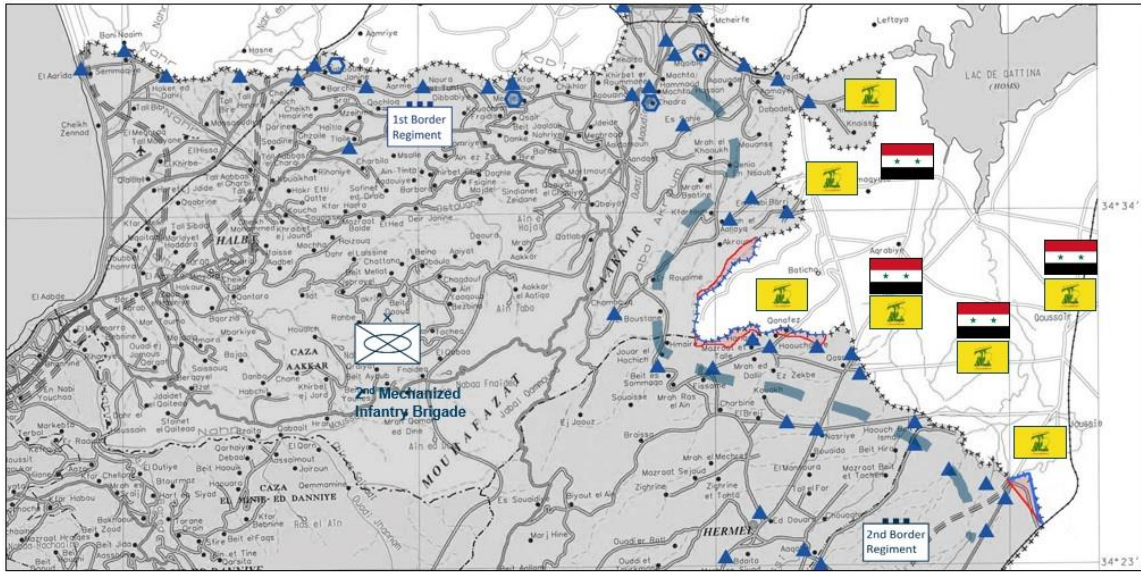
Hezbollah can afford to ignore the steady build-up of LAF forces, capabilities and purpose along the border with Syria.⁹⁵

A second challenge is to take advantage of LAF momentum in conducting border-management, interdicting the flow of fighters and weapons in either direction along the Lebanese Syrian border and conducting counter-terrorism operations targeting groups like the Abdallah Azzam Brigades, Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS. Key obstacles to these efforts over the 2012-2013 period were the absence of a legitimate government that enjoyed Sunni and Shi'a domestic support, had the backing of key regional and international states – including the US, Saudi Arabia and Iran – and lastly political top cover to conduct military operations that both Sunni and Shi'a may consider sensitive.

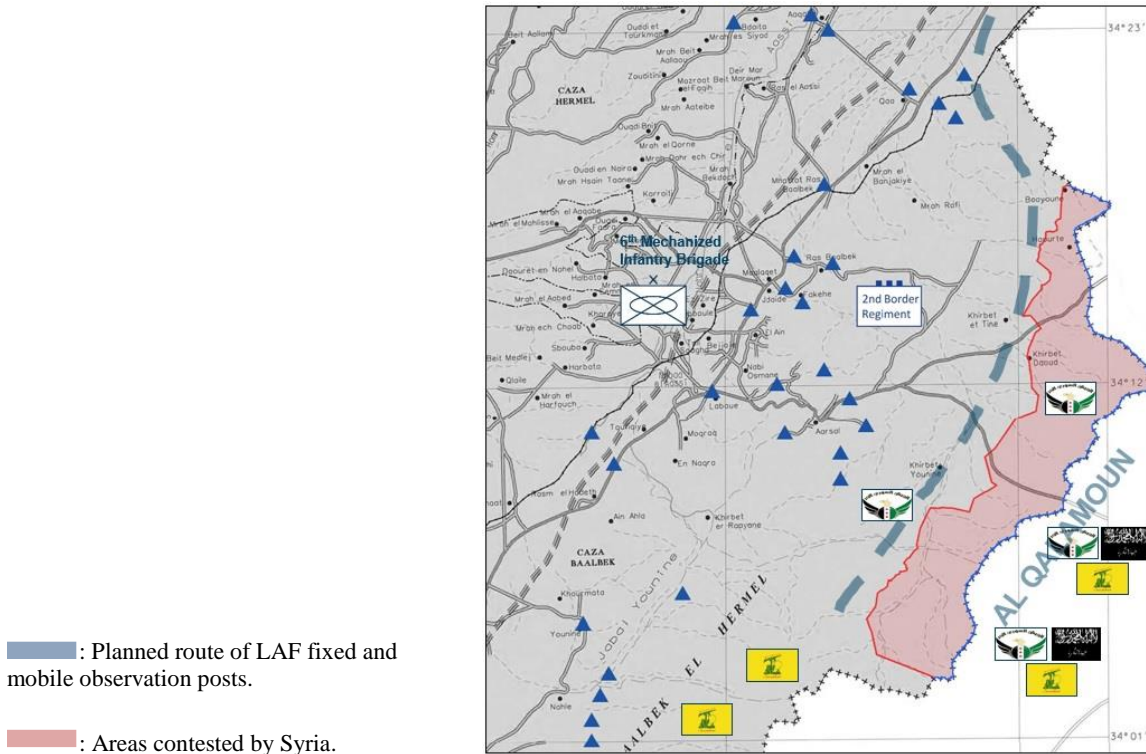
While Prime Minister Tam Salam managed to form a cabinet that included both the March 14 and the March 8 coalitions – including Hezbollah and Saad Hariri's mainly Sunni Future Movement – and that enjoys broad international legitimacy, it still remained unclear at the end of February 2014 whether the new cabinet would be capable of seizing on the LAF's momentum along the border.⁹⁶

Figure VIII.53: Policing an Uncertain Border Region

Area of Responsibility of the LAF 1st Border Regiment



Area of Responsibility of the LAF 2nd Border Regiment



Note: Blue triangles are LAF checkpoints. Blue Hexagons are hardened LAF fixed observation points.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and U.S. government experts. Positions of Hezbollah forces adapted from reporting and analysis by Nicholas Blanford.

The 2013 Capabilities Development Plan

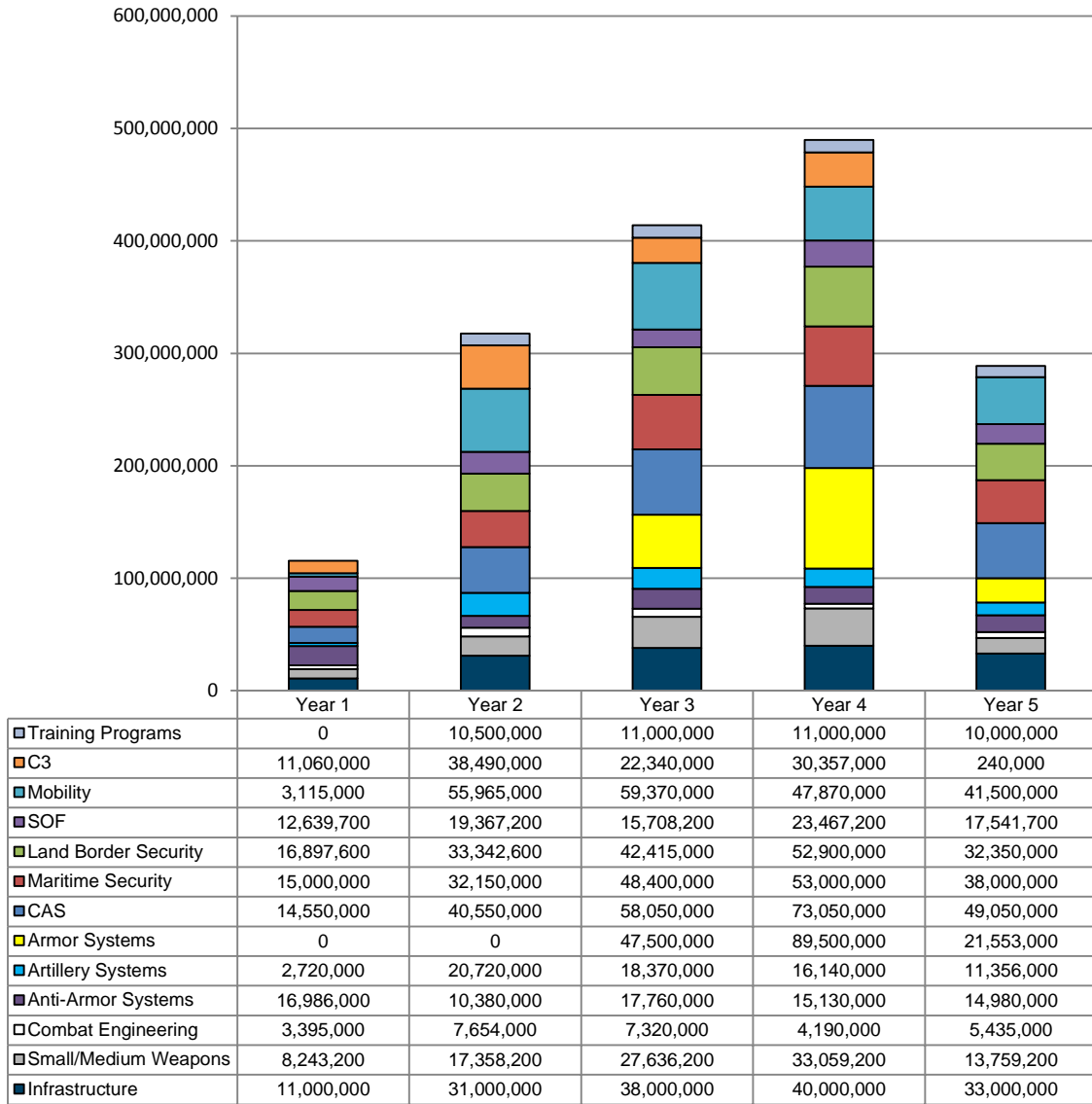
Effective planning and support are critical if the LAF and the government of Lebanon are to make good on the military's core national security priorities in 2014. To that end, in 2013 the LAF formulated a five-year capabilities development plan (CDP).

The CDP was the first major strategic document produced by the LAF to address critical mission areas, minimum force capabilities, targets in terms of professionalizing LAF standard operating procedures, and linking the overall effort to budgeting and future funding in both an inter-agency and a civil-military environment.⁹⁷

The CDP is a first attempt at putting together a Lebanese military "white paper." There is no analogy to the current effort on this scale in post-independence Lebanon. The CDP also reflects the severity and urgency of both internal and regional pressures facing the country. While the fiscal and cost breakdown of the five-year effort remains anecdotal at best, it remains useful in evaluating where the LAF hopes to focus its military development efforts. **Figure VIII.54** shows that building up armor, mobility, close air support (CAS), naval and border forces are key priorities.⁹⁸

The CDP is not intended to be a static structure with a finite end-state for the LAF. However it is a key stepping stone that could enable the LAF, the government of Lebanon and the international donor community – including the US – to think far more clearly about what can be achieved, how, and with what resources when it comes to Lebanese military development. Answering these questions has become more critical as Lebanon and the LAF increasingly find themselves in a Levant in search of any semblance of stability or predictability.

Figure VIII.54: Planning for a Precarious Future: The 2013 LAF Capabilities Development Plan



Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and U.S. government experts

The U.S., Saudi Arabia & the Politics of Military Aid

At the end of December 2013, Lebanese President Michel Sleiman announced that Saudi Arabia would pledge \$3 billion to enable the LAF to acquire weapons from France.⁹⁹ If the Saudi aid materializes, it will be the single largest external contribution in terms of military aid in the history of the LAF. As **Figure VIII.55** shows, Saudi Arabia and France were not leading donors to the LAF over the 2006 to 2013 period. **Figure VIII.55** also shows that the US provided some 72 percent of all aid to the LAF since 2006.

It is unclear if and how the Saudi plan will crystalize in ways that dramatically affect or impact the current capabilities of the LAF. The decision-making behind the plan to provide the LAF with French equipment and training is a trilateral one – between the Lebanese president, the French president and the leadership in Riyadh – but it was driven largely by Franco-Saudi bilateral priorities.¹⁰⁰

The reasoning behind the Saudi initiative are not too dissimilar to Saudi aid efforts in Egypt: in the perceived absence of a strong US position or response to events in the Levant – especially in terms of regime change, instability and regional competition with Iran – Saudi Arabia finds itself both reacting to events and taking preemptive action in a bid to reshape events in its favor.¹⁰¹

In Lebanon, that means first and foremost finding new ways to compete with Iran and its local ally Hezbollah, or at least trying to impact the internal balance of power. It was also meant to show Saudi disapproval in the face of US effort in Lebanon. The US-Lebanese bilateral relationship had increasingly become defined by a military-to-military relationship that both the US and the LAF viewed as increasingly critical and mutually beneficial on issues tied to common counter-terrorism threats and priorities tied to regional security.

While the LAF was consulted by the Lebanese president on its military development objectives and the CDP, military leadership were not initially aware of any plan by Saudi Arabia to finance the sale of French systems, sustainment and training to Lebanon. No funding will be transferred directly to the government of Lebanon and the mechanisms by which orders, payments and deliveries will play out are likely to be triangular and complicated by domestic constraints and pressures in all three countries concerned.

Meanwhile, key questions remain as to how the grant aid structure will operate; whether or not the Lebanese can drive the requirements; what the timelines may look like in terms of order and deliveries, and how France will deal with Israeli QME concerns under an administration that is at least as sensitive to Israel as every other government that has come before it. In the end, the Lebanese – and the LAF by extension – may be junior partners, unless they are able to steer the effort in ways that line up with the military's long term national defense priorities and the CDP.

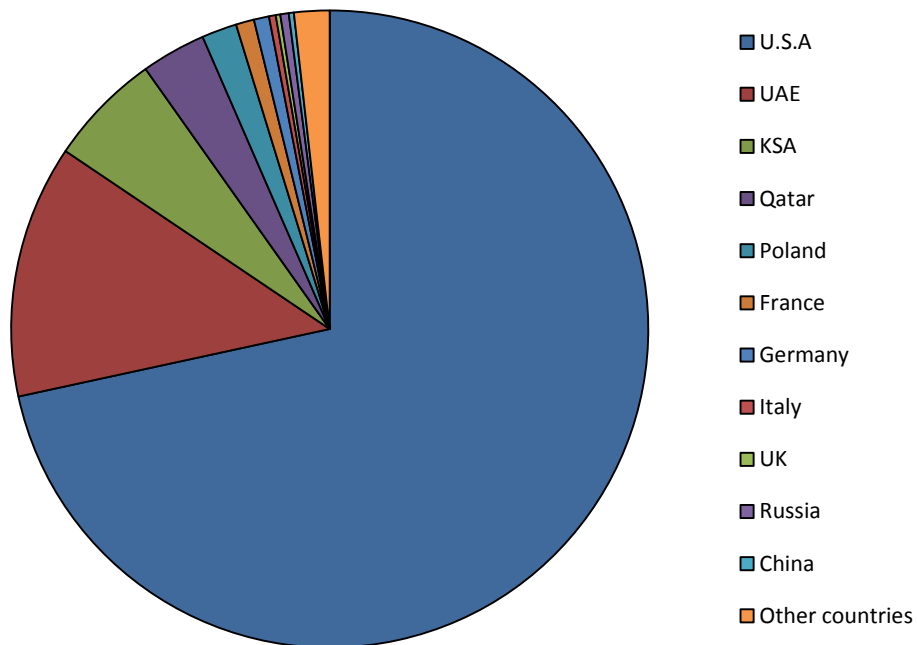
The US and other members of the international donor community view the Franco-Saudi effort as complementary to existing aid structures like US FMF and Section 1206 funds and UK efforts to build up LAF border forces. They also feel that there may be key areas where the French – working closely with the LAF – can have a positive effect on Lebanese military development.

Unlike the US and the UK, the French can focus on Lebanese naval development efforts. This could entail a bottom up effort to reshape an atrophied force of some 2,000 into a coastal naval force able to conduct patrol and interdiction in Lebanese territorial and economic waters. This would include dry docks, floating dry dock, ship-to-shore communications and other systems to supplement the sale of coastal craft able to operate in difficult weather conditions.

Basing and infrastructure are other key areas where France can support the LAF. Working with local and French contractors, France can help the LAF become more than what it is now in places like the South, Akkar and parts of the Bekaa: an expeditionary force in its own country. The US and the UK have also done a great deal to support infrastructure by helping to rehabilitate the Hamat Air Base – arguably one of the most strategic and defensibly military positions in Lebanon – and the fortifications/observation posts of the 1st and 2nd border regiments. In the long term, the LAF needs to build up bases, barracks, gun ranges, training grounds and other infrastructure across the country.

The other key area is airlift and transport. The LAF already operates both attack and transport helicopters of French origin and can easily absorb additional systems such as the Gazelle and the Puma – both of which the LAF already operates. The French can also help the LAF create a capability it currently does not have, which is some basic access to tactical if not strategic fixed wing airlift. Such a system would allow the LAF more autonomy with regards to taking part in regional combat exercises with partner nations like Egypt, Jordan, France or the US.

Figure VIII.55: Total International Aid to the LAF 2006-2013
(\$1.16 billion through July 2013)



Note: Distribution does not reflect aid levels and transfers after July 2013; Figures do not include aid or grants to the Internal Security Forces (ISF) or other security units.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and U.S. government experts.

Syria & the Future of US-Iran Competition in Lebanon

An aggressive LAF security response to regional unrest and strong international support gave the Lebanese government some much needed breathing room and political legitimacy in 2013 to try and insulate Lebanon from the corrosive effects of Syria's increasingly violent civil war. However, neither solves the underlying pressures, the reality that Hezbollah will remain nothing short of Lebanon's Sparta, or that the scale of unrest in Syria poses real questions about the future stability of Lebanon regardless of the internal balance of power.

Even if the Assad regime were to fall, Hezbollah would still remain nothing short of Lebanon's Sparta. It is – and will likely remain – Lebanon's best organized and most disciplined political force. The logic that Hezbollah is weakened because Syria is unstable remains unproven, and should the group's opponents seek to confront its armed status unilaterally, there is a clear precedent for Hezbollah to undertake possibly violent preemptive action – in May 2008, Hezbollah responded to the government of Prime Minister Fouad Saniora's efforts to close down the group's private communications and fiber-optic network by engaging in running battles in predominantly Sunni West Beirut with Lebanese Sunni fighters. Fighting quickly spread to the Chouf Mountain – the traditional bastion of the Druze community – and to Tripoli in the North.

There is every reason to assume that another May 2008-type event is likely should Hezbollah perceive an imminent threat from its local opponents in Lebanon. Given the Levant has grown far more polarized along Sunni-Shi'ite and pro and anti-Iranian lines, it is also difficult to predict the scale of any internal conflict, the ability of regional states to broker successful de-escalation, or any guarantee that the conflict will remain largely localized and not spread into all-out civil war.

In the end, the choices thus far for Lebanon's leading Sunni and Shi'a factions attest to the stark reality that Lebanon's opposing political forces cannot escape the negative effects of competing on either side of Syria's civil conflict. Syria and Lebanon are tied together by geography, demographics, unstable regional alignments, and deepening Sunni-Shi'a regional tensions. In addition, competing local political forces have yet to succeed and win outright in successive struggles for power in Lebanon. Any scenario where the country's leading political forces miscalculate at home or in Syria is likely to have catastrophic consequences for the future stability of Lebanon and the broader Levant.

Despite the scale of polarization in Lebanon, there are still forces in both coalitions that favor stability, even if it is precarious and uncertain. These include members of leading Sunni, Shi'a, Druze, and Christian factions who recognize that any sitting government would have to try to distance the country from the Syria conflict. There is also the growing reality that radical and jihadi Sunni forces represent as much of a threat to Lebanon's Sunni community as they do to Hezbollah and the Shi'a. Lebanon's competing factions must remain focused on the reality that none of them can win decisively and that finding ways to insulate Lebanon from Syrian instability is the sectarian equivalent of discretion as the better part of valor.

Ultimately, Lebanon's future hinges on how events in Syria and the broader trends in both US-Iran and Gulf-Iran competition take shape in the coming months if not years. Despite UN and Arab League efforts toward a short-term cease-fire, there is every reason to expect continued hostilities and long-term instability in the conflict, with as yet no tangible signs of a lasting resolution. The longer Syria's crisis persists, the more critical it will become for Lebanon and the international community, led by the United States, to minimize future spillover effects from what may be years of instability in the Levant.

Supporting Lebanon's military and security forces will prove to be especially important. The LAF in particular has and will continue to play a critical role in terms of internal security, safeguarding borders, and insulating Lebanon from regional instability. Lebanon will need help in planning to bolster the resources and capabilities of the LAF to secure Lebanon from regional instability. While it remains unclear how recent unrest will impact the effort, that any sitting government in Lebanon would endorse such a move is a testament to how destabilizing the Syria crisis has become.

¹ For more on the nature of the “zero sum” game and sectarian competition in post-war Lebanon, see Aram Nerguizian, *The Paradoxes of Military Development in Post-Syria Lebanon: Primacy of the Sectarian System*, May 10, 2010, presentation given at Stanford University, available at: http://iis-db.stanford.edu/evnts/6102/Stanford_Presentation_for_Circulation_05-20-2010.pdf; see Bassel F. Salloukh, “The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon,” in Bahgat Korany & Ali E. Hillal Dessouki Eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization*, New Revised Edition, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010.

² Ibid; Marie-Joelle Zahar, “Foreign Interventions, Power Sharing and the Dynamics of Conflict and Coexistence in Lebanon,” in Are Knudsen & Michael Kerr, *Lebanon After the Cedar Revolution*, London: Hurst & Company, p. 63-81.

³ Bassel F. Salloukh, “The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon,” in Bahgat Korany & Ali E. Hillal Dessouki Eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization*, New Revised Edition, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010.

⁴ “Trial By Fire: The Politics of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon,” *Middle East Report*, No. 100, December 2010, International Crisis Group, p.4.

⁵ “STL indicts 4 Hezbollah members, seeks arrests,” *The Daily Star*, June 30, 2011.

⁶ “Palestine, Israel and Lebanon: Politics and Peace Prospects,” International Peace Institute with Charney Research, December 8, 2010.

⁷ “Lebanese: Hariri Tribunal Untruthful,” Information International, August 23, 2010, available at <http://information-international.com/info/index.php/component/content/article/42-rokstories/570-lebanese-hariri-tribunal-untruthful->.

⁸ David Pollock, “Case Closed,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 20, 2011.

⁹ See “Trial By Fire: The Politics of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon,” *Middle East Report*, No. 100, December 2010, International Crisis Group.

¹⁰ Author’s interview with former UN Hariri Commission representative, September 2011.

¹¹ Author’s interview with senior legal advisor and counsel to Hezbollah, 2010, 2011.

¹² Author’s interview with US security assistance officer, name withheld, June 2010; Author’s interview with LAF procurement officer, name withheld, 2009, 2010.

¹³ As one senior officer put it, “when it comes to procurement and planning, we expected the US to teach us how to fish; not ask us to build a fishing rod.” Author’s interview with senior LAF officer, July 2010.

¹⁴ Author’s interview with LAF senior officers, names withheld, September 2011.

¹⁵ According to the CIA World Factbook, accessed August 1, 2013, available at:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html>.

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