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# LEADING A RESILIENT LEBANESE ARMED FORCES THROUGH CRISES AND FOR THE LONG RUN

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Repeated crises in Lebanon, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted the need for resilience in the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Amid the current acute economic and financial crisis facing the country, there are warning signs about the LAF's incapacity to continue, as the resources at its disposal and popular confidence in its effectiveness have both been degraded. In light of the current challenges and those that may lie ahead, the LAF needs to become more resilient, able to both adapt and strengthen as an organization, while also ensuring public security, the conditions of its personnel, and its own long-term status.

## Threats to Lebanon's public security

Lebanon's economic and political crises, the pandemic, the horrific Beirut port explosion in August 2020, and the recent armed clashes in the Tayouneh area of the capital are all testing popular confidence in the LAF's ability to ensure peace and order at a time of declining Lebanese state authority.

Almost two years after the economic crisis began, a Lebanese government has finally been formed, but it faces enormous political and economic challenges. Lebanon's government has started talks with international financial institutions to implement reforms in line with the prerequisites of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) bailout program.

Although the LAF reflects the composition of Lebanese society — different regions and confessions are all represented within its ranks — military cohesion is undermined whenever Lebanon's unity is threatened. Today, financial difficulties weigh heavily on Lebanese citizens, including military personnel. Increased political partisanship is degrading public security and may even have regional implications given the LAF's mandated missions areas: border control, U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 against armed militias, and the fight against terrorism. In addition, there are also risks associated with the issue of the [U.S. military end-use list](#) and competition between regional powers.

The U.S. continues to provide significant assistance to the Lebanese people and the LAF, which it considers an increasingly important institution amid Lebanon's deteriorating public security. The U.S. administration increased its annual financial military assistance to the LAF by \$15 million, to a total of \$120 million in 2021, to cover spare parts to maintain U.S.-made military equipment as well as provide longer-term support for Lebanon's border security and counterterrorism operations. It is expected that Washington will continue to support the LAF logistically, provide humanitarian assistance, and will eventually help the Lebanese government, but only if the new government takes steps to help itself.

It is important to note that it will take time for reforms to be implemented and for IMF funds to be disbursed and start having an impact. In fact, a meaningful economic

recovery may take as long as a decade. In the meantime, therefore, frustrations and hunger may increase, and the integrity and resilience of Lebanese institutions, including security organizations like the LAF, will be tested. In fact, current operating conditions are certain to hurt the morale of officers and soldiers and negatively affect field performance in missions ranging from maintaining security to fighting terrorism. Therefore, supporting the army's unity and maintaining its morale and capabilities will be key to carrying out all of the LAF's essential tasks to mitigate threats to Lebanon's public security.

## Consolidation of a resilient LAF

For the LAF, resilience is not just about the ability to adapt to worsening circumstances, but also about further strengthening and developing as an organization, enhancing its decision-making abilities, skills, processes, and material resources to proactively address and manage adversity.

The financial and economic reforms required by the IMF will certainly impact the LAF as well. Consequently, the LAF's operating model should focus on performance resiliency, not just on driving productivity by cutting costs and making the most of the resources available.

The LAF should become more efficient, and its leadership should encourage resilience in order to thrive in a volatile environment and capitalize on emerging opportunities. The LAF's leadership should strive for cost productivity while preserving security and stability, maintaining the respect and support of Lebanese citizens, and ensuring mutual trust with international partners providing support.

Throughout its recent history, the LAF has performed well in the face of a variety of different crises, including the security challenges caused by armed non-governmental organizations, the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the implementation of UNSCR 1701, and the threat of ISIS. Its responses to these challenges made it an organization trusted by the international community to provide peace and security in Lebanon, with an emphasis on its unique role as a national institution that promotes cohesion. Today, the LAF is seen as the only entity that can protect the Lebanese people from security threats and as the country's most trusted and respected institution.

The LAF has repeatedly had to deal with crises in a volatile environment. These include the spillover from the Syrian crisis since 2011, the ISIS terrorist threat on its eastern border, internal security issues, the fight against terrorism, large demonstrations, the Beirut Port blast, and most recently the armed clashes in Tayouneh. The LAF responded to these crises, but it needs to further strengthen its resiliency. That involves not only optimizing its role as a security provider and unifying its organization, but also capitalizing on and maximizing its opportunities to gain public confidence.

## The LAF's resilience depends on supporting its personnel

Resilience has always been part of the LAF's operating model, as the cost of failure for the stability and security of Lebanon and the region is extraordinarily high. Investing in the LAF's resilience today will pay off when it comes to security operations, but resiliency isn't just about security operations; it is also linked to how the LAF supports its personnel.

Officers, petty officers, and soldiers need to feel that they earn an income that reflects the risks involved in exercising their duties. Therefore, ensuring economic security for LAF soldiers is a priority and it is important to invest in additional benefits.

With the economic collapse that started on Oct. 17, 2019, Lebanon began shutting down. Two years on, the Lebanese pound has [lost 90% of its value](#) against the dollar, leaving the country facing severe and worsening food, fuel, and electricity shortages from which the LAF is not exempt. Accordingly, the LAF's purchasing power declined, and like most Lebanese people, its personnel have had their life savings wiped out.

The LAF's leadership quickly realized the need to consider cutting costs, but their first thought was, "How do we keep our soldiers safe?" The LAF has personnel all over Lebanon, in its headquarters, in regional barracks, and in special units for emergency deployment. It quickly used its available resources to ensure they were safe, secure, and their logistical and medical needs were met. For months now, the LAF has been sounding the alarm about its inability to adequately pay and sustain its troops.

After securing the immediate needs of its personnel, the LAF shifted to the survival of the organization. With its primary



Photo above: Lebanese soldiers stand guard as U.S.-made Bradley Fighting Vehicles are being delivered at the port of Beirut on August 14, 2017. Photo by PATRICK BAZ/AFP via Getty Images.

security assistance partner, the United States, the LAF leadership developed plans to ensure operational sustainability through additional financial support, and it also requested international assistance after the dramatic declines in its budget.

Given its limited resources, the LAF has adopted mitigation measures, reducing some training and logistics functions, while still supporting its soldiers to the best of its ability. It maximizes home postings, grants leave extensions to reduce personal fuel use, distributes emergency food parcels to families when available, subsidizes food in army commissaries, and provides regular medical services (at a time when health care is out of reach for 70% of the Lebanese population).

The LAF has also instituted measures to reduce travel costs for soldiers. A transportation network of military and civilian buses in every major unit facilitates the movement of soldiers at no cost, without the need to reassign them near their homes. This approach preserves the confessional and regional diversity within the LAF's units and ensures that changes in their makeup do not affect performance on the ground in different operating areas across Lebanon.

The LAF's ability in difficult times to look after its personnel allows it to continue fulfilling its role and maintain the

confidence of the Lebanese people. Moreover, international partners like the U.S., EU, U.K., France, Italy, Germany, Egypt, and Iraq have provided assistance, in addition to local and international organizations. The LAF has also benefited from exceptional allocations for fuel and food from Lebanon's government budget.

However, it is important to pay close attention to the early warning signs of potential issues that could endanger the LAF's resilience, such as bribery, desertions, and absenteeism. Ongoing resilience is needed in order to focus on long-term reforms, cost effectiveness, positive cultural characteristics, and the skills and processes that will allow the LAF to remain successful.

## Improving resilience is also about focusing on long-term reforms

There are several key steps the LAF can take to improve its resilience in the long term.

First, it should continue taking advantage of the present opportunity provided by the Defense Institution Building (DIB) project. This requires tailor-made solutions in light of the LAF's





Photo above: An anti-government demonstrator argues with a Lebanese army officer during riots in the northern Lebanese port city of Tripoli on April, 20, 2020. Photo by Marwan Naamani/picture alliance via Getty Images.

size, capacity, and resources to make it a more transparent, accountable, effective, and affordable security institution. The DIB project is helping the LAF achieve self-sustainment by implementing a planning process for acquiring and integrating new capabilities in terms of the costs and benefits of operational requirements and anticipated resources. It is also helping the LAF to reshape its logistics to be more capable and responsive to military requirements. Consequently, the LAF will use its logistics and administrative components to enhance current reforms, to sustain its new weapon systems, and to facilitate prolonged operations.

Second, the LAF should address structural reforms to mitigate the shortage of resources required for institutional reforms, including the allocation of institutional roles and responsibilities to meet future defense and security needs. The LAF needs an appropriate defense structure and chain of command to manage execution of roles and responsibilities by transforming and right-sizing its forces.

Third, the LAF should improve its budget execution and accountability to pay for resources efficiently and effectively. Running out of funds and not addressing priorities will have serious implications for the LAF's operations and capabilities. Although it has a weak balance sheet to start with, the LAF receives U.S. financial assistance under various security assistance programs. In fact, it made decisions such as implementing institutional changes recommended by the DIB program and adopting a transportation policy to cut costs, all in order to become more resilient.

Fourth, the LAF needs to emphasize capability preservation and growth, in order to remain the top security provider in the country. In times of crisis, the traditional policy response is to cut costs, because of the uncertainty over how long the crisis will last. There are times when one must do that, and there is certainly room for the LAF to improve its productivity. It has a large footprint across Lebanon: it is implementing UNSCR 1701 in the south, exercising security and control on the northern and eastern borders with Syria, fighting terrorism, preserving

internal security, and staying ready for contingencies. However, the LAF should spend more time on ensuring it preserves its capabilities and maximizes its financial resources, either from national funds or international assistance. In today's volatile situation in Lebanon, the LAF needs to improve its resilience and ensure its survivability. Moreover, there are specific areas where it can measure whether it is doing the right things when it comes to both hard and soft resilience. Capability preservation and development is a hard resilience indicator that needs to be measured in terms of growth. The LAF should examine specific capabilities and see if significant improvements have been achieved. On the soft side, LAF must consider resilience as a property of systems — one that requires a resilient institutional mindset.

Fifth, the LAF must educate personnel and leaders on resilience and empower them on an ongoing basis, so that the armed forces can respond quickly in a crisis. The LAF is a values-based organization, with core beliefs of honor, sacrifice, and loyalty. It should continuously develop a culture of ownership and empowerment, to be prepared for the challenges ahead.

Finally, it is important to proactively communicate with international partners like the United States, which are standing by the LAF and providing continuous security assistance. They need to know where the LAF stands on a variety of fronts. If it accepts the challenge of reforming itself as a defense institution with more effective, transparent, and accountable governance, it has to communicate more frequently and be transparent about its financial planning. The LAF should publicly showcase its aid and explain how it is allocated. This, in turn, is likely to attract more aid, including military equipment and foreign currency, which will help ensure the LAF's operational sustainability, personnel readiness, and organizational resiliency.

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