

*INSS Insight* No. 1027, February 25, 2018

**Israel's Position on US Military Aid to the Lebanese Army**

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In early February 2018, the US administration affirmed that the United States remained committed to the security and stability of Lebanon. In this context, it was emphasized that the weapons and training provided to the Lebanese army are intended to develop its combat abilities in order to maintain it as a national force – a defensive shield against extremist terrorist elements. At the INSS annual international conference in January 2018, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Satterfield reiterated that the administration intended to persevere in its efforts to bolster the elements of state security in Lebanon, with an emphasis on the Lebanese army.

Since 2006, the United States has provided the Lebanese army with more than \$1.6 billion in military aid. Recent months have witnessed an expansion in US aid, some of which has already reached Lebanon. This aid includes six A-29 Super Tucano light planes for attack and patrol purposes, 32 Bradley M2-A2 armed personnel carriers, light attack helicopters (MD 530G), and six Scan Eagle unmanned aerial vehicles. In addition, US Special Forces personnel are currently present in Lebanon for training purposes.

In tandem, the Russian media announced recently that the Russian Ministry of Defense has been instructed to begin talks with its Lebanese counterpart with the goal of signing a cooperative agreement between Russia and Lebanon. The agreement is supposed to include the opening of Lebanese sea ports and airports to Russian military maritime vessels and planes. Russia is also reportedly interested in assisting the Lebanese army with training and military equipment.

US policy regarding Lebanon, which regards the ongoing strengthening of the Lebanese army as a necessary measure, focuses on maintaining state stability by means of support for its institutions. The official visit to Washington in July 2017 by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, which included a meeting with President Donald Trump, occurred within this context. The US administration also emphasizes that its military aid to Lebanon will not pose a threat to Israeli forces in the event of a clash, and that the weapon systems it provides are not expected to fundamentally change the balance of power.

In his visit to Beirut, the first by a Secretary of State in a number of years, Rex Tillerson stressed repeatedly the administration's opposition to Hezbollah. However, in the

meetings, including with President Michel Aoun (a Hezbollah ally), it did not appear that the United States has confronted the reality of Hezbollah's partnership in the government, or the identical interests of Hezbollah and official Lebanese government positions. Such converging interests are also evident in the disagreement between Lebanon and Israel regarding the maritime border and the natural gas deposits in the Mediterranean Sea.

Israel's official view of US aid to the Lebanese military runs sharply counter to the approach of the US administration. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman has repeatedly stressed that "today, the Lebanese army has lost its independence and is another unit in Hezbollah's apparatus, and therefore, as far as we are concerned, the infrastructure of the Lebanese army and the Lebanese state is one with the infrastructure of Hezbollah." In practice, a great deal of evidence, including evidence that accumulated over 2017, is indicative of cooperation between Hezbollah and the Lebanese army in the operational realm, within the framework of the military measures against the Islamic State on the Syrian-Lebanese border, and in the course of incidents that have occurred along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

US policy regards stability in Lebanon as an important goal, and military figures, led by the commander of CENTCOM, view the Lebanese army's contribution, though limited, as important to the fight against terrorist elements and a counterbalance to Hezbollah. This sharpens the question whether in a time of confrontation the US will provide Israel with the necessary backing to realize Israel's threats whereby "Hezbollah and Lebanon are one," or alternatively, as it has done in the past, take action to prevent Israel from doing significant damage to the infrastructure of the Lebanese state and military, and refrain from using its veto in the Security Council.

The gaps that exist between US policy and the messages sent by Israel require an analysis of the positive and negative significance of the American position, as well as an answer to the question of what policy Israel should adopt in an effort to guarantee its interests vis-à-vis the US administration. The formulation of a comprehensive policy is also important given the administration's apparent willingness to mediate between Israel and Lebanon on contested issues, and in light of the possibility of expanded Russian involvement in Lebanon.

### **Considerations against US Policy**

a. Security Council Resolution 1701, which was approved following the Second Lebanon War and constitutes the basis for the decision to provide aid to the Lebanese army, was partially implemented in the Lebanese army's deployment in southern Lebanon. Nonetheless, Hezbollah continues to constitute the primary military force in the country, and the Lebanese government has not used the Lebanese army to impose its sovereignty

on all parts of the country, or to implement Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701 regarding the disarming of the military militias.

b. Close cooperation continues between the Lebanese army and Hezbollah. Therefore, the working assumption must be that weapons and knowledge that reach the Lebanese army will find their way into the hands of Hezbollah. This means that all aid to the Lebanese army is liable to strengthen the military capabilities of Hezbollah.

c. The political system and decision making process in Lebanon are influenced by Hezbollah. As a result, the agenda in Lebanon is largely determined by the interests of the organization, which serves the aims of Iran.

d. The Lebanese authorities are taking no action to prevent Hezbollah from increasing its military capabilities, and no efforts were made to prevent the group from deploying surface-to-surface missiles and rockets intended for striking at Israel and taking measures to improve the system's accuracy.

### **Considerations in Favor of US Policy**

a. The US assessment that the Lebanese army is not a single unit but rather also encompasses elements that oppose Hezbollah, or at least its policy, appears to be correct. That being the case, a decision to deny aid could weaken those who oppose Hezbollah.

b. Continuing to strengthen the Lebanese army reinforces the claim that it holds the responsibility to restrain Hezbollah, and that if it fails to do so, it will suffer the consequence. Neglecting the Lebanese army, on the other hand, is liable to push it even further into the arms of Hezbollah, and will certainly weaken the understanding that it is the responsible party in this context.

c. It is doubtful whether denying weapons to the Lebanese army will weaken Hezbollah, whereas supplying weapons to the Lebanese army will not necessarily have a significant impact on the strength of the organization.

d. A decision on the part of the American administration to retreat from its policy regarding the Lebanese army will increase its image as a "betrayal" of its allies, which could serve to increase Hezbollah's status as the "protector of Lebanon."

e. A US retreat in this realm could also force Lebanon and the Lebanese army to improve its ties with Russia.

### **Israel's Goals**

a. To reduce Iranian influence in Lebanon.

b. To prevent Hezbollah from expanding its control in Lebanon and increasing its military strength.

c. To strengthen the interest of the Lebanese authorities and population in preventing Hezbollah from taking action against Israel.

d. To increase the deterrence against Hezbollah in an effort to prevent it from taking action against Israel.

- e. To encourage the US administration to leverage the aid to Lebanon, including the Lebanese army, as a means of reinforcing its understanding of the cost of a clash with Israel.
- f. In the event of a broad military clash between Israel and Lebanon, it is important that at the end of the confrontation, there be a responsible and stabilizing force within Lebanon that is not Hezbollah.

### **Recommendations**

The US administration is determined to provide aid to the Lebanese army as part of its policy to preserve the legitimate institutions of Lebanon and thereby prevent deterioration into instability. Therefore, the possibility of persuading the United States to cease the aid appears unlikely. The Israeli discourse with the US administration in this context should have two main goals: one, to ensure that the aid does not significantly increase the threat against Israel, based on the working assumption that Hezbollah will be able to appropriate the weapons; and two, to strengthen the administration's use of this aid to motivate the authorities in Lebanon to impose limitations on Hezbollah.

Moreover, it is extremely important to engage in advance coordination with the US administration regarding the realm of military operations and the time Israel will have to complete them, if and when a military clash erupts between Israel and Hezbollah. It is important to reach understandings with the United States whereby Israel will not oppose the provision of aid to the Lebanese army if the administration accepts the Israeli approach, which assigns responsibility for military escalation to the Lebanese state and stipulates that if the Lebanese army takes action against the IDF, it will be attacked with great force. Without advance agreements on this issue, Israel's threats could boomerang and severely weaken its deterrence on the day after a confrontation.