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# Lebanon: Background and U.S. Policy

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## Summary

Lebanon's small geographic size and population belie the important role it has long played in the security, stability, and economy of the Levant and the broader Middle East. Congress and the executive branch have recognized Lebanon's status as a venue for regional strategic competition and have engaged diplomatically, financially, and at times, militarily to influence events there. For most of its independent existence, Lebanon has been torn by periodic civil conflict and political battles between rival religious sects and ideological groups. External military intervention, occupation, and interference have exacerbated Lebanon's political struggles in recent decades.

Lebanon is an important factor in U.S. calculations regarding regional security, particularly regarding Israel and Iran. Congressional concerns have focused on the prominent role that Hezbollah, an Iran-backed Shiite militia, political party, and U.S.-designated terrorist organization, continues to play in Lebanon and beyond, including its recent armed intervention in Syria. Congress has appropriated more than \$1 billion since the end of the brief Israel-Hezbollah war of 2006 to support U.S. policies designed to extend Lebanese security forces' control over the country and promote economic growth.

The civil war in neighboring Syria is progressively destabilizing Lebanon. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, nearly one million predominantly Sunni Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon, equivalent to close to one quarter of Lebanon's population. Regional supporters and opponents of Syrian President Bashar al Asad are using Lebanon as a transit point and staging ground in a wider regional conflict. Hezbollah has intervened in Syria in support of Asad, and Sunni extremist groups based in Syria are cooperating with Lebanese and Palestinian Sunni extremists in Lebanon to carry out retaliatory attacks against Hezbollah targets.

The U.S. intelligence community told Congress in its 2014 Worldwide Threat Assessment that, "Lebanon in 2014 probably will continue to experience sectarian violence among Lebanese and terrorist attacks by Sunni extremists and Hezbollah, which are targeting each-others' interests. ... Increased frequency and lethality of violence in Lebanon could erupt into sustained and widespread fighting." In January 2014, the U.S. State Department warned against all travel to Lebanon in light of growing terrorist threats.

The question of how best to marginalize Hezbollah and other anti-U.S. Lebanese actors without provoking civil conflict among divided Lebanese sectarian political forces remains the underlying challenge for U.S. policy makers. The ongoing political deadlock and the prospect of executive, legislative, and security force leadership vacuums amplify this challenge.

This report provides an overview of Lebanon and current issues of U.S. interest. It provides background information, analyzes recent developments and key legislative debates, and tracks legislation, U.S. assistance, and recent congressional action. It will be updated to reflect major events or policy changes.

For more information on related issues, see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard; CRS Report R43119, *Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response*, by Rhoda Margesson and Susan G. Chesser; and, CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

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## Background

Since achieving political independence in 1943, Lebanon has struggled to overcome a series of internal and external political and security challenges. Congress and the executive branch historically have sought to support pro-U.S. elements in the country, and in recent years the United States has invested more than \$1 billion to develop Lebanon's security forces. Some Members of Congress have supported this investment as a down payment on improved security and stability in a contentious and volatile region. Other Members have criticized U.S. policy and sought to condition U.S. assistance to limit its potential to benefit anti-U.S. groups.

The Lebanese population is religiously diverse, reflecting the country's rich heritage and history as an enclave of various Christian sects, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Alawites, and Druze. In order to mitigate a tendency for their religious diversity to fuel political rivalry and conflict, Lebanese leaders have attempted with limited success since independence to manage sectarian differences through a power-sharing-based democratic system. Observers of Lebanese politics refer to these arrangements as "confessional" democracy.

Historically, the system served to balance Christian fears of being subsumed by the regional Muslim majority against Muslim fears that Christians would invite non-Muslim foreign intervention.<sup>1</sup> Lebanese leaders hold an unwritten "National Covenant" and other understandings as guarantees that the president of the republic be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of Parliament a Shiite Muslim. Although Christians were always an overall minority in Lebanon, the large Christian community benefitted from a division of parliamentary seats on the basis of six Christians to five Muslims. This ratio was adjusted to parity following Lebanon's 1975-1989 civil war to reflect growth in the Muslim population.

Sectarianism is not the sole determining factor in Lebanese politics.<sup>2</sup> The confessional system at times has produced alliances that appear to some to unite strange bedfellows, including the most recent governing coalition that linked Hezbollah—the Iran-backed Shiite militia, political party, and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization—together with leftist parties and pro-Syrian Christian factions.<sup>3</sup> While the reality of religious sectarian rivalry persists, it is also true that some political leaders support the preservation of the confessional system to preserve their own personal interests. These factors, combined with the tensions that have accompanied regional conflicts and ideological struggles, overshadow limited progress toward what some Lebanese hold as an alternative ideal—a non-confessional political system.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Michael Suleiman, "The Role of Political Parties in a Confessional Democracy," *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1967; Ralph E. Crow, "Religious Sectarianism in the Lebanese Political System," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 1962, pp. 489-520; Malcom Kerr, "Political Decision-Making in a Confessional Democracy," in Leonard Binder (ed.), *Politics in Lebanon*, Wiley and Sons, New York, 1966, pp.187-212; Farid el Khazen, "Political Parties in Postwar Lebanon: Parties in Search of Partisans," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 2003, pp. 605-624; Paul Salem, "The Future of Lebanon," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 6, 2006, pp. 13-22; and, Arda Arsenian Ekmeji, *Confessionalism and Electoral Reform in Lebanon*, Aspen Institute, July 2012.

<sup>2</sup> As one academic author put it in the 1960s, "While it is an exaggeration to hold that all things political in Lebanon are fundamentally religious, it is nevertheless true that any explanation of Lebanese politics will be incomplete unless the role of religious attitudes and organizations are taken into account." Crow, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Hezbollah politicians won 10 seats out of 128 in parliament in the 2009 national elections and held two cabinet seats in the 2011 cabinet: Minister of State for Administrative Reform Mohammed Fnaysh and Minister of Agriculture Hussein al Hajj Hassan. The U.S. government holds Hezbollah responsible for a number of kidnappings and high-profile terrorist attacks on U.S., European, and Israeli interests over the last 30 years.

**Figure I. Lebanon: Map and Select Country Data**



**Source:** Prepared by Amber Hope Wilhelm, Graphics Specialist, Congressional Research Service.

The consistent defining characteristic of U.S. policy during the Bush and Obama Administrations has been an effort to weaken Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon. Parallel U.S. concerns focus on corruption, the weakness of democratic institutions, the future of Palestinian refugees, and the presence of Sunni extremist groups. The latter threat was illustrated by the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF's) 2007 confrontation with the Sunni extremist group Fatah al Islam, which resulted in the destruction of much of the Nahr al Bared Palestinian refugee camp. The threat continues to be reflected in some Lebanese Sunnis' support for extremist groups that are fighting in Syria and in the recent campaign of anti-Hezbollah bombings and sectarian attacks in Lebanon. While some Sunni extremist groups appear to have grown in strength since 2012, Hezbollah remains the most prominent, capable, and dangerous U.S. adversary in Lebanon.

Congress has appropriated over \$1 billion in assistance (see **Table 2**) for Lebanon since the end of the 34-day Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 to strengthen Lebanese security forces and promote economic growth. Some Members of Congress have expressed support for the goals and concerns outlined by Bush and Obama Administration officials since 2006, but periodically have questioned the advisability of continuing to invest U.S. assistance funds, particularly at times when the political coalition that includes Hezbollah has controlled the Lebanese cabinet.

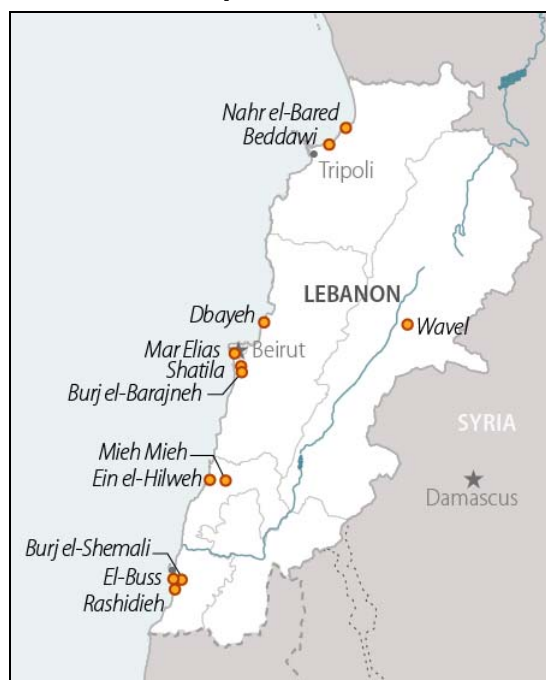
U.S. engagement nominally seeks to support the development of neutral national institutions and to drive change that will allow Lebanon's 4.4 million citizens to prosper, enjoy security, and embrace non-sectarian multiparty democracy. In practice, U.S. policymakers have sought to walk a line between maintaining a neutral posture and marginalizing those in Lebanon who are hostile to the United States, its interests, and its allies. Some Lebanese—particularly Hezbollah supporters and others who reject calls for non-state actors to disarm—have decried U.S. policy as self-interested intervention in the zero-sum games of Lebanese and regional politics. Other Lebanese welcome U.S. support, whether as a means of fulfilling shared goals of empowering neutral national institutions or as a means to isolate their domestic political rivals. Some groups' views of U.S. involvement fluctuate with regional circumstances and their personal fortunes.

The challenges Lebanon presents to U.S. policymakers, with its internal schisms and divisive regional dynamics, are not new. After Lebanon emerged from French control as an independent state in the 1940s, the United States moved to bolster parties and leaders that offered reliable support for U.S. Cold War interests.<sup>4</sup>

The influx of Palestinian refugees to Lebanon following Arab-Israeli wars in 1948 and 1967 further complicated the regional and domestic scenes, just as an influx of close to one million Syrian refugees has done since 2011. Palestinian refugee camps (**Figure 2**) became strongholds for the Palestine Liberation Organization, staging areas for cross-border *fedayeen* terrorist attacks inside Israel, and ultimately targets for Israeli military retaliation. In recent years, some of these camps have become safe havens for transnational Sunni extremist groups.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a slow drift toward civil war, as the United States provided support for the Lebanese Armed

**Figure 2. Location of Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon**



**Source:** United Nations Relief Works Agency/Congressional Research Service.

<sup>4</sup> The United States intervened militarily in Lebanon in 1958 in response to fears of the overthrow of the pro-U.S. government of President Camille Chamoun. New leaders elected during the four-month U.S. military operation and their successors proved unable to chart a course for the country that avoided further civil conflict.

Forces (LAF) “to improve the army’s capability to control the Fedayeen.”<sup>5</sup> This policy foreshadowed current U.S. concerns and approaches, which similarly seek to strengthen the LAF and build its reputation as a neutral body capable of weakening a different set of anti-U.S. non-state groups.

Lebanon’s civil war erupted in 1975 over unresolved sectarian differences and the pressure of external forces, including the Palestinians, Israel, and Syria. Hundreds of thousands were killed and displaced over 14 years of brutal war among a bewildering array of forces with shifting allegiances. Syria sent military forces into Lebanon in 1976 and they remained until 2005. Israel sent military forces into Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982; they remained in southern Lebanon until 2000. The United States deployed forces to Lebanon in the early 1980s as part of a multinational peacekeeping force. They targeted anti-U.S. forces and were withdrawn under considerable congressional scrutiny after 241 U.S. personnel were killed in the 1983 U.S. barracks bombing.

U.S. policy toward Lebanon since the end of the Lebanese civil war has reflected a desire to see the country move toward the vision outlined by Lebanese leaders in 1989 at Taif, Saudi Arabia, where they met to reach a national agreement to end the fighting. Among the goals enshrined in the Taif Agreement were the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Lebanon, the disarming of non-state groups, and the development of strong national security institutions and non-confessional democracy. Successive U.S. Administrations have embraced the Taif principles, while acting to limit opportunities for U.S. adversaries and anti-Israeli forces.

Syria’s security presence in Lebanon was acknowledged at Taif, but security negotiations called for in the agreement did not occur until Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Hariri’s assassination and the mass national demonstrations that followed marked a defining political moment and led to the emergence of the pro-Asad “March 8” coalition and the anti-Asad “March 14” coalition that now dominate the political scene (see **Figure 3** below). The intervening years have been marked by conflict, political gridlock, and further assassinations of anti-Syria figures. Each coalition has held power, although attempts at unity government have proven fruitless, with both sides periodically resorting to resignations, mass protests, and boycotts to hamper their rivals. External players such as Syria, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States, and others have all struggled for influence.

The central security question for Lebanon after the Syrian departure became the future of Hezbollah’s substantial military arsenal and capabilities, which rival and in some cases exceed those of Lebanon’s armed forces and police. Debate on Hezbollah’s future and Lebanon’s national defense posture intensified after Hezbollah provoked the 2006 war with Israel, which brought destruction to large areas of Lebanon. Following an attempt in 2008 by government forces to assert greater security control in the country, Hezbollah used force to confront other Lebanese factions. In 2013, it overtly intervened in the Syrian conflict on behalf of the Asad government. Both incidents illustrated the lengths to which Hezbollah leaders are willing to go to defend their prerogatives and position. These issues dominate Lebanese debates and are rooted in decades-old struggles to define Lebanon’s political system, regional orientation, and security institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Henry Kissinger) to President Richard Nixon, “Actions to Bolster Moderates before Arab Summit,” December 23, 1969.

### Figure 3. Lebanon's Political Coalitions

Reflects Those Parties with Largest Number of Seats in Parliament



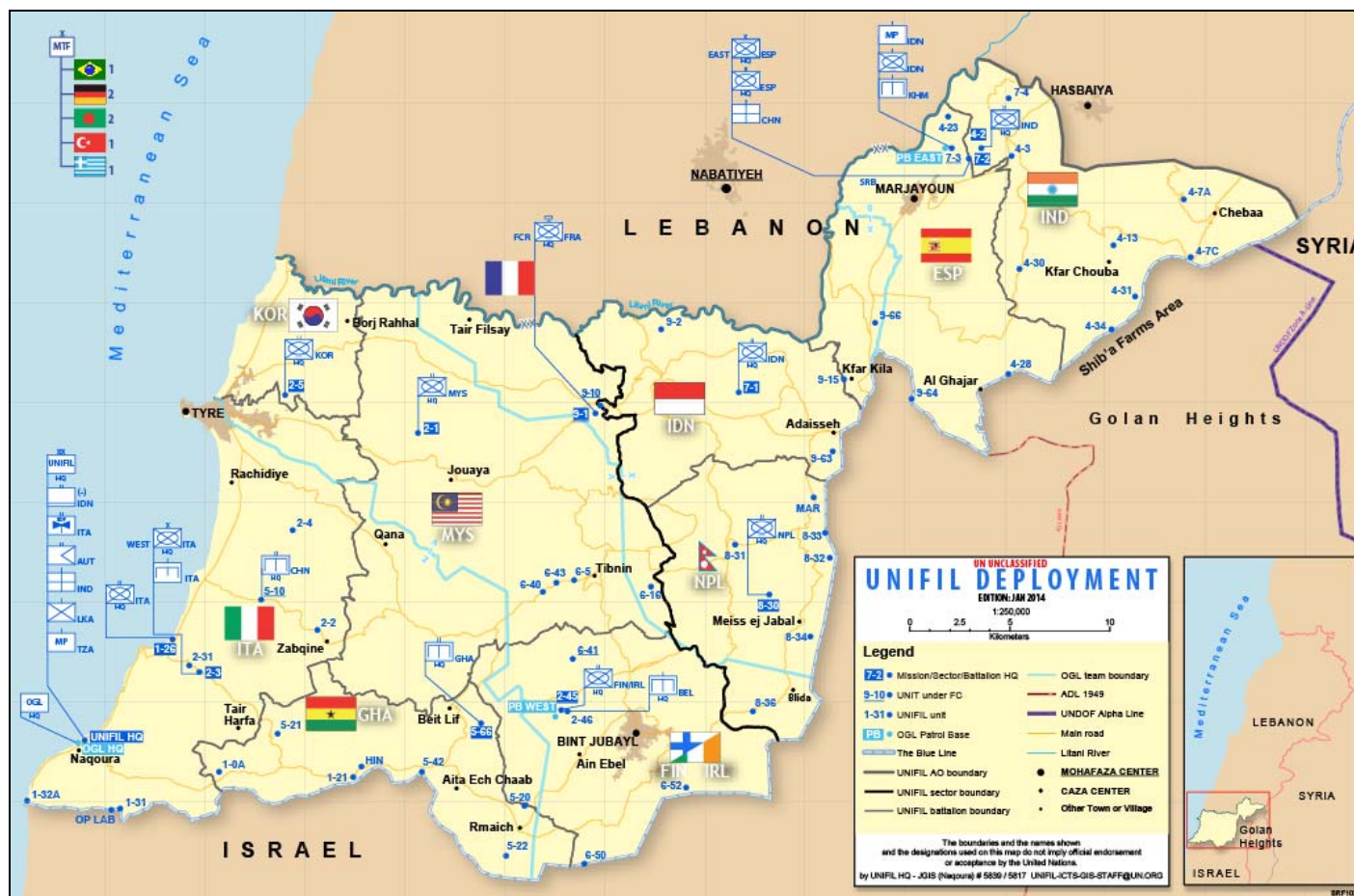
**Source:** Congressional Research Service.

Hezbollah has traditionally defined itself and justified its paramilitary actions as legitimate resistance to Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory and as a necessary response to the relative weakness of Lebanese state security institutions. However, Israel's withdrawal from Lebanese territory in May 2000 and the strengthening of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) with international and U.S. support since 2006 have undermined these arguments and placed pressure on Hezbollah to adapt its rhetoric and policies. Hezbollah increasingly has pointed to disputed territory in the Shib'a Farms area of the Lebanon-Syria-Israel tri-border region, Israeli overflights of Lebanese territory, and, more recently, to Sunni extremist groups operating in Syria and Lebanon as important justifications for its posture (see **Figure 4** below). The United States continues to contribute more than \$100 million annually (see **Table 2**) for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), established in 1978 by U.N. Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426, as modified in 2006 by Resolution 1701.



**Figure 4. Map of United Nations Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) Deployment and Lebanon-Syria-Israel Tri-border Area**

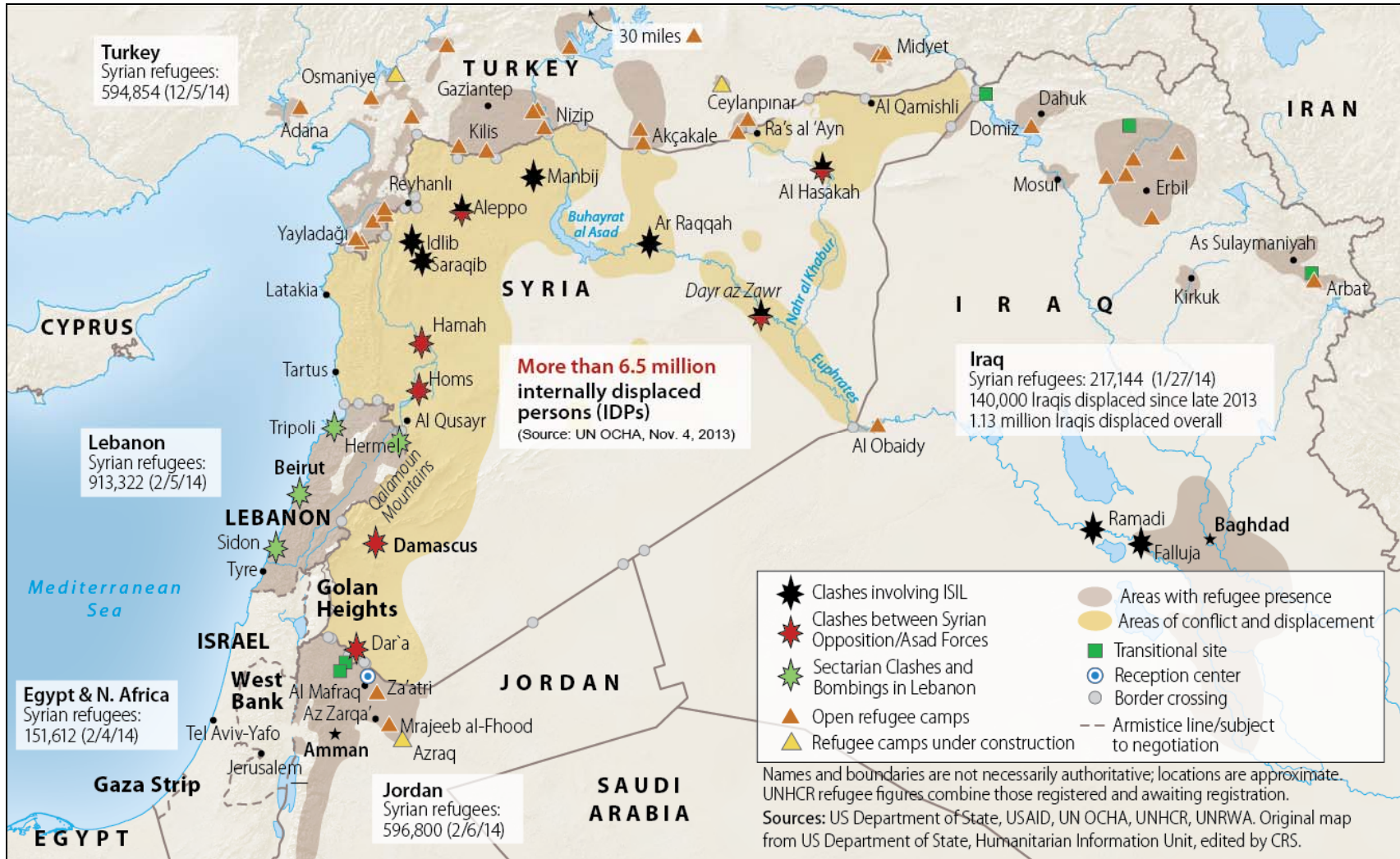
As of January 2014



**Source:** United Nations Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), modified by CRS. Names and boundaries are not necessarily authoritative; locations are approximate. Boundary lines do not imply endorsement and may be subject to negotiation. As of February 5, 2014 UNIFIL reported that its force consisted of 10,208 peacekeepers from 38 troop-contributing countries. For details, see <http://unifil.unmissions.org>.

**Figure 5. Map of Conflict and Displacement in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq**

As of February 7, 2014



Hezbollah's Lebanese critics share its objections to Israeli military incursions in Lebanon and have long emphasized the need to assert control over remaining disputed areas with Israel, such as the Shib'a Farms, the Kfar Shouba Hills, and the northern part of the village of Ghajar (see **Figure 4**). However, current Hezbollah policy statements suggest that, even if disputed areas were secured, the group would seek to maintain a role for "the resistance" in providing for Lebanon's national defense and would resist any Lebanese or international efforts to disarm it as called for in the 1989 Taif Accord that ended the Lebanese civil war and more recently in U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701.

Hezbollah enjoys considerable but not uniform appeal among members of the Lebanese Shiite constituency, which is widely assumed to have become a larger percentage of the Lebanese population than it was when the current proportional arrangements were established. In recent years, Hezbollah candidates have fared well in municipal elections, winning seats in conjunction with allied Amal party representatives in many areas of southern and eastern Lebanon. Lebanon has not conducted a national census in decades largely because of the sensitivity of confessional power-sharing arrangements.

## Recent Developments

The war in neighboring Syria, the influx of Syrian refugees, Hezbollah's intervention on behalf of President Assad, Lebanese Sunni support for Syrian opposition forces and a wave of sectarian violence and terrorist attacks by Sunni extremist groups have heightened tensions and complexities surrounding all of these issues. As of early 2014, U.S. officials continue to call on Lebanese leaders to avoid a political vacuum in the midst of volatile regional conditions.

Lebanese leaders have been unable to agree on the formation of a new cabinet since March 2013, when the cabinet led by Prime Minister Najib Miqati resigned amid disputes over terms for a parliamentary election law and security issues. Miqati and the members of his cabinet have continued to serve as caretakers in their ministries while Prime Minister-designate Tammam Salam has consulted with Lebanese parties in an attempt to form a new cabinet. Over the course of this process, leaders of opposing political factions have considered and rejected proposals that would grant varying proportions of 24 cabinet positions among the two broad coalitions (see **Figure 3**), while also reserving seats for non-affiliated centrists. In late January 2014, President Michel Sleiman and Prime Minister-designate Salam signaled their intention to name what Lebanese political analysts refer to as a "fait accompli" or "neutral" cabinet if faction leaders remained unable or unwilling to agree on an "all encompassing" cabinet. As of February 14, a broad agreement appeared to have been reached regarding the rotation of cabinet positions among factions, but disagreement over the leadership of the Interior Ministry led to the failure of an attempt by Salam to announce a new slate of ministers. Coalition leaders continued to consult with outside patrons and local supporters to determine the way forward.

The cabinet dispute is one symptom of the deeper current of mistrust and animosity prevailing among some Lebanese political leaders and citizens. This trend has produced systemic paralysis in the country's key political institutions and is being severely exacerbated by the ongoing war in neighboring Syria, the direct support of armed Lebanese militia groups for opposing sides in that war, and the war-related influx of close to one million predominantly Sunni refugees to Lebanon. A series of high-profile bombings and armed clashes (see **Table 1**) have shaken Lebanon in the last year, increasing sectarian tensions and straining already fragile security conditions.

### Table I. Chronology of Select Violence, Attacks, and Related Developments

October 2012	Internal Security Forces (ISF) intelligence chief Brigadier General Wissam al Hassan is killed in a car bombing in Beirut. Hassan is reported to have uncovered a plot by a pro-Syrian former cabinet minister to smuggle explosives into Lebanon and target anti-Asad political figures.
May 2013	Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah delivers speech acknowledging Hezbollah's direct participation in Syrian conflict, states purpose is to defend Lebanon from Sunni extremists. Sectarian clashes kill and wound Lebanese Sunnis and Alawites fighting in Tripoli. Unknown forces launch two rockets into southern Beirut.
June 2013	Hezbollah forces assist the Syrian army in recapturing the city of Qusayr. Lebanese Armed Forces clash with supporters of Salafist Sunni cleric Ahmad al Asir and members of Jund al Sham and Fatah al Islam, 16 troops are killed. A rocket attack causes power outages in southern Beirut.
July 2013	A bomb wounds more than 50 people in the Beirut neighborhood of Bir al Abed. Jabhat al Nusra leader Abu Mohammad al Jawlani (Golani) declares a "new era for the Sunnis in the region" and warns that "the practices of Iran's party in Syria and Lebanon [Hezbollah] nowadays will not go unpunished." <sup>6</sup> Baghdadi further warned "those who claim to be Shia in Lebanon against being dragged by Iran to a war they would not endure. I say that your rejection and denial of Iran's party will rescue you from unnecessary afflictions."
August 2013	Two rockets fall near the Presidential Palace east of Beirut. A car bomb kills 30 and wounds more than 300 people in the Hezbollah stronghold of Ruwais, a southern suburb of Beirut. Hezbollah mobilizes forces to secure its bases of support in Lebanon. Car bombs kill 45 and wound more than 500 people leaving prayers at two Sunni mosques in Tripoli.
September 2013	Hundreds of military and security officers deploy to Dahieh in southern Beirut to replace Hezbollah personnel that had asserted control over the area in the wake of attacks.
November 2013	Two suicide attackers strike Iranian Embassy in Beirut, killing 23 and wounding at least 150 people. The Al Qaeda inspired Abdullah Azzam Brigades claim responsibility.
December 2013	Jabhat al Nusra in Lebanon releases its first statement, claims responsibility (along with a group named for 20 <sup>th</sup> century Syrian Sunni militant leader Marwan Hadid) for a rocket attack on Hezbollah positions in Hermel in eastern Lebanon. Sunni attackers strike Lebanese Armed Forces officers in Sidon. Hezbollah claims to have ambushed and killed more than 30 people near Nahle entering Syria to support armed opposition groups. Former Lebanese Ambassador to the United States and former Finance Minister Mohammad Chatah is killed in a Beirut car bombing.
January 2014	Lebanese Armed Forces announce capture of Abdullah Azzam Brigades emir Majed al Majed, a Saudi national. Two suicide attacks strike the southern Beirut suburb of Haret Hreik and a third strikes Hermel. LAF captures second Azzam Brigade figure, kills another.
February 2014	Jabhat al Nusra claims responsibility for a suicide bombing attack in Hermel. Suicide attack strikes minibus bound for south Beirut neighborhood of Choueifat. Security forces arrest Azzam Brigade figures, seize explosives, suicide belts, and vehicles.

**Source:** U.S. Government Open Source Center (OSC) reports, Lebanese media, and social media outlets.

<sup>6</sup> OSC Report TRN2013072225034533, "Syria: ...Audio by Al-Nusra Front Leader Al-Jawlani," July 23, 2013.

Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian conflict on the side of Assad antagonizes its critics, who allege that Hezbollah has caused the spread of conflict into Lebanon. In December 2013, Jabhat al Nusra leader Abu Mohammad al Jawlani (Golani) described Hezbollah's overt intervention in Syria as having "opened the door wide open for us to enter Lebanon and rescue the Sunni people in Lebanon."<sup>8</sup> Hezbollah claims it is fighting extremist groups in Syria that threaten all Lebanese, and its supporters are critical of Lebanese Sunni support for extremists at home and in Syria.

### Assassinations and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)

The October 2012 killing of Internal Security Forces (ISF) intelligence director Brigadier General Wissam Hassan and the December 2013 killing of former Finance Minister Mohammad Chatah have returned the issue of political assassinations to the forefront of national politics in Lebanon. A string of reported assassination attempts targeting several anti-Assad politicians also has created controversy. In early 2012, a sniper attack was reported against the March 14-aligned leader of the Lebanese Forces bloc, Samir Geagea, who continues to allege that unidentified unmanned surveillance drones have been spotted near his compound. In July 2012, March 14-aligned independent Boutros Harb reported a failed attempt to plant explosives in his office building. In August, former information minister Michel Samaha was arrested on charges of aiding a wider plot to assassinate Lebanese figures. Many Lebanese view the ISF's role in the assassination investigations and Samaha's arrest as having motivated as yet unidentified parties to assassinate Wissam Hassan. Suspicion in the Hassan case and other attempted assassinations fell broadly on the Assad government and its Lebanese allies. The killing precipitated renewed confrontation over the Miqati cabinet, which subsequently resigned.

Throughout this period, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)—formed to investigate the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and others—has remained controversial but has continued its work with Lebanese and U.S. government financial support (see note **Table 2**). The STL has indicted five members of Hezbollah on charges of assassinating Hariri. Hezbollah disavows the allegations and has refused to turn over the named individuals. The STL Trial Chamber is now hearing testimony in The Netherlands against the five accused in absentia. The STL credited the Lebanese government's "multiple attempts ... to find the accused at their last known residences, places of employment, family homes and other locations."<sup>7</sup> The Hassan and Chatah cases will not be subject to the jurisdiction of the STL unless the Lebanese government and the U.N. Security Council decide to refer the cases for STL prosecution. That appears unlikely under current political and security circumstances in Lebanon.

Even before the recent escalation in sectarian violence and terrorist attacks, non-state actors such as Hezbollah and predominantly Palestinian extremist groups such as Jund al Sham and Fatah al Islam posed a constant challenge to state security. Moreover, the Abdullah Azzam Brigade, an Al Qaeda-linked terrorist organization, was operating in the country, posing a risk to Lebanese officials, international targets, and rival groups. Joint claims of attacks and pledges of affiliation among Sunni extremist groups in Lebanon suggest that members of these groups are collaborating with both Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, aka ISIS) in their efforts to attack Shia civilians, Hezbollah, and Lebanese security forces.<sup>9</sup>

As violence has escalated since mid-2013, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) increasingly has been drawn into confrontations with Sunni extremist groups seeking to attack Shia communities and Hezbollah strongholds in retaliation for Hezbollah's overt intervention in Syria on behalf of the Assad government. The LAF's operations have been endorsed by a broad spectrum of political

<sup>7</sup> Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Decision to Hold Trial in Absentia, Case STL-11-01, February 1, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> OSC Report PLL2013121972257182, "Syria: Al-Nusra Front Leader Interviewed on Syrian Conflict, Political Vision, Regional Affairs," December 19, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, OSC Report TRR2014012570778214, "ANF in Lebanon, Abdallah Azzam Brigades Claim Joint Operation Against Hizballah, Targets in El Hermel," January 25, 2014; and, OSC Report TRR2014012571427255, "Lebanon: Al-Qa'ida Emir 'Abu-Sayyaf al-Ansari' in Tripoli Declares 'Pledging Allegiance' To ISIL," January 25, 2014.

leaders in Lebanon, including prominent Sunnis. Nevertheless, the appearance of the LAF frequently targeting Sunni militants and protecting targeted Shia communities may be giving rise to increased perceptions among some Lebanese Sunnis that the LAF is acting in effect for the benefit of Hezbollah. National figures such as President Michel Sleiman, Sunni political leader Saad Hariri, and a number of Christian and Shia leaders continue to stress the neutrality of state security forces and the importance of the preservation of the armed forces as a national and nonsectarian institution. The LAF is likely to face challenges to its reputation as long as it simultaneously remains under pressure from Sunni extremists and is unauthorized (and unable) to halt Hezbollah's continuing operations in Syria.

These trends lead many observers to express concern for Lebanon's stability and warn of the risk of broader conflict. The U.S. intelligence community told Congress in its 2014 Worldwide Threat Assessment that, "Lebanon in 2014 probably will continue to experience sectarian violence among Lebanese and terrorist attacks by Sunni extremists and Hezbollah, which are targeting each-others' interests. ... Increased frequency and lethality of violence in Lebanon could erupt into sustained and widespread fighting."

On January 31, 2014, the U.S. State Department warned U.S. citizens against all travel to Lebanon citing the "increasing frequency of terrorist bombing attacks throughout the country" and country-wide threats from Hezbollah, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Jabhat al Nusra, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

## U.S. Assistance and Issues for Congress

Following Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and the war between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, the George W. Bush Administration requested and Congress appropriated a significant increase in U.S. assistance to Lebanon. Since 2006, the United States has granted over \$1 billion in assistance to Lebanon, with the following goals:

- Supporting the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 1559 and 1701;
- Reducing sectarianism and unifying national institutions;
- Providing military equipment and basic supplies to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF);
- Providing support to the Internal Security Forces (ISF) for training, equipment and vehicles, community policing assistance, corrections reform, and communications; and
- Increasing economic opportunity.

U.S. security assistance since 2006 has been administered in line with multi-year, bilaterally-agreed and congressionally-notified development plans to modernize and equip the LAF and ISF. The Obama Administration and some Members of Congress have supported the continuation of this assistance, in spite of growing concerns for Lebanon's stability. Recent U.S. investment in improvements in Lebanon's border surveillance and control capabilities have proven particularly relevant in light of the porous nature of the Syrian-Lebanese border and its exploitation by various forces involved in the Syrian conflict and in terrorist attacks inside Lebanon.

Over the long term, U.S. officials hope that building an apolitical, competent state security apparatus will improve internal stability and public confidence in the LAF and ISF. Such public confidence could in theory create space for the Lebanese government to address more complex, politically sensitive issues ranging from political reform to developing a national defense strategy. A more fundamental, if less often acknowledged, hope among some U.S. officials and some Members of Congress has appeared to be that building up the LAF might eventually enable the Lebanese government to contain, or even potentially dismantle, Hezbollah's military capabilities. Similar hopes were advanced in the 1970s, but U.S. assistance proved unable to sufficiently empower the LAF to take action against the Palestinian *Fedayeen*. The political consequences of LAF confrontations with the Palestinians contributed to the outbreak of civil conflict, which in turn led to foreign intervention in the civil war that followed.

At the same time, some Members have worried that by improving the capabilities of Lebanese security forces, the United States may be indirectly benefitting Hezbollah, particularly to the extent that Hezbollah members or sympathizers are present in security forces or to the extent that Hezbollah's participation in the Lebanese government gives it influence over security sector decisions and resources. The rise of armed Sunni extremist groups, including Al Qaeda-affiliated groups like Jabhat al Nusra may balance or obviate some of these concerns, although some Members of Congress may argue that Hezbollah should remain a higher priority concern.

**Table 2. U.S. Assistance to Lebanon and UNIFIL Contributions, FY2009-FY2014**

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

Account	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012 (Actual)	FY2013 (Estimate)	FY2014 (Request)	Account Total
ESF	67.50	109.00	84.73	84.73	70.00	70.00	485.96
IMET	2.28	2.50	2.48	2.38	2.25	2.25	14.14
1206	49.24	23.00	-	-	8.70	-	72.24
FMF	159.70	100.00	74.85	75.00	75.00	75.00	559.55
INCLE	6.00	20.00	19.50	24.00	15.50	13.89	98.89
NADR	4.60	6.80	4.80	5.05	4.70	4.76	30.71
1207	10.00	-	-	-	-	-	10.00
Annual Total	299.32	261.30	186.36	191.16	167.45	165.90	1271.49
UNIFIL Contributions	186.40	233.08	152.06	148.44	161.10	156.00	888.64

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

**Note:** U.S. contributions to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon have been drawn from the ESF account.

## Legislation in the 112<sup>th</sup> and 113<sup>th</sup> Congress

During the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, some Members questioned the advisability of funding U.S.-sponsored initiatives in Lebanon at prevailing levels, citing both U.S. budgetary constraints and Hezbollah's then-increased participation in the Lebanese government.<sup>10</sup> Since FY2012, Congress has enacted conditions in annual appropriations legislation that have prohibited U.S. assistance to the LAF if it is controlled by a terrorist organization.<sup>11</sup> LAF command rests with General Jean Kahwaji, who is not a Hezbollah member. Fayez Ghosn of the March 8-aligned Marada Movement serves as acting defense minister in the resigned Miqati cabinet.

Most recently, Section 7041(e) of the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 113-76) carries forward the terrorism-related prohibition on the use of funds appropriated under the State Department and Foreign Operations division of the Act, and limits the use of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) account-funded assistance to specific purposes. Those purposes are “to professionalize the LAF and to strengthen border security and combat terrorism, including training and equipping the LAF to secure Lebanon’s borders, interdicting arms shipments, preventing the use of Lebanon as a safe haven for terrorist groups, and to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701.” The Act requires the Administration to submit to the Appropriations Committees “a detailed spend plan, including actions to be taken to ensure that equipment provided to the LAF is used only for the intended purposes,” as well as regular notification of the Appropriations Committees of planned obligations of funds for Lebanon programs, including any lethal assistance. While some Members support greater conditionality on aid to the LAF, others suggest that the best way to weaken Hezbollah and Sunni extremist groups is to provide a military and security counterweight by continuing to assist the LAF.

Current U.S. assistance to the LAF includes Section 1206 funding for border security and counterterrorism programs (\$8.7 million in FY2013), International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs (\$2.2 million in FY2013), Counterterrorism Fellowship Program (CTFP) funds, the provision of Excess Defense Articles, and Foreign Military Financing (FMF, \$71.2 million in FY2013) programs that equip and train LAF units. According to the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, from June 2012 through May 2013, the United States supplied more than \$180 million worth of equipment and weaponry to the LAF.

The LAF's multi-year capability development plan reportedly envisions a further expansion of the force beyond its current 65,000 personnel and further improvements in its armaments and logistical support capabilities. In December 2013, Saudi Arabia pledged \$3 billion to finance French training and equipment programs for the LAF. Thus far, U.S. officials have embraced the initiative and may seek to shape and build upon it if and when it begins in earnest. It remains to be seen whether the Administration's FY2015 foreign assistance request will include requests for

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<sup>10</sup> H.R. 2215, the Hezbollah Anti-Terrorism Act (HATA), would have limited certain types of assistance to the LAF while Hezbollah is part of the governing coalition in Lebanon. The bill did not preclude supporting programs that foster democracy and rule of law, educational funding, or LAF training through International Military Education and Training (IMET). Representative Berman later offered HATA as an amendment to H.R. 2583, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, which was reported by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs (H.Rept. 112-223).

<sup>11</sup> In December 2011, P.L. 112-74, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012, provided that the \$100 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds appropriated in FY2012 for the LAF could not be allocated to the LAF if it is controlled by a foreign terrorist organization (such as Hezbollah).



Congress to fund new programs or initiatives designed to speed up, expand, or target assistance in response to rising violence in Lebanon.

## Outlook

Conditions in Lebanon are fragile and the country's stability is jeopardized by the fighting in Syria. At the same time, some in the Administration and Congress may view the Syrian uprising as an opportunity to weaken Hezbollah, as well as its key patron, Iran, and to limit Hezbollah's role in Lebanese affairs. It remains to be seen whether a weakened Hezbollah would be amenable to increased cooperation with its sectarian rivals. The rise in Lebanon of Sunni extremist forces linked to Syria such as Jabhat al Nusra and ISIL create new threats for U.S. policymakers to consider. Since 2006, Hezbollah, its allies, and their Sunni extremist rivals have viewed U.S. assistance programs as a thinly veiled attempt to build proxy forces to target them. During this period, some Members of Congress have argued that the LAF and ISF should act more forcefully to limit weapons smuggling to Hezbollah, if not to confront Hezbollah directly. Persistent congressional concerns about the trustworthiness of the LAF and its potential to threaten Israel have placed limits on the extent of U.S. engagement. The Obama Administration, like its predecessor, has sought to underscore that the intent of U.S. support is to build national institutions in Lebanon that can impartially confront a range of security challenges, of which there is no shortage at present.

Lebanese leaders and their U.S. interlocutors are acutely focused on the threat that potential power vacuums in executive, legislative, and security force leadership positions may pose to Lebanon's security in 2014. Two key domestic political issues remain unresolved: who will succeed President Michel Sleiman when his term expires on May 25, 2014, and which election law will govern parliamentary elections that have been delayed until November 2014.<sup>12</sup> General Jean Kahwaji, whose term as the head of the LAF was extended for two years in July 2013 when he reached mandatory retirement age, is considered as one potential candidate to succeed Sleiman. Central Bank governor Riad Salameh is also discussed as a viable candidate. Free Patriotic Movement head and former army leader Michel Aoun also appears to be seeking an opportunity to become President, and some groups' opposition to Aoun's candidacy appears to have played a role in prolonging the cabinet crisis since March 2013. That crisis emerged in large part from factions' inability to agree on terms for May 2013 parliamentary elections, and, despite an agreement to delay the polls until November 2014, parties appear no closer to consensus on

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<sup>12</sup> The 1926 constitution established Lebanon as a parliamentary republic. Citizens elect the parliament for four-year terms, and the parliament in turn elects the president for a non-renewable six-year term. The president chooses a prime minister and appoints a cabinet subject to the confidence vote of parliament. Before each parliamentary election an electoral law is enacted. Recent laws have preserved an equal balance of parliamentary seats between Muslims and Christians and outlined specific seat quotas for religious sub-sects. For example, the 2008 election law specified seats for Sunni, Shiite, Druze and Alawite Muslims as well as among Christians for Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Evangelical, and Christian minorities. The current law was adopted in 2008 and establishes a winner-take all system across 26 districts, known as *qada*. In August 2012, after several rounds of disagreement, the cabinet endorsed a proposal calling for the introduction of a proportional representation system over 13 larger districts, but the proposal was never enacted. Supporters of the draft argued that it would encourage parties to extend beyond political or sectarian strongholds and run more nationally oriented campaigns. The Future Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party, and some minority parties expressed opposition to the proportional representation system and the cabinet draft, citing fears it would undermine their ability to achieve representation in parliament and maintain influence over cabinet formation. See International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), *The Lebanese Electoral System*, March 2009.

proposals that could alter the electoral fortunes of certain factions considerably. In the meantime, rising insecurity has made the prospect of grand political compromise appear more necessary but less likely.

Overall, the prevailing political balance in Lebanon continues to reflect fundamental communal divisions and different perspectives on events in neighboring Syria. These divisions and differences show little sign of abating, and have intensified as the conflict in Syria has continued and as attacks have spread in Lebanon. Some Lebanese leaders signal that they want to move beyond the sectarian politics that have paralyzed the country, while others seek to perpetuate the confessional system to defend or advance personal or communal interests.

Lebanon's rival political coalitions accuse each other of jeopardizing the country's security by choosing sides in Syria's conflict as each contemplates the potential change in sectarian power dynamics that could be ushered in by prolonged conflict or regime change in Syria. Hezbollah and its Shiite and Christian allies fear that an empowered Syrian Sunni majority will undermine their interests and empower their domestic rivals. The March 14 coalition seeks to undermine its competitors by linking them to the violent oppression of the Asad government, even as questions rise about the tactics and long-term intentions of fellow Asad opponents among small Sunni extremist community.

U.S. decision makers face a delicate series of choices as the Syrian conflict drags on and Lebanese leaders seek to carry out needed elections and avoid slipping further toward crisis. Congress may seek to influence U.S. policy in the short run through its consideration of notifications for the obligation of foreign assistance funds for Lebanon and for any proposed arms sales. The upcoming consideration of the Administration's FY2015 assistance requests offer further opportunities for oversight and policy review. Broader evaluation of the direction of U.S. policy toward Syria is ongoing in both chambers and may include new assessments of U.S. engagement in Lebanon. The choices that Lebanese leaders make with regard to the Syrian crisis, their own political disputes, and the use of state security forces to assert sovereignty and combat non-state actors may further shape the future of U.S. assistance to and relations with Lebanon.

In the interim, Lebanon is likely to remain an arena for sectarian and geopolitical competition, with political paralysis and insecurity as the result.

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