
REBUILDING LEBANON'S ARMY

By

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Building a national Army is a difficult task, as newly-independent countries have discovered, but building a national Army when foreign troops occupy the country and partisan militias -- better armed than the Army -- control large territories is a challenge almost without precedent. Yet Lebanon, after eight years of civil war and foreign invasion, is trying to do just that, with US and allied assistance.

There is much talk of "rebuilding" the Lebanese Armed Forces, but in fact most of the building needed must be from scratch. In Lebanon's delicately balanced pre-war political system, the Armed Forces were limited in size and authority. Even before the civil war, party militias existed and operated in many areas. It was true that on occasion the Army could play a significant role, and Gen. Fuad Chehab served as President after the 1958 Lebanon crisis. Chehab's rule was a period of strength for the Army, but accusations of excessive power exercised by military intelligence led to a subsequent clipping of its wings.

Furthermore, the Army, like society as a whole, was a delicate balance of confessional representations. The Commander must be a Maronite Christian, the Chief of Staff a Druze, and so on. An apocryphal but revealing joke used to be told of a Lebanese company fighting Israel in 1948 and refusing to move on the grounds that, since four Maronites had been wounded, it was now essential that three Sunnis, two Shi'as, and so forth also be wounded.

Many military units became personal fiefdoms for local commanders, and corruption was rampant. With the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, many Army units simply faded away, men and arms going into one or another militia. Some commanders, such as Israel's ally Maj. Sa'd Haddad, deserted the Army to start their own forces. The Army became a joke, exercising no power except a certain ceremonial guard duty around the Presidential Palace and its own headquarters.

But the need to give real authority to the Army was evident throughout the civil war. Only a national Army could possibly hope to restore some sort of order and replace the various militias, the Syrian troops who entered in 1976, or the Israelis who entered in 1982. Already in 1978 plans were drawn up to reorganize the Army, institute conscription, and eventually spread out to control the country. The vicissitudes of war and occupation made those 1978 plans little more than dreams until the traumatic war of 1982.

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Israel's invasion and the election of Bashir Gemayel, and after his death of his brother Amin, as President of the Republic changed the political equation. Although Bashir commanded the largest and most powerful of the militias, the Phalangist "Lebanese Forces", he and Amin have both been committed to rebuilding the national Army. With US, French, and Italian aid, as well as help from Jordan, Lebanon is gradually beginning to do so.

Total Reorganization

What the Army needed, it seemed clear, was a wholesale "new broom" approach, removing the deadwood from the command structure and installing a new breed of officer, committed to a Lebanese rather than a communal or regional identity. And that is what the Army is getting.

Last December, the long-time Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Victor Khoury, was "retired". He was replaced with Lt. Gen. Ibrahim Tannous. . . . Tannous was considered by some too pro-Phalangist, but quickly impressed observers with his ability to restructure the Army without exceedingly partisan decisions. And the new broom swept clean: a total replacement of all senior commanders and officials. It is said that about 140 general and field-grade officers were "retired." Many of them, like the once-powerful Military Intelligence Chief Col. Johnny 'Abduh, received diplomatic posts abroad.

Tannous generally has adhered to the traditional confessional breakdown of assignments, but there have been some surprising exceptions. Thus the commander of the Beirut region, traditionally a Shi'ite, is now a Maronite, while the new commander at Junieh -- the Phalangist Maronite stronghold -- is a Sunni Muslim.

Not only the faces are changing: the structure and manning of the Armed Forces are also undergoing drastic change. The Army was down to about 8,000 men at one point in the civil war (while total Phalangist militia forces were as high as 22,000 and the militias had more tanks than the Army). The Army is now perhaps 22,000 and growing rapidly, with an ultimate goal of about 60,000, not counting Internal Security forces and a planned Frontier Force. It may grow even larger.

One major change has been the introduction of conscription, the so-called "Service to the Flag" law. Lebanon's conscription law was passed years ago, but the civil war and the lack of Army authority made it impossible to implement. On April 18 of this year, although the Army still controls little more than the Beirut area proper, "Service to the Flag" was implemented. The results astonished even the most optimistic Army planners.

Within the first month of conscription, potential draftees flocked to the colors, not merely in Beirut but in other parts of the country -- where militias or Syrian and Israeli troops were in control, and thus the Army cannot enforce the draft -- straining the Government's ability to process them. At one point Beirut requested an urgent shipment of 5,000 uniforms from the US: although the uniforms were already in the supply pipeline, they had to be specially flown to Lebanon just to cope with the number of

new draftees. And, for the first time, the Christian militias are not discouraging young men in their territory from joining the national Army.

As a result of the surprising response to the "Service to the Flag" law, Lebanese planners began talking in terms of as many as 12 combat brigades (compared with the seven to nine envisioned in present planning). That may be premature, a reaction to the first flush of success for conscription, but it is a sign of the degree to which the law is proving popular.

The New Brigades

The force structure of the Army is being reorganized as well as expanded. Traditionally, Lebanon's Army was structured in battalions, without larger formations. Beginning in 1978, plans have been under way to create a system of brigades (all light mechanized infantry under present planning). The nuclei of eight brigades (plus a Headquarters Brigade and a Republican Guard brigade) have been created. At this writing, most are well below strength, but the US plan to equip them, combined with the manpower provided by conscription, are expected to allow for rapid expansion.

The US rebuilding program is being undertaken in several phases, first laid out in the so-called "Bartlett plan" drawn up last fall after a US Department of Defense survey team visited Lebanon to determine what was needed. This on-site survey was not binding on the Lebanese, but meshed neatly with the previous studies done in 1978 and thus became the framework for the US effort.

The four phases envisioned by the Bartlett plan were:

-- In the near-term, restructuring, arming, and manning four brigades up to approximately 70 percent strength, both in equipment and personnel. This phase was completed this past spring. It involved the transfer of a very wide range of equipment, from large items like M-113 APCs and trucks to communications equipment, rifles, shelter halves, and uniforms.

-- Phase II, which began in April, will bring the four brigades of Phase I up to 100 percent strength, and add two new brigades, which would be brought up to 65-70 percent strength.

-- Phase III, to be carried out over the next year or so, will see the completion of the basic seven-brigade organization, the creation of basic infrastructure, and the possibility of expanding by another two brigades.

-- Phase IV would deal with longer-term infrastructure and, perhaps, deal with reconstruction of the Navy and the Air Force. (As will be seen, the other services are likely to be left to France or other countries to develop.)

The brigades for which organizational structures and at least nuclei of forces exist are each assigned to a region of Lebanon. Some have a few troops in these regions now, although only greater Beirut is under direct Army control. The brigades, with their regional assignments and the new commanders named by Tannous, are:

- Headquarters Brigade, Brig. Gen. Sami al-Nakadi.
- Republican Guard Brigade, Brig. Gen. Munir al-Sarduk.
- First Brigade (Baq'a Valley), Brig. Gen. Ibrahim Shahin. (Shahin was a colonel when appointed: his small force in the Baqa'a clashed with Iranian-backed Shi'ites of the al-Amal militia earlier this year and Shahin was wounded, after which he received his promotion.)
- Second Brigade (Northern Lebanon), Col. 'Assam Abu Jamra.
- Third Brigade (Sidon), Col. Sa'id al-Qa'qur. (This brigade would presumably eventually patrol in the South along the Israeli border. Until recently, units in Sidon assigned to this brigade could not leave Israeli-controlled areas for training, but that is no longer the case.)
- Fourth Brigade (Mount Lebanon), Col. Jurj Haruq.
- Fifth Brigade (Mount Lebanon), Col. Gabriel Arsuni.
- Sixth Brigade (Beirut), Col. Lutfi Jabir. (Col. Jabir was formerly attached to the Syrian-dominated Arab Deterrent Force.)
- Seventh Brigade (Logistics), Col. Faris Lahud.
- Eighth Brigade (Mount Lebanon near Beirut), Col. Michel 'Awn. (The newest brigade organization, three battalions were designated as its nucleus earlier this year.)

The US Role

The US effort to facilitate this rapid creation and arming of the Lebanese Army is now well under way. By the spring of 1983, about 1,000 vehicles were said to be in the pipeline, either aboard ship or already on their way to Lebanon. Total costs for the first three phases were estimated at up to \$500-million, with about \$235-million already committed by May of 1983.

The purchases are being paid for with a mix of US Foreign Military Sales (FMS) credits and Lebanese cash reserves. Uncommitted FMS credits from previous years (untouched due to the confusion in Lebanon) have reportedly now been committed, and the US Administration has proposed a special Supplemental to this FY 83 aid package to Lebanon. The Supplemental includes -- in addition to \$150-million in Economic Support Fund assistance for civilian rebuilding -- a special, one-time \$100-million in guaranteed FMS loans to finance Phases II and III, along with \$1-million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding to train Lebanese officers in the US. (At the time of the Congressional presentation, it was estimated that Phase II would cost about \$55-million and Phase III about \$105-million.)

Lebanese sources note that even when the \$100-million in credits is passed, it will fall well short of needs, and much continues to be paid for in cash.

That package, at presstime, seemed on its way to passage. The House Foreign Affairs Committee approved the Supplemental in April, while rejecting other Administration supplemental requests.

In addition to the Supplemental, normal-level FMS and IMET credits are being requested for FY 84, including \$15-million in FMS and \$750,000 in IMET funds. The 1984 request specifically mentions providing funds for tracked vehicles and crew-served weapons including anti-tank missiles, machineguns, and rifles, and assisting in the purchase of wheeled vehicles, communications equipment, engineer equipment, spare parts, and replacements. It is stated as necessary to continuing the reorganization of one mechanized brigade and one light infantry battalion.

Nor are the FMS credits the only source of funding, as the difference between the requests and the estimated \$235-million already committed shows. The Lebanese Government, true to Lebanese traditions of being shrewd businessmen, somehow managed to emerge from years of civil war with substantial financial reserves.

Because of past problems with corruption and bribery among senior officers, the Lebanese military has insisted that all procurement be handled through the FMS system, including that being paid for in cash. The Army wants no hint of past corruption to emerge in the rebuilding of the Army. As a US Defense official put it, "Whatever the US Army is willing to buy, that's good enough for them." Thus the procurement process is subject to US Federal Procurement Regulations, and the Lebanese do not deal directly with companies, even for purchases not paid for with FMS credits.

Meanwhile, the US presence on the scene has continued to grow. An Office of Military Cooperation (OMC) was established at the beginning of this year, supervising a wide range of training. Mobile training teams, as well as the permanent members of the OMC, have been engaged in training the Lebanese military, along with US Marines who were in the country as part of the Multinational Force. Training in Lebanon has included individual and small unit training, organizational management training, and logistics training.

Meanwhile, under IMET, Lebanese officers have been training in the US, and more are expected. A special class of 50-60 Lebanese lieutenants were to be given the Infantry Officer Basic Training course at Fort Benning, Georgia, as one example of the program.

The French

There has been speculation in the Arab press of a potential conflict of interest between the US and France over Lebanon's military future. France has a longstanding traditional interest in Lebanon -- some Franco-Lebanese go so far as to date it to the Crusades -- and supplied most of the country's small Air Force prior to the civil war. Arab press reports have claimed that there is an understanding now between France and the US to the effect that the US will rebuild the Lebanese Army while the French concentrate on the Air Force and Navy.

In fact, no formal understanding exists. Non-US sources emphasize that, in fact, Lebanese officials were eager to have the US handle all the services, but Washington insisted on the involvement of France and Italy. In some ways, they are simply better equipped to provide what is needed.

As for the Air Force, the US does not consider it a priority. Both the US and the Lebanese agree that the major need is for helicopters for lift operations and perhaps some air-mobile internal security work. There is no urgent need for supersonic aircraft; the few Mirages in Lebanon's pre-war inventory are not in use.

Thus speculation heard after last year's war suggesting that the Northrop F-5 (or even the F-20) might be appropriate for Lebanon seems to have been premature. At the moment Lebanon's Government only controls one airfield: Beirut International Airport. The old Lebanese Air Force base at Rayaq in the Baqa'a Valley is under Syrian control. But the French are believed interested in providing Mirages, as well as additional helicopters, in the fairly short term.

Similarly, the US is not a likely supplier of vessels for rebuilding the Navy, though it might provide training. The US simply does not manufacture the sort of coastal patrol vessels and perhaps fast attack craft which a small Navy like Lebanon's is likely to need. France again would be a likely supplier (and possibly Italy or the UK). So, while no formal division of the services has been agreed to, the Air Force and the Navy fall to the French because the US is not prepared to rebuild them now. The Lebanese military itself has made clear that the Army reconstruction is entrusted to the US.

Late last year, after visiting Beirut, Defense Minister Charles Hernu announced that he was establishing a working team to handle the question of Franco-Lebanese military cooperation.

The French signed an agreement at Yarzeh (the location of Lebanon's Defense Ministry) on April 16, approving a loan for military purchases of FF 600-million (\$81.6-million as this was written, though the rapid decline of the franc makes dollar equivalencies fluctuate dramatically). The agreement was signed by Marc Hochet, the French Ministry of Defense's Director of International Affairs, and Alain Hautecoeur, who is coordinating all French aid -- military and development -- to Lebanon. (A FF 250-million financial protocol was also signed.)

Also in April, French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson visited Beirut, summoning French ambassadors from other Middle Eastern countries to meet with him in the Lebanese capital, in what was seen as a sign that France once again considers Beirut a focal point for French interests in the region.

Although specific equipment has not yet been ordered, Air Force equipment is widely believed to be under discussion. Earlier, France had announced that it would train about 100 Lebanese officers. Of these, 25 were at the French Cavalry School and the other 75 were to be trained at the Applied Artillery Schools. This seems to be the limit of French involvement with the Army's reconstruction, however.

Other Aid

Other sources of aid may include other NATO countries. US officials note that some Italian equipment, produced for NATO and identical with US equipment, can be obtained more quickly than waiting for US production to make it available, and that the US is pleased to have such equipment sold to Lebanon.

Britain may prove to be another possible supplier. (The US, France, Italy, and the UK, of course, are the contributors to the Multinational Force trying to keep the peace in Beirut.)

Lebanon and Jordan discussed Jordanian training of the Lebanese Army and the provision of tanks from Jordan's inventory to Lebanon during the April visit of Lebanese Defense Minister 'Isam Khoury to Amman. The Jordanian tank transfer has been in the air for several years now. When Jordan ordered 100 M-60A3 tanks from the United States in 1980, it agreed to dispose of an equal number of its existing M-48 tanks, in order to meet objections by Israel's supporters in the US Congress. Jordan at that time announced that it would provide 80 of its M-48s to Lebanon, 20 of them as an outright gift.

That transfer is said to have been approved by the US in 1982, but presumably was delayed by the war in Lebanon. Lebanese reports said that Khoury and Jordanian Armed Forces Commander Gen. Zayd ibn Shakir were discussing the possibility of modifying the tanks which Jordan is giving as a gift (no number was specified in the report), as well as the delivery date.

The modification would presumably be an upgrading to M-48A5 standards, which Jordan has been doing with some of its M-48s. The United States has already agreed to sell Lebanon 34 M-48A5s directly, in a \$32-million deal announced last November.

The Lebanese Defense Minister also discussed Jordan's providing training courses for Lebanese officers, as well as the dispatch of Jordanian military musicians to help train and develop Lebanon's military bands.

The Army's Mission

At the end of all this rebuilding, what will the Lebanese Army look like, and what will it be able to do? Present plans envision regular Armed Forces -- Army, Navy, and Air Force -- totaling about 60,000, although that may grow even larger if conscription proves successful. In addition, there would be about 20,000 Internal Security forces.

Finally, President Gemayel plans to create a Frontier Guard force. There is no such force at the moment (Lebanon does not control any of its frontiers anyway), and one idea which is said to be under consideration is that the present armed militias, especially the Phalangist "Lebanese Forces," might provide the Frontier Guards. Lebanese sources discount the likelihood of this, however.

The "Lebanese Forces" future relations with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are a key question for the future. The "Lebanese Forces" continue to

control the so-called "Maronite enclave" north of Beirut. Well-armed and well-trained (by Israel), they are still potentially stronger than the Army. When Bashir Gemayel died, he was seeking a formula for integrating them into the LAF.

Under their current commander, Fadi Frem, the "Lebanese Forces" seem to have taken on a life of their own, independent of their former loyalties to the Phalangist Party. Amin Gemayel, though now President, does not command their loyalty as did his brother Bashir. Although Lebanese sources claim that Amin could disband them whenever he feels the Army is ready to take over control of the militia's territory, many observers are not so sure.

Taking them into the Army in organized units might drastically transform the Army, already seen as Maronite-dominated by some confessional groups. While Sa'd Haddad's smaller militia in the south will probably be integrated into the LAF as part of the agreement with Israel, the "Lebanese Forces" would be a much larger morsel to digest.

The Army has made some progress in taking over militia-controlled territory. The "Lebanese Forces" turned over control of the Beirut docks to the Army recently, with dramatic results. Government duties rose from 1.3-million Lebanese lira daily to 5.5-million when the Army took over the docks. Earlier, the militia had turned over duties patrolling East Beirut to the Army and the four-nation Multinational Force (MNF); the militias no longer wear their uniforms in the capital.

But the real issue, as far as future deployment beyond Beirut is concerned, is the withdrawal of Syrian and Israeli forces. As this is written, the tentative Israeli-Lebanese agreement was contingent on Syrian acceptance, and that remained far from certain. If there are long delays, however, the Lebanese Army may have an opportunity to prove its mettle.

Israel has suggested that if agreement is not reached soon, it may pull its forces back from the Chouf, where Phalangist militias and Druze militias have been fighting, with Syria backing the Druze and Israel at various times helping both sides. The Israelis see their planned partial withdrawal as a threat, but the Lebanese disagree. Sources say General Tannous is eager to send his forces into the Chouf, to restore order, and to show what the new Army can do. Western observers agree it could prove an excellent test of the Army's capabilities.

And, if diplomacy succeeds and Israeli and Syrian forces withdraw, the Army feels it is ready to move into their territories. While many observers believe that it will be a long time before the Army can provide full security, and that some form of the MNF may have to patrol the south to reassure Israel, it is also claimed that the Army could move into the south on short notice if given the chance. One estimate said that the LAF could put a brigade in the south in two months.

Prospects

Those familiar with General Tannous and the drastic reorganization he has in train are confident that, given the chance, the Army can eventually do

its job and protect the national territory. Tannous has removed the dead-wood, and cut through much of Lebanon's red tape. (The majlis al-'askari or military council, which supposedly controls military policy since the civil war, paralyzed the Army for years, since it contained representatives of so many factions and confessional groups and could not take strong decisions. Although the council has not been abolished, Tannous appears -- unofficially -- to have circumvented it and to be making decisions himself.)

But the future of the Army is tied up with the future of Lebanon, and that is dependent on many variables: getting foreign troops to leave the country, trying to restore some sort of normal political life despite the scars and hatreds of years of civil war, and finding a way to either integrate or disband the militias. It seems clear that Tannous is making the necessary changes in the Army, but the Army's future will depend on events beyond his control. For all the optimism now being expressed about the Army, there are so many causes for pessimism in other areas that its future remains uncertain.
