

POLICY PAPER

**FORCE FOR FUNDS:
SAVING LEBANON'S
ARMY FROM FINANCIAL COLLAPSE**

DEC 2021

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ONLY A MODERN NEUTRAL AND SUSTAINABLE LAF CAN SURVIVE THE ECONOMIC CRISIS





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 14 December, a retired member of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), Mohsen Halim Suleiman, lit himself on fire to protest his increasingly abject living conditions. Just a few years ago, Suleiman could have depended on respectable pensions after retirement from the LAF—an institution that is both Lebanon's single largest public employer and the sole security institution responsible for maintaining domestic stability and defending the nation's borders.

Suleiman's desperate final gesture epitomises the LAF's troubled standing in these dark days. The army's historical goodwill—opinion polling singles out the LAF as the country's most respected public institution—risks fizzling out as the economic crisis deepens. Should that happen, Lebanon will be left without any institution that inspires public confidence, not to mention a fighting force that can defend the country from different security threats.

At present, the LAF's finances are so woefully unsustainable that active service members have turned to a wide range of last-resort options. These responses range from working in part-time jobs around military duties, to requesting early retirements, to defecting entirely from the corps. The only way to save the LAF lies through tackling the financial quandary head-on, while also addressing the outdated, sectarian politics that obstruct the LAF from performing its important duties effectively.

Political interference from Lebanon's sectarian powers has long prevented necessary reforms to the LAF's structure—mainly, rationalising the LAF's bloated number of both military and civilian dependents. For many years, sectarian elites have abused their power to

engage in clientelist, "militarised welfare," using the LAF as a vehicle for purchasing political capital.

To overcome this systemic problem, the LAF will need to treat political interference in appointments, staffing, and spending as public enemy #1. Eventually, the unmeritocratic system of sectarian hiring will need to end. This step is as important to the LAF's future as it is for the development of a national defence strategy, which rationalises the use of Hezbollah's arms the LAF's military capability.

But first, the LAF must stem the bleeding. Given Lebanon's parlous finances, emergency funding for wages and benefits will need to come from foreign aid. Ultimately, the LAF will need to meet all its institutional funding requirements from Lebanon's public budget. Getting there will mean bringing the LAF's proportional spending on wages well below 50 percent of its annual budget. This would create fiscal space for spending on other priorities, like equipment acquisition and training.

In tandem, the LAF needs to work on its image—not through fancy posters, but by understanding Plato's time-honoured advice that 'when men speak ill of thee, live so as nobody may believe them.' Even if it remains illegal to say anything deemed "offending [to] the military," the LAF should rise above employing this outdated legal bludgeon against public criticism.

The revolution of October 2019 and the ensuing financial crisis have exposed the LAF to the financial and public opinion conundrum it currently finds itself in. But it is the same understanding that brought people to the streets to face the LAF which it needs to draw upon to defend its nation's sovereignty, people, and its diversity.



DEFEND OR FEED?

On top of its peace and security duties, for decades the LAF has successfully provided a vital source of income and social support for hundreds of thousands of Lebanese. The LAF employs approximately 80,000 active service members, making it Lebanon's largest public employer. Each soldier draws a salary, as well as food and transportation costs, from the national budget. Before the crisis, the LAF could offer competitive wages to its members—major-generals received monthly incomes of LBP 8,455,000 (around \$5,637), and entry-level privates collected LBP 1,332,000 (\$888).¹ Owing to their seniority, high-ranking officers also enjoyed fringe benefits including maid services and the use of private vehicles. Beyond active soldiers, the LAF offers welfare services to an estimated 400,000 individuals in military families, who benefit from healthcare and education support. Accordingly, the LAF's salary and benefits scheme has historically appealed to Lebanese households as an avenue for enrichment and social mobility.

At the same time, the LAF's generous remuneration and benefits policies have imposed an enormous financial burden on the institution's bottom line. In 2020, the LAF spent LBP 1.9 trillion (or \$1.3 billion, at the official exchange rate) on staff salaries, benefits, and pensions—accounting for 71 percent of the LAF's total budget². By contrast, the U.S. Army allocates roughly 35 percent of total national defense spending to staff entitlements³, while the French Armed Forces use only 32 percent of their public funds for this purpose⁴. The LAF's wage bill weighs heavily even on Lebanon's public finances at large; out of the public sector wages bill for January-May 2021, over 42 percent went to military personnel.⁵

Since October 2019, the economic crisis has fundamentally undermined the LAF's sustained and concentrated investment in staff and benefits. Denominated in Lebanese Lira, the LAF budget has depreciated in line with the local currency's collapse, losing more than 90 percent of its value. Internal LAF estimates in early 2021 suggested its treasury allocations would be exhausted by June, leaving a six-month void until the end of the fiscal year.⁶ Staff salaries have nosedived in the same proportion as the Lebanese Lira—a major-general's monthly salary of 8,455,000 LBP now amounts to \$313 at the parallel market rate (27,000 LBP, at the time of writing), while privates earn the equivalent of just \$49. In real terms, therefore, even the highest-ranking LAF officer earns less than an entry-level fighter for Hezbollah's military wing, who still reportedly receives \$500 per month, in 'fresh' dollars.⁷

The LAF's parlous economic state has forced the institution to adopt severe negative coping strategies. Spending on development and training has been the first casualty of the crisis, making room for more urgent spending. Various countries have provided food supplies to prevent soldiers from going hungry.⁸ Soldiers have been permitted to take multiple days off per week to work second and even third jobs—offences that would normally merit punishment or expulsion—reducing the number of soldiers on duty each day by around 50-60 percent.^{9,10} Despite these mitigation measures, many senior officers have requested early retirement, while lower-ranking troops seek three-month periods of unpaid leave to earn income from supplementary jobs. According to a retired military officer, LAF leadership has refused almost all these requests. Triangle has also reviewed a recent circular, dated 8 September 2021, which prohibited leave requests made by LAF personnel currently outside Lebanon.

Force for funds: Saving Lebanon's Army from financial collapse

The LAF Financial Structure

The Lebanese Armed Forces consist of 400 Generals and 80,000 soldiers...

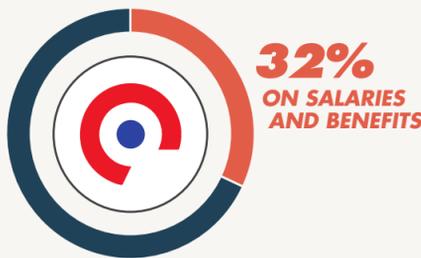
1 General **to** **200** for every 200 soldiers



US Army



French Armed Forces



Crisis Dynamics

LAF Major General



Pre-crisis, received **8,455,000 LBP** which, at 1,500 rate was **USD 5,637**

Amid crisis, receives **8,455,000** which, at 27,000 rate is **USD 313**

LAF Private First Class



Pre-crisis, received **1,332,000 LBP** which, at 1,500 rate was **USD 888**

Amid crisis, receives **1,332,000 LBP** which, at 27,000 rate is **USD 49**

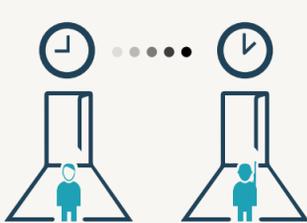
Hezbollah Member



Pre-crisis, received **USD 900** which, at 1,500 rate was **1,350,000 LBP**

Amid crisis, receives **USD 500** which, at 27,000 rate is **13,500,000 LBP**

Adaptation Measures / Coping Mechanisms



Loosened rules to allow for soldiers to take days off to work second jobs



Reduced the percentage of the force that is active to 50 or 60% per day



Facilitated a transportation network to cut the cost of scarce and costly fuel

Reform Measures



Build National Defence Strategy including reforms capable of attracting emergency financing



Cash fund from the UN or similar multilateral organisation to meet immediate costs and prevent accusations of instrumentalisation



Hold transparent investigations of LAF members accused of violent misconduct /corruption and de-escalate politicised trials of civilian LAF critics



Over time, cut down number of general-grade officers and regular soldiers, bringing the LAF's wage bill below 50 percent of its annual budget



Institute meritocratic recruitment processes to select new hires based on the LAF's institutional needs, with full transparency



The LAF has not been able to stem the outflow of disgruntled troops entirely, and the threat of more defections looms large. Around 2,000 soldiers have deserted the army since 2019—a number that, for now, serves as a red flag rather than a catastrophe.¹¹ The size of the force has shrunk for the first time since 2007, from a 2018 peak of 81,000 members down to around 78,842.¹² More concerningly, underpaid soldiers present an easy target for recruitment by other groups, especially considering Lebanon's disintegrating central government and the region's various non-state security actors. As one example, low-ranking Hezbollah fighters—with their reported \$500 monthly pay packets—enjoy roughly ten times the spending power of their LAF counterparts. At the same time, analysts raise increasing concerns about the potential for terrorist groups like the so-called Islamic State to gather strength (and fighters) over the coming period in Lebanon.¹³ For these reasons, the LAF faces enormous stakes in preventing large-scale defection from its ranks, something which constitutes an existential threat to Lebanon's already fraught security situation.

OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY

Aside from the financial toll, heavy spending on staff costs restricts the LAF's capacity to develop a more effective fighting force at precisely the time that the country needs it. Typically, a national military should balance wages and benefits obligations with other key spending priorities. The French Armed Forces, for example, allocated 56 percent of the institution's 2020 budget to equipment purchases and infrastructure, spending just 32 percent on salaries.¹⁴ This even-handed approach ensures that the French Armed Forces can improve its capacity to deliver security services while also meeting staff payment obligations.

On the other hand, the LAF spent a relative pittance on non-remuneration priorities, even before the economic crisis struck. In 2018, the LAF allocated just 9.6 percent and 0.6 percent of its budget to equipment and training respectively. With the crisis' onset, the LAF has slashed its non-remuneration budgets even further, in a desperate effort to make ends meet.¹⁵

Far from self-sufficient, the LAF has traditionally relied on foreign aid to meet most of the institution's equipment and training needs. Since 2006, the LAF has received more than \$2.5 billion from the United States, with one figure suggesting that the US government had provided over 80 percent of the LAF's equipment alone.¹⁶ Over the past decade, American aircraft, vehicles, weapons, and other equipment have been donated to the LAF, usually as tools in the United States' efforts to combat terrorism in the region. Moreover, since 1970, over 6,000 LAF personnel have participated in United States-based training courses, with 204 soldiers taking part last year. The LAF has also accepted donations of military equipment from France, Australia, and the United Kingdom in recent years. Following the Beirut port explosion, humanitarian food and medical aid flooded in for the LAF from more countries like Jordan, Spain, Morocco, Turkey, Iraq, and Qatar.

While the LAF needs these various forms of donor support, aid dependence has exposed the institution to accusations of political steering. Most alarmingly, needing equipment from abroad could cast the LAF into Lebanon's most dangerous security fault line, being the rift between Hezbollah and the West. Already, the LAF holds a conflicting mandate with Hezbollah, as the latter retains de-facto authority to retain a weaponized fighting force outside the LAF's purview. In the intervening years, Hezbollah-aligned publications have seized on the



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“Reports indicate that previous capacity development plans have tackled rationalising the LAF’s size, improving the corps’ professionalism, and improving the institution’s financial sustainability. To date, however, these discussions remain hidden from the Lebanese people’s view.”

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LAF’s heavy reliance on American support as grounds for suspicion that the LAF has become an arm for U.S. policy.¹⁷ The opposite perception—that the LAF is overly beholden to Hezbollah—is forthcoming from Gulf-backed publications.¹⁸

While the Lebanese army has a mission,¹⁹ that mission does not fall under a clear national defence strategy that represents a realistic assessment of Lebanon’s security needs. In lieu of such a consensus vision, the LAF has developed five-year “capacity development plans,” on which LAF leadership reportedly draws during discussions with international donors. These documents—the latest of which spans 2018 to 2022—are not available for public scrutiny, even as they are continually cited by the United Nations and other international bodies.²⁰ Reports indicate that previous capacity development plans have tackled the issues of rationalising the LAF’s size, improving the corps’ professionalism, and improving the institution’s financial sustainability.²¹ To date, however, these discussions remain hidden from the Lebanese people’s view.

SECT OR COUNTRY?

Turning the LAF into a modern force will likely require more than a technical plan to do so, because its structure has become so intertwined with the fabric of the Lebanese political and sectarian system. Just as the entrenchment of competing interest groups in the Lebanese state’s architecture repeatedly hampers political action, so too does it politicise the army. As a result, the LAF becomes vulnerable to instrumentalization by competing political actors, making it almost impossible to develop a united and politically sanctioned vision on whom and what ultimate purpose the army serves.

Like the rest of the public service, any technocratic effort to reform the LAF must contend with institutionalised power-sharing between Lebanon’s various religious sects. The LAF’s most senior positions mirror the confessional power structures of the Lebanese state: by custom, the LAF commander must be a Maronite Christian, the Chief of Staff a Druze, and four generals must represent the Sunni, Shia, Greek Orthodox, and Greek Catholic communities. An informal quota system for the forces’ lower ranks is also reportedly in place; it strives to maintain acceptance rates for applicants to the Military Academy along a 50:50 split between Christians and Muslims.²² This equilibrium has helped the LAF to enjoy far more success than other state bodies, such as the Internal Security Forces, in winning over the Lebanese public. A 2013 study found that the LAF was clearly the most trusted security institution in the country, garnering consistently high approval rates amongst Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Druze respondents.²³

Nevertheless, the same sectarian power-sharing guarantees have allegedly exposed the LAF to political manoeuvring and co-optation. This institutional vulnerability can manifest



in cynical jockeying over appointments to leadership positions. As one example, Christian Maronites were reportedly distanced from senior roles under the 1998-2007 presidency of Emile Lahoud, who wished to prevent the emergence of a major political competitor from within the army.²⁴ In other cases, important senior posts have been left empty for long stretches of time or occupied by 'placeholder' generals, whose terms of service are extended repeatedly to avoid politicized questions of succession.²⁵ Most recently, a new case has seen impropriety charges levelled at eight senior security figures, including former LAF commander Jean Kahwagi, on accusations that include making appointments to 'sectarianised' slots in exchange for cash.²⁶

Politicised decision-making has arguably contributed to the LAF's unsustainable budget. Several experts contend that the LAF's ranks, which hover at around 80,000 active service members, are too large for a country of Lebanon's relatively small size. Nevertheless, the high numbers of recruits – whose families receive various benefits – persist due to what experts have described as the "militarisation of welfare," whereby politicians secure what were historically stable, well-remunerated positions for their constituents.²⁷ These efforts have survived previous efforts to keep the LAF's spiralling wage bill in check, even before the economic crisis. In 2017, a legal ban was placed on all government hires, including new hires to the army, due to the cost of a public sector wage bill weighed down by politicians making hires to strengthen client networks. According to an informed military source, politicians

used the elections to recruit new soldiers regardless, prioritising political capital over the army's fiscal position.

The same clientelist considerations apply to appointing high-ranking officers. Instead of maintaining 160 general-grade officers—as the LAF's official command structure calls for—some reports claim that as many as 400 general-grade officers are currently serving in the LAF. Each of these officers is entitled to a handsome wage (at least in pre-crisis terms), as well as various fringe benefits like housemaids and vehicles for private use. LAF observers have ascribed the LAF's excessive number of general-grade officers to "constant political interventions and poor promotion policies."²⁸ As ever, the LAF's financial position suffers with each unnecessary appointment, not to mention the accusations which are levied at the institution when it needs to address security incidents produced by the same sectarian forces that push those appointments.

THE SPILL OVER

Now, as Lebanon lurches into rolling major security incidents, the LAF finds itself increasingly embroiled in political feuds. In October 2019, protests erupted across the country amidst popular dissent and disenchantment with the clientelism of Lebanon's ruling class. Inevitably, Lebanon's leaders called on the LAF to intervene and restore stability. The protests presented a conundrum for the LAF. If the army intervened overtly to break up protests or violence, it faced accusations

"Instead of maintaining 160 general-grade officers – as the LAF's official command structure calls for – some reports claim that as many as 400 general-grade officers are currently serving in the LAF."



of partisan preference;²⁹ on the other hand, avoiding direct engagement exposed the LAF to allegations of ineptitude.³⁰ Eventually, the public rose in anger and criticism when an LAF member shot and killed a protester in Tripoli, damaging the LAF's historically high public approval ratings in the process.^{31,32}

Demonstrations following the Beirut Port explosion again placed the LAF in a difficult position between Lebanon's leaders and public. On 8 August 2020, the LAF and other state security agencies participated in a crackdown against widespread protests demanding accountability for the catastrophe. LAF personnel, along with other agencies, were recorded opening fire at protestors and using physical violence to quell demonstrations.³³ It is not clear whether LAF members were also responsible for illegally aiming birdshot at head and neck level at protestors in incidents reported by Human Rights Watch.³⁴ Beyond the LAF's response, the institution faced allegations of involvement in the years of state negligence that led to the explosion, one of the largest non-nuclear blasts in recorded history.³⁵

While the LAF has been thrust into these unenviable positions, the institution's response to public criticism has sometimes jeopardized a crucial asset: public trust and confidence. Under Lebanese law, it is a criminal offence for a person to say anything deemed "offending [to] the military." This broad prohibition, which moves well beyond ordinary laws of defamation, has provided a platform for the LAF to address public relations challenges with brute force.³⁶

In one prominent example, journalist Radwan Mostafa penned an article alleging that several senior military and military intelligence officials knew that the government had stored ammonium nitrate at the Beirut Port, which

caused the explosion.³⁷ The LAF's response provoked more controversy instead of de-escalating the issue—Mostafa was referred to military trial for defamation, eliciting criticism from national and international human rights institutions. Military court trials, which do not follow normal rules of due process, have been used to silence other journalists, human rights lawyers, and even comedians who criticise Lebanon's security apparatus.³⁸ Even if this approach wins some battles for the LAF against certain individuals, it will almost certainly lose the war of public opinion—a much higher stakes contest for the army's prestige and long-term sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As 2021 draws to a close, the LAF has reached a troubling position. Amidst the economic crisis, a slashed annual budget means that the army can no longer provide livelihoods for the institution's many dependents. The desperate financial circumstances also prevent the LAF from upgrading its equipment and technical capacities, which have remained severely under-funded for decades.

In the short term, funding must be made available to pay the salaries of army personnel, who rely on the army to support themselves and their families. Without improved wages, these LAF members could leave the nation's leading security institution for other careers, perhaps even with other, non-state security actors. Foreign donors should insist that the LAF receives and disburses any financial aid received with complete transparency, to ensure that the support reaches its intended recipients.

Looking further forward, the LAF should begin rectifying two key structural flaws: the institution's budget and sectarian quotas. At present, the LAF lumbers under



salaries and benefits owed to its costly bloated ranks and top-heavy command structure. Over time, the LAF should develop a more sustainable military budget, which balances remuneration and other strategic priorities more effectively. The LAF should work towards cutting the institution's overall wage bill, bringing it below 50 percent of its annual budget. The army can start this process by allowing early retirement requests and enforcing hiring freezes for new recruits.

As the LAF cuts back on remuneration obligations, it can gradually invest more funds in developing technical skills and purchasing military hardware. This would allow the LAF to assume greater control over the institution's strategic future. Intensive training programs could transform the LAF into a more streamlined, special forces institution, capable of combating militant threats with strong, localised fighting capacity. Such a transition would conform with some recent LAF successes, including missions against the Al-Nusra Front and along the northern border with Syria. In addition, spending less on wages would make the LAF less beholden to foreign donors for training and equipment upgrading.

Secondly, the LAF must confront the thorny issue of sectarianised appointments. The LAF's power-sharing arrangements have prevented the army's disintegration, especially as Lebanon recovered from the civil war. Over time, however, politicians have exploited the LAF's sectarian quotas for cynical ends. High-ranking officers have been appointed—or, in some cases, not appointed—due to political calculations. Clientelist considerations also led the LAF to keep hiring new recruits, even as the institution's wage bill became clearly unsustainable.

The LAF can begin de-sectarianising the military by introducing transparent, meritocratic hiring processes

for vacant positions. The army could introduce examinations, akin to the Civil Service Inspection Board tests for public servants, that would assess each candidate's application based on qualifications alone. While this would present stern obstacles for purely political hires, it would also ensure that the LAF benefits from engaging staff with higher professional credentials, improving the institution's overall capability.

A judicial probe into corruption in the system of appointments should be concluded transparently and any proven offenders held accountable accordingly to reaffirm the institution's commitment to transparency and adherence to regulations, while the system by which promotions take place should be depoliticized in future and appointments to senior positions made on merit. Recruits should be selected based on the force's needs, which should be clearly assessed and documented.

Meanwhile, incidents in which the military has been dragged into politicized public relations incidents should be calmly de-escalated. Civilians, such as journalist Radwan Mortada, should be tried in civilian courts, as journalist Haneen Ghaddar was ultimately tried in civilian courts despite her initial referral to military trial.³⁹ LAF soldiers responsible for the death or injury of protestors must likewise be investigated and held accountable.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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