

The Five Wildcards of Lebanese Military Capability Development

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Five wildcards will impact the future development of Lebanese military capabilities: joint force integration, strategic guidance, elite competition, overlapping economic and healthcare crises, and external challenges.

After the withdrawal of the Syrian armed forces from Lebanon in 2005, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) began to [operationalize their capability development](#). Despite the lack of top-down, strategic policy guidance to inform force posture, doctrine, and resourcing, the LAF has worked with external security assistance donors to produce two five-year Capabilities Development Plans (CDPs), for 2013–2017 and 2018–2022.

As the LAF works towards its third CDP (2023–2027), it faces overlapping challenges tied to human capital, strategic direction, governance, and socioeconomic instability. These coincide with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on foreign assistance budgets, which only further complicate a prepandemic waning of international interest in Lebanon.

Bottom-Up Effort

The United States played a critical role in assisting the LAF to jump-start its capability planning efforts. The 2006 Martz Report—named for its principal author,

retired brigadier general Joseph E. Martz—and subsequent U.S. assessments shaped a series of joint capability reviews (JCRs) between the U.S. military and the LAF starting in 2009. U.S. government officials met with LAF personnel representing the army, navy, air force, communications, intelligence, protected mobility, and special operation forces. At their most active, LAF internal joint meetings took place monthly in anticipation of the next bilateral round of JCRs with its U.S. counterpart.

Other partners soon joined the effort. The United Kingdom supported the LAF deputy chief of staff for planning, and others such as France, Canada, and Italy, followed suit with their own bilateral support initiatives. UN agencies assisted the LAF in situating its capabilities development agenda in the larger context of multilateral support for Lebanon's security and stability. Subsequent LAF-led Executive Military Commission (EMC) meetings consolidated the often-disparate bilateral efforts of its partner nations into a single framework to support LAF capability development.

The June 2012 [Baabda Declaration](#), issued during the mandates of former president Michel Suleiman and former prime minister Najib Mikati, enabled the LAF to align its capability development objectives with efforts to mitigate instability from civil war in neighboring Syria. Taken together, and driven by a planned June 2014 ministerial conference in Rome to build international support for the LAF, these efforts resulted in the first CDP in April 2013.

The lead-up to a [second ministerial conference](#) in March 2018 prompted the LAF to produce a second CDP focused on consolidating border security with Syria, enhancing the LAF's maritime capabilities, preparing for new mission sets tied to oil and gas exploration, and posturing the LAF to adapt to geopolitical changes along the UN Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon.

Capability Planning Wildcards

As the LAF works toward the third CDP, sustaining the effort will require five critical wildcards. First, the LAF is still struggling to integrate and sustain jointness among officers nominally tasked with LAF capabilities planning. Most of the officers who were instrumental in framing the first two CDPs have retired, and military leadership transitions in 2016 and 2019 were either haphazard or undermined by Lebanon's divisive internal politics, or both. Meanwhile, donor coordination mechanisms such as the EMC and the newly formed Directorate of International Military Cooperation are either inactive or underutilized.

Second, the LAF continues to search for meaningful strategic direction. The first and second CDPs emphasized the LAF's roles tied to counterterrorism, territorial integrity, and sovereignty. After the LAF's expulsion of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in 2017, the LAF's counterterrorism role remains, but without the perceived gravity of Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra militants operating within Lebanon. The post-Islamic State LAF also lacks an enabling political environment to address the

elephant in the room: Hezbollah's unchecked internal autonomy, which undermines the LAF's aspiration to be the sole guarantor of Lebanon's territorial integrity.

Third, the absence of any meaningful Lebanese government planning on defense has been a chronic and sustained challenge since 2005. Civilian input on strategy formulation remains subordinated to the narrow preferences of competing political-sectarian elites who regard the military, at best, as spoil to compete over, and at worst, a threat to their autonomy. As a result, the LAF is often in the awkward position of championing its own military development without a civilian governing framework to shape budgets, parliamentary hearings on ways and means, or meaningful Lebanese national security directives.

A fourth wildcard is Lebanon's overlapping healthcare and economic crises. The LAF's COVID-19 caseload stood at 2,492 on April 14, 2021, or 3 percent of the force. The longer-term consequences of a devaluing Lebanese pound are even more uncertain. Between annual inflation of 131 percent in the year ending on September 30, 2019, and budget estimates based on 8,500 pounds to the dollar, an internal LAF assessment estimates that the force will be unable to sustain regular and contractor wages, spare parts for its logistics motor pool, or the purchase of medical supplies beyond June 2021.

Lastly, the LAF must contend with external factors that impact capability development. After the 2017 defeat and expulsion of Islamic State, the LAF's mainly Western security assistance partners have grown frustrated by the lack of momentum by the military and the country's political forces to consolidate a larger national security role for the LAF. Meanwhile, most assess Hezbollah to have expanded its national security autonomy and political power, often at the expense of the LAF. The global coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated these trends by tightening foreign aid budgets, potentially deprioritizing Lebanon at a time of growing great power competition.

An Uneasy Pathway to an Uncertain Future

As LAF Command gears up for the 2023–2027 CDP, it will need to empower military personnel able to deliver a credible plan and prioritize limited resources to sustain core capabilities critical to a professional Lebanese military, and forgo those that are unsustainable or aspirational.

The military will have to push civilian decisionmakers to craft even the most basic elements of [national security guidance](#) to support the true costs of force maintenance beyond 2021. The LAF will also have to reinvigorate existing channels meant to focus external partner engagement. This will include taking a hard look at how it can align its capability development goals with the interests and values of donors that have been—and will remain—critical to the force's long-term future.

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