



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade**

***“IRANIAN BACKED MILITIAS: DESTABILIZING  
THE MIDDLE EAST”***

A Written Statement by:

**Aram Nerguizian**

Senior Associate, Burke Chair in Strategy  
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

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**2172 Rayburn House Office Building**

## Executive Summary

On July 20, 2017, the Lebanese Shi'a militant group Hezbollah confirmed that it had put in motion a plan to dislodge Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) militants from Lebanon. The commencement of Hezbollah military operations preempted the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) from putting in motion plans tied to clearing JAN and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militants from Lebanese territory on its own. On July 27, 2017, Hezbollah announced that it and JAN had reached a tentative ceasefire as negotiations intensified to secure safe passage for remaining Nusra fighters to rebel-held areas in Syria.

Hezbollah's decision to take on JAN militants militarily placed the LAF in an all but untenable position. The LAF's leadership were uncomfortable that Hezbollah's campaign against JAN amounted to a media nightmare for the Government of Lebanon and the military. However, it must be said the LAF has had three years to plan, push for, and execute a military option to deal decisively with the presence of JAN and ISIS fighters in Lebanon, and missed several opportunities to do so.

While the LAF has done much to distance itself from the actions of Hezbollah along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, LAF inaction against ISIS was not an option. If the LAF failed to act against ISIS, it would have been accused of kowtowing to Hezbollah. Conversely, in committing to confronting the militants, it risked accusations of collusion with the Shi'a militant group at the expense of the fears and concerns of Lebanon's Sunni community. Through it all, the LAF would have to deconflict with Hezbollah at the level of LAF command, manage its own internal divisions, and maintain unity of command in the Aarsal theater. This meant working to interdict if not avoid past situations where LAF active and retired personnel were accused of trying to liaise between the LAF and Hezbollah on the ground without authorization from LAF headquarters.

Successful and proactive steps by the LAF to shape the security dynamics of Lebanon's eastern frontier represented a moral turning point not unlike the LAF's hard-won 2007 battle against Fatah al-Islam militants in Tripoli's beleaguered Nahr El-Bared refugee camp. The United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) have stated clearly that as members of the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition, they stood ready to assist the LAF, should Lebanon and the LAF request it.

Having worked for weeks to get the necessary forces in position, and with a clear and insulated theater-level chain of command in place, the LAF began the execution of its counter-ISIS campaign against militants on the Lebanese side of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. The operation – code named “Dawn of the Jurds” – was publicly announced on August 19, 2017. Later that day, Hezbollah and the Syrian Arab Army announced their own counter-ISIS military campaign on the Syrian side of the frontier.

For all the international concern of potential LAF-Hezbollah coordination, the official start date of Dawn of the Jurds is misleading. Well before August 19th, the LAF had already begun taking independent action against ISIS positions and ridge lines east of Ras Baalbek, and the first major thrust of the LAF counter-ISIS operation was executed on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

The net effect of the LAF's superior battlefield awareness and targeted strike capability was the accelerated demoralization of ISIS forces in Lebanon. By the time elite units were poised to make a major eastward push on August 19, 2017 – the operation's official execution date – LAF senior commanders and battlefield planners felt confident that they, and not ISIS, would be shaping the battlefield and the tempo of the operation. As LAF regular and elite forces took more ground and

consolidated their new positions, the effective use of ISR, targeted strike, SOF and armored mobility led to the description of Dawn of the Jurds by one U.S. military officer in Lebanon as “21st century maneuver warfare by a modern military.”

As the LAF prepared to free the last remaining pocket of territory held by ISIS, Hezbollah publicly announced that it was negotiating with ISIS militants directly to secure definitive information about the whereabouts of LAF military personnel captured by ISIS and JAN in August 2014. This in turn forced a temporary suspension of LAF military operations. A controversial agreement between Hezbollah and ISIS militants would lead to the release of Hezbollah and Iranian prisoners of war in Syria, and the coordinates of the bodies of the then-confirmed dead LAF personnel in ISIS controlled territory. In exchange, Hezbollah would grant the militants safe passage out of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. On August 29, 2017, ISIS forces began preparations to depart the battlefield. As a result, major LAF maneuver operations were suspended indefinitely.

There is no doubt that some, if not many, in the LAF felt an obligation to go the distance against ISIS and push the militants out or defeat them outright without leaving an option for them to withdraw. However, political maneuvering the final two days of the operations hardly constitute a “victory denied.” In executing Dawn of the Jurds, the LAF needed to accomplish three objectives in its counter-ISIS campaign: 1) the withdrawal of ISIS elements from Lebanese territory, 2) establish with certainty the fate of LAF service men held captive by ISIS since 2014, and 3) and complete the campaign on its own as Lebanon’s principal legitimate national security actors.

As far as the LAF is concerned, it deems that it has more than accomplished what it set out to do. The LAF now sits on 120 square kilometers of formerly ISIS-held territory, and other LAF border units are poised to consolidate the military deployment along the quasi-totality of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier – an outcome that would have been political unheard of before Syria’s civil war, and a first in Lebanon’s post-Independence history.

Furthermore, for the first time since the Lebanese Civil War, the LAF successfully conducted a theater-level combined arms operation against an asymmetric enemy that had no choice but to integrate static defenses in its quickly-eroding order of battle. The LAF capitalized on more than 10 years of force development and modernization; this includes special forces by regional standards, some of the region’s very best use of conventional ballistic artillery fire, and a targeted ground-to-ground and air-to-ground strike capability, and round-the-clock surveillance and tactical intelligence from ISR-capable aircraft and a fleet of UAVs.

After Dawn of the Jurds, LAF senior commanders and their U.S. and U.K. counterparts are more than comfortable stating that the campaign was conducted with no cooperation or coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah. On the contrary, the LAF’s solo campaign was so successful, that elements close to Hezbollah sought to actively take credit retroactively for the LAF’s successes, and/or promote a narrative of secret coordination between the LAF, Hezbollah and the Assad regime.

What happens after the operation is at least as important as winning the battle itself. With JAN and ISIS evicted from Lebanon, the LAF will now have to turn its attention towards providing Lebanon and its citizens with the level of security and stability it feels they need. This in turn entails permanently consolidating the LAF’s defensive posture along the border with Syria. The LAF has already signaled its intent to hold the positions it has liberated indefinitely. There is no other group or faction that is either there or able to do it in the LAF’s stead. The LAF will have to shape and maintain complete oversight over the areas liberated by its troops from ISIS.

There are also important military and policy implications for Hezbollah. While Hezbollah has stated publicly that it intends to vacate what little remains of its limited border presence, the LAF's deployment and activity along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier complicates any hypothetical land-bridge linking Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. Because the LAF now actively polices and monitors much of the border with Syria, there is significant overlap between the LAF's preference not to coordinate with any Lebanese faction, and the need to actively interdict illicit activity along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.

Over the last five years, the LAF has not shied away from stopping illicit materials, contraband and weapons from entering Lebanon. Hezbollah has actively worked to avoid using areas where the LAF is known to operate. However, as more LAF units are stood up, doing so has grown increasingly difficult. The real challenge will come if and when Hezbollah accepts or rejects curtailing what remains of its clandestine presence along Lebanon's still-porous border with Syria.

Lastly, Dawn of the Jurds may have lasting implications for a national security debate long-dominated by Hezbollah's military preeminence. The LAF's rapid and professional execution of the counter-ISIS campaign – without anyone's help, and certainly not with the help of the Syrians or Hezbollah – has shattered the narrative in the minds of many Lebanese that Hezbollah is Lebanon's sole preeminent national security actor. Presented with such a singular challenge to its self-styled resistance and national security narrative, Hezbollah needed a cease-fire agreement to hasten the withdrawal of ISIS from the Lebanese-Syrian frontier and to consolidate its own reputation. In short, the battle against ISIS in Lebanon may be over, but the war over Lebanon's national security narrative has only just begun.

The LAF and the Lebanese need countries like the U.S. and other donors and partners to maintain the current momentum of military assistance, especially as the LAF reorients itself and its mission sets after defeating ISIS in Lebanon. Within that, there are practical ways for the U.S. to play a critical supporting role and to ensure that the LAF dominates the battlefield:

- The U.S. Government needs to validate and qualify how it will maintain adequate levels of military assistance to the LAF. As serious questions are raised about plans to zero out Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to 42 out of 47 country recipients – including Lebanon – in 2018, it must be made abundantly clear: failing to support the LAF's efforts to consolidate its national security role will only serve to roll back unprecedented gains by a stabilizing and a moderating force in Lebanon and the region.
- The U.S. should not shy away from the scale of its commitment to – and presence in – Lebanon. The U.S. military currently maintains a larger special operations presence than most Arab countries with more than 70 SOCCENT trainers and support personnel in Lebanon at any one point in time. U.S. military personnel can and do go almost anywhere in Lebanon, and play a key role in bolstering the LAF's emerging capabilities. The U.S. should take a page out of Iran's playbook on Lebanon and take ownership of its close relationship with the LAF.
- As the LAF fought ISIS militants, logistical support and resupplies from the U.S. would have been critical in a sustained fight. The Lebanese military currently has the ability to draw on U.S. CENTCOM regional holdings. The U.S. should reaffirm this privileged status and do so publicly and work closely with LAF leadership and the theater commander to ensure that LAF stocks are adequate in any future asymmetric military engagement.
- Thanks to U.S. military assistance and persistent training, the LAF effectively conducted target designation to then direct unguided and guided fire on high value targets in real-time. Conducting “find, fix, and finish” with dozens if not hundreds of simultaneous targets on a dynamic battlefield was a challenge that presented a much higher degree of complexity. U.S. military leaders should continue to encourage CENTCOM and SOCCENT personnel in Lebanon and the broader Levant to work in

partnership with their LAF counterparts to strengthen their ability to sustain complex target acquisition and battle management.

- The U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) has played a growing role in support of the LAF's efforts to adequately equip and link up its new land border forces. The LAF has proven itself to be a force for stability in the Levant and a military that takes its regional responsibilities seriously. The U.S. should continue to ensure adequate funding and programming in support of the LAF's long-term aspirations to secure Lebanon's land and maritime borders.

Through the Dawn of the Jurds operation, the LAF has proven that it can make excellent use of U.S. and other partners' lethal and technical security assistance. The operation also challenged the notion that Hezbollah is Lebanon's only credibly national security actor.

Over the 2005 to 2017 period, successive generations of LAF leadership have grown ever more confident and emboldened by the idea that the LAF can be Lebanon's preeminent national security actor. Still, the LAF has struggled time and again with what it sees as the false perceptions of LAF-Hezbollah collusion and the potential impact of U.S. policy choices that could hurt institutions like the LAF, all in a failed bid to counter Iranian influence in the Levant.

Inevitably, those who define Lebanon through the lens of Hezbollah will fail to see the LAF as anything but an extension of the militant group. At the same time, as one senior Pentagon official noted on background, one central narrative conveyed during the recent visit by Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Washington DC was that many in the U.S. government and Congress believe that "there is still a Lebanon and LAF worth saving." In the wake of the LAF's successful counter-ISIS campaign, there continues to be tremendous good will towards the LAF in U.S. military circles where the LAF is considered a key emerging military ally, and – paradoxically – one of the region's "fighting" militaries.

Being hawkish on Lebanon in U.S. policy terms has traditionally meant being tough on Hezbollah and other factions and institutions in Lebanon because of the presence of Hezbollah in the country. When the LAF engaged ISIS militarily in August 2017, being hawkish on Lebanon meant doubling down on supporting the LAF because, in the end, a Lebanon with a weak LAF will be fertile terrain for Iran and its local and regional partners. Conversely, supporting the LAF as U.S. civilian and military leaders did during Dawn of the Jurds only served to strengthen the LAF's domestic and international military legitimacy.

Given the optics and potential consequences – both for Lebanon and for the U.S. – the LAF's battle against ISIS was a confrontation that it had to win decisively. Failure, or the risk of it, would only bolster Hezbollah's argument that it and Iran are indispensable to Lebanon's stability. In executing Dawn of the Jurds, the LAF met and exceeded local and international expectations. In particular, it kindled an additional layer of respect for its growing capabilities in the eye of many Lebanese. In the face of continued questions about the trajectory of future military aid, the U.S. and key partners such as the U.K. need to be bold in supporting a rare success in how they build partner capacity in countries like Lebanon, and on capitalizing on how an allied military like the LAF fights the common threat posed by ISIS. Ultimately, supporting the LAF and the Government of Lebanon are the only credible ways to shape the U.S.'s preferred outcomes in Lebanon.

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## Introduction

On July 20, 2017, the Lebanese Shi'a militant group Hezbollah confirmed that it had put in motion a plan to dislodge Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) militants from Lebanon. The commencement of Hezbollah military operations preempted the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) from putting in motion plans tied to clearing JAN and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militants from Lebanese territory on its own. On July 27, 2017, Hezbollah announced that it and JAN had reached a tentative ceasefire as negotiations intensified to secure safe passage for remaining Nusra fighters to rebel-held areas in Syria.

Hezbollah's decision to take on JAN militants militarily placed the LAF in an all but untenable position. The LAF's leadership were uncomfortable that Hezbollah's campaign against JAN amounted to a media nightmare for the Government of Lebanon and the military. However, it must be said the LAF has had three years to plan, push for, and execute a military option to deal decisively with the presence of JAN and ISIS fighters in Lebanon, and missed several opportunities to do so.

Since the accession of General Joseph Aoun to the post of LAF Commander, LAF-Hezbollah relations have remained largely civil – much like the LAF's relations with all of Lebanon's major political sectarian factions. However, below the surface, some of the LAF's recent key military personnel choices have annoyed Hezbollah. Despite that, the LAF is not in a position where it can be openly antagonistic towards Hezbollah – the preeminent faction in Lebanon's sectarian political landscape.

While the LAF has done much to distance itself from the actions of Hezbollah along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, LAF inaction against ISIS was not an option. If the LAF failed to act against ISIS, it would have been accused of kowtowing to Hezbollah. Conversely, in committing to confronting the militants, it risked accusations of collusion with the Shi'a militant group at the expense of the fears and concerns of Lebanon's Sunni community. Through it all, the LAF would have to deconflict with Hezbollah at the level of LAF command, manage its own internal divisions, and maintain unity of command in the Aarsal theater. This meant working to interdict if not avoid past situations where LAF active and retired personnel were accused of trying to liaise between the LAF and Hezbollah on the ground without authorization from LAF headquarters.

Hezbollah has three key advantages over the LAF and the Lebanese state. Hezbollah has complete and coherent unity of command, the will to act decisively, and an unmatched ability to shape the narrative and optics of its actions. By contrast, the Government of Lebanon and the LAF have been chronically divided against themselves, and have struggled to take decisive action against the clear and present danger posed by JAN and ISIS. Lebanese civilian and military leaders also struggle to shape the optics of the LAF's objectives centered on defending villages along the border with Syria, and not enflaming already precarious tensions with Lebanon's Syrian refugee population.

The LAF's battle against ISIS was far more challenging than Hezbollah's very limited campaign against JAN. ISIS fighter were more likely to use suicide tactics, and the group was betting that the LAF would hesitate in the face of mass casualties in the absence of large-scale close air support (CAS). However, failure to act would have been no different than past focal points in post-war and post-Syria Lebanon – such as the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war and the May 2008 Hezbollah takeover of west Beirut – when the LAF failed to act decisively or assert its institutional military preeminence.

By contrast, successful and proactive steps by the LAF to shape the security dynamics of Lebanon's eastern frontier represented a moral turning point not unlike the LAF's hard-won 2007 battle against Fatah al-Islam militants in Tripoli's beleaguered Nahr El-Bared refugee camp. The United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) have stated clearly that as members of the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition, they stood ready to assist the LAF, should Lebanon and the LAF request it.

In a world marked by change, Lebanon did not have the luxury of mismanaging how its armed forces acted to counter the threat from groups like JAN and ISIS. The U.S. and the U.K. – which have invested heavily in the LAF's military development over the last decade – have watched the Hezbollah campaign and Lebanon's civil-military incoherence with concern. At the same time, Hezbollah and its sponsor Iran benefited from any perceived wedge between the LAF and its principal military partners.

Despite these pressures, and thanks to the LAF's professional and independent execution of its counter-ISIS military operation, the dominant view in the U.S. is that Lebanon and the LAF are still worth supporting. Decisive military action by the LAF served to validate the view that doubling down on Lebanon's military was the right decision in order to strengthen the Lebanese state's military legitimacy, bolster stability and confidence in Lebanon, and to counter arguments justifying Hezbollah's military preeminence. The alternative is a *fait accompli* wherein Hezbollah plays an even larger role in shaping and defining Lebanon's national security environment.



## The Divisive Politics of the Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus

Syria's civil war and the Lebanon-Syria insecurity nexus complicate and inform every aspect of sectarian and factional competition in Lebanon in ways that neither the Lebanese nor their regional and international allies seem to have fully accounted for. The conflict in Syria also defines how both the United States and Iran deal with their respective sets of interests, partners, and allies in Lebanon and the broader region.

Over the course of the conflict, competing Lebanese factions have adopted diametrically opposing views on Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Anecdotal data from polling and field work shows the continued prevalence of deep divisions along Sunni-Shi'a lines. A majority of Lebanon's Shi'a continue to view the Assad regime, Iran and Hezbollah favorably. Meanwhile, the country's Sunnis continue to maintain the opposite set of views relative to the country's Shi'a.

For much of Syria's civil war, fighters affiliated with JAN and Syria ISIS have been entrenched in the no man's land straddling the Lebanese-Syrian frontier east of the Bekaa border town of Aarsal. In the wake of a joint JAN-ISIS armed incursion in Aarsal in 2014, Lebanon's civilian and military leaders have debated when and how to neutralize the threat posed by JAN and ISIS. However, regional alignments and local sectarian politics have thwarted attempts at forging a cohesive Lebanese policy response to JAN and ISIS.

Meanwhile, the presence of Syrian refugees and displaced persons further complicate the politics of security and stability along Lebanon's frontier with Syria. **Figure 1** shows the number and distribution of Syrian refugees registered by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) as of June 30, 2017. Of the more than 1 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, some 118,000 were in the Baalbek-El Hermel governorate. While other governorates in Lebanon may have higher totals, the town of Aarsal in Baalbek-El Hermel – with some 39,300 registered refugees – has the highest concentration of any municipality in Lebanon.

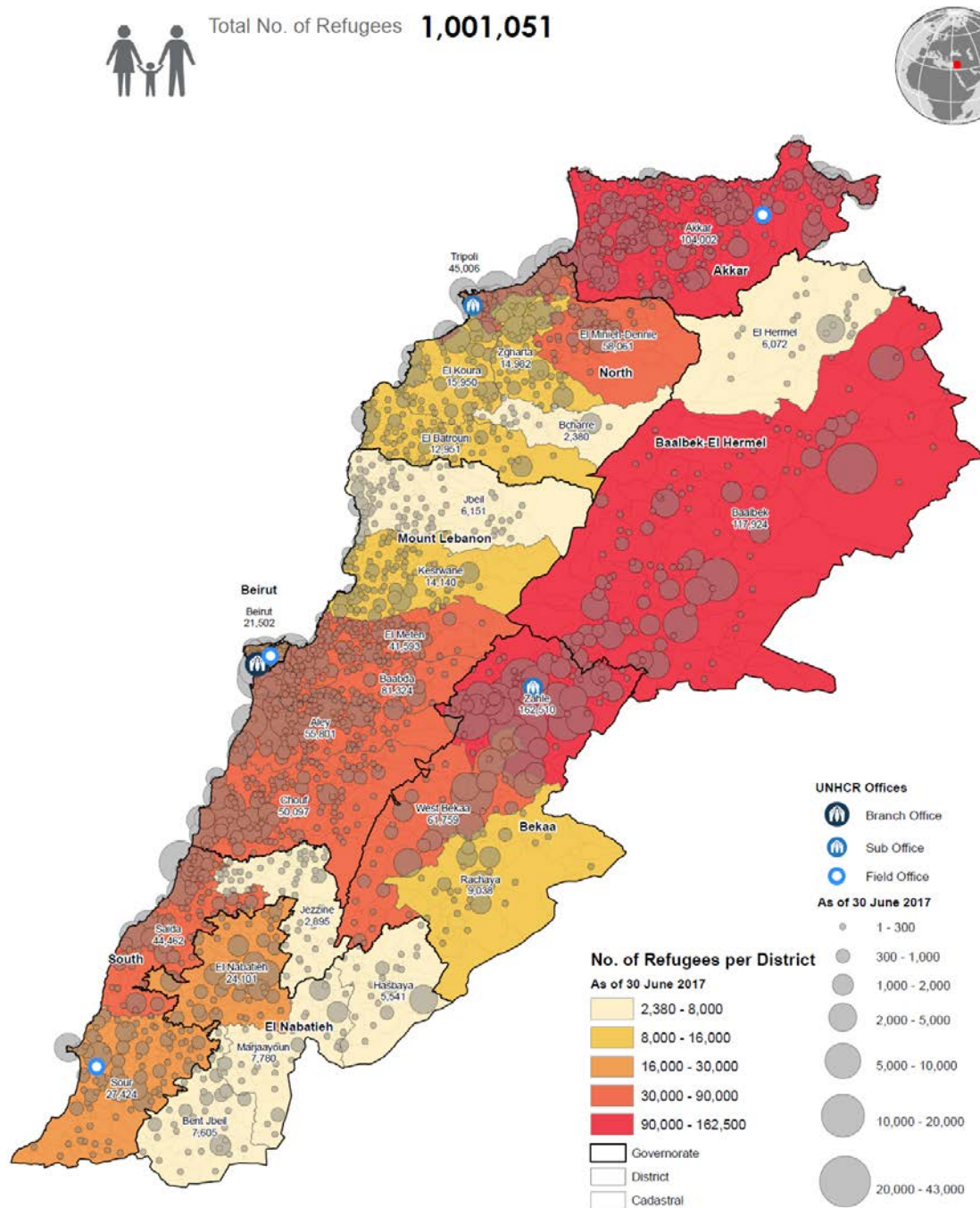
**Figure 2** shows the deployment of LAF units in and around the Aarsal AOR before the beginning of Hezbollah's campaign against JAN on June 20, 2017. Along with estimates of areas of control tied to Hezbollah, JAN and ISIS, **Figure 2** also shows the presence of a select pocket of displaced Syrians north-east of Aarsal. Located east of LAF checkpoints and defensive positions, many of these tented settlements can be found in areas not unlike Wadi Hmayyed – one of a series of valleys that swoop across the frontier landscape. With more than 11,000 residents, the Syrian settlements shown in **Figure 2** overlapped with JAN-controlled territory, complicating an already complex civil-military challenge.

Over the 2014 to 2017 period, politicization and sectarian polarization – often along Sunni-Shi'a lines – have overridden calls for a resolution of the clear and present threat that groups like JAN and ISIS represent to every faction and sect in Lebanon. Political divisions have also complicated Lebanon's overall approach to its displaced Syrian population. Throughout this period, the LAF has been largely unable or unwilling to act on its own military priorities. Instead, the military deferred time and again to overlapping Lebanese, regional and international political pressures.

The LAF is intent on preserving Lebanon's hard-won stability in a region wracked by violence and uncertainty. By the same token, the LAF – supported by external partners such as the U.S. and U.K. – is hard-pressed to consolidate its growing national security credentials. In so doing, it will have to balance local and international expectations tied to the treatment of displaced Syrians,

while remaining cognizant of the fact that tented settlements have been used – and will likely be used again – by JAN and ISIS to bog down the LAF’s counter-terrorism efforts.

**Figure 1: The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus: Syrian Refugees Registered in Lebanon – June 30, 2017.**



Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from “Syria Refugee Response – Lebanon Syrian Refugees Registered,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 30, 2017, available at:

<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122#>

## **The 2014 Battle of Arsal & the Struggle for North-East Lebanon**

For much of Lebanon's modern history, the Arab-Israeli conflict, civilian mistrust of the military, and objections by Damascus were obstacles to establishing an effective border regime along Lebanon's border with Syria. The August 2014 conflict with JAN and ISIS validated the LAF's assumption that its primary national security focus must be to stand up credible border security forces and to contain the effects of the Syria crisis. This has meant accelerating an effort that successive Lebanese governments have ignored since independence in 1943: consolidating a real-world security and border regime along the Lebanese-Syrian border.

In 2012, the United Kingdom began playing a critical role in supporting the LAF develop dedicated border security forces. The U.K.'s Rapid Land Border Security Assistance Project to assisted the LAF to mentor, equip and sustain newly formed land border regiments. The LAF's LBRs would be tasked to fulfill mission requirements Lebanese officers nicknamed "four Ds": detect, deter, defend, and deny the activities of illegal arms actors operating along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.

Over the 2012-2014 period, the U.K.-backed effort provided observation, protection, mobility and communication equipment to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> LBR. In addition, the U.K. effort assisted the LAF to establish a network of protector border observation posts (PBOPs), buttressed by a series of mobile observation towers. Each *Sangar*-style PBOP is equipped with day and night electro-optical surveillance systems, anti-RPG netting, protection from overlapping HESCO barriers, and other offensive and defensive countermeasures. The PBOPs were intended to be both defensible and to provide significant capability in terms of overlapping overwatch of the border and real-time command and control in support of other LAF units.

On August 2, 2014, JAN and ISIS militants conducted a coordinated attack against regular troops from the LAF's 8th Mechanized Infantry Brigade (MIB) in and near the town of Arsal. The 8th MIB was in the initial phase of a redeployment from South Lebanon to the Arsal AOR when the attack commenced and was quickly reinforced by elite special operational forces (SOF) personnel from the Ranger and Air Assault regiments.

The fight for Arsal was the first major engagement for the LAF's 2nd Land Border Regiment (LBR), where its protected border observation posts (PBOPs) foiled an ISIS breakout effort into the neighboring towns of Ras Baalbek and Qaa. The conflict saw the LAF use laser-guided missile fire from a fixed wing platform in combat for the first time. 2014 also marked the first major military confrontation wherein the LAF took advantage of its then-limited ability to "net" VHF, ISR and other data feeds in real time from the battlefield.

However, the LAF's response to the militant push in Arsal highlighted future challenges in bolstering unity of effort, resilience under fire of untested conventional units, and the LAF's continued reliance on reserve special operations forces. The LAF also had to take stock of the fact that JAN and ISIS used tented settlements in and around Arsal to mask and execute part of their offensive on the town. LAF planners will have to factor the vulnerability of the displaced Syrian population into any future military and counterterrorism operations against JAN and ISIS.

When the struggle for the town and its surrounding hilltops and valleys subsided on August 7, 2014, the fighting had left some 20 LAF personnel killed and 85 wounded in action, while some 100 militants were also killed. The short-lived conflict also led to the capture of 23 LAF and 17 Internal Security Forces (ISF) personnel. Three were subsequently executed by JAN, and as of July 25, 2017, at least 7 LAF personnel remain in ISIS captivity.

Since 2014, the LAF has stood up another two border regiments to supplement 1st and 2nd LBR, and with the aim of providing near-100% military coverage over the Lebanese-Syrian border by or before 2018. The LAF has also reallocated major regular units to bolster its four LBRs.

## **The LAF's Defense/Internal Offense Posture in 2017**

Over the years 2014 to 2017, backed by an expanded U.K. Rapid Land Border Security Assistance Project and subsequent support from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), the LAF has significantly upgraded, expanded, and fortified its defensive line against JAN, ISIS and beyond. Meanwhile, training from U.S. and U.K. SOF personnel continue to build up the lethality and effectiveness of LAF frontline units in the field. **Figure 2** shows the mid-2017 deployment of LAF major units, JAN, ISIS and Hezbollah in the greater Aarsal AOR. The LAF's current deployment is focused on frontier defense and – when necessary – conducting high intensity offensive operations within Lebanon's borders.

At present, the LAF's 2nd Land Border Regiment is manning six PBOPs and five forward operating bases (FOBs). These fortifications are further reinforced by the 14 FOBs manned by the 9th Mechanized Infantry Brigade, which are not shown in **Figure 2**. 2nd LBR has both been regularly targeted and has regularly repelled ISIS advances over the 2014-2017 period. 2nd LBR sharp shooters are class-leading by global standards, and have five confirmed kills at ranges in excess of 2,000 meters.

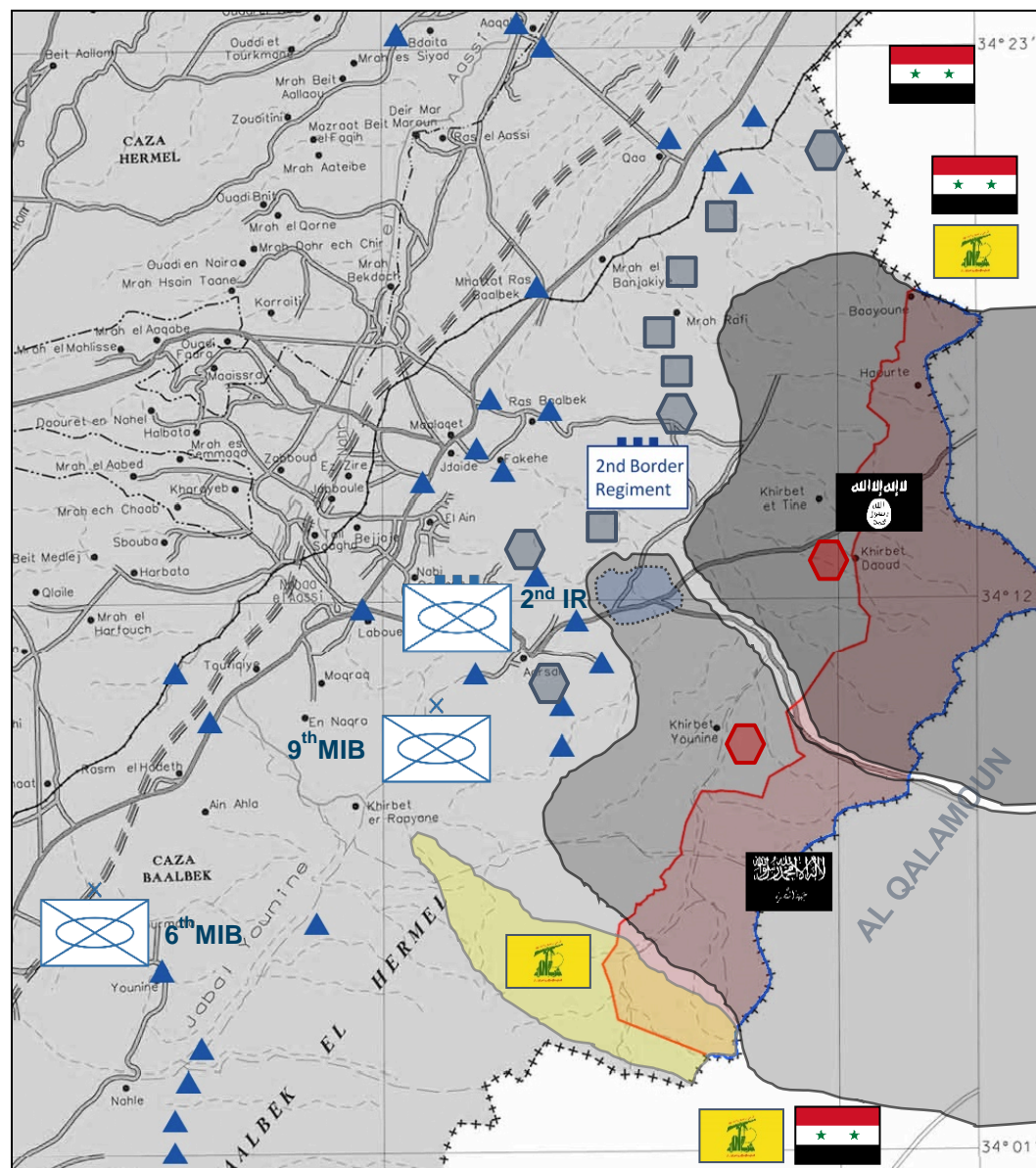
The 2nd Intervention Regiment is deployed near the town of Aarsal itself, and the 6th Mechanized Infantry Brigade is deployed further south in the Baalbek AOR. Other Intervention Regiments deployed elsewhere in Lebanon regularly forward-deploy individual company formations to support mainline units in the Aarsal AOR. At present, the 3rd and 4th IRs regularly swap companies forward to key positions near the town of Ras Baalbek northeast of Aarsal.

Frontline LAF units are regularly reinforced by support units both within and beyond the Aarsal AOR. The 1st and 2nd Artillery Regiments provide daily support in the form of unguided and guided 155mm artillery fire from LAF M-109 self-propelled and M-198 towed artillery units. **Figure 3** illustrates indirect and unguided artillery fire rates in the Aarsal AOR in 2016. These in turn are supplemented by the added capability of the LAF's AC-208 Armed Caravans. Armed with multiple variants of the AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, LAF AC-208s provide a targeted strike capability that has effectively been used against difficult and high-value JAN and ISIS targets.

Other specialized units provide additional and decisive support to LAF units in the Aarsal AOR. The LAF's elite Ranger Regiment and Air Assault Regiment are key SOF units that bring superior firepower and added lethality to regular ground forces. Both units have been engaged in support of LAF ground operations and both have played active combat roles in Aarsal. Meanwhile, the 1st Armored Regiment provides LAF mechanized infantry brigades with additional armor and armored mobility, and buttress combined arms operations with LAF infantry personnel.

Over the same period, the LAF has conducted countless targeted missile and indirect fire strikes against both JAN and ISIS positions on the Lebanese side of the Qalamoun range. The LAF has also conducted multiple sorties by Lebanese SOF units to capture high-value militant targets, and to interdict planned attacks against nearby towns and villages. While JAN and ISIS have adapted multiple survival strategies to cope with regular LAF attacks across barren and rugged terrain, they both relied heavily on a network of caves and tunnels for protection against artillery barrages from either side of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.

**Figure 2: The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus: Policing an Uncertain Border Region – July 20, 2017**



● LAF Protected Border Observation Posts (PBOP) with Towers/ISR

■ LAF Forward Operating Base (FOB)

▲ LAF Checkpoint

■ Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

■ Areas Controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)

■ Areas Controlled by Hezbollah

■ Select Displaced Syrian Population

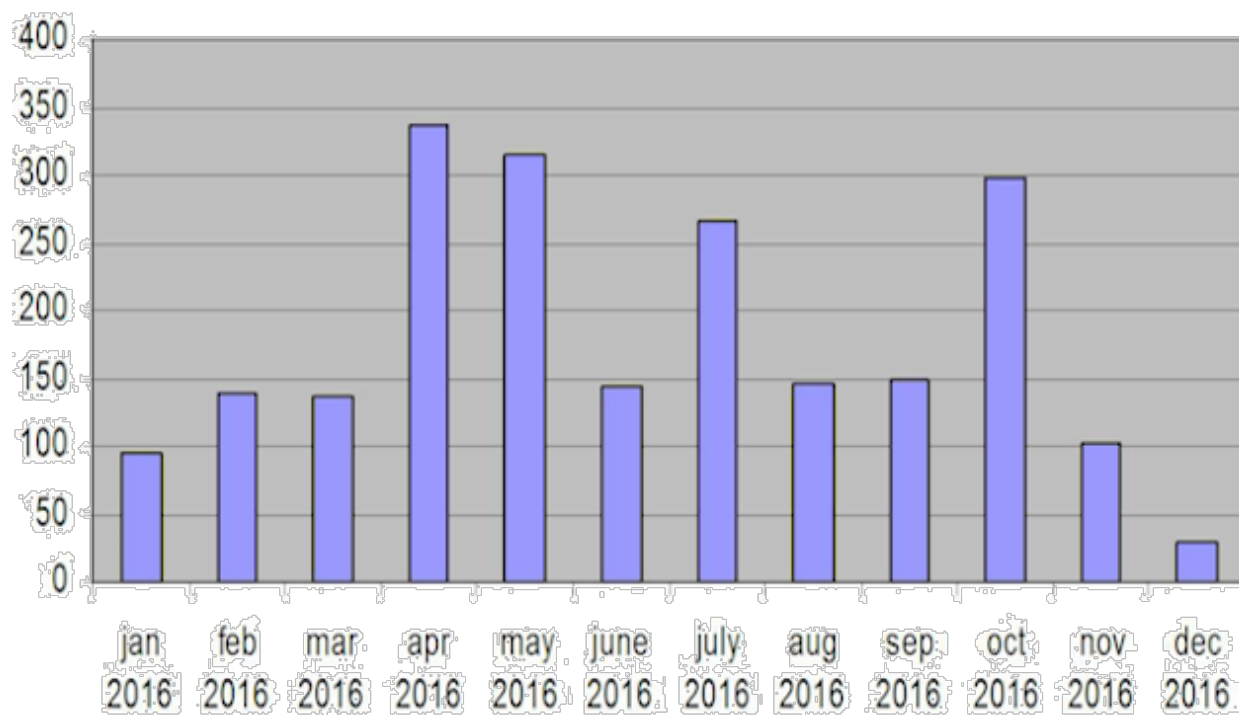
Note: Areas marked in red are areas contested by Syria. Red hexagons are LAF planned PBOP sites currently in the control areas of ISIS or JAN. "MIB" stands for Mechanized Infantry Brigade. "IR" stands for Intervention Regiment.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces experts, July 23, 2017.

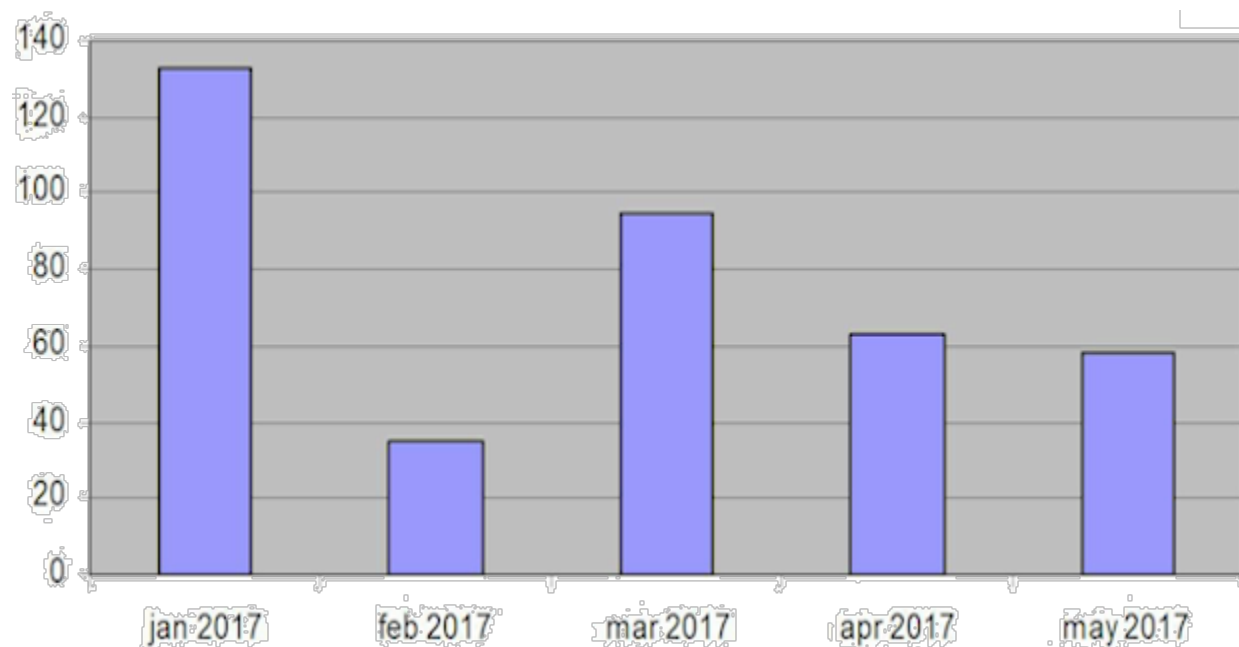


**Figure 3: LAF Indirect Artillery Support in the Aarsal AOR  
2016-2017**

**Monthly Artillery Fire Rates: 2016**



**Monthly Artillery Fire Rates: 2017**



Note: Number of rounds per month varies according to weather conditions. Count does not include terminally-guided munitions.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces experts, June 12, 2017.

## Hezbollah, the LAF and the Power of Perception

Hezbollah's military action against JAN in Lebanon cannot be viewed along in a vacuum. Though based in Lebanon, Hezbollah has been an expeditionary force in Syria for at least the last six years, and Iran has leveraged the group's effectiveness in Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere. Both Hezbollah and Tehran are acutely aware of the mix of forces they must mitigate to sustain their "resistance" narrative across the Middle East.

To Iran and Hezbollah, the LAF must be capable enough to maintain stability, but preferably not to the point of demanding a monopoly on the use of violence in Lebanon. In Syria, Hezbollah and Iran prefer to maintain an expeditionary deployment with a toehold on the Golan Heights, but without the military and political costs of a high intensity proxy civil war. Some challenges are harder to mitigate. As the group deepens its asymmetric train and equip role in Yemen, it has no clear path to return to the broader Arab fold; a stark contrast from its status during and after the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah conflict.

Possibly the most difficult challenges are the policy preferences of the U.S. and Russia in Syria. While diverging significantly, separately, both the U.S. and Russia have no preference that parts of Syria and its government become more closely integrated with Iran's "resistance" ideology, or its geopolitical preferences. Crucially, Russia's long-standing objective to transform the Syrian government and security apparatus in its own image clashes with Iran's preference of replicating the Hezbollah experience in Syria. As Syria's civil war becomes a less dynamic war of positions, Iran and their Hezbollah allies might increasingly find Syria – under Russian control to the west, and American preeminence to the east and south-east – to be increasingly inhospitable.

By taking preemptive military action against JAN, Hezbollah took the initiative away from the LAF and the Government of Lebanon. The operation began soon before Prime Minister Saad Hariri and other government officials were meant to travel to Washington. Meanwhile in Syria, JAN's main force took over much of Idlib province after forcing out Ahrar al-Sham – an Islamist group backed by Turkey. Furthermore, the day before Hezbollah's announcement, the Trump Administration confirmed that it was terminating a clandestine program to arm and train Syrian insurgents battling the Assad regime, including rebel groups in the Southern Front near the Syrian-Jordanian border.

The rationale for the timing of Hezbollah's attack against JAN is likely to be a source for persistent debate. Nonetheless, Hezbollah's actions are a source of embarrassment for both the Government and Lebanon's military. In the short to medium term, Hezbollah exhibited its usual flair for shaping the optics of its military campaign with significant emphasis on stagecraft and set pieces for public consumption. The militant group's media outlet released a daily stream of footage, along with maps showing the progression of Hezbollah forces conducting infantry maneuvers, how it utilized artillery, antiaircraft guns and unguided rockets; Hezbollah also highlighted its combat engineering, showcasing its armored bulldozers as fighters captured abandoned JAN positions.

Initially, Hezbollah had hoped that the LAF would grant it permission to conduct operations from the west, immediately adjacent to the LAF's frontline with JAN. The LAF refused, forcing Hezbollah to adopt a less than optimal strategy focusing on pushing north from its southern positions in Lebanon and from the east in coordination with the Syrian Arab Army. Meanwhile, the LAF focused exclusively on maintaining its defensive posture, utilizing artillery and smaller caliber fire when JAN personnel appeared to be approaching 2<sup>nd</sup> Land Border Regiment positions, damaging its image and reputation at home and abroad.

Much has been made of purported coordination or cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah, be it in 2017 in Aarsal or in past military engagements. According to LAF leadership and field commanders, when it comes to Hezbollah, the LAF continues to abide by a strict deconfliction policy that is not unlike how U.S. and Russian military forces deconflict in Syria. At no point did the Lebanese military command, units or smaller formations coordinate LAF actions with Hezbollah. Instead, the LAF leverages its intelligence branch to maintain channels as needed to every major faction in Lebanon.

**Figure 2** and **Figure 4** show the rapid progression of Hezbollah forces as they took position after position from JAN forces. Between July 21, 2017 and July 24, 2017, Hezbollah had taken over more than 60% of territory previously held by JAN. **Figure 5** shows what remains of the area controlled by Nusra fighter before the declaration of a tentative ceasefire on July 27, 2017. Estimates of the number of dead, wounded and captured in combat vary widely. *Reuters* reported that more than 20 Hezbollah fighters and 150 JAN militants were killed in combat.

In the weeks that followed the Hezbollah operation, there were growing questions as to whether losses incurred by the group occurred in the fight against JAN, or elsewhere in other battles in Syria. There were similar questions on the veracity of the fighting between Hezbollah and JAN, given that the Assad regime and Hezbollah appeared to be actively negotiating the withdrawal of JAN militants and their leaders well before Hezbollah's July 2017 counter-JAN operation in Lebanon.

As was discussed earlier, one of the long-standing concerns of the LAF in any potential engagement with JAN and ISIS was the challenge of how to address the presence of a large, tented settlement of more than 11,000 Syrian refugees. By chipping away rapidly at the territory controlled by JAN, Hezbollah's military campaign had heightened the risk that JAN fighters and their families – and possibly ISIS members further north – could have tried to melt away into the refugee population near Wadi Hmeyyed. Lebanese intelligence services were actively tracking the possibility of joint JAN-ISIS attacks against LAF positions utilizing suicide truck bombs. Conveniently, Hezbollah could likely have taken credit for there being no such attacks, while conversely restating the importance of its military role should such attacks have occurred.

On August 2, 2017, buses carried some 8,000 JAN fighters and Syrian refugees to the JAN-held province of Idlib after JAN and Hezbollah exchange of prisoners. After a week of fighting, Hezbollah's most important victory is not defeating JAN. Before the ceasefire, JAN resistance grew markedly the closer Hezbollah fighters go to the tented settlement. Meanwhile, indiscriminate Syrian bombardment of the camps from Syrian side of the border threaten to undermine the narrative of a clean and swift campaign. Where Hezbollah truly succeeded is in shaping perception and the optics of itself, and by reciprocity effacing its long-term national security rival, the LAF. Hezbollah has little incentive to correct the perception that the LAF is either a non-player shaping the security politics of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, or colluding with its fighters.

Hezbollah has a track record of shaping optics in ways that only serve to sow doubt about the LAF and its intentions. Hezbollah liberally plagiarizes footage of LAF guided missile strikes as its own. In late 2016, Hezbollah paraded U.S.-made M113s it had captured from the South Lebanon Army (SLA) – a one-time Israeli proxy in South Lebanon – in the process raising doubts about the LAF's exemplary end use monitoring track record. In April 2017, the presence of Hezbollah fighters near the headquarters of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) during a tour of the



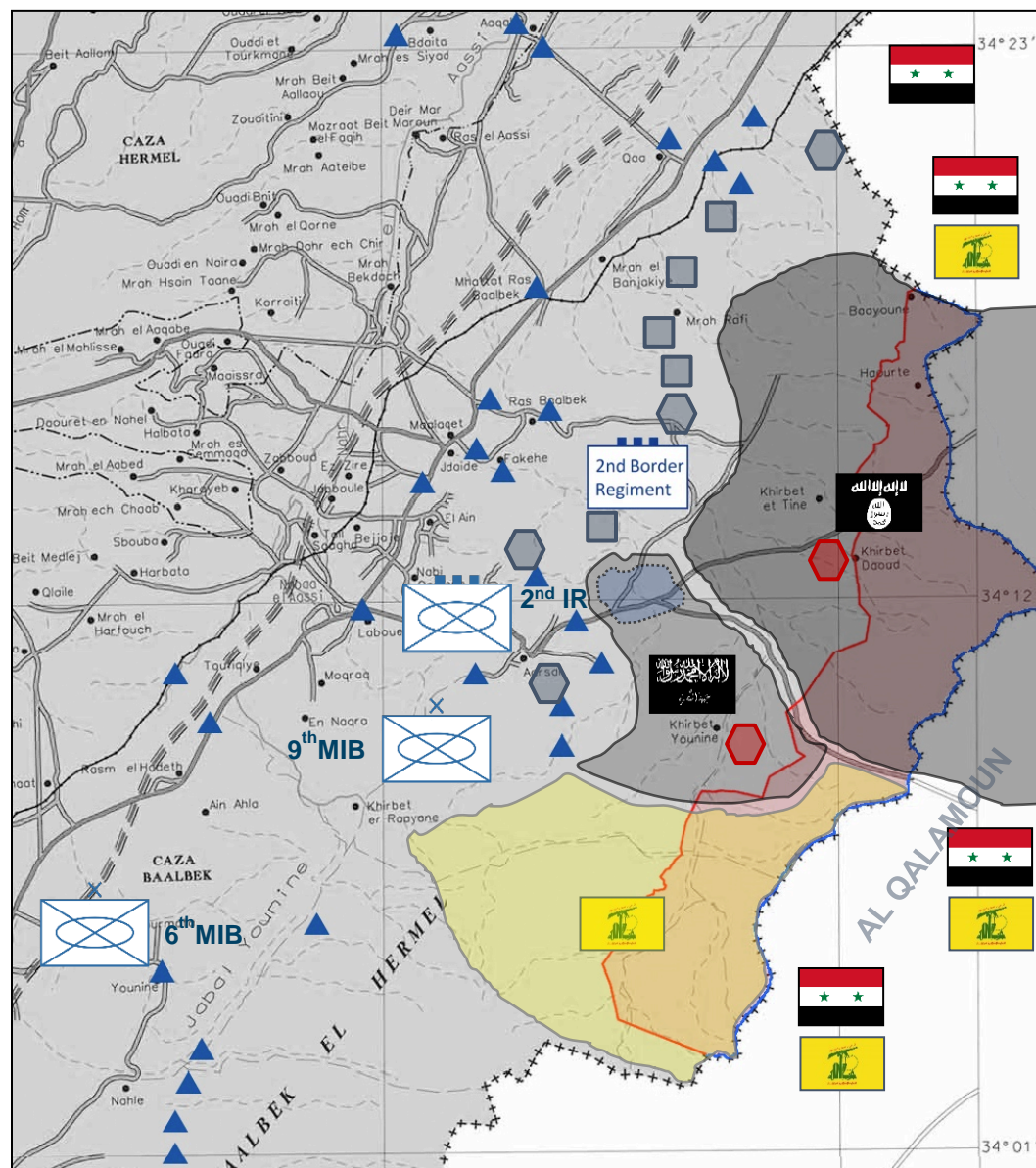
U.N. Blue Line separating Lebanon and Israel served to embarrass Government of Lebanon and LAF personnel on the ground.

Hezbollah's counter-JAN operation also raises questions on the importance of stagecraft over tradecraft. There were questions both during and after the operation that Hezbollah appeared to be making heavy use of combat camera, including staging footage of set piece actions against JAN militants. One can critically point out that Hezbollah fighters on film appeared to have inferior levels of training and readiness relative to comparable LAF forces. One western military observer went so far as to compare some of what he saw to "second year cadets at a military academy," while Lebanese military senior officers also appear skeptical of the breadth and scope of the Hezbollah operation. Be that as it may, the content circulated for domestic and international consumption must not belie the fact that Hezbollah has proven to be a significant and well-disciplined asymmetric force.

What matters is that many Lebanese and many more watching around the world took away the impression that Hezbollah wanted: its military commanders and fighters executing a clear plan to evict JAN, while Lebanon's competing factions postured and debated without providing the Lebanese military with a clear mandate to act. And now that Hezbollah has all-but ensured JAN's demise and withdrawal from Lebanon, their continued presence in the greater Aarsal AOR threatens the pace and timing of planned LAF operations against ISIS.

After JAN militants and their families had withdrawn from Lebanon, the LAF needed Hezbollah to honor a public pledge to turn over the areas it now controls over to the LAF. Hezbollah failing to do so expeditiously undermined military planning efforts, delayed the timing and pace of a potential LAF campaign, and gave ISIS more time to fortify its positions and close gaps in their own asymmetric defensive line.

**Figure 4: The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus: Policing an Uncertain Border Region – July 24, 2017**



● LAF Protected Border Observation Posts (PBOP) with Towers/ISR

■ LAF Forward Operating Base (FOB)

▲ LAF Checkpoint

■ Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

■ Areas Controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)

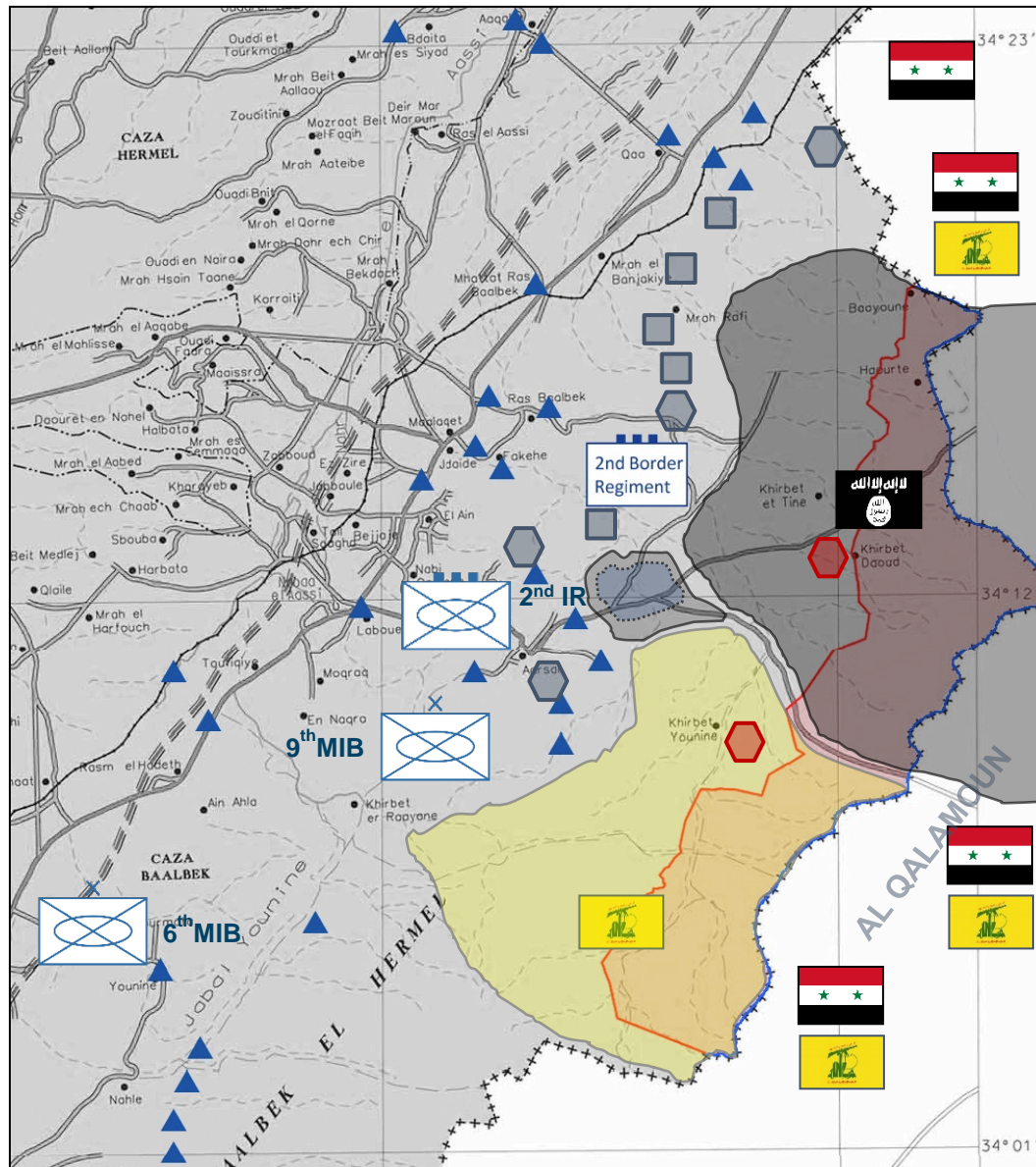
■ Areas Controlled by Hezbollah








■ Select Displaced Syrian Population

Note: Areas marked in red are areas contested by Syria. Red hexagons are LAF planned PBOP sites currently in the control areas of ISIS or JAN. "MIB" stands for Mechanized Infantry Brigade. "IR" stands for Intervention Regiment.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and United Nations experts, July 24, 2017.

**Figure 5: The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus: Policing an Uncertain Border Region – July 27, 2017**



-  LAF Protected Border Observation Posts (PBOP) with Towers/ISR
-  LAF Forward Operating Base (FOB)
-  LAF Checkpoint
-  Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)
-  Areas Controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)
-  Areas Controlled by Hezbollah
-  Select Displaced Syrian Population

Note: Areas marked in red are areas contested by Syria. Red hexagons are LAF planned PBOP sites currently in the control areas of ISIS or JAN. “MIB” stands for Mechanized Infantry Brigade. “IR” stands for Intervention Regiment

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and United Nations experts, July 24, 2017.

## The LAF and the Need to Defeat ISIS

Lebanon and its military missed a crucial window of opportunity to act first on defeating JAN. In many ways, this was a missed opportunity three years in the making. Lebanon's competing civilian leaders struggled between 2014 and 2017 to get past a persistent state of political paralysis and institutional decay.

Over the same period, the LAF's unity of effort was significantly compromised. Repeated end of service extensions for a select group of senior LAF officers – including LAF Commander General Jean Kahwaji – sapped military morale. Since General Kahwaji's first term extension in 2013, dozens of key general officers have retired from the LAF, many if not most of them before the retirement of a commanding general who was ten years their senior. With the departure of institutional change agents, recurring rumors that the then-Commander of the LAF had aspirations for higher political office, and a loss of momentum in efforts to deal decisively with ISIS and JAN, once-motivated junior officers saw themselves as orphans of a military leadership crisis they could not hope to shape or influence.

The appointment of General Joseph Aoun as the new Commander of the LAF on March 8, 2017 served to significantly alleviate internal pressure and disaffection within both the LAF officer corps and among NCOs and enlisted personnel. With a new President, a new LAF Commander and a new government, the Government of Lebanon and the LAF appeared poised to action and address the presence of JAN and ISIS militants in Lebanon. However, as Lebanon's new political and military leadership sunk deeper in trying to manage the competing priorities of Lebanon's sectarian political factions, they failed to seize the opportunity and take decisive military action.

With JAN routed by Hezbollah's swift military intervention, the LAF could not afford to miss a closing window to defeat ISIS, and to do so even if the optics were difficult to shape. To that end, as **Figure 6** shows, key maneuver and combat support units were forward deployed to the Aarsal and Ras Baalbek AOR, including the bulk of the elite Air Assault Regiment. Elements from the Directorate of Military Intelligence's (DMI) *Moukafaha* and Strike Force elite counter-terrorism units were also deployed. Much of the set piece shaping is also complete with the redeployment of the 1st Intervention Regiment (IR) from Tripoli to the Aarsal and Ras Baalbek AOR. Combined with existing frontline units and additional troops as needed from the 4th LBR and the 6th IR, the LAF had a combined force of more than 8,500 men in the broader eastern Bekaa region.

This force level would be critical given key differences between the areas controlled by JAN and ISIS. While JAN held positions that were relatively inferior to those of ISIS, they had excellent supply lines through to the town of Aarsal itself. Conversely, while ISIS may not have the best supply lines – often prompting them to raid JAN resupply convoys – they did hold on to far more defensible strategic ground, making it all the more likely that the battle against ISIS would be more challenging and resource-intensive.

The LAF had many combat capabilities that other armed factions in Lebanon – including Hezbollah – could not match. However, as the LAF fine-tuned its planning and resourcing effort, it needed to be honest with itself concerning prerequisites for success, its own capabilities and limitations, and whether it could effectively deal with and adapt to the threat from ISIS:

- Hezbollah had to cease all military operations and withdraw from the Aarsal and Ras Baalbek AOR. The LAF could not afford even a lingering impression that it and the Shi'a militant group were working together to defeat ISIS. It also could not conduct operations so long as Hezbollah

continued to hold ground formerly held by JAN. The Government of Lebanon – of which Hezbollah is part – led by the President and the Prime Minister would have had to buttress the LAF to ensure that deconfliction was preserved.

- The LAF would have to carefully manage the presence of displaced Syrians east of its current frontline. As LAF units pressed east and northeast, the Government of Lebanon would have to work with the LAF to make it clear to camp residents that they were not the target of military operations, and that there was every intent to preserve their wellbeing in concert with international humanitarian organizations operating in Lebanon.
- Public diplomacy and messaging is a strong suit of Hezbollah's and the LAF needed to do far more to actively communicate its actions, intentions and preferred outcomes. This level of messaging also entailed a willingness to be self-critical and open to engagement from a wider mix of interest groups across Lebanon.
- While the LAF had far more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability than in 2014, there were real-world limits to how much the LAF could task its current mix of AC-208s and UAVs to provide adequate ISR coverage. The LAF needed to be ready to leverage the presence of key partner assets in Lebanon – chief among them the U.S. Central Command's Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) forward presence in Lebanon and the broader Levant.
- Not unlike ISR, the LAF had significantly expanded its ability to find, fix and finish targets in the Aarsal and Ras Baalbek AOR. However, managing a larger mix of targets, or queuing and designating multiple targets simultaneously, is another area where the LAF could elect to leverage U.S. SOCCENT capabilities in Lebanon and the broader Levant.

The most important element in any campaign against ISIS would be the need to establish, sustain, and maintain unity of command in the theater of war. In 2012, when the LAF engaged in street clashes in the northern town of Tripoli, LAF headquarters assigned the commander of the LAF's northern region as head of operations at the theater level. This meant overseeing a complex force that included the 10<sup>th</sup> MIB, 4<sup>th</sup> IR, the Air Assault Regiment, and the Marine Commando Regiment. While managing the mix of leadership of frontline LAF regular and SOF units was challenging, the LAF ensured that the chain of command was respected, and unity of command maintained.

During the August 2014 clashes between the LAF and the mixed force comprised of JAN and ISIS fighters, the LAF once again sought to create unity of command in an AOR that included the 2<sup>nd</sup> LBR, element of the 8<sup>th</sup> MIB, and a relief force that included the 6<sup>th</sup> MIB and the elite Ranger Regiment. However, unlike in 2012, the LAF struggled to establish and maintain unity of command at the theater level. Not only did unit commanders clash over who was in command, LAF leadership at headquarters regularly circumvented the chain of command and communicated directly with junior officers and platoon leaders fighting Nusra and ISIS militants. It is important to caveat that even modern militaries would struggle to shape unity of command in a fast-paced defensive military action.

With the LAF poised to engage ISIS, the theater commander would have to coordinate a force larger than the troops committed to either the 2012 Tripoli clashes, or the 2014 counter-offensive against JAN and ISIS. The LAF expected to find itself in a far more challenging theater of war than the one faced by Hezbollah with complexities tied to civilians in the combat zone, the assumption that ISIS still had LAF servicemen in captivity, and the possibility that – unlike JAN – ISIS could make use of suicide tactics to bog down a LAF advance. The LAF would also have

to actively guard against wildcards not unlike past instances where LAF active and retired personnel were accused of liaising between the LAF and Hezbollah on the ground without authorization from LAF headquarters.

Establishing this level of unity of command started and ended with the LAF commander himself. Ultimately, the LAF was set on a course of action that supported a clear end-state: the removal of the ISIS threat from Lebanese territory. Once it committed, it needed to be ready to absorb losses, adapt its tactics quickly, and be relentless in its bid to achieve said end-state. The alternative would be the demoralization of the Lebanese Armed Forces and the loss of a unique opportunity to favorably shape the security politics of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.

### **Figure 7: LAF Units in the Larger Arsal/Ras Baalbek Area of Responsibility – July-August 2017**

#### **Active Maneuver Forces in the Arsal/Ras Baalbek AOR**

<b>Unit Formation</b>	<b>Estimated Unit Strength</b>
6 <sup>th</sup> Mechanized Infantry Brigade	2,000
Air Assault Regiment	1,100
1 <sup>st</sup> Intervention Regiment	1,000
4 <sup>th</sup> Intervention Regiment (one company)	100
DMI* Special Forces (one company)	100

#### **Combat Support Forces in the Arsal/Ras Baalbek AOR**

<b>Unit Formation</b>	<b>Estimated Unit Strength</b>
9 <sup>th</sup> Mechanized Infantry Brigade	2,000
6 <sup>st</sup> Intervention Regiment (Rayak Air Base)	1,100
2 <sup>nd</sup> Land Border Regiment	500
4 <sup>th</sup> Land Border Regiment	450
4 <sup>th</sup> Intervention Regiment (one company)	100
Combat Engineering Regiment (one company)	100
6 <sup>th</sup> Mechanized Infantry Brigade (one artillery company)	18 155mm artillery pieces
1 <sup>st</sup> Artillery Regiment (one company)	18 155mm artillery pieces
2 <sup>n</sup> Artillery Regiment (one company)	MLRS*

#### **Estimated Maneuver and Combat Support Forces in the Arsal/Ras Baalbek AOR**

<b>Unit Formation</b>	<b>Estimated Unit Strength</b>
Maneuver Forces	4,300
Combat Support Forces	4,250
Total Force Strength	8,550

Note: Figures shown above are adapted from 2015 actual figures.

\*: “DMI” refers to the LAF’s Directorate of Military Intelligence. “MLRS” refers to multiple launch rocket system.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces experts, July 26, 2017, August 20, 2017.



## The LAF's "Dawn of the Jurds" Operation Against ISIS

On August 12, 2017, Hezbollah forces withdrew to Syria from positions captured from JAN militants. **Figure 8** shows the LAF area of control adjacent to the pocket controlled by ISIS. As the map shows, the ISIS AOR is divided into three separate segments or "fassil" named from north to south "Bakr," "Ali, and "Oussama." **Figure 8** also shows the smaller pocket of terrain previously held by Hezbollah.

As stated earlier in this report, the LAF was confident that ISIS militants had every intention of inflicting the maximum possible level of attrition losses to the LAF, while trying to hold their ground long enough to force a favorable non-kinetic outcome. However, ISIS forces in Lebanon lacked air support, had no reliable heavy firepower, and had to manage limited stockpiles of ammunition. Furthermore, ISIS positions have been under persistent and sustained surveillance and attack over the 2014 to 2017 period, suffering slow but steady attrition due to LAF sniper fire, targeted *Hellfire* strikes, and LAF SOF incursions.

Having worked for weeks to get the necessary forces in position, and with a clear and insulated theater-level chain of command in place, the LAF began the execution of its counter-ISIS campaign against militants on the Lebanese side of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. The operation – code named "Dawn of the Jurds" – was publicly announced on August 19, 2017. Later that day, Hezbollah and the Syrian Arab Army announced their own counter-ISIS military campaign on the Syrian side of the frontier.

For all the international concern of potential LAF-Hezbollah coordination, the official start date of Dawn of the Jurds is misleading. Well before August 19<sup>th</sup>, the LAF had already begun taking independent action against ISIS positions and ridge lines east of Ras Baalbek. **Figure 9** shows in general terms the series of complex sets of maneuvers executed by LAF regular and special forces as they clawed away significant chunks of terrain from ISIS control. **Figure 9** also shows that the first major thrust of the LAF counter-ISIS operation was executed on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017 by the 1<sup>st</sup> IR east of 2<sup>nd</sup> LBR positions east of Ras Baalbek – five days before the operation's official start date.

Both before and after LAF ground forces began to push into ISIS territory on August 14<sup>th</sup>, LAF AC-208 *Armed Caravans* and *ScanEagle* UAVs provided round-the-clock ISR capability in the Dawn of the Jurds AOR, finding and fixing any potential ground-to-ground and air-to-ground threats they could identify. As a result, LAF field and headquarters commanders had unprecedented situational awareness through access to accurate real-time telemetry from the battlefield.

Throughout this process, the LAF would go on to make liberal and ingenious use of its U.S.-supplied precision munitions such as the AGM114 *Hellfire* laser-guided air-to-ground missile and the M712 *Copperhead* 155mm cannon-launched, fin-stabilized, terminally laser-guided munitions. While not designed to work in concert with the LAF's AC208 laser designation capability, in a first for the *Copperhead*, LAF ISR, SOF, and artillery personnel would use the AC208 and the *Copperhead* together to rapidly find, fix, and finish high value ISIS targets. All-told, some 140 *Copperhead* rounds would go on to eliminate most ISIS high value targets. This included artillery positions, machine gun nests, ISIS logistics vehicles, sniping positions and munition depots – including anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs).

The net effect of the LAF's superior battlefield awareness and targeted strike capability was the accelerated demoralization of ISIS forces in Lebanon. With the 1<sup>st</sup> IR's second major push against ISIS positions on August 16, 2017, the LAF had all but broken ISIS' ability to hold critical terrain. At this point, LAF generals would have been forgiven for pressing their advantage. Instead, with each LAF thrust, frontline and combat support units worked to consolidate LAF gains. Also on August 16, the 9<sup>th</sup> MIB would move in concert with the 1<sup>st</sup> IR's push to fill the void left by Hezbollah forces on August 12, 2017, protecting the 1<sup>st</sup> IR's southern flank in the process. Combat engineers would work feverishly to dismantle ISIS mines and booby-traps. LAF D-9 bulldozers – up-armored locally – cut new roads as and where needed to avoid the most extensive of ISIS' minefields, enabling the LAF to sustain the relatively brisk pace of Dawn of the Jurds.

By the time the Air Assault Regiment (AAR) was poised to make its big eastward push north of positions held by the 1<sup>st</sup> IR on August 19, 2017 (the operation's official execution date), LAF senior commanders and battlefield planners felt confident that they would be shaping the battlefield and the tempo of the operation. As LAF regular and elite forces took more ground and consolidated their new positions, the effective use of ISR, targeted strike, SOF and armored mobility led to the description of Dawn of the Jurds by one U.S. military officer in Lebanon as "21<sup>st</sup> century maneuver warfare by a modern military."

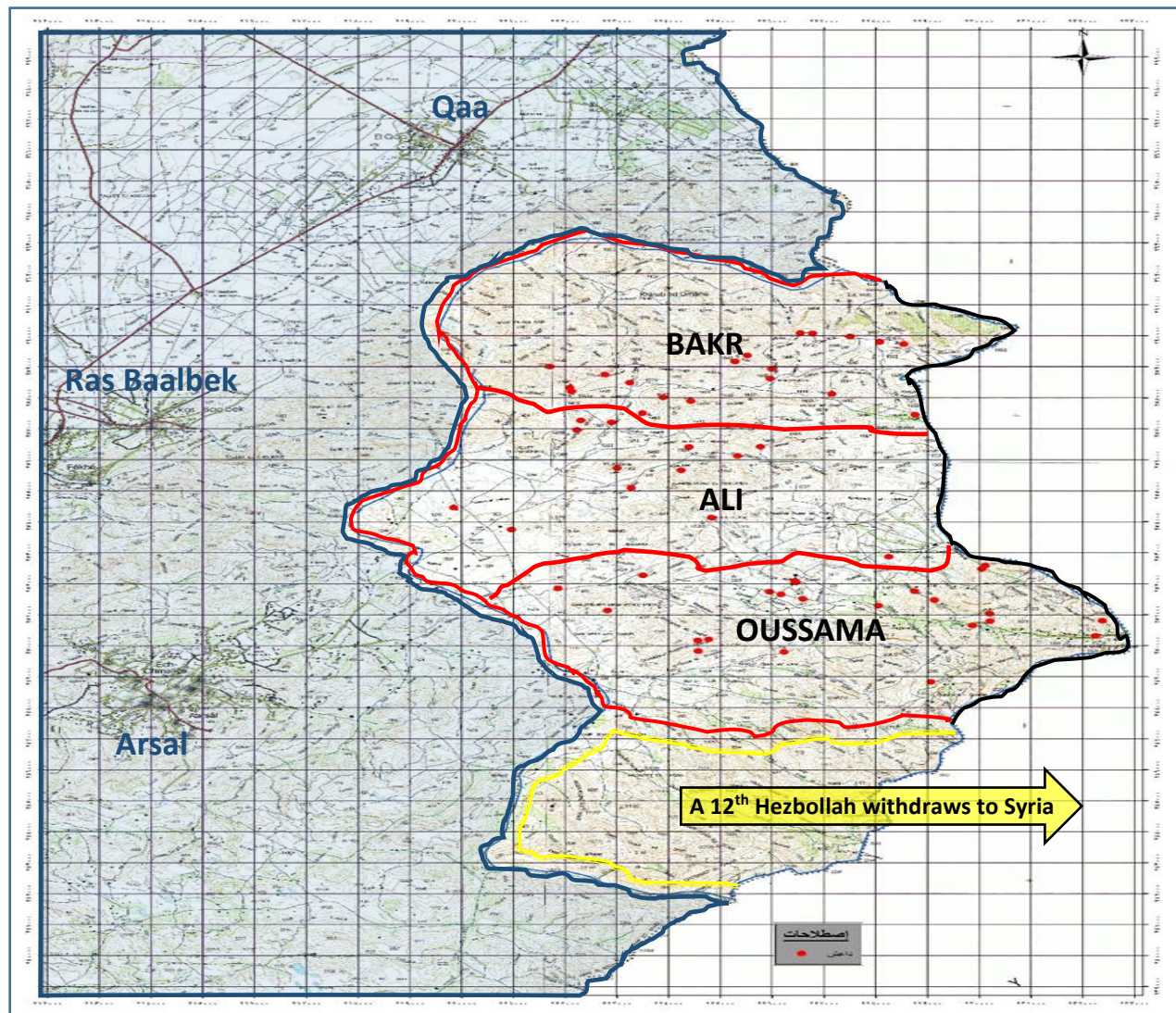
Over the August 22 to August 25 period, LAF regular and SOF units continued to press ISIS forces into an ever-smaller pocket of territory east of the commanding heights of Khirbet Daoud. By August 27, 2017, LAF theater commanders were ready to make a decisive push against the remaining 20 square kilometers of territory still held by ISIS. After well-placed *Copperhead* strikes had pushed ISIS forces below 50 percent fighting strength, ISIS' local commander was reported to have secured permission to negotiate with the Lebanese state and the LAF for the militants' surrender.

As the LAF prepared to free the last remaining pocket of territory held by ISIS, Hezbollah publicly announced that it was negotiating with ISIS militants directly to secure definitive information about the whereabouts of LAF military personnel captured by ISIS and JAN in August 2014. This in turn forced a temporary suspension of LAF military operations. A controversial agreement between Hezbollah and ISIS militants would lead to the release of Hezbollah and Iranian prisoners of war in Syria, and the coordinates of the bodies of the then-confirmed dead LAF personnel in ISIS controlled territory. In exchange, Hezbollah would grant the militants safe passage out of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. On August 29, 2017, ISIS forces began preparations to depart the battlefield. As a result, major LAF maneuver operations were suspended indefinitely.

In the final count – and contrary to initial estimates – the LAF had 9 military personnel killed in action, most of them due to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines. Of the some 100 LAF personnel wounded, some 70 were deemed fit to return to the battlefield and most did so. Dawn of the Jurds led to the death of more than 50 ISIS militants – though Lebanese authorities have yet to report official figures – and more than twice that figure are reported to have been wounded by LAF fire.



**Figure 8: Defeating ISIS: the LAF and Operation “Dawn of the Jurds” – August 13, 2017**



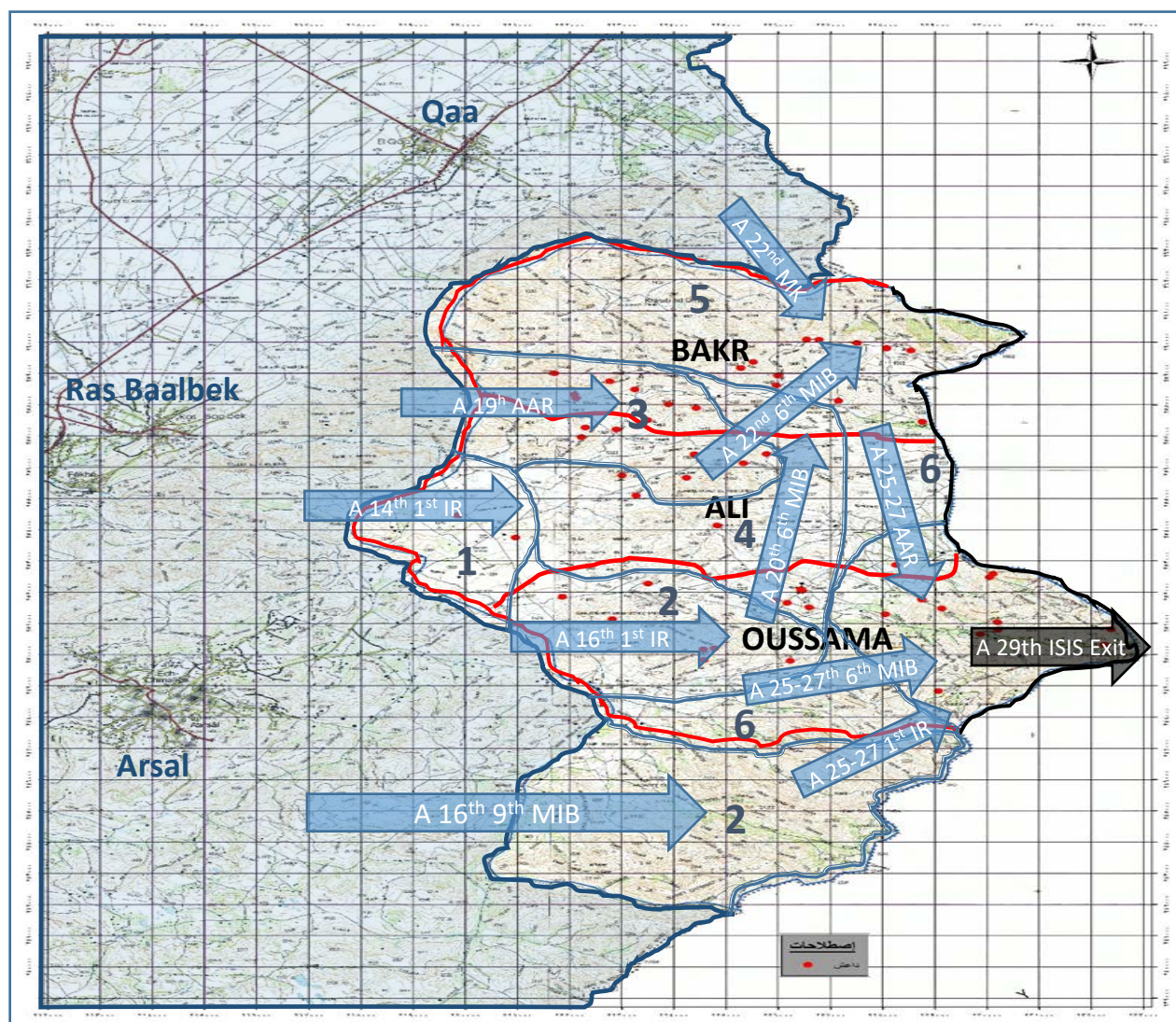
- Areas Controlled by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)
- Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)
- Select ISIS Positions

Note: This map does not show areas contested by Syria as shown in previous maps in this report.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Brigadier General (ret) Maroun Hitti and other Lebanese Armed Forces experts, September 20, 2017.



**Figure 9: Defeating ISIS: the LAF and Operation “Dawn of the Jurds” – August 14-August 29, 2017**



Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Brigadier General (ret) Maroun Hitti and other Lebanese Armed Forces experts, September 20, 2017.

## **Initial Implications of “Dawn of the Jurds”**

There is no doubt that some, if not many, in the LAF felt an obligation to go the distance against ISIS and push the militants out or defeat them outright without leaving an option for them to withdraw. However, political maneuvering the final two days of the operations hardly constitute a “victory denied.” In executing Dawn of the Jurds, the LAF needed to accomplish three objectives in its counter-ISIS campaign: 1) the withdrawal of ISIS elements from Lebanese territory, 2) establish with certainty the fate of LAF service men held captive by ISIS since 2014, and 3) and complete the campaign on its own as Lebanon’s principal legitimate national security actors.

As far as the LAF is concerned, it deems that it has more than accomplished what it set out to do. The LAF now sits on 120 square kilometers of formerly ISIS-held territory, and other LAF border units are poised to consolidate the military deployment along the quasi-totality of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier – an outcome that would have been political unheard of before Syria’s civil war, and a first in Lebanon’s post-Independence history.

Furthermore, for the first time since the Lebanese Civil War, the LAF successfully conducted a theater-level combined arms operation against an asymmetric enemy that had no choice but to integrate static defenses in its quickly-eroding order of battle. The LAF capitalized on more than 10 years of force development and modernization; this includes special forces by regional standards, some of the region’s very best use of conventional ballistic artillery fire, and a targeted ground-to-ground and air-to-ground strike capability, and round-the-clock surveillance and tactical intelligence from ISR-capable aircraft and a fleet of UAVs.

Still, the operation was not without its risks or implications. The LAF has gone to great pains to articulate publicly what it feels it believes and upholds publicly: that it would not coordinate or cooperate its military operations with the Syrian military or Hezbollah. Intentions aside, the LAF had no ability to predict or shape what either of those belligerents did or did not chose to do in ways that could affect the LAF’s concept of operations in the Aarsal and Ras Baalbek AOR.

After Dawn of the Jurds, LAF senior commanders and their U.S. and U.K. counterparts are more than comfortable stating that the campaign was conducted with no cooperation or coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah. On the contrary, the LAF’s solo campaign was so successful, that elements close to Hezbollah sought to actively take credit retroactively for the LAF’s successes, and/or promote a narrative of secret coordination between the LAF, Hezbollah and the Assad regime.

What happens after the operation is at least as important as winning the battle itself. With JAN and ISIS evicted from Lebanon, the LAF will now have to turn its attention towards providing Lebanon and its citizens with the level of security and stability it feels they need. This in turn entails permanently consolidating the LAF’s defensive posture along the border with Syria. The LAF has already signaled its intent to hold the positions it has liberated indefinitely. There is no other group or faction that is either there or able to do it in the LAF’s stead. The LAF will have to shape and maintain complete overwatch over the areas liberated by its troops from ISIS.

There are also important military and policy implications for Hezbollah. While Hezbollah has stated publicly that it intends to vacate what little remains of its limited border presence, the LAF’s deployment and activity along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier complicates any hypothetical land-bridge linking Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. Because the LAF now actively polices and monitors much of the border with Syria, there is significant overlap between the LAF’s preference

not to coordinate with any Lebanese faction, and the need to actively interdict illicit activity along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. Over the last five years, the LAF has not shied away from stopping illicit materials, contraband and weapons from entering Lebanon. Hezbollah has actively worked to avoid using areas where the LAF is known to operate. However, as more LAF units are stood up, doing so has grown increasingly difficult. The real challenge will come if and when Hezbollah accepts or rejects curtailing what remains of its clandestine presence along Lebanon's still-porous border with Syria.

Lastly, Dawn of the Jurds may have lasting implications for a national security debate long-dominated by Hezbollah's military preeminence. The LAF's rapid and professional execution of the counter-ISIS campaign – without anyone's help, and certainly not with the help of the Syrians or Hezbollah – has shattered the narrative in the minds of many Lebanese that Hezbollah is Lebanon's sole preeminent national security actor. Presented with such a singular challenge to its self-styled resistance and national security narrative, Hezbollah needed a cease-fire agreement to hasten the withdrawal of ISIS from the Lebanese-Syrian frontier and to consolidate its own reputation. In short, the battle against ISIS in Lebanon may be over, but the war over Lebanon's national security narrative has only just begun.

## **U.S. Policy and the Need for Sustained Strategic Engagement**

On the LAF's path toward sustainable military development, the support of the U.S. is second only to the support and trust of the Lebanese people themselves. Despite losing the initiative to Hezbollah in the fight against JAN, one cannot reiterate enough how far the LAF has come as a national security actor and as an international partner in the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition.

American policy towards Lebanon and the LAF is a function of far broader U.S. strategic imperatives in the Middle East, including the regional contest with Iran. How the U.S. goes about providing security assistance to its Lebanese allies is also dependent on, and held back by, this overarching top-down approach to security politics in the Levant.

At the level of the U.S. government, it was hoped that the LAF, which was popular across the country's sectarian divisions, could gradually take on an increasingly important national security role, largely at the expense of Iran's main non-state regional ally Hezbollah. Many in the U.S. Congress supported U.S. efforts to build up the LAF based on the hope that the military could one day confront Hezbollah and serve as a bulwark against Iranian influence along Israel's northern flank.

Over the 2005 to 2010 period, it became clear to successive U.S. administrations that supporting the LAF so that it might confront Hezbollah was unrealistic. In the wake of regional protests starting in 2011 and the outbreak of Syria's civil war, the U.S.-Lebanese bilateral relationship became increasingly defined by both countries' need to cooperate on regional security, intelligence sharing and dealing with emerging and common threats from militant groups inspired by Al-Qa'eda and ISIS with operational links to Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

The LAF and the Lebanese need countries like the U.S. and other donors and partners to maintain the current momentum of military assistance, especially as the LAF reorients itself and its mission sets after defeating ISIS in Lebanon. Within that, there are practical ways for the U.S. to play a critical supporting role and to ensure that the LAF dominates the battlefield:

- The U.S. Government needs to validate and qualify how it will maintain adequate levels of military assistance to the LAF. As serious questions are raised about plans to zero out Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to 42 out of 47 country recipients – including Lebanon – in 2018, it must be made abundantly clear: failing to support the LAF's efforts to consolidate its national security role will only serve to roll back unprecedented gains by a stabilizing and a moderating force in Lebanon and the region.
- The U.S. should not shy away from the scale of its commitment to – and presence in – Lebanon. The U.S. military currently maintains a larger special operations presence than most Arab countries with more than 70 SOCCENT trainers and support personnel in Lebanon at any one point in time. U.S. military personnel can and do go almost anywhere in Lebanon, and play a key role in bolstering the LAF's emerging capabilities. The U.S. should take a page out of Iran's playbook on Lebanon and take ownership of its close relationship with the LAF.
- As the LAF fought ISIS militants, logistical support and resupplies from the U.S. would have been critical in a sustained fight. The Lebanese military currently has the ability to draw on U.S. CENTCOM regional holdings. The U.S. should reaffirm this privileged status and do so publicly and work closely with LAF leadership and the theater commander to ensure that LAF stocks are adequate in any future asymmetric military engagement.
- Thanks to U.S. military assistance and persistent training, the LAF effectively conducted target designation to then direct unguided and guided fire on high value targets in real-time. Conducting "find, fix, and finish" with dozens if not hundreds of simultaneous targets on a dynamic battlefield was a challenge that presented a much higher degree of complexity. U.S. military leaders should continue to encourage CENTCOM and SOCCENT personnel in Lebanon and the broader Levant to work in partnership with their LAF counterparts to strengthen their ability to sustain complex target acquisition and battle management.
- The U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) has played a growing role in support of the LAF's efforts to adequately equip and link up its new land border forces. The LAF has proven itself to be a force for stability in the Levant and a military that takes its regional responsibilities seriously. The U.S. should continue to ensure adequate funding and programming in support of the LAF's long-term aspirations to secure Lebanon's land and maritime borders.

Through the Dawn of the Jurds operation, the LAF has proven that it can make excellent use of U.S. and other partners' lethal and technical security assistance. The operation also challenged the notion that Hezbollah is Lebanon's only credibly national security actor.

Failing to adequately fund and support the LAF can only serve to strengthen Hezbollah's own narrative that the U.S. is not serious about supporting the LAF. It would also undermine testing positions Hezbollah has taken on the record, stating that they would only stand down their own military capabilities if and when the LAF is strong enough to provide security and stability in Lebanon.

A sustained and long-term effort to support the LAF is an objective that is espoused first and foremost by the LAF's U.S. military counterparts who have worked and trained alongside the LAF for more than a decade. In the short term, they will have to focus more narrowly on rapidly responding to the evolving needs of the LAF as they fight to dislodge ISIS from Lebanon. In the medium to long term, they and their civilian partners will have to carefully weigh the consequences of withholding military aid to an emerging regional military ally in a unique plural society in the Arabic-speaking Middle East.

## Conclusion

Over the 2005 to 2017 period, successive generations of LAF leadership have grown ever more confident and emboldened by the idea that the LAF can be Lebanon's preeminent national security actor. Still, the LAF has struggled time and again with what it sees as the false perceptions of LAF-Hezbollah collusion and the potential impact of U.S. policy choices that could hurt institutions like the LAF, all in a failed bid to counter Iranian influence in the Levant.

Inevitably, those who define Lebanon through the lens of Hezbollah will fail to see the LAF as anything but an extension of the militant group. At the same time, as one senior Pentagon official noted on background, one central narrative conveyed during the recent visit by Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Washington DC was that many in the U.S. government and Congress believe that "there is still a Lebanon and LAF worth saving." In the wake of the LAF's successful counter-ISIS campaign, there continues to be tremendous good will towards the LAF in U.S. military circles where the LAF is considered a key emerging military ally, and – paradoxically – one of the region's "fighting" militaries.

Being hawkish on Lebanon in U.S. policy terms has traditionally meant being tough on Hezbollah and other factions and institutions in Lebanon because of the presence of Hezbollah in the country. When the LAF engaged ISIS militarily in August 2017, being hawkish on Lebanon meant doubling down on supporting the LAF because, in the end, a Lebanon with a weak LAF will be fertile terrain for Iran and its local and regional partners. Conversely, supporting the LAF as U.S. civilian and military leaders did during Dawn of the Jurds only served to strengthen the LAF's domestic and international military legitimacy.

Given the optics and potential consequences – both for Lebanon and for the U.S. – the LAF's battle against ISIS was a confrontation that it had to win decisively. Failure, or the risk of it, would only bolster Hezbollah's argument that it and Iran are indispensable to Lebanon's stability. In executing Dawn of the Jurds, the LAF met and exceeded local and international expectations. In particular, it kindled an additional layer of respect for its growing capabilities in the eye of many Lebanese. In the face of continued questions about the trajectory of future military aid, the U.S. and key partners such as the U.K. need to be bold in supporting a rare success in how they build partner capacity in countries like Lebanon, and on capitalizing on how an allied military like the LAF fights the common threat posed by ISIS. Ultimately, supporting the LAF and the Government of Lebanon are the only credible ways to shape the U.S.'s preferred outcomes in Lebanon.