

Series
Number

2/07

Keynotes

Cranfield CSSM Case Study Series

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Prospects for Security Sector Reform in Lebanon

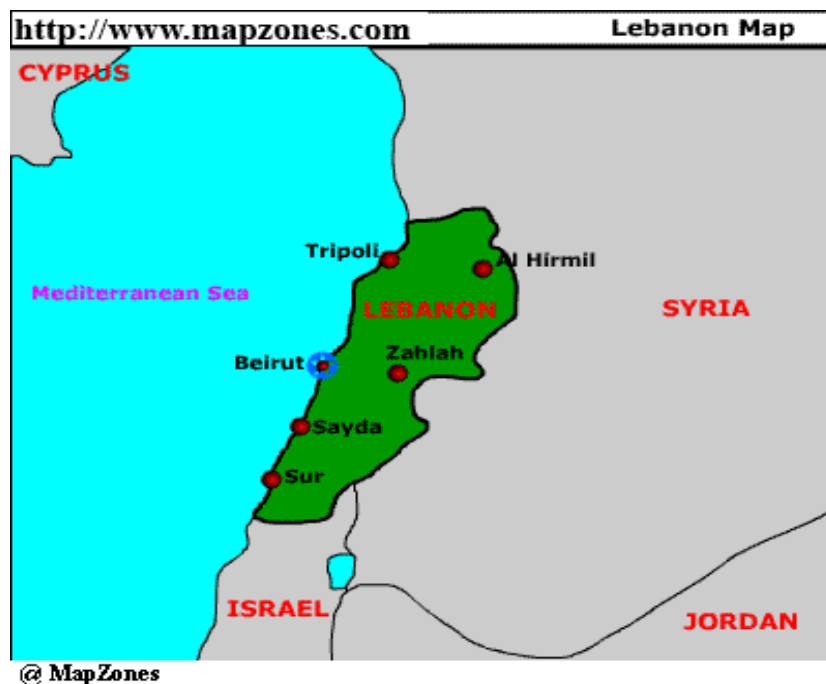
Aim

The aim of this case study is to present an overview of the prospects for Security Sector Reform in Lebanon following the recent conflict.

Background and Scenario

The recent Lebanese conflict lasted 34 days and claimed the lives of around 1200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and 250 Israeli, mostly soldiers. It is still early to assess the full consequences of the conflict.

Map of Lebanon



Lebanon – Key Facts

Population: - 2006 estimate 3,874,050 (113th) - Density 358/km² (26th) 948/sq mi (please note that because of political sensitivities, there has been no census taken in Lebanon for more than 50 years. Therefore, population figures are not entirely reliable)

Capital (and largest city): Beirut

Official languages: Arabic (and formerly French)

Government: Republic. President: Émile Lahoud Prime Minister: Fouad Siniora

Independence: Declared November 26, 1941. Recognized: November 22, 1943

Area: - Total 10,452 km² (166th) 4,035 sq mi

GDP (PPP): 2005 estimate - Total \$24.42 billion (103rd) - Per capita 6,681 (90th)

HDI (2006): 0.774 (medium) (78th)

Currency: Lebanese lira (LL) (LBP)

However, the massive victory rally held by Hezbollah in Beirut, as well as other signs, highlight an important “social fact”: the organization has clearly won what Professor. Feldman called the “war of the narratives”. In other words, Hezbollah is clearly perceived to be the winner of the conflict throughout the world. This is due to a number of factors:

- Prime Minister Olmert articulated unrealistic objectives in his July 17 speech to the Knesset. By setting the bar very high, nothing less than the complete annihilation of Hezbollah as a fighting force it made it easy for Sheikh Nasrallah to claim victory. It was enough for him to survive.
- The Israeli government seems to have believed that such far-reaching goals could be achieved by the use of airpower. In this case, as it is bound to happen, accusations are already being traded between the military and the government. However, whoever bears ultimate responsibility the consequences are under the eyes of everyone and, crucially, of the Iranians.

Academics such as Professor Susser of the Moshe Dayan Centre at Tel Aviv University, who are close to the Israeli security apparatus, are trying to reverse this perception so far without much success. They point to the fact that Hezbollah has somewhat depleted its missile stocks. There are signs, though, that the organization is close to acquiring again its pre-existing capability as a steady stream of Iranian weapons is reaching it via Syria. More seriously, Professor Susser highlights the difficulty that the organization will face in operating in Southern Lebanon because of the beefed up UNIFIL presence. However, these realities on the ground were undermined by the fact that Prime Minister Olmert had set these very ambitious goals. He certainly lost the war of the “narratives”, which in the kind of limited war we are talking about is what really counts.

Important Lessons

Furthermore, there are a number of additional lessons that military and diplomatic decision makers are pondering throughout the world.

- The fact that network, asymmetric warfare has become very effective. Many top of the line Merkava III tanks were incapacitated if not destroyed.

- The fact that Hezbollah seemed to be able to intercept Israeli communications. If true this will be a **major** reversal of the assumption that today Western militaries are able to eavesdrop on guerilla organizations but not vice versa.

Iranian Perspectives

The outcome of the recent Lebanese war strengthens the hand of Iranian hardliners. They can now claim that a military confrontation with the United States, if properly managed, is not bound to be a disaster for the Iranian nation. The Iranian military made a great display of conducting manoeuvres centered around so-called network warfare near the Strait of Oman in the last few months. The message to outside forces is that as they advance on Teheran they will not find much in the way, but Iranians will later close down on them from every corner. They will also do their best to disrupt shipping in the Gulf with Chinese missiles and other equipment acquired recently. It would be a mistake to think that because Iran was successfully contained during the 1987-8 Tanker war the same goal can be achieved nowadays. Technology has moved on and Iranians have operated very well in procuring cost-effective weaponry.

The New UNIFIL

The presence of a new, reinforced UNIFIL force in Lebanon may give rise to the hope that a new phase of Security Sector Reform may be implemented by the Lebanese government, leading eventually to the full disarmament of Hezbollah, the last of the Lebanese armed militia to retain its weapons. The new international force, currently under French command, numbers around 15.000 soldiers. They are complemented by a contingent from the Lebanese Army that is also supposed to number 15.000 troops. The new UNIFIL force is in fact completely different from its predecessor. Its rules of engagement and mandate are more robust and the force is supposed to assist the Lebanese army in the disarming of Hezbollah. This was in response to Israeli pressure as the Olmert government wanted to avoid a simple return to the status quo ante.

However, the two main contributing nations, France and Italy do not appear to have the political willingness to sustain losses to normalize the situation in case hostilities erupted again. For all intents and purposes UNIFIL is still caught between a rock and a hard place and the main goal of the military planning seems to have been ensuring that evacuation is feasible in a short period of time should hostilities reignite. Furthermore, the new UNIFIL force is very vulnerable to Hezbollah reprisal action if the US were to carry out a limited strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. This said, it is certainly true that UNIFIL raises the political costs for any of the two parties if they wished to restart hostilities. From this point of view the mission fulfils an important task.

Historical Perspectives

Lebanon is peculiar as it underwent a full, successful DDR process before. It is important to recall it here in order to understand how different the situation is nowadays and why it is highly unlikely that the Lebanese Army will be able to disarm Hezbollah even with the assistance of the newly strengthened UNIFIL mission. The previous successful case of DDR in Lebanon came in the wake of a 15 years civil war after the signing of the Ta'if agreement

in October 1989 that stipulated vast constitutional changes.¹ The demobilization process that began in the Spring of 1991 was not instigated as a result of a military victory over militia forces. The process began in the summer of 1991 after changes on the Lebanese domestic scene that overlapped with regional and international upheavals. In other words, the disarmament process followed a political deal. Crucially the process was conducted under the aegis of Syria, then a hegemonic presence in the country. The Lebanese Army, led by General Emile Lahoud, the current president, was able to restore the authority of the Lebanese state in a matter of months after a conflict that had lasted 15 years. The First Gulf War and the end of the Cold War had instigated a reapproachment between Syria and the United States and President Hafiz al-Assad of Syria had been given carte blanche by the Americans to implement the DDR process. The disarmament process was codified domestically by Law 88 enacted by Parliament on June 13, 1991. Nowadays the political conditions for the disarmament of Hezbollah are simply not there, the same way they were not there in 1991 when it was the only Lebanese militia, alongside the Israeli clients of the South Lebanese Army not to be dismantled.

In 1991 Hezbollah was unofficially sanctioned as a “resistance” force fighting against Israeli occupation of the southern part of the country and therefore escaped demobilization. In fact the militia was militarily reinforced rather than demobilized. The success they had in dislodging the Israelis from South Lebanon in 2000 further enhanced the reputation of the movement in the eyes of most Lebanese and indeed across the entire Muslim world. In sum, the successful DDR process in 1991 cannot serve as a precedent to gauge the chances of a renewed effort aimed at restoring full sovereignty by the Lebanese state.

Prospects for SSR/DDR

Nowadays there are worrying signs that the two parties to the conflict may be preparing for a new round of conflict. Furthermore, the domestic political situation in Lebanon is in a state of flux. The Israeli army may try to re-establish its image as a force capable of deterring any possible enemy, be it a conventional army or a guerrilla organization. Hezbollah, on the other hand, will ready itself to open a second front if American military action against Iran is carried out. Therefore, the new UNIFIL force is absolutely not supervising a truce between two parties willing to find a compromise. It is presiding over an interlude between two warring parties. The possibility that it will be able to enforce UN Security Council 1559, calling for the disarmament of Hezbollah, is very slim. Even if the Israeli withdrawal to the border were to be actually certified by the UN.

Even from a formal and legalistic point of view the new Security Council resolution beefing up UNIFIL does not call for its forces to directly implement the disarmament of Hezbollah. French and Italian forces are supposed to assist the Lebanese army to implement UN Security Council resolution 1701. Since the current Lebanese government does not have enough political capital to do so it is highly unlikely that Hezbollah will be disarmed in the near or middle term. UNSC Resolution 1701, passed on August 11, 2006 calls upon the UN

¹ The definitive account of the reintegration process is Elizabeth Picard, *The Demobilization of the Lebanese Militias, Prospects for Lebanon 9* (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1999). For a better understanding of the long term consequences on Lebanese collective memory see also Sune Haugbolle "Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East - Volume 25, Number 1, 2005*, pp. 191-203.

secretary-general to devise proposals for a lasting ceasefire along the Lebanon-Israel border which would take into account the outstanding issues between the two countries, including the Shebaa Farms, Lebanese and Israeli prisoners held by both sides, and Israeli overflights in Lebanese airspace. UNIFIL forces are supposed to play a “facilitating” role in all these issues. However, we have already seen how the UNIFIL force is not in a position to stop Israeli overflights of Lebanese territory, an activity that is in clear breach of UNSC resolution 1701. There are very thorny political obstacles in the path of SSR in Lebanon and the new, beefed up UNIFIL force is not in a position to solve them.

More in general within Lebanon all political obstacles to successful SSR remain intact and were actually exacerbated by the conflict. The conflict assured a moment of national unity in opposition to Israel but now bickering along sectarian lines is re-emerging. General Michael Aoun, recently back from exile in France, is aligning himself with Hezbollah as he aspires to succeed Emile Lahoud as president of the Republic, a post that must go to a Maronite Christian in accordance with the 1943 National Pact and the 1989 Ta’if accord that put an end to the civil war. On the opposite side is the current Lebanese government supported by the so-called “14 March Alliance” of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Sunni politician Hariri and an assortment of mainstream Christian Maronite forces. The alliance is trying to regain some room for manoeuvre after Hezbollah increased its prestige immensely as a result of the war. The political will to welcome UNIFIL and implement SSR will fall away if the government falls, an increasingly likely possibility in light of the recent mass demonstrations in Beirut.

Finally, it must be kept in mind that the situation is completely different from 1991, the last time militia disarmament was successfully implemented. Then, Syria, a hegemonic outside actor ensured that disagreements between parties did not get out of hand. Even with such a powerful outside actor overseeing the process the disarmament of the Lebanese forces was not successfully carried out until 1994 when the Lebanese government gained enough strength. Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese forces, was released from prison just one year ago after being imprisoned for his role in resisting disarmament. In fact, the Ta’if accord that put an end to the civil war in 1989 stipulated expressly that Hezbollah could keep its weapons because of its role in fighting Israeli occupation of the south of the country.

The two regional supporters of Hezbollah Syria and Iran do not have an interest in abetting SSR in Lebanon. The Syrian leadership is watching closely the results of the ongoing UN investigation of late Prime Minister Hariri’s murder. President Lahoud, who is firmly supported by Syria, has successfully prevented the holding of the international trial that was scheduled for March. In case the investigation were to be jumpstarted again, Syria may have an interest in encouraging Hezbollah to engage in skirmishes along the Israeli border in order to divert international attention. Therefore, recent overtures by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad who proposed to assist with the implementation of Resolution 1701 and invited Israel to restart peace negotiations should be treated with healthy scepticism.

As for Iran, which is at the moment the staunchest supporter of Hezbollah in the regional scene, an escalation of its stand-off with the U.S. will have direct implications for Lebanon. Hezbollah is likely to see itself as destined to partake in a military confrontation, which would reignite the war with Israel and is likely to seriously alienate Hezbollah in a Lebanese context. Therefore, we can safely conclude that the regional situation is not conducive to SSR in Lebanon.

On a positive note some possibilities have opened up as a result of the recent conflagration. The possibility of a UN force in Gaza is now being seriously contemplated, something that was unthinkable until a few months ago. There may be an acceptance of new roles for the UN and the EU in security, political and economic issues as the U.S. faces increasing costs in acting unilaterally.

Discussion questions

- What does the experience of Lebanon tell us about the importance of political context for successful SSR? To what degree can a single SSR process template be utilized for different situations?
- Does the 1991 DDR process hold any lessons for today's situation? How important is the relationship between sub-state actors and the central government in the case of Lebanon?