

Lebanese Armed Forces: A United Army for a Divided Country?

Lebanon is straining under the fallout from the Syrian civil war amidst catering for one million refugees. Can the Lebanese Armed Forces contain the crisis and deliver the country from war?



Introduction

Multi-confessional armies are often considered weak and prone to disintegration. This CMI Insight traces the development of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF; hereafter, the army) from their inception as a neutral political arbiter, through civil war fragmentation (1975–90), to post-civil war reintegration, restructuring and reform. The ongoing Syrian civil war poses a host of new security challenges for the army and threatens its cohesion and neutrality. Conflict spillover has made the army a political target with deadly attacks on soldiers and units amidst

charges of political bias. The army also struggles to contain the country's internal conflict, demonstrating the challenges faced by a multi-confessional army in a deeply divided society. Based on key studies of the Lebanese army, reports and field interviews, this CMI Insight demonstrates the crucial importance of managing civil-military relations for preserving the army's internal unity and external neutrality.¹

A neutral army

Lebanon is a deeply divided country with a troubled civil war history (1975–90). The Lebanese army is multi-confessional and should ideally reflect the religious diversity of the country itself. The importance of confessional representation in the army can be traced back to the mandate period (1920–46), when the selective recruitment of Muslims and Christians to local army units, Troup Spéciales du Levant, was a political balancing act. During the post-independence period (1943–75), the number of Shias and Sunnis in the ranks rose, but there was still a Christian numerical dominance. The same was true for the officer corps and the army command. The army commander and the head of military intelligence, known by its French name Deuxième Bureau, were both Christians, hence criticised as leading a “Christian Army”. In the same period, the police and gendarmerie (Internal Security Force, ISF), by comparison, had a predominance of Muslims.

The Lebanese army has since its inception sought to remain neutral. The army did not intervene during Lebanon's quest for independence from France (1943), was a bystander in the first Arab-Israeli war (1948), and refrained from siding with either party during Lebanon's brief civil war (1958). Taken together, the responses to these events cemented the vision of a neutral army (*jaysh muhayid*). Indeed, the army was neither trained nor equipped for a military offensive. Rather, its primary role



was to serve as a neutral arbiter guaranteeing free elections, democratic transitions and political stability. However, during the period 1958–70, the army's role was politicised and the Deuxième Bureau became a political tool of government. Still, it is noteworthy that, since the country's independence in 1943, the army has remained under civilian control and not attempted a coup d'état.

Civil war (1975-90)

In 1975, at the start of the civil war, the army counted about 20,000 men. Trying to quell the nascent conflict, the army was pulled in from the start. When the government collapsed, the army disintegrated along confessional lines, leading to internal rebellion, short-lived insurrections and revolts prompting mass defections and desertions. While the large majority of the soldiers simply went home or stayed in their barracks, the remainder (approx. 15 per cent) joined the newly formed factions and militias.

During the civil war, there were several attempts at restructuring the army. This included offering amnesties to defectors and militiamen as well as laying off those not reporting for duty and hiring new recruits. Most importantly, the army re-assigned about 8,000 soldiers and staff and kept them on the state payroll. This unique solution managed to maintain a bond between soldiers and the state, even though an estimated 3,000 soldiers turned militiamen were battling the state. Despite reeling from breakaway militias, the army was able to retain its impartial image.

The militias were typically associated with a pre-existing political party or religious group. Only about 15 per cent of the population joined the militias. The militias differed in size, personnel and number of fighters; by the end of the war, approximately 25 militias had gathered about 50,000 full-time fighters. Despite their wartime exploits, most militias failed to institutionalise their economic and political role and were disbanded after the war.

Post-civil war DDR process

The civil war ended with a peace deal, the Taif Accords (1989), which instituted Syrian quasi-suzerainty, followed by a General Amnesty Law (1991) granting all leaders and militia members immunity from war crimes. In April 1991, about 50,000 militia fighters were disarmed following a general amnesty and an offer of government posts to militia leaders. The peace deal enabled Syria to continue its tutelage of the country by keeping 14,000 soldiers stationed in Lebanon. The soldiers had been stationed in Lebanon since 1976 as the Arab Deterrent Force (ADF). All soldiers were supposed to be withdrawn within two years, but this never happened. Instead, the Syrian military presence was institutionalised in bilateral agreements, most importantly the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination (1991), and the Defense and Security Pact (1991).

The General Amnesty Law was part and parcel of the post-war disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process. It targeted communal and local militias as well as militias linked to political parties, but excluded the Palestinian militias, Hezbollah and the Israeli proxy force, the South Lebanese Army (SLA). The extent to which the militias complied with the decree and their willingness to decommission and dispose of their weapons varied, as did their ability to reintegrate ex-combatants. When the first (and only) phase of the reintegration process was completed in October 1993, about 6,000 ex-militiamen had been integrated into the army. Many of those not eligible for army service either were offered civilian jobs, accorded local integration or left the country. The integration of militiamen into the army was lopsided, with a majority of those integrated being Muslims. Only lower-ranking personnel joined the army. The most violent, experienced and ideologically driven fighters were left out. From 1993, the mandatory military service was reintroduced, enrolling about 3,000 conscripts a year.

Post-civil war reform

The post-civil war reform of the Lebanese army took as its model the already obsolete "national Arab army," a large, ineffective and costly force, ill equipped for modern, asymmetric warfare. Under Syrian tutelage, Hezbollah's militia was exempted from the DDR process. Hezbollah's small, mobile, well-trained force became an extension of the army, in a "conceptual continuity" and not as an irregular force. This was controversial and led to a growing sectarian split within the army ranks. The army also refrained from taking full military control of Lebanese territory and left the southern areas under the protection of Hezbollah's militia, a non-state actor.

Moreover, there was a reshuffling of personnel among brigades to enhance Muslim-Christian confessional balance, dubbed "Total Integration," followed by laying off staff and hiring new members within the officer corps. In order to sever primordial ties and confessional loyalties, a cumbersome six-month rotation of the army units between regions was instituted. Both the six-member army command (Conseil Militaire) and the brigades' command chain were multi-confessional.

Inter-state wars

In the early post-war period, fierce battles erupted along the country's southern border following exchanges between Hezbollah and the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). Israel's Operation Accountability (1993) and Operation Grapes of Wrath (1996) destroyed thousands of homes (19-20,000), killed Lebanese civilians and led to a mass exodus of internally displaced persons (300-500,000) from the conflict zone. The Lebanese army played no role in these wars; indeed, it was not deployed south of the Litani River. Nor could the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), deployed at the Israeli border from 1978, deter Hezbollah's numerous militant operations, peaking at close to 5,000 during 1996–2000.

The cross-border attacks ended in 2000 when the Israeli forces withdrew unilaterally. Due to the tensions along the border, UNIFIL remained as a peacekeeping force in the southern zone, its mandate was extended and the force expanded. However, Hezbollah's militia took control of the liberated areas, which led to a privatisation of national security, a development that sidelined the army. Overall, the army drifted from the consensus model of the 1960s and 1970s to a coercive role, clamping down on radical Sunni groups and opponents of Syria. Officers were increasingly being trained in Syria and received a wide range of economic privileges and perks that promoted corruption within the army ranks.

Elite rivalry and army recruitment

The confessional tensions grew after 2000 and led to a struggle for control with state institutions and the funding under their purview, including the army, intelligence agencies and security units. The rivalry between pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, a former army general, and Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a business tycoon, translated into competition for control over the army. This led to a selective recruitment that reversed attempts over the previous decade to maintain a confessional balance within the army ranks. The Presidential Guard was expanded and put under Syrian control. In response, the Internal Security Force (ISF) was enlarged and put under the direct control of the prime minister. These forces were trained and equipped by France and the United States respectively. The Government Guard, an offshoot of the ISF tasked with the protection of the prime minister, was enlarged too and staffed by Sunnis, leading to charges of a sectarian bias.

The army is required to staff the officer corps with an equal number of Muslims and Christians (each comprising several sects), but recruitment of soldiers is less rigidly enforced, with around two-thirds of the new recruits being Muslims. In either case, the army struggles to fill the quota of Christians, who are not attracted to army service. For poor Muslims, however, army service is often their only job option, meaning that the internal competition among Muslim candidates is fierce. The recruits also complain that enrolling in the army is marred by favouritism and bribery.

In 2004, the army totalled 60,000 men, with a slight majority of Muslim officer corps. Universal conscription was abolished in 2005 with Syrian approval but the force continued to grow with an estimated 5,000 recruits on contract, the majority Muslims, and current estimates reaching 70,000 men. Together with Syria, Lebanon has one of the highest ratios of army personnel to civilians in the world (>175 to 10,000). Nonetheless, the country's security was compromised by internal rivalry between intelligence units, each under separate command and

with little coordination between them. This made the country susceptible to security breaches as the regional tensions rose from late 2004. Indeed, intelligence agencies, in particular the General Security Directorate (Sûreté Générale), stand accused of colluding with Syria to destabilise Lebanon.

The Beirut Spring

In 2004, UN Security Council Resolution 1559 mandated a dissolution of all non-state militias, and a new role for the army, including taking up position along the border with Israel. Each of these demands challenged the post-war status quo and raised tensions between the president and the prime minister and Syria's Assad regime. The crisis came to a head in 2005, when former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his entourage were killed in a devastating car bomb attack in Beirut, which was blamed on Syria. The assassination sent shockwaves through the country and led to massive outpouring of anger and grief, leading to the popular uprising known as the Beirut Spring, or Cedar Revolution.

During the turmoil, acting Prime Minister Omar Karami ordered the army to quell the protests, but the commander in charge, General Michel Suleiman, defied the orders. This decision was crucial to safeguard the citizens' legitimate right to protest, which grew to become a freedom intifada; at the time the largest peaceful demonstration in the Middle East. A large group of protesters demanded the end of the Syrian hegemony in Lebanon, the withdrawal of Syrian troops and an international investigation into the murder of Hariri. Faced with massive domestic protests and international condemnation, Syria withdrew its remaining troops ahead of the UN Security Council deadline of 30 April 2005.

The 2006 July War between Hezbollah and Israel can be seen as a consequence of the shift in the regional power balance.

The 2006 July War

The departure of the Syrian army opened a new and independent role for the Lebanese army and was followed by an unblocking of US aid. The army acted as a proxy for the West, amidst stronger internal divisions between the rival political blocs formed by the Beirut Spring: the March 8 pro-Syrian bloc, and the March 14 pro-Western bloc. The 2006 July War between Hezbollah and Israel can be seen as a consequence of the shift in the regional power balance. Hezbollah's cross-border ambush of an Israeli patrol led to a massive Israeli retaliation that wrecked much of Lebanon's infrastructure, displaced one million people, and killed more than 1,000 civilians. The Israeli army also dropped cluster bombs over south Lebanon just ahead of the UN-brokered ceasefire that ended the conflict. Despite the devastation of parts of south Lebanon and Hezbollah headquarters in Beirut, the party claimed a Divine Victory that inflated its popularity across the Arab world.

The Hezbollah attack was not coordinated with the army command. The army did not engage in combat but lost about fifty soldiers in war-related incidents. Following the 2006 July War, four army brigades totalling 15,000 men were deployed along the Israeli border south of the Litani river, together with an enlarged UN peacekeeping force (UNIFIL II), currently staffed by more than 10,000 men. The UNIFIL mission has been contested, with harassment of UN personnel and deadly attacks on convoys and vehicles. The redeployment eroded the army's autonomy and amounted to greater integration in the security policies of western states. The danger of this move was that it eroded the army's neutrality and impartiality, presenting the army as an ally of Western powers.

Attacking the army

In May 2007, army personnel came under attack from a fringe Islamist group based in the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr el-Bared near Tripoli. More than 20 militants and 21 soldiers were killed in the initial shoot-out, which soon turned the camp into a war zone. After 15 weeks of intense bombardment and gunfire, the camp was reduced to rubble and the death toll reached 500. This was the largest armed conflict since the 2006 war and the most deadly. The victory came with a huge cost for the army; about 170 soldiers were killed, the large majority young Sunnis from the poverty-stricken Akkar region north of Tripoli where army service is one of the few career options open to young men. Ill-equipped and undertrained, they were killed by sniper fire, booby-traps and hit-and-run attacks.

The drawn-out fight between Sunni militants and the army proved that the army would attack Sunni adversaries, defying long-held fears that this scenario would split the army ranks along sectarian lines and lead to defections. Indeed, the decision to attack the camp was the army's own, although the government backed it. However, the siege of a Palestinian refugee camp was considered an attack on the refugees themselves and the soldiers were accused of abusing residents, torturing captives, and desecrating homes.

Trust in the army

The army is consistently ranked as the country's most trusted public institution with approval ratings above 75 per cent. Following the Nahr el-Bared incident, the army's popularity soared and opinion polls showed strong support for the army's fight against militant groups. The army is sensitive to its public image, seeing itself as a vanguard of the nation rising above sectarian differences. To this end, the army has its own public relations department, doubling as the army's spokesperson. The department also engages in public-private publicity partnerships, an example is the commercial advertising campaign, The Nation in Our Hearts, which celebrated the army's heroic

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Nahr el-Bared victory using billboards and TV spots praising the army for saving the nation.

The bloody Nahr el-Bared campaign started a new and worrying trend: turning the Army into a political target. In late 2007, the army commander in charge of the siege of the camp was killed by a car bomb, followed soon after by twin bus bombs killing army personnel. The deadly attacks made the army start commemorating slain soldiers and officers as martyrs (*shabeed*). This is a martyrology, common in Lebanon, which posterises and commemorates victims in annual memorials and vigils. Unlike the country's numerous confessional martyrs, memorials of slain army soldiers portray them as martyrs of the nation, hence validates the army's motto of honour, sacrifice and loyalty to the nation (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Flag and motto of the Lebanese army: "Honour, Sacrifice, Loyalty"

Beirut clashes

In 2008, the internal political crisis deepened when the government decided to unearth Hezbollah's secret communications network. This sparked the biggest sectarian clashes in Beirut since the end of the civil war. During the 8–14 May clashes, rival militias took to the streets, resulting in 65 people killed and more than 200 injured. The army, taking refuge in the "neutral army" concept, neither intervened nor attempted to disarm, round up or arrest the fighters deployed throughout the streets of Beirut. Lacking political cover for intervening, and fearing an internal split in its ranks, the army was a passive bystander as the Hezbollah's militia took control of the streets of West Beirut.

The incident brought the country on the brink of civil war, but the political turmoil was resolved by the surprise Doha Agreement that paved the way for the election of a new president, General Michel Suleiman.² While the army seeks to stay aloof from politics, the tradition of promoting acting army

commanders to the presidency, which began with Fouad Chehab (1958–64), was followed by Emile Lahoud (1998–2007) and repeated in the appointment of Michel Suleiman (2008–14). As if to underline this problem, the most likely candidate to succeed Suleiman as his successor is Army General Jean Kahwagi. In sum, this amounts to a symbiosis between the state and the army.

National Defence Strategy?

Lebanon's politicians have for years struggled to agree to a National Defence Strategy but the process has been deadlocked by persistent crises in government and regional tensions. The most divisive issue is the country's "dual-power" condition, instituted by the Syrian presence from the early 1990s as a conceptual continuity between the army and Hezbollah's militia, also known as the Resistance (*al-muqawamah*). Since 2005, Hezbollah's armed status has been enshrined in a tripartite defence formula known as "People-Army-Resistance". From mid-2011, the Syrian civil war deepened internal divisions and raised tensions over Hezbollah's military engagement in Syria, in contravention of the non-intervention agreement, the Baabda Declaration.³ The regional and internal divisions have strengthened the opposition to Hezbollah's armed status, held up elections to the parliament, and left the presidency vacant.

Until 2005, most Western countries shied away from funding the army because Syria was in control of the country.

Following a yearlong power vacuum, an interim (salvation) cabinet agreed to a watered down formulation of "the Lebanese people's right to resistance". This compromise statement is politically significant, but does not change Hezbollah's armed status. The main reason for not surrendering its arms is that, without them, Hezbollah cannot sustain its hard-won position domestically. Disarmament can not only dismantle the movement's political gains but also endanger its existence. For the same reasons Hezbollah has rejected putting its militia under the army command.

Sunni-Shia tensions

From March 2011, the Syrian revolt has multiplied armed clashes and deadly bomb attacks across Lebanon, in particular in cities with Sunni majorities (Tripoli, Sidon) and in the capital. In Beirut, the army deploys about 4,000 soldiers in addition to reserve personnel on standby. Additionally, the army deployment has been reinforced in known conflict zones, such as mixed confessional neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, the army's role in ending these clashes has led to criticism that is biased in favour of Hezbollah (and Syria), compromising its image as a neutral arbiter.

This in particular concerns the army's handling of the so-called Abra incident, a suburb of Sidon, a Sunni-majority city. In mid-2013, soldiers clashed with militiamen belonging to

firebrand Sunni cleric Sheikh Ahmad Assir. The incident killed more than 50 people, including 17 soldiers. A local Hezbollah-affiliated militia was charged with clandestine involvement in the incident that led to the fatal shoot-out. The army was likewise charged with conspiring with Hezbollah to eliminate Assir and accused of mistreating detainees.

Targeting the army

The Syrian civil war has spilled across the border to Lebanon, with Syrian artillery shelling border towns and Hezbollah's militia crossing into Syria. The Lebanese army patrols the border (not demarcated), but has neither returned fire nor attempted to hinder Hezbollah's cross-border movement. Despite its neutral stance, the army has gradually been pulled into the regional conflict. This includes several attacks on soldiers and units stationed in the Bekaa Valley, especially the border village of Aarsal. The attackers are mainly foreign jihadist groups – Nusra Front and Islamic State (IS, ISIS) – which in August 2014 took control of Aarsal. In the bloody battle to retake the town, scores of militants and civilians were killed, while the army lost more than 20 soldiers, with an equal number captured by Islamic State. The abduction and later beheading of two of the soldiers have caused widespread protests and resentment over state and army inaction and demands for negotiating the captives' release.

Hezbollah has also become a target of jihadist groups, being punished for its military involvement in Syria. Suicide attacks and car bombs have bypassed Hezbollah's security network and targeted shopping malls, parking lots and busy streets in Beirut's Southern Suburbs. The army has been unable to avert the many attacks, despite stepping up patrols and rounding up suspects. The attacks have been condemned by all political parties, but has eroded Hezbollah's image of invincibility and increased sectarian tensions throughout the country.

Strengthening the army

The Lebanese army is costly and the defence budget consumes a large share of the country's GDP. From a peak of around 26 per cent in 1992, the budget has since 2002 hovered around 4 per cent (USD 1.6 billion approx.),⁴ most of it spent on salaries, pensions, and perks with little left for new equipment. Lebanon's military spending is lower than the regional average (Saudi Arabia tops the list with 8.9 per cent of GDP) and this is one reason why the army's eleven infantry brigades are poorly equipped, and the small naval and rudimentary air force lack combat capability. In 2006, the army estimated that it would cost about one billion dollars to equip its combined infantry, naval and air force.

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the army because Syria was in control of the country. Following the Syrian troop withdrawal in 2006, the US has been the main supplier of arms and financing to the army, amounting to one billion dollars during 2006–14. In late 2013, Saudi Arabia awarded the army a three-billion-dollar grant to purchase military equipment supplied by France. The grant was widely seen as a means to strengthen the army at the expense of Hezbollah’s militia fighting in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime. In mid-2014, Saudi Arabia awarded the army a one-billion-dollar grant to combat “religious extremism”. Shortly after, the cabinet announced plans to add 12,000 new army and police recruits. However, the main reason the army is unable to combat Islamic militancy is neither lack of resolve nor outdated equipment, but rather the fact that it does not have a political mandate for taking decisive action.

The Tripoli tripwire

Nowhere has the army’s lack of a mandate been more evident than in the political-religious conflict in Tripoli, Lebanon’s second largest city. The army is deployed in Syria Street, bordering two inner-city neighbourhoods at odds since the civil war: Bab al-Tabbaneh (Sunni) and Jabal Mohsen (Alawite). This is the country’s deadliest proxy war with the Sunnis supporting the Syrian opposition and the Alawites supporting the Assad regime. Over the past three years (2011–14), more than 20 rounds of conflict have killed more than 200 persons and injured 1,300. Among the casualties are at least 10 dead soldiers and 70 injured (Figure 2).⁵ The conflict is concentrated along the main front line, but affects the whole city and has worsened the already difficult living conditions among residents living in extreme poverty.

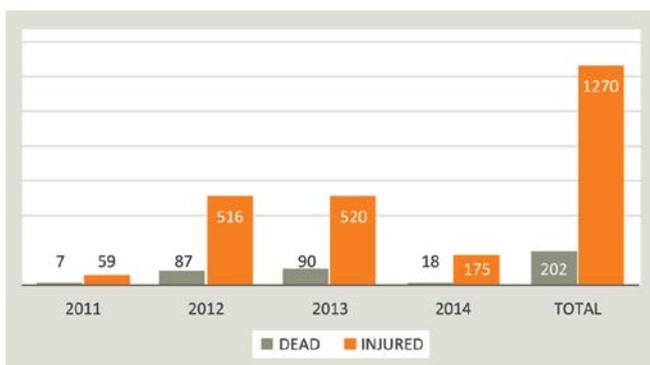


Figure 2: Tripoli conflict: casualties 2011–2014

The conflict between the two communities began during the Lebanese civil war when their religious-political alignment placed them on opposite sides of the bloody conflict. The simmering conflict has since erupted several times (2005, 2008) and from mid-2011, the Syrian revolt made the conflict break out yet again. In an attempt to stop the fighting, the army devised a comprehensive security plan (Tripoli Security Plan), but lacking a political mandate to enforce it, could neither seize weapons nor arrest fighters (Figure 3). All the army could

do was trying to contain the conflict within pre-set “red lines” and prevent either community from being overrun. The army is accused of being Hezbollah-controlled, but both communities embrace the army as a protector and as the only force capable of preventing the conflict from spiralling out of hand. Nonetheless, sniper fire and clashes not only kills soldiers and fighters, but also children, teenagers and women.



Figure 3: Tripoli Security Plan
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During spring 2014, a new cabinet mandated the army to take stronger action in Tripoli and implement the dormant security plan. Almost 2,000 army soldiers took part in the crackdown, which after shutting down the mobile phone network, raided the warring neighbourhoods and began mass arrests of wanted militia leaders, fighters and sponsors as well as confiscated heavy arms and light weapons. More than 200 arrest warrants were issued, prompting many to flee while others turned themselves in. The army’s clampdown has restored a tenuous calm, but the conflict awaits a political solution; one that the army’s security plan cannot provide. In the meantime, Tripoli’s Syria Street remains the fault line between the country’s rival blocs and the inhabitants bear the brunt of the country’s internal conflict.

Conclusion

The Lebanese army remains the country’s most valued public institution and last resort amidst repeated government collapse and state failure. Indeed, the army strives to embody a national ideal: a united force, rising above sectarianism. From its inception, the army has remained a neutral arbiter under civilian control. Rebuilding the army after the civil war successfully integrated many former militiamen and increased the confessional balance. Reformed in the mould of traditional Arab armies – large, costly and inefficient – the Lebanese army has remained subservient to Hezbollah’s militia. The country’s “dual-power” condition is unresolved and compounded by the Syrian civil war and the long-term UNIFIL presence

(1978–present). The army carefully protects its neutrality and avoids taking sides in, and becoming a party to, sectarian conflicts. The main reason for the army not intervening is not a lack of capability, but a lack of a political mandate and the absence of a national defence strategy. Currently, the Syrian civil war strains the army's cohesion and threatens its neutrality, the army's most valued assets in a divided society. Moreover, the spillover

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from the Syrian civil war and Hezbollah's military engagement has magnified the army's security challenges and made it a target. The massive foreign grants seek to strengthen the army's military capability, stabilise the country and contain the Syrian crisis. Still, the complex national and regional dynamics underline the challenges facing a multi-confessional army in a deeply divided country.

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INTERVIEWS

Interviews conducted by the author in Tripoli, Beirut and Baabda, 6–17 November 2013.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This CMI Insight is part of the Everyday Maneuvers project and provides the background for four ethnographic studies of civil-military relations in North Lebanon.
- 2 Doha Agreement, <http://bit.ly/1vCMaDJ> (accessed 1. October 2014)
- 3 Baabda Declaration, <http://bit.ly/1nTgadO> (accessed 30. September 2014)
- 4 SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database (accessed 30. September 2014)
- 5 Casualty figures compiled from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bab_al-Tabbaneh%E2%80%93Jabal_Mohsen_conflict; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_violent_events_relating_to_the_Syrian_Civil_War_spillover_in_Lebanon_\(2011%E2%80%9314\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_violent_events_relating_to_the_Syrian_Civil_War_spillover_in_Lebanon_(2011%E2%80%9314)). The figures exclude the many casualties elsewhere in Tripoli, including the twin mosque bombings that killed 47 people and injured 500 in August 2013.

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