

U.S. Lawmakers Drop Hold on Aid to Lebanese Military

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Washington has provided Lebanon's military with an estimated \$720 million in aid since 2006 in an effort to develop the institution as a counterweight to Hezbollah, which receives its arms and funding from Iran and Syria, and has grown as a political force with seats in the Lebanese government.

"We reviewed our assistance to Lebanon and concluded that it is vital, given ongoing challenges to the Lebanese state from Hezbollah and others," State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said Friday.

The White House and State Department have pressed senior Democrats in Congress in recent weeks, particularly Howard Berman (D., Calif.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, to lift its hold on military assistance, in a bid to strengthen Mr. Hariri's government against Hezbollah's growing power, according to U.S. officials.

Mr. Berman has voiced concerns about the Lebanese military's independence from Hezbollah and the possibility that some U.S. military aid could be used against Israel.

In August, Lebanon's military engaged in a border skirmish with Israeli troops that killed a senior Israeli military commander.

The U.S. and Lebanon have, subsequently, conducted a review of their military-assistance program and assuaged the Democratic lawmakers' concerns, according to congressional officials.

"I have been given reason for confidence that assistance to the LAF has not fallen into the hands of Hezbollah and that every possible measure is being taken by Lebanese and American authorities to prevent that from happening," Mr. Berman said in a statement Friday.

U.S. assistance has included armored personnel carriers, helicopters, M-16 rifles, night-vision scopes and advanced training.

The Obama administration has focused on stabilizing Lebanon as concerns mount in Washington and in Arab capitals that Hezbollah could resort to violence or try and overthrow Mr. Hariri in a bid to disrupt the Beirut government's cooperation with the U.N. tribunal.

According to officials briefed on the court's work, up to six members of Hezbollah could be indicted by the end of the year for the 2005 car bombing, which killed Mr. Hariri and 22 others. Among the members investigators are looking at, according to these officials, is Musafa Badreddine, a senior Hezbollah military commander. Hezbollah has denied any role in Mr. Hariri's killing.

Lebanon's instability has undercut the Obama administration's efforts to re-engage with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The U.S. has hoped that a rapprochement with Damascus could stabilize Lebanon and underpin broader Arab-Israeli peace talks. But U.S. officials say Syria has been cooperating with Hezbollah in seeking to discredit the U.N. tribunal while transferring increasingly sophisticated weapons into Lebanon.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Friday reprimanded Syria for interfering in Lebanon's affairs.

"Syria's behavior has not met our hopes and expectations over the past 20 months—and Syria's actions have not met its international obligations," Mrs. Clinton said in an interview with Lebanon's An Nahar newspaper.

Mrs. Clinton also trumpeted Lebanon's armed forces as the key to insuring the survival of an independent Lebanese government. "It is truly a national institution and a strong symbol of national unity," she said.

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