

Securing Lebanon - time to act

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The conclusion of the fighting between the Lebanese Army and the Fatah al-Islam militants is unfortunately just the latest painful reminder of Lebanon's seemingly inherent lack of security. While self-evidently it is not possible for a country to prosper economically without adequate security, the latter is unachievable without first identifying and articulating threats to national security and agreeing appropriate responses. The best tribute to those Lebanese soldiers who died at Nahr al-Bared would now be a renewed effort to debate the critical security issues that lie at the heart of Lebanon's quest for stability.

There have been accusations that despite acute sacrifices, the Lebanese Army was poorly trained and equipped for the task of defeating the militants. Lack of experience in urban warfare, a desire to spare civilians, equipment shortfalls, a shortage of aviation assets and the surprising level of experience of the militants were all factors in prolonging the hostilities. The inability of the Lebanese state to gain access to the self-administering Palestinian camps was also compounded by a weak border regime that allowed foreign militants, weapons and know-how to enter the country in the first place.

The most comprehensive assessment of Lebanon's border security to date has been that of the United Nation's Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team (LIBAT). The report of June 26, 2007, states that in Lebanon border security is "insufficient to prevent smuggling, in particular the smuggling of arms, to any significant extent. The assessment was further strengthened by the fact that not a single on-border or near-border seizure of smuggled arms was documented to the Team." LIBAT stated that the level of cooperation and coordination between the four Lebanese security agencies with border management responsibilities, particularly in terms in inter-agency information sharing and joint planning, was low. This explains how the sophisticated sniper rifles that were used with such devastating effect by the militants in Nahr al-Bared were able to enter the country.

Did the Lebanese Army therefore pay the price for the shortcomings of the wider security structure in Lebanon? A holistic overview of Lebanon's security raises important questions. Who is mandated to defend Lebanon? Against what internal and external threats must the country defend itself? Hizbullah's arms are frequently described as defensive weapons to be used against the external threat of Israeli attack until such time as the Lebanese Army is strong enough to defend the state. It is ironic therefore that the same ineffective border management regime that facilitates the passage of weapons to Hizbullah also enables groups like Fatah al-Islam to flourish and in turn attack and debilitate the Lebanese Army.

As Lebanon acknowledges the sacrifice of dozens of military personnel, it is critical there now be a considered debate within Lebanon about what security means for Lebanon. While the views of external actors need to be heard, not least those of the US whose military support to Lebanon has increased from \$800,000 in 2004 to over \$200 million this year, this is quintessentially a Lebanese process. The end of the hostilities offers a 'golden hour' when seemingly the sole point of consensus in Lebanon, the sacrifice of the Army, needs to be built on. With the Presidency currently held by a former General, serious consideration given to his replacement by another military officer and Israeli planes striking what they suspect were weapons destined for Lebanon in Syria, there has never been a better time for an inclusive discussion about the role of the security forces, threats to Lebanon's security and the appropriate responses to them.

This inclusive process should form an umbrella encompassing all activities relating to the security of Lebanon. Within this are the inter-related topics of Hizbullah's weapons, the transformation and development of the Internal Security Forces to effectively police the country, the role of the UN force in Lebanon, the need to clarify missions and mandates amongst the Lebanese security agencies and augment the fledgling efforts to create a common border force, better coordination of donor support for the security forces, the fate of Palestinian weapons and training camps, the socioeconomic root causes of radicalisation and many other issues.

Short-term pragmatic responses to threats to internal security must not undermine longer term steps to improve the effectiveness, accountability and governance of the security sector. But if a repeat of Nahr al-Bared is to be avoided, a Lebanese debate about the nature of the true threats to Lebanon's security must start now.

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