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Lebanon

Lebanon’s Sovereignty Battle Isn’t Just Over Arms

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In early August 2025, Lebanon’s cabinet approved a landmark, though deeply polarizing, decision: tasking the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) with drafting a plan to bring all weapons under state control by year’s end. Widely seen as the first formal step toward disarming Hezbollah, the decision sparked immediate backlash. Four Shi'ite ministers walked out of the cabinet session, Hezbollah leaders denounced it as a “grave sin,” and warnings followed that any enforcement under Israeli fire would be met with retaliation.

The episode crystallizes Lebanon’s sovereignty dilemma. Backed by Western donors, the government is pursuing force consolidation on the belief that sovereignty begins with coercive authority. Yet this moment exposes the deeper problem: a fragile state, fractured by war, foreign influence, and political paralysis, attempting to claim sovereignty by decree.

Sovereignty is often defined as the state’s monopoly over the use of force and its independence in foreign affairs, premised on functional institutions, fiscal stability, and legitimacy. Lebanon has none of these. Coercive authority without institutional credibility cannot hold territory or command loyalty; an army cannot defend a state that cannot govern.

A more durable vision, sovereignty from below, starts with the state’s ability to deliver services, secure rights, and include citizens in political life. In Lebanon’s case, the question is not only who holds the weapons, but whether the state is seen as legitimate, capable, and inclusive.

The security-first approach now underway is fundamentally flawed. Lebanon cannot rebuild sovereignty from above through military consolidation alone. It must be grounded in political legitimacy, fiscal autonomy, and institutional capacity. And that begins with confronting the reality of Lebanon’s current position: a state besieged on multiple fronts, militarily, economically, and politically, whose path to sovereignty cannot be separated from the threats it faces and the means it commands.

Lebanon’s Sovereignty Under Siege

To understand why force consolidation is not enough, one must first grasp the scale and nature of the pressures Lebanon faces today. Four overlapping challenges define this moment.

First, Israel’s 2024 war on Lebanon left over 4,000 dead, including 316 children, and displaced more than one million people. Despite a ceasefire in November, Israel has committed more than 5,000 violations and continues to occupy positions south of the Litani River. Moreover, Israel continues to violate Lebanon's sovereignty and assassinate individuals, more than 300 since the conclusion of the ceasefire, with the continuous support, explicit or not, of the USA and western powers.

Second, the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 did not close the security gap along the Syrian frontier. In March, clashes erupted between Lebanese clans in border areas and armed forces loyal to the new Syrian authorities led by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Third, Hezbollah operates as a powerful parallel armed security actor, integrated into Iran’s regional strategy and entrenched in areas neglected by the state.

Finally, Western military aid, such as the $95 million the U.S. released in March, is increasingly tied to the LAF’s role in “containing Hezbollah and Iran,” constraining policy autonomy.

Taken together, these dynamics mean that the debate over sovereignty is not merely about the status of Hezbollah’s weapons. It is about whether the Lebanese state can act independently in the face of both domestic veto players and external conditions. That independence depends not only on the political will to act, but on the capacity to do so.

An Army Stretched Beyond Its Means

At the heart of Lebanon’s security dilemma stands the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Tasked with securing the South, guarding the Syrian frontier, and assuming Hezbollah’s deterrent role, the LAF is expected to deliver national defense while remaining neutral in a country deeply divided over its mission.

Its resources make this mission implausible. The 2025 defense budget stands at $800 million, with 67% consumed by salaries. Once operating costs are deducted, just $24 million, or 3%, is left for training, modernization, and equipment. NATO guidelines call for 20% on modernization, [1] while Israel spends more than $5 billion annually on military R&D alone. [2]

The disparity is staggering. Per soldier, Lebanon spends $10,600 each year; Israel spends $273,560. Per capita, Lebanon’s defense spending collapsed from $457 in 2018 to $30 in 2021, a 93% drop, before rebounding to $110 in 2024, still 76% below pre-crisis levels. [3]

This is not merely a matter of low numbers, it is about strategic dependency. The LAF relies almost entirely on foreign donors for fuel, equipment, and logistics. Such dependency limits operational independence, undermines strategic credibility, and exposes the institution to political leverage. In effect, Lebanon is being asked to act as a sovereign security actor using tools it does not control and resources it does not own.

This mismatch between mandate and means forces a harder question: if Lebanon cannot fund or equip the army to fulfil its assigned role, what strategic options remain open to it?

The Neutrality Mirage

With alliances and band wagoning politically impossible, some advocate neutrality as Lebanon’s strategic path. In theory, neutrality fits the country’s plural political identity and offers a way to avoid entanglement in regional wars.

In practice, neutrality is meaningless without the resources and legitimacy to enforce it. Countries that have successfully anchored neutrality in their national strategy back it with substantial investment: Switzerland spends around $683 per capita on defense, Austria $473, and even Ireland, often seen as militarily modest, spends $243. Lebanon’s 2024 figure was just $110. [4]

Nor is neutrality simply about money. These states enjoy broad public trust in their militaries, grounded in perceptions of impartiality and national ownership. Lebanon has neither the fiscal means nor the cohesive legitimacy to make neutrality a credible policy without deep political and institutional reform.

That gap points to a larger truth: before Lebanon can credibly choose a defence posture, neutrality or otherwise, it must first address the internal deficits that make any strategy unsustainable. That means starting not with the army, but with the state itself.

Rebuilding from Below

A credible sovereignty strategy must begin where Lebanon is most fragile: in its legitimacy and its capacity. Reclaiming legitimacy requires dismantling the sectarian patronage system and replacing it with a secular, proportional framework that allows for genuine cross-sectarian and class-based representation. Only through such a shift can political authority be anchored in broad consent rather than in narrow confessional bargains.

But legitimacy without capacity is hollow. Fiscal sovereignty must be restored through progressive taxation and by reducing reliance on foreign financing. Economic independence also depends on redirecting investment toward productive sectors and historically marginalized regions, breaking the post-war model of finance-driven growth that deepened dependency and inequality. Finally, the state must reassert itself as the primary provider of essential services, re-establishing the social contract on which meaningful sovereignty rests.

These steps would not only strengthen the state but also erode the parallel legitimacy that sustains non-state armed actors. This is why the question of Hezbollah’s arms should be approached differently than it is today.

Disarmament as an Outcome, not a Precondition

Hezbollah’s military power is sustained not only by its alliance with Iran but also by the vacuum left by state failure. Demanding its disarmament before rebuilding the state reverses the sequence.

If the state can defend borders, provide services, and protect rights, the social and political rationale for Hezbollah’s arms will weaken. Disarmament would then be the natural result of restored state credibility.

Seen in this light, military consolidation is not the starting line for sovereignty, it is the finish line of a much broader process of state reconstruction.

From Assertion to Construction

The post-2006 experience offers a warning: when the state abandons reconstruction, it cedes legitimacy to others. If the state once again withdraws from that role in 2025, the result will be a deeper crisis of sovereignty.

True sovereignty cannot be declared through cabinet votes or donor communiqués. It must be built politically, fiscally,

and institutionally. The LAF can guard the borders, but only a reconstituted state can safeguard its population.

When citizens see the state not as an enforcer but as a guarantor of rights, Lebanon will have moved from asserting sovereignty to constructing it.

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Prepared by The Policy Initiative in collaboration with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). The article reflects the authors’ views and not necessarily those of FES. This article is based on a forthcoming paper.

1. NATO. 2014. Wales Summit Declaration.

2. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2025. Military Expenditure Database

3. Ibid.

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[1] NATO. 2014. Wales Summit Declaration.

[2] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2025. Military Expenditure Database.

[3] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2025. Military Expenditure Database.

[4] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2025. Military Expenditure Database.