

# General Chaos: The Potential for Military Rule in Lebanon

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Since mid-2019, Lebanon has faced compound economic and political crises that rival any in its modern history. Drastic hyperinflation, mass unemployment and severe import difficulties have each been exacerbated by the Beirut explosion and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, while the formation of a government capable of implementing necessary economic reforms is beholden to continued discord amongst the country's traditional sectarian political elites. Moreover, widespread distrust in Lebanon's elites — indeed, Lebanon's entire governance system — is now so great that even if a government were formed, it is highly unlikely to secure broad public approval. Though viable alternatives remain unclear, many Lebanese have demanded a complete political overhaul and the formation of an independent, non-sectarian government since the mass protests of October 2019.

Throughout this period, the position of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) has been a source of considerable speculation. Much of this speculation, especially from western analysts, has either focused on the integrity of the LAF as the crisis deepens (i.e., whether the LAF will break down along sectarian lines), or on the LAF's role in protecting the Lebanese political establishment (especially as the suppression of dissent becomes more common). As conditions deteriorate, however, attention must also be given to a third possibility, namely, that the LAF may seize power in some form of military coup or military government.

The potential for a military government in Lebanon is often dismissed out of hand. Most analysis points to the fact that the LAF is not the strongest armed actor in Lebanon; maintains a complicated relationship with the country's premier armed entity, Hezbollah; has its own internal sectarian divisions and political allegiances; and that neither the Lebanese population nor political parties would tolerate a military government. And yet, these pervasive assumptions are not necessarily correct. Since October 2019, some Lebanese protesters have demanded some form of military government. The LAF is relatively popular, particularly when compared to the country's ruling elite, has been increasingly involved in direct service provision, and has on several occasions stated that it will not carry out certain orders on behalf of Lebanon's elected officials.<sup>1</sup> In any country faced with such dynamics, analysts would consider the prospect of some form of military takeover, coup, or radical rebalancing of civil-military affairs. Assessing such a possibility in the case of Lebanon today is critical to understanding the future operating environment in the country.

On that basis and as an exercise in contingency planning, this briefing note assesses the likelihood of some form of military government in Lebanon. Rather than construct a detailed scenario laying out how military rule could come into being in Lebanon, this paper instead attempts to explore the preconditions for any such development. Specifically, it aims to:

- Explain the rationale for considering a potential military government;
- Explore the preconditions necessary for some form of military government, and;
- Examine the likelihood that preconditions will be met and a military government will be formed in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>1</sup> Maha El Dahan and Laila Bassam, "Lebanon army chief berates politicians after president calls to clear protests", Reuters (2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-idUSKBN2B00NN>

## Why is a military government scenario possible now and why should it be of concern?

- The ruling elite has consistently failed to salvage the Lebanese state amid its near total political and economic collapse.
- No other public institution demonstrates similar credibility.
- There is sizable public support for military rule as a ‘last resort’ option.
- LAF has expressed criticism of the ruling elite, empathy towards protest movements, and defiance of Presidential orders to clear the streets.

Trust in governmental institutions and the patronage networks with which they are entwined has been heavily eroded, as they have proved incapable of extricating Lebanon from its various crises. Though public aspirations for a technocratic government propose to solve this democratic deficit through competitive elections culminating in effective, non-sectarian governance, Lebanon’s revolutionary movement is both leaderless and uncoordinated. It lacks a concrete agenda to address the sectarianism and self-interest that has been at the heart of the Lebanese state since its formation and that will almost certainly resist an agenda for change. Absent any realistic alternatives, the LAF is left as one of the few institutions that garners widespread support across the Lebanese public and is regarded suitable for helping address the country’s compound crises.



General Joseph Aoun criticizes Lebanese politicians during a meeting with Army cadres. Image courtesy of Lebanese Armed Forces.

...in early March 2021, Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, Joseph Aoun, effectively criticized Lebanon's ruling elites by asking;

“Where are you going, and what are you planning to do?”

Since the end of the civil war, the LAF has sustained a relatively neutral image, positioning itself as a broadly apolitical entity concerned with upholding Lebanese unity. Polls from 2019 showed that while just 48% of the population trusted the police, a massive 87% trusted the LAF.<sup>2</sup> More recent crackdowns on protests have likely damaged this popular acceptance somewhat, though the LAF has largely demonstrated an evenhanded approach to protests that compares favorably to that taken by the country's other security services.<sup>3</sup> On occasion, the LAF has also shown itself as empathetic to the aspirations of the protest movement. Speaking in early March 2021, Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, Joseph Aoun, effectively criticized Lebanon's ruling elites by asking; “Where are you going, and what are you planning to do?” The Commander further emphasized the right to peaceful protest, and later declined to clear the streets in response to demands from President Michel Aoun. The middle of March saw subsequent protests in El Mina, Tripoli district, in which protestors voiced the clearest demands yet for direct military rule in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup>

The international community also realizes the importance of LAF as perhaps the most vital national institution that has managed to divorce itself from the entrenched features of sectarianism, corruption and clientelism. However, the economic and financial collapse of Lebanon has spilled over to the state's security apparatuses, LAF included. Last year, the army had scrapped meat from meals provided to soldiers on duty; the devaluation of the pound has eroded the value of soldiers' salaries and led to an almost 90 percent decrease in the army's budget.<sup>5</sup> More critically, however, although the international community has blocked much needed funding to Lebanon, conditioning aid to governance and structural reforms, it has spared the army from such conditions. On 17 June 2021, France hosted a virtual conference attended by more than 20 countries and the United Nations, all of whom agreed to provide emergency aid to the army — to include food, medicine and fuel — in an attempt to ameliorate the impact of the crisis and ensure that LAF remains cohesive, operational, and capable of safeguarding stability. The US has also increased its funding to the LAF from USD 15 million to USD 120 million in fiscal year 2021.<sup>6</sup> This distinct treatment of the LAF not only reflects the international trust and support that it enjoys, it also positions it as a credible substitute to governing and ruling Lebanon, a role which the traditional elite have failed to fulfill.

<sup>2</sup> Arab Barometer (2019) [Lebanon Country Report 2019](#).

<sup>3</sup> Carnegie Middle East Centre (2019) [Playing Politics: International Security Sector Assistance and the Lebanese Military's Changing Role](#).

<sup>4</sup> The protests took place on 15 and 18 March 2021. For more, see Lebanon 24 reports on these events [here](#) and [here](#) (Arabic).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Young, “A Military Lifeline”, Carnegie Middle East Center (2021), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/84756>

<sup>6</sup> David Schenker and Grant Rumley, “Preserving the Lebanese Armed Forces Amid State Decline”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2021), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/preserving-lebanese-armed-forces-amid-state-decline>

## What are the preconditions for military rule in Lebanon?



There is precedent for a military intervention subsequent to state calamity in Lebanon. Between 1958 and 1964, General Fouad Chehab oversaw a transitional period in which he instituted a range of Chehabist reforms following the spiralling chaos, sectarianism, and corruption that characterised the presidency of Camille Chamoun.<sup>7</sup> Though Chehab's leadership featured substantial securitization of the state apparatus,<sup>8</sup> he is widely credited with stabilizing Lebanon and creating an environment in which opposing political forces began to coordinate in the national interest. This experience undoubtedly resonates in the present moment, but a range of domestic and external conditions would need to be met before the country revisits a similar solution to its current difficulties.

### Internal Conditions:

- **The LAF would need to coordinate with Hezbollah and reassure it that neither its weapons, nor its influence will be compromised.** LAF rule would likely need to avoid, as much as reasonably possible, the emergence of an armed resistance which would threaten the LAF's authority and risk dragging the country into a full-scale open armed power struggle. Hezbollah is the only group in Lebanon that poses such a threat to a military government.<sup>9</sup> To mitigate the risk of an armed confrontation, the LAF would need to coordinate with the group, likely even providing guarantees that its control and weapons would be preserved in Hezbollah stronghold areas at a minimum.
- **The LAF would need to ensure unity within its ranks to avoid defections and fragmentations within its ranks.** Like Lebanon's other security bodies, the LAF is subject to pressure brought on by Lebanon's sectarianism. During the civil war, LAF brigades fragmented along sectarian lines, hundreds deserted, and the military faced an almost total collapse.<sup>10</sup> Its ranks were unified in the post-war period, and it became one of the most broadly representative institutions in the country. If a contemporary transition to military government features fragmentation of the armed forces, it would result in greater instability. Military rule would require the LAF to maintain unity throughout.
- **The LAF would need to maintain a neutral image and allow space for civil society.** Popular support for — and international acquiescence to — a military government would require distance from the sectarian and political divides which challenge social and political cohesion. The LAF would need to maintain equal distance from all parties, ensuring freedom of speech, upholding human rights, and providing space for civil society. So far as it exists, support for a military government is seen as an alternative to the current system, primarily as a vehicle allowing Lebanon to transition beyond sectarianism. Any military system that fails to do so would likely prompt violent backlash over time.



General Fouad Shehab (above),  
 General Joseph Aoun (below).  
 Images courtesy of Lebanese Armed Forces.

<sup>7</sup> Among these reforms are the organisation of the banking sector, establishment of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), development of the education system and infrastructure development. Chehab also managed to diffuse sectarian tensions, reduce corruption and limit job patronage by political elites.

<sup>8</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, "A History of Modern Lebanon". Pluto Press (2021), pp. 140-143.

<sup>9</sup> Shaan Shaikh and Ian Williams, "Hezbollah's Missiles and Rockets", Center for Strategic and International Studies (2018), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/hezbollahs-missiles-and-rockets>.

<sup>10</sup> Aram Nerguizian, "The Lebanese Armed Forces: Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Syria Lebanon", Center for Strategic and International Studies (2009), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/090210\\_lafsecurity3.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/090210_lafsecurity3.pdf)

### External Conditions:

- **The West, mainly the US, must grant its blessing for an LAF-Hezbollah agreement and recognize the military government as legitimate.** Lebanon depends on loans, grants and other forms of assistance from western countries. LAF in particular is highly dependent on US assistance, with an estimated yearly budget of USD 224 million.<sup>11</sup> Lebanon's economic crisis has already affected the country's security apparatus, leaving many soldiers with a salary worth just \$80 per month. The LAF is not in a position to compromise this support, both for its international legitimacy and its own internal structural integrity.
- **Israel must be provided with re-assurances in regards to the military-Hezbollah agreement.** Hezbollah remains one of Israel's primary regional enemies and a threat to its stability. Any agreement resulting in military rule in Lebanon would almost certainly require terms which favor the group's stability and which may further consolidate its domestic power and military arsenal. Were Israel to consider its national security interests at increased risk, the prospect of Israeli military action which engulfs a range of Lebanese groups becomes likely. It is highly unlikely the LAF would be in a position to avoid engagement, and would therefore need to provide continued reassurance to Israel that Hezbollah is being kept in check.
- Iran would seek similar assurances that its regional interests would not be substantially compromised. Turmoil in Lebanon would have negative implications for Iran's interests in Syria. It would need to be assured that Hezbollah's resources and status are least sustained under Lebanese military rule. Naturally, this would further require that opposing parties in Lebanon do not gain increased power at the expense of Hezbollah.

<sup>11</sup> Figure from US Embassy Lebanon: U.S.-Lebanese Military Cooperation Factsheet.



General Joseph Aoun meets with US Ambassador Dorothy Shea. Image courtesy of Lebanese Armed Forces.

## How likely is it that these preconditions will be met?

Accommodation of Hezbollah is central to the formation of a military government in Lebanon. It would be needed to offset domestic armed challenges to LAF rule, and would be needed to reassure external parties that the influence of Hezbollah is neither reduced nor amplified. Presently, however, it is difficult to foresee how any such arrangement could be reached. First and foremost, the US will almost certainly refuse to accept an agreement which entrenches the interests of Hezbollah. Absent US support, the LAF would be forced to brook a loss of vital financial support, which would precipitate the disintegration of its forces and increased disaffection amongst the public.<sup>12</sup> Economic circumstances mean the average soldier's salary is around one-eighth of what it was pre-crisis; according to various media reports, the devaluation of salaries has triggered an increase in the number of soldiers requesting furlough, and the number of senior commanders seeking early retirement.<sup>13</sup> Budgetary constraints have also prompted the military to make searing cuts to even the most basic employment benefits.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> In his recent speech, General Joseph Aoun rejected criticism of the armed forces for accepting foreign aid, explaining that hadn't it not been for such assistance, the situation would have been far worse.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Habouch, "Deteriorating Lebanon concerns US officials after army warns of 'social explosion'", Al Arabiya (2021), <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/03/09/Lebanon-crisis-US-officials-concerned-over-security-situation-in-Lebanon-after-army-chief-warning>

<sup>14</sup> The Arab Weekly, "Army holds on to neutrality as chaos spreads across Lebanon", (2021), <https://theArabweekly.com/army-holds-neutrality-chaos-spreads-across-lebanon>



General Joseph Aoun meets with Hezbollah's political wing "Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc". Image courtesy of Lebanese Armed Forces.

... calls for a military government are an option of last resort that promises to introduce additional problems to those already faced by the Lebanese people.

Additional obstacles are presented by Israel. When General Chehab assumed power in 1958, Israel was still in the process of state development and its ties with the outside world were in their infancy. Circumstances are very different today, and it is highly unlikely that contemporary Israel would accommodate an arrangement in Lebanon which facilitates the full militarization of a government which already features the strong influence of Hezbollah. Israel has undertaken decades of sporadic attacks to counter the actual and perceived threat of the group, most recently in relation to the May 2021 hostilities in Gaza, and has adopted an increasingly aggressive tone. In response to remarks made by Hezbollah Leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in February 2021, Israeli Defence Minister and Alternate Prime Minister, Benny Gantz said that “If Nasrallah and Hezbollah’s threats translate into action, the outcome will be painful for Hezbollah; and, sadly, it will also be painful for the Lebanese people.”<sup>15</sup> There is little doubt that Israel would strongly oppose a military government in Lebanon which at the very least sustains the group’s anti-Israeli activities and, at worst, may even facilitate its expansion and military and political strength.

An LAF-Hezbollah agreement would also be unwelcomed for several important political forces in Lebanon, especially those linked with Sunni and Christian groups, namely the Future Party (Sunni), the Lebanese Forces (Christian), and the Phalangists (Christian). Disenchantment with any such agreement is likely, leading to the probable exacerbation of sectarian differences. The LAF’s ability to demonstrate its neutrality in respect to all Lebanese constituencies will be subsequently questioned by the public, potentially leading to the fragmentation of the LAF itself.<sup>16</sup> The LAF would almost certainly struggle to sustain the fragmentation this would produce.

When General Chehab undertook the kinds of reform necessary to salvage the Lebanese state in the middle of the last century, he did so with an almost dictatorial approach to domestic security.<sup>17</sup> Seldom did he account for human rights, freedom of expression, and civil society. Today, however, such an approach would be unacceptable to the many Lebanese who have demanded fundamental changes to the patterns of national governance for which Chehab is partly responsible. Protestors have been clear in their demand for more democratic freedoms, including the right to hold the government accountable for its conduct and application of the rule of law.

General Joseph Aoun has demonstrated some notable solidarity with the aspirations of the protest movement, but the extent to which this support translates into a transparent and accountable government is a far more complex proposition. Entanglement with international interests in Lebanon’s military, economic, and political stability, not to mention direct responsibility for the country’s massive political and economic crises present a different calculus and, likely, markedly different LAF behavior. Alongside the seemingly impossible challenge of accommodating Hezbollah to the satisfaction of both domestic and international power-holders, calls for a military government are an option of last resort that promises to introduce additional problems to those already faced by the Lebanese people.

<sup>15</sup> Middle East Monitor (2021), [Israeli DM Threatens Lebanon over Remarks Made by Hezbollah](#).

<sup>16</sup> Reports [assess](#) the LAF as roughly 24% Christian, 35% Sunni, 27% Shia, and 6% Druze.

<sup>17</sup> Chehab was [criticised](#) by some of his contemporaries for overseeing a ‘police state’.



A 'last resort' option, however, and despite its accompanying baggage, cannot be discounted given the incredible pace at which the country is collapsing. International and local actors have been considering scenarios of total state collapse, street chaos, armed confrontations, and a fully fledged renewed civil war. While each of those scenarios is notionally possible, considering imminent social strife that the country is facing, they all discount the important part that LAF can play and the fact that it is the sole national entity which both international and local communities continue to see value in salvaging. The aforementioned conditions for the materialization of a military rule are indeed complex and difficult to imagine coming into alignment; that said, the past 18 months have brought radical, unanticipated change to Lebanon. The rules of the game can change at any given moment, and there may yet come a point at which military governance is the last viable option to keep Lebanon afloat.



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