By Joseph Daher, Sami Zoughaib, and Sami Atallah
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Security Without Legitimacy

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Contents

Introduction

Lebanon enters the second half of 2025 confronting two converging crises. The first is military. Between mid-September and late November 2024, Israeli forces launched a destructive air- and ground-campaign that targeted South Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut and infrastructure across the country. A ceasefire was declared on 27 November 2024 but has not been respected. Since the start of the hostilities in October 2023, Israeli attacks have killed more than 4,000 people and displaced over one million civilians, while causing about US$3.4 billion in physical damages and damaging or destroying nearly 100 000 housing units (Human Rights Watch 2025). Humanitarian agencies estimate that at the peak of the fighting more than 900,000 people were internally displaced and that the hostilities have affected around 1.2 million people (European Commission 2025). The United Nations Development Programme assesses reconstruction needs at about US$3.4 billion and donors have pledged roughly US$750 million in humanitarian aid (Human Rights Watch 2025). Israel continues to occupy five strategic positions south of the Litani River despite a February 18 deadline for withdrawal.

The second crisis is institutional. Lebanon's financial collapse, now in its sixth year, has crippled public services, deepened poverty and hollowed out the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), making soldier salaries dependent on foreign aid. The Lebanese pound has lost over 95 % of its value since 2019 and a low-ranking soldier's monthly salary has fallen from around US$800 to about US$50 (Al-Mashareq/AFP 2023). This collapse has forced donors such as the United States to provide direct salary supplements to keep the army and police functioning (Al-Mashareq/AFP 2023). The LAF's operational capacity remains severely limited, even as it is tasked with asserting control in the South and along the border with Syria.

Together, these conditions have reignited the national debate over sovereignty. In the wake of the war and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, domestic and foreign actors alike have called for the LAF to assume full control of Lebanese territory and for Hezbollah to disarm. In the beginning of August 2025, the Lebanese government voted by a far majority to mandate the Lebanese army to draw up an action plan to be presented to the Council of Ministers by August 31, so that by the end of the year, weapons are exclusively held by the Lebanese state.[1]

This demand to disarm Hezbollah, often echoed by regional and Western powers, rests on a familiar logic: the state's sovereignty can only be restored by consolidating its monopoly over violence. From this perspective, Hezbollah's autonomous military capacity, and its alignment with Iran, are the principal obstacles to Lebanese sovereignty. Similar calls have extended to Palestinian armed groups in Lebanon's refugee camps.

Yet this vision of sovereignty, pursued almost exclusively through the expansion of state security forces, overlooks two essential realities. First, the LAF lacks the material and fiscal capacity to independently defend Lebanon's borders or fill the vacuum left by Hezbollah. In the context of runaway inflation and currency collapse, the overwhelming majority of the 2025 defense budget is consumed by salaries and basic operations. Many soldiers now earn less than US$50 per month and require foreign salary supplements (Al-Mashareq/AFP 2023), leaving only a small fraction of the budget for training, equipment or modernization. Second, the Lebanese state lacks the legitimacy to sustain a centralized defense strategy. Years of sectarian patronage, regressive taxation and economic exclusion have undermined the state's credibility among its own citizens.

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1 The Shi'a Ministers affiliated with Amal and Hezbollah walked out of the session before the decision was reached as "an expression of the resistance's [Hezbollah's] rejection of this decision" (Al-Jazeera English 2025).

The aim of this paper is to challenge the dominant, militarized conception of sovereignty in Lebanon by arguing that true national sovereignty cannot be restored through force consolidation alone. Instead, it advances a „sovereignty from below" framework that emphasizes the need for democratic reform, equitable economic development, and inclusive state-building as preconditions for any sustainable national defense strategy.

This paper argues that such a top-down model of sovereignty—based solely on military centralization and external alignment—is inadequate and ultimately unsustainable. Lebanon cannot achieve genuine sovereignty without first reconstructing its fiscal, economic, and democratic foundations. We advance an alternative framework, grounded in the concept of sovereignty from below: the idea that lasting sovereignty must be built through equitable development, social cohesion, and popular legitimacy.

The argument proceeds in four sections. Section 1 reexamines competing conceptions of sovereignty and situates Lebanon within these frameworks. Section 2 explains why Lebanon requires a defense strategy, and against whom, taking into consideration the challenges it faces from internal and external actors and factors. Section 3 assesses the country's current defense architecture—split between an overburdened army and an autonomous militia—and highlights the structural limits of this model. Section 4 evaluates strategic options available to small states and argues that autonomous defense is Lebanon's most viable path. It also shows why that path remains out of reach without deep political and economic reform. The conclusion outlines a sovereignty-from-below agenda that can generate the institutional capacity and public trust required for any credible national defense strategy.

1. Concept of Sovereignty

Sovereignty is often treated as a fixed and unquestioned attribute of statehood, yet its meaning remains contested. In the dominant tradition of political thought, sovereignty refers to the state's exclusive and ultimate authority over a defined territory (Bhadauria 2012). This understanding, rooted in the Westphalian model and articulated most famously by sociologist Max Weber, holds that a state is sovereign when it successfully claims a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force within its borders. It is also understood to exercise autonomy in foreign affairs, making decisions without being subject to the will or coercion of external powers.

In this framework, sovereignty is tightly linked to the presence of a unified state apparatus capable of asserting territorial control, maintaining internal order through the army and police, and protecting national borders. International relations are organized on the basis of reciprocal recognition among such sovereign entities, each presumed to govern independently and without interference.

However, this "sovereignty from above" model fails to account for the realities of many states—including Lebanon—where these conditions do not hold, which questions the concept at its core. States may lack effective control over their full territory due to civil conflict, armed non-state actors, or direct foreign interventions. More fundamentally, sovereignty understood purely in terms of coercive capacity overlooks the institutional, social, and economic conditions necessary to sustain authority.

In response to these limitations, a broader conception of sovereignty has emerged—one that includes, alongside territorial control and military capacity, the ability to guarantee rights, deliver services, and ensure meaningful participation in governance. From this perspective, sovereignty is not only about enforcing order but also about securing what scholars have

termed "human security," which includes freedom from want, access to basic services, and protection of civil and political rights.

This paper adopts this expanded approach. It understands sovereignty not simply as the power of the state to dominate, but as the capacity to govern legitimately and responsively. Sovereignty from above—military authority, border enforcement, and foreign policy autonomy—can only be sustained if rooted in sovereignty from below: a political order based on social justice, inclusive institutions, and economic viability.

Lebanon's sovereignty has long been compromised both by foreign interventions and by internal weaknesses. In the next sections, the paper will examine these dual challenges in more detail. It begins by assessing why Lebanon still needs a credible defense strategy, and who poses the threats that such a strategy must address.

2. Why Lebanon Needs to Defend Itself— and Against Whom

Lebanon's sovereignty has been repeatedly violated by regional powers and global actors alike. From Israeli invasions and occupations to Syrian tutelage and international political conditionality, the country's territorial integrity, political autonomy, and strategic agency have all been compromised. These experiences are not only historical—they continue to shape Lebanon's security landscape today. Any discussion of sovereignty must begin with a clear accounting of these threats and their legacy.

Israel: A Permanent Military Threat

Israel has posed the most sustained and violent threat to Lebanese sovereignty, and still does.[1] Since 1948, its armed forces have carried out successive attacks, occupations, and wars on Lebanese soil. The Israeli bombing of Beirut International Airport in 1968, the 1978 occupation of the South, and the full-scale 1982 invasion—culminating in the Sabra and Shatila massacre—left deep and lasting scars. By the end of 1982, nearly 20,000 people had been killed and more than 30,000 wounded, with 175,000 displaced (Tucker 1982).

Even after the civil war, Israeli operations continued. Operation Accountability (1993) and Operation Grapes of Wrath (1996) caused extensive civilian displacement and deaths, including the Qana massacre, where more than 100 civilians were killed in a UN compound (Democracy Now 2006). Although Israel withdrew from South Lebanon in 2000, it retained control of the disputed Shebaa Farms and the Kfarchouba Heights and continued regular incursions into Lebanese territory.

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1 Even prior the establishment of the state of Israel, sectors of the far-right of the Zionist movement had ambitions on southern Lebanon, particularly potential annexation of the territories south of the Litani River.

The 2006 war again exposed Lebanon to large-scale destruction, killing over 1,200 people and damaging vital infrastructure (Amnesty 2006). While Hezbollah claimed political success, the war reaffirmed Israel's military dominance and its willingness to act unilaterally in Lebanon.

The most recent escalation occurred between September and November 2024, with massive casualties and destructions as mentioned in introduction, while the Israeli occupation army continues to bomb Lebanon in violation of the ceasefire concluded in the end of November. These actions confirm that Israeli military pressure is not episodic, but systemic and ongoing.

Syria and the Northern and Eastern Frontier

Syria has also historically undermined Lebanon's sovereignty. Its military entered Lebanon in 1976 under the pretext of stabilizing the civil war and remained until 2005. During this period, Syrian intelligence and political networks exercised de facto control over Lebanon's internal and external affairs (Salloukh 2005). Even after the formal withdrawal, Syria continued to exert influence through allied political factions.

With the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, new challenges have emerged. The LAF has reinforced its presence at the border with Syria, particularly to try curtailing smuggling and tackle insecurity provoked by clashes between Hezbollah-backed Lebanese clans residing in these areas and armed forces affiliated to the new Syrian ruling authorities led by Hay'at Tahrir Sham (HTS). At the end of March 2025, Lebanese and Syrian defense ministers held a meeting in Saudi Arabia and concurred on the need to bolster security and military coordination along their common border and concluded an agreement in principle for its demarcation. More generally, the porous state of the Syrian Lebanese border dates back to the pre-war era. In 2008, an independent UN assessment team reported that the border was "penetrable" and that the smuggling of arms and other products across the border between the two countries remained more or less unabated (Hutson and Long 2011).

At the same time, despite calls from official on both sides to establish more cordial relations between the two countries, tensions remained persistent on several issues, including Syrian political prisoners in Lebanon or deposits of Syrian nationals in Lebanese banks. In addition, the new authorities in Damascus have expressed hostility towards Hezbollah and taken measures to increase controls at the border between Lebanon and Syria, where weapons destined for Hezbollah are regularly seized, as well as cash in direction of Lebanon. The overthrow of the Syrian regime in December 2024 represented indeed a major blow and further weakening for Hezbollah, particularly as Syria was a strategic rear base for the transfer of weapons from Iran and a logistical center for the party, including weapons production, and cash transfer.

Beyond the security dimension, the collapse of the Syrian regime has deepened Lebanon's humanitarian burdens. During the escalation of hostilities after October 2023 more than 900 000 people inside Lebanon were displaced and at least 562 000 crossed into Syria (European Commission 2025). The European Commission estimates that about 90 020 people remain internally displaced while Lebanon also hosts roughly 1.5 million displaced Syrians, of whom 815 000 are registered with the UN Refugee Agency (European Commission 2025). Since December 2024 approximately 151 688 Syrians have returned home and more than 100 000 new displaced persons have entered Lebanon (UNHCR 2025), reportedly . These flows highlight that the security crisis is inseparable from the protracted displacement and refugee crisis that strains Lebanon's social fabric, infrastructure and public finances.

Iranian's Expanding Influence

Iran increased its influence in Lebanon mainly through its support to Hezbollah in the past decades. Since the mid-1980s, Tehran has supported Hezbollah, providing it with funding and arms. Hezbollah's connection to Iran has remained essential since then but has evolved since the 2010s because of the party's growing significance in Lebanon and on the regional politi-

cal scenes. Hezbollah's became the leading nexus of Iranian influence in the region, particularly following the eruption of the revolutionary processes in Syria and the Middle East and North Africa since 2011. While Hezbollah is a Lebanese actor with some forms of political autonomy, the party has been acting as the main actor serving and participating in Iranian regional political interests, such as intervening in Syria to support the Assad regime, an ally of Teheran. Its role has been essential for the consolidation and expansion of Iran's network of regional allies (Daher 2023). The Iranian regime expanded since the mid 2000s its influence in the Middle East, primarily through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)). It took advantage of the defeat suffered by the U.S. and its allies in their so-called War on Terror in the Middle East and Central Asia. Iran secured allies with Iraq's various Shia Islamic fundamentalist parties and militias and their representatives in state institutions, becoming the most influential regional power in the country. In the 2010s, the Iranian regime also strengthened its relations with other organizations in the region, particularly the Houthi movement in Yemen, especially after Saudi Arabia's war on the country in 2015. Since then, Iran has provided the Houthis with military support. In addition, Tehran struck a close alliance with Hamas in the occupied Palestinian territories.

With Teheran's support to Hezbollah and its networks of allies, Iran has been attempting to achieve a regional balance of power against Israel and the U.S. as well as pursue its own military and economic aims in the region. This also meant breaching the sovereignty of regional countries, including Lebanon, by increasing Iranian influence through its allies.

Foreign Political Conditionality

Lebanon's sovereignty is also constrained by political conditions imposed by international actors. The disarmament of Hezbollah, for instance, is no longer treated as an internal matter. It has become tied to broader geopolitical negotiations, particularly U.S.–Iran relations, favoring Israeli political interests and to the policy preferences of Western donors. The United States and several European governments have made post-

war reconstruction aid conditional on the full disarmament of Hezbollah and the extension of LAF control across all Lebanese territory.

Such pressures distort national decision-making. They place Lebanon's recovery and political stability at the mercy of external agendas, deepening dependency and limiting the space for sovereign policymaking. When key financial and diplomatic resources are contingent on outcomes beyond the state's control, Lebanon's autonomy becomes notional.

This record of occupation, coercion, and dependency confirms that Lebanon cannot afford to abandon or postpone the question of defense. Its sovereignty is not only internally fragmented; it remains externally constrained. The next section examines how Lebanon currently attempts to defend itself and why that model—split between a donor-dependent army and a politicized militia—is both untenable and fiscally unsustainable.

3. The State's Current Defense Strategy: Political Momentum, Structural Limits

Lebanon's post-war political consensus is coalescing around a familiar formula: restore sovereignty by disarming Hezbollah and expanding the role of the LAF. President Joseph Aoun, elected in early 2025, has publicly affirmed the state's exclusive right to bear arms and pledged to strengthen the army to secure borders, combat smuggling, and deter Israeli aggression (Orient Today Staff 2025 January). As mentioned in introduction, the Lebanese government voted at a majority in August in favor of a decision to monopolize the possession of weapons by the end of the year.

This message has resonated with international partners. Western governments and regional donors have welcomed the LAF's redeployment to southern Lebanon, where, according to army officials, over 90 percent of Hezbollah's infrastructure south of the Litani River was dismantled by April 2025 (Arab News 2025). Along the Syrian border, the army has increased patrols and launched new coordination efforts with Syrian counterparts to address smuggling and insecurity.

On the surface, these moves suggest a reassertion of state authority. But beneath the optics lies a sobering reality: Lebanon is attempting to centralize security through an army that cannot sustain, modernize, or independently command the responsibilities being placed upon it.

A Heavy Burden, Hollow Capacity

The LAF's budget for 2025 stands at approximately US$800 million. Around two-thirds is absorbed by wages and benefits; once essential operating costs—fuel, clothing, food and medical supplies—are factored in, little remains for training or procurement. For comparison, NATO guidelines recommend devoting at least 20 percent of military budgets to moderniza-

tion (NATO factsheet on the Defense Investment Pledge). Israel allocates roughly one-third of its ~US$15 billion defense budget to these functions.

These figures are not a technicality; they describe a structural incapacity. With only 3 percent (≈ US$24 million) available for training, maintenance and equipment, the army cannot refresh stocks, absorb new doctrine, or sustain basic readiness. Against a conservative 20 percent benchmark, Lebanon would need ≈ US$160 million a year; the resulting shortfall (≈ US$136 million annually) accumulates into chronic arrears in spares, munitions and replacement of even routine kit.

The outcome is a readiness trap: wage and operating lines crowd out investment; ageing equipment raises risk and downtime; and legitimacy erodes as underpaid soldiers and visible gaps at borders and along the coast convince communities the state cannot protect them. It is therefore incoherent to argue that disarmament, by itself, would restore sovereignty when the state actor slated to assume a monopoly of force lacks the minimum funding to train, maintain and recapitalize. Even if Hezbollah disarmed tomorrow, a 3 percent modernization slice would leave an enforcement vacuum. The debate must shift from juridical assertions to material capacity and legitimacy—privileging force quality over size and judging performance by outputs rather than optics.

Dependency Disguised as Sovereignty

The LAF's growing role in border control, post-war stabilization, and Hezbollah containment depends almost entirely on foreign assistance. In March 2025, the United States unfroze $95 million in military aid, explicitly linking the support to efforts to "constrain Hezbollah and Iran" (Helou 2025). France and Qatar continue to provide fuel and operational support, while broader donor conferences frame LAF funding as an instrument for rebuilding Lebanon's sovereignty.

Yet this support comes with political conditions and strategic expectations. The LAF is being asked by domestic and inter-

national stakeholders to simultaneously deter Israel, enforce disarmament, secure borders with Syria and preserve internal cohesion, while operating within the budgetary and diplomatic constraints set by its foreign backers. This is not sovereignty—it is managed dependency.

Strategic Mismatch and Regional Imbalance

Even if the LAF were politically unified and institutionally strengthened, it would still operate under conditions of extreme asymmetry. Between October 2023 and September 2024, the United States provided $17.9 billion in emergency military support to Israel (Bilmes, Hartung, and Semler 2024)—more than Lebanon's entire defense budget for the past 20 years combined. A further $20 billion in advanced weapons contracts was signed in mid 2024, to maintain and reinforce Israel's regional military superiority (Singh and Stone 2024). All of these decisions demonstrate the United States' long-term commitment to Israel and its strategic importance in consolidating American influence in the region.

Lebanon, by contrast, ranks 90th globally in defense spending, contributing just 0.02 percent of the world's total. Its defense ambitions, however noble, remain fundamentally out of step with its fiscal capacity and geopolitical leverage.

The Illusion of Sovereignty from Above

The current strategy is based on a top-down vision of sovereignty: that territorial control and a strong central army will produce national authority. But this logic is collapsing under the weight of fiscal exhaustion, foreign dependency, and strategic overreach.

Like Hezbollah's reliance on Iran, the LAF's survival depends on external patronage. And just as Hezbollah's arms complicate state sovereignty, so too does an army that cannot plan, fund, or deploy without donor approval.

The result is a contradiction at the heart of the sovereignty project: Lebanon is being asked to defend itself with institutions it cannot sustain, in a regional environment it cannot shape, using resources it does not control. Without deep structural reform—economic, institutional, and political—sovereignty from above will remain performative, not transformative.

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4. Strategic Options for Small States— and the Only One that Fits Lebanon

Lebanon is not the only small state navigating structural vulnerability in a volatile regional environment. From Moldova to Singapore, small states across the world have historically adopted different strategies to mitigate insecurity and preserve sovereignty. Their choices reflect recurring dilemmas: how to deter stronger neighbors, avoid entangling alignments, and balance limited resources with strategic demands.

In *Small States and International Security*, Bailes, Thorhallsson, and Rickli identify five common strategic models available to small states. These range from military neutrality and autonomy to reliance on regional or distant patrons, to participation in multilateral alliances or deep institutional blocs. Each model involves trade-offs between autonomy, credibility, cost, and external dependence. Applying this typology to Lebanon clarifies which pathways are available—and which are already foreclosed by geopolitical realities and structural constraints.

The analysis shows that Lebanon is boxed in four of the five strategic models are either unavailable or politically untenable. The only viable option in principle—strategic autonomy or neutrality—remains out of reach under current fiscal and institutional conditions. This section explains why.

Table 1

Strategic Model	Core Logic	Examples	Applicability to Lebanon
1. Strategic Autonomy / Neutrality	Rely on credible self-defense while avoiding alliances.	Switzerland; Moldova in the 1990s	Viable in principle, but unaffordable today.
2. Bandwagoning with Regional Power	Accept protection from dominant neighbor.	Belarus–Russia	Not viable: Israel and Syria are both sources of threat.

3.Extended Deterrence via Distant Power	Invite offshore protection or military guarantees.	Bahrain–USA; Taiwan–USA	Partly present, but conditional and unstable.
4.Multilateral Collective Defense	Share defense under treaty-based alliance.	NATO; ANZUS	Unavailable: no such alliance includes Lebanon.

Why Strategic Models Based on Alignment or Shelter Are Not Viable

Of the five small-state security strategies outlined by Bailes et al., four are clearly incompatible with Lebanon's context:

→ Bandwagoning with a regional power (Model 2) is not a viable option. Syria and Israel, Lebanon's immediate neighbors, are not stabilizing forces but sources of repeated sovereignty violations. Alignment with either would require accepting continued occupation, intervention, or political tutelage—precisely the conditions Lebanon seeks to escape.

→ Extended deterrence via a distant power (Model 3) already exists in limited form. The United States, France, and other partners provide military assistance to the LAF and diplomatic support for the Lebanese state. Yet this support remains conditional, episodic, and heavily shaped by broader geopolitical objectives, particularly the containment of Iran and support and security of Israel. Lebanon receives no formal defense guarantees; it is instead integrated into an ambiguous, externally managed deterrence posture that reinforces dependency rather than autonomy.

→ Multilateral defense alliances (Model 4) are unavailable. Lebanon is not a member of any regional security organization with operational credibility. NATO membership is not on offer, and Arab League military cooperation remains politically fragmented and institutionally weak.

→ Deep institutional shelter (Model 5), such as the security enjoyed by EU or ASEAN members, is even more remote. Leba-

non lacks the governance standards, economic convergence, and institutional stability required to join such blocs, and there is no credible regional equivalent.

Each of these four models either compromises Lebanon's sovereignty outright or assumes structural capacities that the country does not possess. This leaves only one model worthy of further consideration: strategic neutrality grounded in autonomy. The next subsection makes the case for why this model fits Lebanon's political identity and pluralist structure—while acknowledging the economic and institutional obstacles that currently stand in the way.

The Case for Strategic Autonomy and Neutrality

Of all the available defense models, strategic autonomy through neutrality best fits Lebanon's constraints and plural political system. Neutrality in this context does not mean disarmament or passivity. It means avoiding military alignment with competing blocs while building a credible, independent capacity to deter coercion and uphold the state's lawful monopoly of force (Archer, Bailes & Wivel 2014).

This approach avoids the structural risks of the other options. Band wagoning with a regional power would formalize tutelage; extended deterrence from distant patrons remains episodic and conditioned on their strategic priorities; treaty-based collective defense is unavailable; and deep institutional shelter is unrealistic. Neutrality reduces the risk of Lebanon being drawn into regional conflicts, limits incentives for proxy competition on its territory, and directs scarce resources toward sustainable capabilities—such as mobility, engineering, domain awareness, and civil defense—rather than prestige platforms that cannot be maintained.

A viable neutrality posture would rest on three pillars:

1. Basic deterrence: a professional, minimally but reliably equipped LAF capable of raising the cost of external aggression through serviceable equipment, predictable maintenance, interoperable communications, and trained personnel.

2. Diplomatic engagement: sustained efforts to secure international backing for ceasefires and border guarantees, to support monitoring and verification mechanisms, and to link reconstruction finance to periods of calm.

3. Internal legitimacy: an army perceived across all communities as a national, non-partisan institution—built on lawful conduct, accountability, and equitable public service provision.

Neutrality constrains military alignment; it does not constrain principles. Switzerland's decision to join EU sanctions against Russia in 2022 shows that a neutral state can still condemn violations of international law while remaining non-aligned (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs 2022). By the same logic, a neutral Lebanon could avoid military alignment while expressing solidarity with regional causes and denouncing human-rights violations in neighboring countries, including the continuing occupation and colonization of the Palestinian people by the Israeli state.

Common objections often conflate neutrality with weakness or withdrawal:

→ "*Neutrality is naïve in a hostile environment.*" In reality, it assumes pressure and mitigates it through resilience and denial-based deterrence.

→ "*Neutrality equals disarmament.*" On the contrary, it requires a capable, law-bound force. Disarmament of non-state actors is an outcome of credible protection and fair service provision, not a decree.

→ "*Neutrality forfeits external support.*" In practice, it clarifies the terms of assistance—making it non-escalatory, transparent, and aligned with institution-building.

Adopting neutrality as doctrine reorients choices: from force size to force quality; from prestige platforms to enablers; from ad-hoc deployments to protected readiness cycles; from escalation to civil resilience; and from optics to measurable outputs—

such as interdictions achieved, incidents deterred, response times, and days of safe access to essential services in frontline districts.

On doctrine, neutrality aligns with Lebanon's history and interests. On capacity, the fundamentals do not yet exist. The next subsection examines why strategic autonomy remains out of reach without fiscal reconstruction, institutional reform, and credible protection against renewed large-scale attacks—and what it would take to close that gap.

Why Strategic Autonomy Is Currently Out of Reach

Neutrality is not simply a diplomatic stance. It is a security doctrine that requires a functioning state, a viable economy, and a capable military. These preconditions do not currently exist in Lebanon.

Lebanon spends only $10,600 per soldier per year, compared to $273,560 in Israel (SIPRI military expenditure 2024). The LAF is overstretched, under-resourced, and heavily reliant on donor support. It lacks the operational autonomy and institutional resilience required to assume full responsibility for national defense.

Still, Lebanon is not under-committed to defense spending. In 2024, military spending reached 2.59 percent of GDP—higher than Austria (1.00%), Ireland (0.24%), Switzerland (0.72%), and even some NATO countries like Germany (1.89%) and Canada (1.31%) (SIPRI military expenditure 2024). The problem is not how much Lebanon allocates relative to the economy, but the condition of the economy itself. The state is trying to secure sovereignty through military centralization while lacking the fiscal, institutional, and social foundations that sovereignty requires.

Per capita defense spending illustrates this mismatch. Lebanon spent $457 per person on defense in 2018; by 2021, that figure had dropped to just $30—a 93 percent collapse, second only to Zimbabwe. In 2024, it rose to $110, but remained 76 percent be-

low pre-crisis levels (SIPRI military expenditure 2024). During the same period, countries facing existential threats dramatically increased their military investment:

→ - Ukraine: +1549 percent
→ - Russia: +144 percent
→ - Israel: +111 percent
→ - NATO front-line states like Estonia and Poland: +110 percent on average

This pattern is confirmed when comparing Lebanon to other neutral countries with standing armies. Table 2 shows that Lebanon's per capita defense spending is well below that of nearly all such states, despite its exposure to greater security risks. Only Moldova and Cambodia spend less, and both operate in less contested environments.

Per Capita Defense Spending in Neutral Countries
(USD, 2018–2024 avg.)

<div style="text-align:right">**Table 2**</div>

Country	Legal/Constitutional Status	Avg. Per Capita Exp. (2018–2024)
Switzerland	Federal Constitution (1815)	683.2
Austria	Federal Constitutional Law (1955)	473.2
Ireland	Long-standing neutrality policy	242.9
Serbia	Parliamentary Resolution on Neutrality (2007)	254.1
Malta	Constitution, Art. 1 §3 (1987)	180.4
Turkmenistan	Constitutional Law + UN GA recognition (1995)	100.3
Cambodia	Constitution Art. 53	38.1
Moldova	Constitution Art. 11 (1994)	23.1
Lebanon	**—**	**60.7**

A Strategic Approach Without Strategic Foundations

Lebanon is attempting to restore sovereignty from above—through military deployment, territorial control, and efforts to disarm Hezbollah—while neglecting the deeper constraints that define its loss of sovereignty in the first place. These constraints are not primarily military. They are fiscal, economic, and institutional. Without a viable economy, a functional state, and inclusive public legitimacy, no defense doctrine—whether autonomous or donor-aligned—can be credible or sustainable.

Neutrality is a sound long-term goal. But as things stand, Lebanon is trying to build the roof of a sovereign security architecture before laying the foundation. The next and final section turns to that foundation. It proposes a model of sovereignty from below, rooted in the economic, democratic, and social reconstruction of the state—without which strategic autonomy will remain out of reach.

5. Sovereignty from Below: Rebuilding the Foundations of National Defense

Lebanon's crisis is not one of military weakness alone. It is a crisis of statehood. The analysis so far has shown that efforts to reclaim sovereignty through force consolidation—whether by expanding the LAF, disarming Hezbollah, or securing borders—are taking place in the absence of the very foundations that make sovereignty meaningful or sustainable. The state's capacity to defend its territory has been hollowed out not only by fiscal collapse but by a political economy that has long prioritized sectarian patronage, financial speculation, and service-sector growth over public investment, productive employment, or equitable governance (Daher 2022).

Since the onset of the financial crisis in 2019, Lebanon has experienced a catastrophic economic contraction. GDP has fallen by 38 percent, while inflation has wiped out wages and destroyed savings (World Bank 2024 December). Poverty rates more than tripled between 2012 and 2022, affecting nearly half the population (World Bank 2024 May). The vast majority of depositors still have no access to their bank accounts. Basic services—including electricity, clean water, and public health—have all but collapsed. One in three households cannot access needed healthcare.

These trends are not isolated failures. They are the product of a political and economic system that has operated, since the end of the civil war, on the basis of elite financial accumulation, rent-seeking, and sectarian distribution. By 2019, over 78 percent of Lebanon's GDP came from services, while agriculture and industry together accounted for less than 9 percent (World Bank Data 2019). Local capital inflows were dominated by diaspora remittances and speculative finance. At the center of this system were the ruling sectarian parties and the banking elite, who used public debt as a tool of accumulation. Between 1993 and 2019, the Lebanese state paid over $87 billion in interest to local banks, whose assets grew by over 1,300 percent (Maucourant Atallah and Tamo 2020).

These dynamics have profoundly undermined the social contract. They did not start with the 2019 financial collapse; many Lebanese had long looked beyond the state for protection, welfare and opportunity. The recent crises have further eroded an already weak social contract, pushing even more people toward sectarian parties, non-state institutions and informal networks for services the state fails to provide. In this vacuum, all major factions have sustained their legitimacy by acting as substitutes for the state, providing welfare, jobs, and protection within their communities. Hezbollah stands out within this system. Its popularity among Shi'a communities rests not only on its military role but also on its capacity to provide healthcare, employment, and security in ways the state cannot. This remains true even after its military defeat in the 2024 war, underscoring how parallel providers can entrench legitimacy while hollowing out state sovereignty.

In this context, calls to rebuild sovereignty through military reform alone are dangerously misplaced. Without rebuilding the economic and political institutions that anchor state legitimacy, no amount of LAF deployment will yield a meaningful monopoly over violence. Sovereignty is not simply about who holds arms; it is about who holds legitimacy.

This section therefore outlines an alternative framework: sovereignty from below. It argues that national sovereignty must be grounded in equitable development, accountable governance, and inclusive public service provision. The state must become not simply the central armed actor, but a guarantor of security in the broadest sense—economic, social, and political. Only on that basis can Lebanon construct a defense strategy that is both sovereign and sustainable.

Reconstructing Sovereignty from Below: A Political-Economic Agenda

The collapse of Lebanon's sovereignty is not merely a failure of defense policy. It reflects the deeper consequences of a political economy built around sectarian patronage, neoliberal rent-

ierism, and elite capture. The state's inability to assert sovereignty over territory, disarm non-state actors, or deliver even basic services stems from this foundational crisis. Addressing it requires more than military reform—it requires a systemic political and economic transformation.

a. Political reform to dismantle sectarian entrenchment
The Lebanese state cannot build broad-based legitimacy so long as its institutional framework continues to organize politics along sectarian lines. The parliamentary electoral system has functioned as a mechanism to reproduce communal divisions, fragment political opposition, and consolidate elite power. Ministries serve not as vehicles for national policymaking but as patronage fiefdoms. In this context, efforts to centralize defense or project state authority often provoke distrust or resistance.

A sovereignty-from-below agenda must begin with reforming the state's legal and political structures. This includes:

→ Replacing the sectarian electoral law with a secular, proportional system that enables cross-sectarian and class-based political representation.

→ Reducing the role of religious and sectarian institutions in public appointments and policymaking.

→ Strengthening judicial independence and regulatory oversight to limit elite impunity.

Only a political system that offers genuine representation and fair access to state resources can build the legitimacy needed to underpin sovereign authority.

b. Transforming the economic model
Lebanon's sovereignty deficit is also rooted in its economic model. Since the end of the civil war, the country has relied on a service- and finance-led growth strategy oriented toward remittances, real estate, and foreign capital inflows. In other words, Lebanon's economy is dependent on foreign sources of funding and rentier dynamics, rather than local capital accu-

mulation and economic dynamics, weakening its ability to strengthen its national sovereignty. At the same time, this model deepened social inequality, regional marginalization, and dependence on external actors. By 2019, services accounted for nearly 79 percent of GDP, while industry and agriculture combined made up less than 9 percent (World Bank Data 2019).

A viable alternative requires shifting toward a production-oriented development strategy that builds local economic resilience. This includes:

→ Supporting manufacturing industry and agriculture, particularly in neglected regions like Akkar, Baalbek-Hermel, and the Bekaa Valley.

→ Investing in infrastructures and employment that promotes broad-based job creation.

→ Reducing the dominance of real estate speculation and financial rent-seeking in the national economy.

A diversified, inclusive and productive economy is not just a development goal—it is a precondition for national sovereignty and to diminish dependence on foreign sources of funding and assistance.

c. Fiscal reform to restore state capacity
Lebanon cannot fund its own defense, let alone broader public services, under a fiscal system that is both regressive and ineffective. Tax revenues have fallen from 15 percent of GDP in 2019 to just 5.7 percent in 2021 (Nseir 2023). Nearly 70 percent of current tax income comes from indirect taxes on consumption, which disproportionately burden the poor while sparing high earners and corporate profits (Nseir 2023).

Rebuilding fiscal sovereignty requires:

→ Implementing a progressive tax system on wealth, income, and corporate profits.

→ Expanding tax compliance and formalizing large segments of the economy.

→ Recovering misappropriated public funds and reducing debt service costs.

This would allow the state not only to fund a credible defense sector with less reliance on foreign aid, but also to finance essential social programs that anchor state legitimacy.

d. Rebuilding universal public services
Public service provision in Lebanon has long been outsourced to sectarian parties, NGOs, and private actors—undermining the role of the state as a provider of rights. In 2019, between 120,000 and 150,000 out of the 300,000 public employees were in the security sector. Military salaries accounted for 63 percent of public payroll spending in 2017, while core services like health and education remain drastically underfunded (Daher 2022).

e. Economic restructuring and defense sovereignty
Lebanon's rentier economy has produced not only inequality but also defense incapacity. Despite the security sector's large share of spending, resources have been consumed by payrolls and patronage rather than investment in strategic capacity. This paradox—high expenditure with limited effectiveness—has left Lebanon dependent on foreign assistance for even basic defense needs. Restructuring the economy is therefore essential. Progressive taxation, recovery of misappropriated funds, and reduced debt servicing would expand fiscal space for both universal services and a modern defense sector. Redirecting resources from bloated payrolls toward equipment, training, and infrastructure would allow the state to sustain its own defense while reducing reliance on external patrons.

To reverse this imbalance, the state must:

→ Invest in universal health coverage, particularly as over half the population remains uninsured.

→ Expand public education and health system, and restore basic infrastructure in underserved areas.

→ Establish equitable service delivery mechanisms that bypass sectarian gatekeepers.

Only a population that feels protected, included, and provided for will grant the state the moral and political authority to assert national sovereignty.

Donors and External Actors: Confronting Aggression to Create the Space for Reform

Lebanon's path to rebuilding sovereignty from below does not unfold in a vacuum. It has been repeatedly disrupted by the reality of sustained Israeli military aggression — not only against specific targets, but through large-scale campaigns that damage infrastructure, undermine the economy, and reset the country's recovery to zero. These are not isolated incidents; they are part of a persistent pattern that constrains Lebanon's ability to consolidate its institutions and chart an independent future.

International partners — the EU and its Member States, the United States, the UN, and regional donors — must stop treating this as an unfortunate backdrop and start addressing it as a central obstacle to reform. Long-term governance, fiscal, and service-delivery gains will remain fragile if Israel retains a free hand to launch major operations that erase years of progress.

A serious donor strategy should:

→ Secure political and operational guarantees that deter renewed large-scale Israeli attacks and uphold commitments under international law.

→ Link reconstruction to protection, ensuring that investments in infrastructure, housing, and energy are not left vulnerable to destruction in the next escalation.

→ Coordinate diplomatic, security, and development levers so that support for reform is backed by measures that constrain further acts of aggression.

→ Make stability a condition for reform, recognizing that Lebanese leaders cannot deliver institutional change while preparing for the next war.

Acknowledging and confronting Israeli aggression is not a diversion from the reform agenda — it is a precondition for it. Without credible deterrence and protection, Lebanon will remain locked in a cycle of rebuilding under the shadow of destruction, and sovereignty from below will remain an aspiration rather than a reality.

Resolving the Defense Dilemma: Toward a National Strategy

A sovereignty-from-below framework also opens space to address Lebanon's central defense dilemma: the status of Hezbollah and the role of the LAF. As argued throughout this paper, attempts to disarm Hezbollah without political, economic, and institutional transformation will likely provoke communal backlash, reinforce insecurity, and further weaken the state.

While Hezbollah's military autonomy and interventions in regional countries such as Syria prior the fall of the Assad's regime are incompatible with a sovereign national defense policy, the party's embeddedness in a context of state failure, insecurity, historical marginalization and continuous Israeli attacks cannot be ignored. Large segments of the Shi'a population view its arms not simply as political leverage, but as a guarantee of protection in a hostile and unequal system.

In this light, disarmament cannot be treated as a precondition for sovereignty—it must be the outcome of a broader process of reconstruction. If the state can demonstrate that it can defend all Lebanese and other populations living in Lebanon, deliver services, and include all regions and communities in a national framework, then the rationale for Hezbollah's military autonomy will begin to erode.

Sovereignty Must Be Built

In Lebanon, sovereignty has too often been imagined as something that can be restored through diplomatic recognition, military deployment, or legal reform. This approach neglects the social and economic foundations on which all sovereign authority must rest. The state must be seen as legitimate, responsive, and inclusive—capable not only of deterring threats, but of meeting needs.

The lack of popular legitimacy of the Lebanese political system and its institutions, in guaranteeing a true democratic space representing the aspirations of the Lebanese popular classes and in providing social and economic services to wide sectors of the population, has also partly created the conditions for the expansion of Hezbollah in the 1980s and its expansion in the following decades.

For instance, it is important to not repeat the mistakes of the reconstruction process of the post 2006 war, in which the role of the Lebanese State and its institutions were nearly completely absent. It ceded control of Beirut's southern suburbs reconstruction to Hezbollah, while adopting a sponsorship model for the reconstruction of infrastructures and villages in the South, transferring its responsibility to foreign countries and private companies. The Lebanese government should be playing a key role in any project seeking to reconstruct cities, suburbs and villages. Otherwise, it will lose (even more) credibility among wide sectors of the population that suffered of Israel's continuous war against Lebanon, with damages and destructions more significant than in 2006.

Sovereignty from below means building that legitimacy from the ground up. It means reversing the logic of warlordism and welfare fragmentation. It means creating the conditions in which all Lebanese (and foreign populations living in the country) —not just donors, parties, or militias—see the state as their own and serving their interests.

Only then can a credible national defense emerge. Only then can Lebanon begin to speak, act, and defend itself as a sovereign republic.

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