CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Lebanon's Information Environment considering the Current Situation, Hezbollah's Disarmament File, and the U.S. Plan

LTC Mohammed Alkarabsheh, JOR Army (CSAG)

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. <u>Subject</u>: **Lebanon's Information Environment considering the Current Situation, Hezbollah's Disarmament File, and the U.S. Plan.**

2. <u>Purpose:</u> This paper aims to understand Lebanon's information environment and how political and security conflicts, especially Hezbollah's disarmament and the U.S. plan, affect public narratives.

3. <u>Introduction:</u> Lebanon is country characterized by rich religious and sectarian diversity, with Muslims comprising about 61% of the population, divided almost equally between Sunnis and Shiites, while Christians make up about 33.7%, including sects such as Maronites, Orthodox, and Melkites, along with Druze representing around 5% of the population. [1] This diversity greatly influences Lebanon's information environment, as sectarian communities tend to form separate information networks reflecting the perspectives and interests of each sect. Additionally, the average age of the population affects the information landscape. Age groups of the population are approximately as follows: 10% (below 15), 15% (15-24), 45% (25-54), 10% (55-64) and 10% (above 65). [2] Younger people are more inclined to use digital platforms and social media actively, while older groups rely on traditional media such as TV and newspapers, creating a complex and multifaceted information environment.

Lebanon faces many challenges: economic hardship, political disputes, and insecurity at the borders. This results in an information climate full of confusion, unreliable sources, and heightened media activity. Uncertainty and misinformation swell, pushing people to rely more on unofficial sources. The divisive debate about Hezbollah's arms and American-led solutions fragments both politics and society, complicating the role of state institutions which struggle to act without creating new internal conflict.

The Lebanese parliamentary elections are scheduled for May 2026. The elections will see vigorous involvement from various sects, and the circulation of information through both digital and traditional media will influence voter tendencies and behaviors. The intersecting context of sectarian divisions and media activity will significantly impact the election results and Lebanon's political future in the coming period.

4. <u>**Key Points driving information environment:**</u>

   a. **Political situation**- After an extended period of political instability and deadlock, in the beginning of 2025 Lebanon elected a new President, a new Government was established, and all key position in

the Government were filled. This political situation presented favourable conditions for Lebanon to strengthen its institutions and to regain control over the country that had been in disarray for years. Now there is a sense of general optimism that the country is on the right path. According to the polls, President Aoun and the LAF (Lebanese Armed Forces) are enjoying high levels of support among Lebanese citizens. However, there are many conflicts on key issues and ongoing political power struggles among sectarian and otherwise divided groups. Hezbollah is aware of the shift in the political balance and of its rivals' attempts to isolate it and limit its power, so they will try to strengthen their positions and gather support for their actions and rebuilding.[3]

Major political actors produce targeted messages through their media outlets and social media accounts. These narratives move quickly and influence public opinion, meaning that political operations such as the law on state arms control and limiting Hezbollah influence or security operations such as LAF seizing Hezbollah's weapons, requires careful information management to reduce sectarian and regional tensions.[4]

b. **Diversity of Media Sources**- Lebanon has a wide variety of information sources, from traditional media to regional and local channels, in addition to active social media platforms. This diversity creates a rich information environment but also a confusing one, as it becomes difficult for the public to distinguish between facts and biased interpretations.[5] According to a study by the ARK Group, media use is strongly confessional. Family and friends are the most trusted source of information, so social media (X, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok) are the primary communication outlets in Lebanon, accompanied by the communication through WhatsApp groups. Among the older and more conservative population, TV is still a relevant source of information. The most popular TV stations in Lebanon include LBCI (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International, a commercial station that was the first private broadcaster in Lebanon), MTV (Murr Television, commercial, privately owned channel), and Al Jadeed (commercial station). While official rankings fluctuate and some sources cite different leaders, these three commercial channels are consistently named among the most watched in the country. Other prominent stations include the state-run Télé Liban (the sole state-owned television station), and politically affiliated channels like OTV (affiliated with the Free Patriotic Movement), and Al-Manar (pro-Hezbollah, also known as "The Beacon").

c. **Interconnection of Security and Information**- Every security move or leaked information has an immediate and direct impact on public sentiment. For example, reports of military movements or security measures quickly become media material that can trigger protests , creating opportunities for escalating tensions.[6] There are many examples of WhatsApp accounts from influential people being hijacked by cyber operation and false information being distributed, spreading fear and panic.

d. **External Influence Factor**- International support, especially from the U.S., and the proposed plan to address the disarmament issue is used in domestic politics and interpreted by different parties either as an external pressure or as an incentive for reconciliation. These interpretations complicate the information environment and make the public more sensitive to both international and domestic discourse. [7] Among the Shia community, the disarmament issue is viewed almost exclusively as externally imposed and politically motivated, so these narratives are pushed by the Shia politicians and influencers, Hezbollah's political wing, to all media.[8] Also, local media follows closely the situation in Gaza which is influencing Lebanon, comparing events in Gaza with prospects for Lebanon.[9]

e. **Erosion of Trust in the Institutions-** The ongoing economic, political, and security crises weaken public trust in official institutions and traditional media. This loss of trust makes individuals more reliant on alternative sources like social media accounts and WhatsApp Groups, which are often less reliable, increasing the difficulty of managing accurate information and enforcing a unified or moderate narrative.[10] However, according to polls conducted in 2025, public approval of Lebanon's central government and its leadership has seen a significant increase.[11]

5. Risks:

a. **Internal/Regional Security Escalation-** Any effective attempt to disarm Hezbollah or restrict its movements without a broad political consensus could drag Lebanon into a local confrontation or escalation with Israel, leading to a wider conflict and destruction of social and information structures, making fact management extremely challenging.

b. **Spread of Misinformation and Biased Media-** For example, Hezbollah, affected by the disarmament plan, will resort to misinformation campaigns and online opinion-shaping operations to discredit opponent's narrative or inflame public sentiment. This poses direct risks of regional incitement and renewed tensions between the Shia community and others, potentially targeting both local and international institutions to undermine their legitimacy.[12]

c. **Overreliance on External Support and Loss of Information Sovereignty-** Accepting security assistance or externally supervised plans may later be used to turn public opinion against the governing elite, portraying them as "implementers of foreign dictates" putting state legitimacy at risk and increasing public perception that there is a lack of control over national decisions. This kind of narrative is already present in Lebanon, actively undermining the government, but the government is handling it well, explaining its reasoning behind the plan and the benefits of the plan for whole Lebanon. Results of the plan implementation will be a decisive factor in who wins this narrative.

d. **Economic hardship increases Public Vulnerability to Misinformation-** The economic crisis and service disruptions place citizens in daily survival mode. In such conditions, their ability to verify or access reliable sources decreases, making them more susceptible to misinformation.

6. Opportunities:

a. **Redefining the Role of the State and Weapon Regulation as a Communication Project-** If the government and army succeed in gradual and transparent communication, with civil participation and demonstration manoeuvres, this can gradually rebuild trust and provide a model for restoring state sovereignty without triggering conflict. Transparent public communication of these steps can reduce waves of fear and rumours.

b. **Strengthening Independent Media and Fact-Checking-** Narratives opposing disarmament often stem from media. In Lebanon, where media ownership and affiliations vary, it is important to understand whether local outlets are state-run or if people rely on regional channels like Al Jazeera which have their own agenda. International support should focus on strengthening media independence, unbiased journalism, and improving source verification to ensure the public receives reliable and diverse information. Over time, such initiatives can contribute to a more resilient and pluralistic information environment that supports informed public discourse. Numerous

organizations are working on various initiatives to combat disinformation. There is ongoing national media and information literacy campaign conducted by the Ministry of Information in a collaboration with UNESCO titled "No Filter: Believe Everything? Think Again" that aims to target disinformation.[13]

c. **Space for Civil-Sectarian and Political Dialogue-** The U.S. and international initiatives encourage participation in funding and reconstruction conferences. Acquired funds can be leveraged for community reconciliation programs promoted through media to reduce sectarian platforms and expand local participation in shaping security and social policies.

d. **Funding Civil Security Institutions and Strengthening Army and Internal Security Capabilities-** Reinforcing the legitimacy of the state and the LAF while countering Hezbollah narratives can be achieved through transparent media coverage of security and disarmament efforts. Security assistance can support the development of border monitoring and enforcement capabilities while respecting citizens' rights, giving the state practical tools to gradually implement disarmament measures and reduce reliance on non-governmental forces.[14]

e. **Developing National Information Infrastructure Resilient to Disruption-** Investing in national news verification platforms, improving internet access in marginalized areas, and media literacy programs can reduce the impact of misinformation campaigns and equip the public with tools to distinguish between facts and propaganda. Examples of news verification platforms in Lebanon are: "Fact Check Lebanon" (run by the Ministry of Information) and the "Checkdesk" platform (promoted by the "Taakad" campaign and launched by SMEX - Social Media Exchange, non-governmental organization). These platforms work to verify the accuracy of information circulating on the internet and in the media, analysing images, videos, and claims.

f. **Rising trust in new government and leadership could be used to resolve long standing issues in Lebanon-** For a long time, there was a very low trust in the Lebanese Government and its leadership due to high corruption and power struggles among political elites. Addressing these causes of mistrust requires implementing transparent governance, enforcing anti-corruption measures, promoting merit-based appointments, and ensuring inclusive decision-making that represents all communities. Now, there is an opportunity with current government and leadership to make a positive impact in the country and media will have a big role in governments' results. It would be beneficial for Lebanon if the international community would listen to the current leadership, their issues and concerns, and give the Lebanese government a chance to get back on their feet without increasing internal conflict.

7. <u>**Conclusion:**</u> Lebanon's information environment is an active factor in the political and security landscape. It is a driving force that can accelerate or hinder the government's plans, particularly regarding the disarmament of Hezbollah. Since we cannot fully control or significantly influence the media, it is essential to focus on managing our own messaging (US) and advising our partners to enhance the effectiveness of their communication with the public. Strategies must consider not only operational steps but also how information is presented, by whom, and at what time, while actively countering misinformation and disinformation from media outlets to reduce the potential risks of internal or external escalation.

Balancing international pressure with internal sensitivity is essential. International plans provide resources and tools, but their acceptance and implementation require a nationally acceptable approach that convinces Lebanese people that security can only be achieved through the state's full sovereignty over all its territories and emphasizes that the State has to be the sole armed power. Neglecting this dimension increases the risks of violence and fragmentation.

The information battle is as important as the security battle. Transparency of the government, countering misinformation, and funding independent media are essential components of any implementation plan, because otherwise, actions remain vulnerable to the narrative hijacking by Hezbollah, who uses its media to promote its narratives and consolidate support among various audiences.

Opportunities exist to strengthen institutions and improve communication by adopting a package of gradual security measures, transparency initiatives, and accompanying economic programs. "State control of arms" campaign can become an entry point for rebuilding trust between citizens and the state, both domestically and internationally. This requires professional communication skills, clear civil rights guarantees, and inclusion of all groups.

The battle of the narratives in Lebanon is intense, and the winner of this battle will benefit in the upcoming May election. There is a trend of Hezbollah intensifying its media activity and actions to strengthen their positions among Shia community and other groups in Lebanon to help them retain their weapons and their power, which is evident from Hezbollah's use of their media outlets, including Al-Manar servers, as a major vehicle for their messaging, offering non-stop broadcasts of pro Hezbollah content, anti-Israel sentiment, and depictions of its military activities intended to inspire support among Shia and other sympathetic audiences. Hezbollah's cyber-combatants are pursuing a determined effort to modernize, leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI), foreign alliances, and digital influence campaigns to regain control of the narrative.[15]

Lebanese institutions and leadership need time and opportunity to resolve Lebanese issues, and they need positive or neutral media coverage. It would be best to support Lebanon from the shadows with all the backing they need, giving them a chance to become a more secure and stable partner in the Middle East.

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