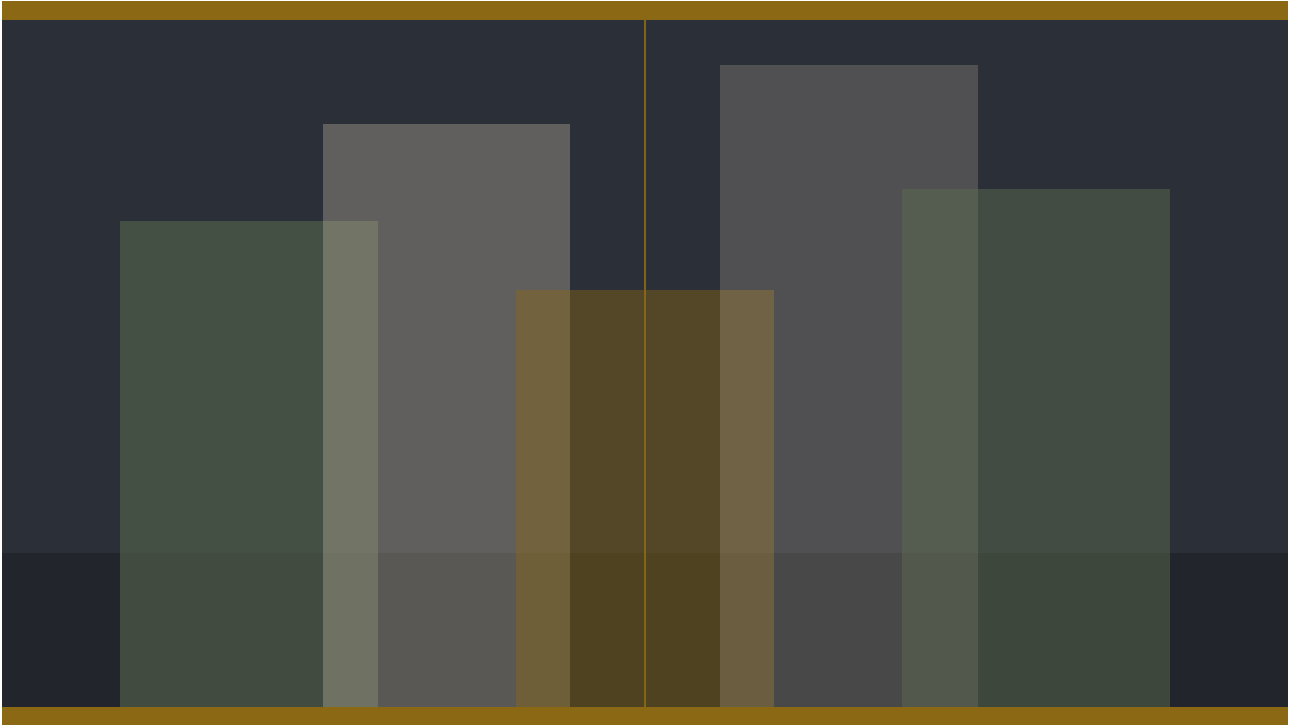




A STATE OF COMPETING SHADOWS

How history engineered Lebanon's security apparatus to fight itself, and why sectarian survival replaced national interest

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I. THE LOGIC OF FRAGMENTATION

The history of Lebanon's state security apparatus has been shaped by decades of instability, political friction, and conflict, ultimately leading to the fragmentation of security agencies along sectarian lines. This reflects the political equilibrium Lebanon has been entangled with since its independence. This structural paradigm endured beyond Lebanese independence and through the post-conflict period, as sectarian factions solidified their influence over the leadership and internal hierarchies of various security and intelligence organizations.

In the wake of the 1989 Taif Accords, authority over all intelligence bureaus was given to the Council of Ministers, led by the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, operational oversight of these entities remains fragmented within a system of informal sectarian distribution. While their respective legal mandates and operational spheres are theoretically defined, they frequently intersect or clash in execution, obfuscating the channels of responsibility and undermining the efficacy of a unified national command structure. In practice, these agencies prioritize the maintenance of internal political equilibrium, a stagnant "stability," over genuine national security. Guarding the sectarian status quo offers no strategic resilience against the compounding, multi-layered crisis threatening the Lebanese State. Institutions were built to balance power, rather than to project it. The four primary intelligence and security directorates, through their historical evolution and institutional architecture, provide a profound mirror of the contemporary Lebanese state while delineating the multifaceted challenges currently confronting the nation. Their profiles are as follows.

II. THE LEBANESE ARMED FORCES AND THE DEUXIÈME BUREAU

The Lebanese Armed Forces (الجيش اللبناني, LAF) have their roots in the Legion of the Levant, the *Troupes spéciales du Levant*, under the French army after 1921 and the establishment of the French Mandate. It was common in the French colonial empire at that time to hire local elements to legitimise control over a newly held territory and population. Given that the historical affinity between the Maronite and Roman Catholic Christian community of Mount Lebanon and the French authorities spans several centuries, the imposition of the French Mandate enjoyed considerable local legitimacy. Consequently, this facilitated the seamless integration of Lebanese personnel into the institutional framework of the French military apparatus. Furthermore, the organizational structure and core values of the Lebanese military continue to reflect the enduring influence of the French patronage system established during the mandate era.

At that time the French authorities incorporated the First Bureau and the Second Bureau into the intelligence apparatus of the growing Lebanese armed forces. The former would oversee the personnel and the counterespionage while the latter would oversee tactical military intelligence. And when the mandate left these structures, the sects captured it.

In 1943, Lebanon was granted independence from the French Mandate and by 1945, the LAF was fully constituted and responded only to the newly born Lebanese State. By tradition, reflecting the sectarian division envisioned by the French authorities and the Maronite dominance over Lebanese institutions, the Presidency was given to the Maronite community, the Commander of the LAF

was given to the Maronite community, and so was the Second Bureau, now known as the Military Intelligence Directorate. Only the chief of staff of the army was granted to the Druze community. In accordance with the constitutional framework, the Presidency holds the mandate of Commander-in-Chief over the Lebanese Armed Forces, whose operations are governed by the 1983 National Defense Law.

The State did not fracture. It was deliberately built into pieces.

This legislation delineates a threefold mission for the LAF: safeguarding against foreign aggression, preservation of domestic stability, and advancement of public infrastructure alongside disaster relief efforts. The Armed Forces are widely recognized as the most neutral security and intelligence agency out of the four Lebanese security agencies. Even though its supreme command is Maronite, most of its elements reflect the overall demographic of Lebanon, with Sunni, Shia, Christian, and other minority components. Even though the institution is highly respected and enjoys true multisectarian support from the population, it operates under a delicate balance to avoid clashing with armed non-state factions.

After the brief First Lebanese civil war in 1958 and the subsequent election of General Fouad Chehab in 1959, the *Deuxième Bureau* saw its power increase dramatically, growing into the main intelligence agency both militarily and politically. The *Deuxième Bureau* held its power in the hands of a few agents close to President Chehab and relied on a wide network of personalities across Lebanon's political and economic life. Following the failure of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party's coup attempt on the night of 30–31 December 1961, the head of the *Deuxième Bureau*, Anton Saad, President Chehab's right hand, decided to turn a new page in its work by tightening the army's grip on public life, rebuilding its apparatus, and reorganising its branches, enabling it to serve as a more vigilant watch over internal security and stability and with greater financial resources. This also led to a shift in the *Deuxième Bureau's* perspective on the role of intelligence. It was no longer content with merely gathering information. Rather, it set about analysing it, unravelling implications and anticipating events in order to mitigate their consequences. This was the essence of Anton Saad's slogan: "Absolute security." This, however, stirred controversy. For some, the *Deuxième Bureau* under Anton Saad's hands acted like a political police, arresting political opponents of the Chehabists. For others, the agency was a modern intelligence agency, responding only to a superior authority, combining diverse capacities and setting national security free from the political agenda of the sectarian ruling elite.

After the downfall of the Chehabists in 1970, the Second Bureau was dismantled by the newly elected president Suleiman Frangieh. The functional parameters of the Second Bureau, formally renamed Military Intelligence Directorate, were formalized via executive decree in 1981, which consolidated its subordination exclusively to the Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Nowadays, the Military Intelligence Directorate oversees military espionage and counterespionage, protection of military sites, coup prevention, and terrorism threats.

III. THE INTERNAL SECURITY FORCES: THE GENDARMERIE OF THE LEVANT

The Internal Security Forces (قوى الأمن الداخلي, ISF) date back as far as 1860 and the Mutasarrifate era in Mount Lebanon, where Christian Maronites gained autonomy and governance in their mountains. A Lebanese *gendarmarie* was then formed with Sunni Arab and Christian Arab components in order for them to be loyal to the Ottoman authorities and to emphasize the recent autonomous status of the region. By 1920, after the Ottoman empire was dismantled, when the French took over Lebanon and Syria on behalf of the League of Nations' mandate, they found that this security force resembled the French Gendarmerie and decided to keep it as it was.

Following independence, the Lebanese authorities established the "Directorate for General Security" (distinct from the modern GDGS) within the Ministry of Interior to consolidate domestic security functions. During the Chehabist era, the Internal Security Forces underwent formal institutionalization via Decree 138 of 1959, which integrated municipal law enforcement under a centralized national command alongside the Gendarmerie, the Judicial Police, and the Training Institute.¹ The contemporary organizational architecture of the ISF was further refined by Law 17 of 1990, expanding its bureaucratic reach to include the Information Section, the Administrative Division, and specialized departments overseeing traffic, public services, and operational logistics.

The ISF Information Section (شعبة المعلومات, ISF-IS) under the Ministry of Interior is the newest among the intelligence services, only becoming officially operational in 2006. Before, it was a small unit under the ISF's services and operations department, created in 1991 by former PM Rafik Hariri to compensate for his lack of access to the intelligence services during the time of Syrian occupation.² Subsequent to Hariri's assassination in 2005, Wissam El-Hassan, who was then the head of the ISF, formally established the Information Branch as an autonomous unit in 2006, driven by a lack of confidence in the data supplied by the General Directorate for General Security (GDGS). Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 left a vacuum in the state security landscape, allowing the ISF to regain momentum in the rivalry it had with the GDGS, especially by investigating Hariri's assassination and formalizing its Information Section.

The ISF is the largest security agency in terms of manpower³, which enables it to operate missions ranging from counterterrorism, drug enforcement, and police missions to criminal investigations. Notably, as the sole agency maintaining a specialized cybersecurity unit, it is tasked with the investigation of cybercrime and related illicit digital activities.

IV. THE GENERAL DIRECTORATE OF GENERAL SECURITY: LEGACY OF THE PREMIER BUREAU

The General Directorate of General Security (GDGS, المديرية العامة للأمن العام) is the other major intelligence agency in Lebanon. It is heir to the *Premier Bureau*, the counterespionage and internal intelligence agency of the French army in the Levant, historically and presently a counterpart to the *Deuxième Bureau* and its sibling in the LAF. Its creation dates back to 1921 and the establishment of the French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon. It finally became known as it is today, under the name of the General Directorate of General Security, in 1959 under the presidency of Fouad Chehab, which gave its directorate to a Melkite Christian. The General Security was then formalized under Decrees 139 and 2873 of 1959.

Only then, after the rifles of the civil war silenced, during the presidency of Emile Lahoud, in 1999, the directorate switched to Shia control in exchange for the State Security being handed over to a Roman Catholic (Melkite). At this point, the General Security gained importance due to the Syrian occupation in Lebanon and its ties with Syrian intelligence at the time. Its missions encompass, similar to the others, counterespionage inside the state and counterterrorism, but unlike the others, the General Security has the mission to control any entry and exit by a foreign national on the territory, control the visa permit, and possesses an office at every border crossing including airports and ports. Thus, the GDGS exerts tight control on the data of all foreign nationals present in Lebanon and on the flow of goods going into the country. This collection of data is useful for a variety of missions, such as counterespionage, control of migrants, and combating the smuggling of illicit drugs and weapons into the country. Furthermore, the General Security acts as the primary liaison for diplomatic engagement with foreign intelligence services and carries out censorship activities affecting Lebanese media. Since the Syrian occupation era, the General Security can be seen as the new *Deuxième Bureau* of the Chehab era, as it became a powerful institution in a security-state apparatus landscape. Indeed, because the GDGS has been assigned to the Shia community, it enjoys greater cooperation with powerful non-state armed actors like Hezbollah and its own intelligence units than the other agencies.

V. THE GENERAL DIRECTORATE OF STATE SECURITY

The General Directorate of State Security (GDSS, المديرية العامة لأمن الدولة) was created in the middle of the civil war under the presidency of Amine Gemayel in 1985, under Decrees 1 (1984) and 2661 (1985), as an attempt to reform the state security apparatus and strengthen its institutions despite the President's lack of control over huge swaths of Lebanese territory. It was meant to be the main security agency of the High Council for Defense, led by the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister. Initially, the directorate was entrusted to the Shia community, a move interpreted by many as a strategic measure to maintain sectarian equilibrium across the nation's intelligence and security apparatus. However, following the transition of the General Directorate of General Security to Shia leadership in 1998 under the presidency of Emile Lahoud, the GDSS was reassigned to the Melkite Greek Catholic community. Historically, State Security has been poorly funded and politically marginalized because of its lack of sectarian support in the Lebanese intelligence agencies' turf war. Its main missions encompass the protection of institutions and personalities and the collection of information, internally and externally, that could pose a threat against the security of the state. Like the others, one of its missions is to thwart threats internally and to conduct counterespionage. However, it is the only agency which has received the mandate to conduct covert operations abroad.

VI. AN APPARATUS THAT WATCHES ITSELF

This structural examination of Lebanon's principal security directorates exposes a profound sectarian entanglement that has defined the political landscape for decades. While their mandates are theoretically distinct, their operational spheres frequently collide, and the supervisory institutions fail to force a cohesive strategic convergence.

Ultimately, the state security apparatus is designed to watch itself, and an apparatus that watches inward cannot watch the horizon. Shifting from competition to collaboration would require dismantling an entrenched sectarian survival mode in favor of genuine national coordination. Lebanon does not suffer from a lack of intelligence. Its agencies possess vast, overlapping capabilities, ranging from border control and surveillance to cybersecurity and military intelligence. Instead, the state is suffering from a surplus of rivalries. Consequently, these entities abandon national security in favor of institutional warfare, actively preserving the sectarian fault lines drawn by the ruling elite.

VII. NOTES & SOURCES

NOTES

1. The Internal Security Forces institute dates back to 1919, when the French Mandate sent officers with the mission to establish an institute for officers, sergeants, and privates in Baabda. Then, in 1920, it was transferred to Beiteddine.
2. The Information Branch was established in 1991 after the issuance of Law no. 17 and decree no. 1157 dated 05/02/1991, which regards the bureaucratic organization of the Internal Security Forces.
3. As of 2009, by law the ISF had 29,494 personnel, and in practice 23,365 personnel.

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