

# For Hezbollah, a Maritime Border Deal Is a Way to Avoid War

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Brief Analysis

**Hezbollah leaders are not ready to act on their many threats of major escalation, so Washington and its allies should prevent the group from reaping the nascent agreement's reputational and financial benefits.**

**A**fter weeks of tension with Hezbollah over maritime border negotiations and natural gas rights between Israel and Lebanon, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein is apparently close to finalizing a deal. According to [reports \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/talks-mark-lebanons-southern-sea-borders-final-stages-president-2022-09-19\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/talks-mark-lebanons-southern-sea-borders-final-stages-president-2022-09-19) from both sides, Israel stands to maintain all exclusive rights over the [Karish gas field \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-karish-gas-field-diplomatic-opportunity-or-casus-belli\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-karish-gas-field-diplomatic-opportunity-or-casus-belli), while Lebanon would gain the entire Qana field. Beirut is still mulling the final details, but according to a September 17 speech by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, the group will give peace a chance and refrain from further threats or military action as the deal is finalized.

Tensions and threats on both sides have indeed moved the agreement's timeline and made it a U.S. priority, leading some observers to portray the reported terms as a concession to Hezbollah's militant stance on the issue. Yet the history of the negotiations shows that most of the concessions have been made by Hezbollah and Lebanon, not Israel.

In 2011, for instance, [a study \(https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/08/10/lebanons-maritime-border-offers-a-case-study-of-missed-opportunities\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/08/10/lebanons-maritime-border-offers-a-case-study-of-missed-opportunities) conducted by the Lebanese military suggested that the southern limit of the country's exclusive economic zone should be extended south from Line 23 to Line 29, which would have brought most of the Karish field into Lebanon's EEZ. Yet Lebanese president Michel Aoun ignored this suggestion and accepted Line 23 as the maritime border. In return for acknowledging Israel's exclusive rights over Karish, Beirut insisted on maintaining control over the Qana field. According to a [seismic survey \(https://www.lpa.gov.lb/english/resource--center/geosciene-library/offshore\)](https://www.lpa.gov.lb/english/resource--center/geosciene-library/offshore) that Lebanon ordered in 2013,

Qana remains just a prospect—drilling would be required to determine if it actually contains gas and how much. In contrast, Karish had already been proven to hold gas at the time of Aoun’s decision.

Many Lebanese, including military officials, are well aware that this is a big concession to Israel, but Hezbollah is playing a different tune. Addressing the group’s support base, affiliated media outlets [have claimed \(https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/us-mediator-made-new-proposal-to-lebanese-israeli-maritime-i\)](https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/us-mediator-made-new-proposal-to-lebanese-israeli-maritime-i) that achieving exclusive rights over Qana represents a victory over Israel—conveniently sidestepping the fact that Hezbollah is simply not ready for another war at the moment and prefers a diplomatic way out of the threats it has issued. Whatever the group’s ultimate intentions may be, a signed maritime agreement could create a new reality and narrative on the southern border with Israel, perhaps with less tension.

## Hezbollah Doesn’t Want a War Right Now

**S**ince their summer 2006 war, both Israel and Hezbollah have been trying to avoid another full-scale conflict—despite the group’s militant rhetoric and efforts to expand its arsenal, and despite Israel’s ongoing attacks against Hezbollah military bases in Syria. Viewed through that lens, Hezbollah’s recent threats of war have a different purpose: to accelerate the diplomatic process, finalize the maritime deal, and begin gas exploration.

In the years following the last war, Hezbollah seemed to reach two important realizations: that the threat of its missiles and drones could achieve more than the arms themselves, and that another war could hold worse consequences for the group than making concessions to its sworn enemy. Moreover, the quality of its fighting force was eroded by its subsequent involvement in the Syria war, compelling it to opt for quantity over quality when recruiting new fighters. As a result, many Hezbollah units are now less well-trained, less ideological, and less disciplined than before, so the group would need more time, resources, and funding to rehabilitate them for war. Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s main patron, Iran, will not be in a good financial position to fully fund the group or rebuild its army and arsenal unless the [stalemate over the nuclear deal \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-iran-deal-wont-prevent-iranian-bomb\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-iran-deal-wont-prevent-iranian-bomb) is broken. The group’s leadership has therefore been hoping that the mere threat of war will push the parties into a deal sooner rather than later.

Given Lebanon’s dire economic and financial deterioration, the government’s desperation for new gas revenue is no surprise (even if the possibility of such revenue is uncertain and would be a long time in coming). Yet Hezbollah is just as keen on reaping the benefits, both to boost its domestic legitimacy and “resistance” narrative—which have been [fading for years \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community)—and to secure a sustainable cash flow for its operations at home and abroad. Another war would only worsen these problems. Indeed, as Israeli strikes in Syria have intensified over the past few weeks, more of Iran and Hezbollah’s weapons production facilities, convoys, and depots have been targeted. Some of these operations have extended [into Lebanon \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-look-down-struggle-over-lebanons-airspace\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-look-down-struggle-over-lebanons-airspace) as well. Replenishing the group’s arsenal under such circumstances is already difficult enough, so the prospect of wider conflict and disruption is not something Hezbollah wants to entertain at the moment—certainly not over a relatively minor and potentially beneficial issue like maritime border demarcation.

This does not mean the group will curtail its efforts to procure arms in the slightest, however. Despite its growing military and political challenges, Hezbollah has managed to develop several new capabilities since 2006, accumulating more short- and mid-range missiles as well as precision missiles capable of doing serious damage to vital Israeli infrastructure such as airports, water facilities, and power plants. At the same time, the group is well aware that actually going after such targets would beget a harsh Israeli response.

Instead, Hezbollah’s military leadership has gradually sought to transform the organization from a purely Lebanese

group into a regional army, enabling it to burnish its “resistance” credentials and challenge Israeli and U.S. interests indirectly via Iranian partners and proxies in other countries (e.g., Iraq’s Shia militias; Yemen’s Houthis). The problem with this approach is that it risks setting off a regional war with the same undesirable result: direct conflict against Israel. Thus far, however, Hezbollah has either discounted the seriousness of this risk or decided that the gamble is worth it.

Whatever the case, many Lebanese Shia outside (and even inside) Hezbollah’s core constituency have seen through this attempted rebranding—they no longer regard the group as a resistance organization that fights injustice, occupation, and corruption, instead seeing it as little more than a drug cartel focused on [mass production and smuggling of Captagon](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dethroning-lebanons-king-captagon) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dethroning-lebanons-king-captagon>). They are also angry about Hezbollah’s efforts to shield corrupt politicians and [hamper judicial proceedings](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/amid-beirut-clashes-lebanese-investigators-need-protection) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/amid-beirut-clashes-lebanese-investigators-need-protection>) related to the 2020 Beirut port blast.

Well aware of this increasing discontent, Hezbollah leaders see a gas deal as a way of regaining some legitimacy by claiming that the group’s weapons are what protected Lebanon’s valuable natural resources against Israel. They have been feeling even more vulnerable after [losing their parliamentary majority](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-hezbollahs-parliamentary-loss-means-lebanon) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-hezbollahs-parliamentary-loss-means-lebanon>) in May, a development that may curtail their power to dictate who will fill Lebanon’s presidency and major security portfolios. This vulnerability is heightened by the realization that international sympathy would not necessarily be on their side in the event of another conflict—postwar reconstruction aid would likely be slower and less generous next time around, and Europe would no doubt be angry about any risk posed to Israel’s Karish field, whose gas will be going straight to them. This is not to mention the domestic backlash, which would probably be considerable given the huge expenditures and damage that such a conflict would bring. Even so, Hezbollah felt compelled to at least threaten war, since otherwise it risked losing face if Israel began unilaterally extracting gas from Karish before reaching a deal with Beirut.

## Policy Options

**A**lthough Washington should continue pushing for a maritime border deal, it need not do so in a way that lets Hezbollah take all the credit. Knowing the many risks that the group is facing, U.S. officials should not take steps that boost its power at home—including in the process of picking Lebanon’s next president. Any deal with Beirut should highlight the country’s institutions and its people, while underscoring Hezbollah and Aoun’s negative role in the process (the president and his allies are still refusing to implement necessary energy reforms).

Once a deal is finalized and the maritime borders are secured, the U.S. government and its European allies need to follow up with diplomatic pressure to make sure that the financial benefits of Qana’s gas—if the field does in fact contain any—go to the Lebanese people, not into the black hole of corruption. Only a serious push to reform the country’s energy sector—such as creating a sovereign wealth fund—would provide such assurance. Otherwise, Lebanon will never truly benefit from the deal even if ample gas is found beneath its waters.

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