

An Israel-Lebanon Agreement May Not Be Worth the Costs

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

The lesson from past deals involving Hezbollah is clear: the group will try to pocket any U.S. concessions on the presidency and other issues while simply jettisoning whatever border commitments it may make in return.

All eyes are on Gaza as Israel and Hamas inch toward a ceasefire in their months-long war. If and when a truce is reached, however, the Biden administration's focus will likely turn to Lebanon, where it hopes to de-escalate amid fears of a full-scale war. Last week, several local and pan-Arab press outlets reported on Beirut's unenthusiastic response to a proposal that Washington formulated in partnership with Paris and conveyed to Lebanese and Hezbollah officials via an unofficial French white paper. Although actual negotiations will not begin in earnest until a ceasefire is reached in Gaza, the initial reception from Lebanon suggests that the chances for success are remote.

Outlines of the Proposed Deal

U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein and French minister for Europe and foreign affairs Stephane Sejourne have visited Beirut repeatedly in recent months to lay the groundwork for a joint de-escalation plan, culminating in the white paper. Building on UN Security Council Resolution 1701—which effectively ended the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel but failed to secure an enduring peace—the new proposal seeks to fix flaws in the original document that hindered implementation, eroded confidence, and contributed to long-term instability along the border. Key elements of the U.S.-French initiative include:

- Redeploying Hezbollah's Radwan special forces seven to ten kilometers north of the border, close to but not necessarily beyond the Litani River
- Stationing 15,000 troops from the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) along the frontier
- Allowing the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and its nearly 11,000 troops to conduct less restricted patrols

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-2-facts-ground>) in south Lebanon unaccompanied by the LAF

- Building observation posts near the border to be staffed by the LAF and/or UNIFIL
- Ending Israeli **military overflights** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-look-down-struggle-over-lebanons-airspace>) of Lebanon
- Establishing a monitoring committee to discuss any infringements of the new arrangement, similar to the body created after Israel's 1996 military campaign in Lebanon
- Initiating negotiations on some disputed border points with an eye toward more formally and precisely defining the UN-demarcated Blue Line

These steps would be complemented by European funding to underwrite LAF operations in the south, as well as U.S. local development assistance and investment promotion.

Negative Response

Arab media reported immediate objections to several aspects of the proposal. The Lebanese paper *Nida al-Watan* noted that Hezbollah flatly rejected the plan, while the reliably pro-Hezbollah daily *al-Akhbar* indicated that Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri **had rejected** (<https://www.al-akhbar.com/Politics/381606/%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%A3%D9%88-%D9%88%D9%82%D9%81-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A>) the provisions on repositioning Hezbollah forces, giving UNIFIL freedom of movement in the south, and creating an internationally directed role for the LAF in the south.

The proposal was also vetted by a pair of Hezbollah advisors dubbed the “Khalilan” or “two Khalils”—namely, Hussein Khalil and Ali Hassan Khalil, the latter a Berri confidant who was designated by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2019 for his ties to the militia and assorted corrupt activities. Per *Nida al-Watan*, they did not **explicitly reject or accept** (<https://www.nidaalwatan.com/article/275672-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2584%25D8%25A8%25D9%2586%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A-%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D9%2589-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%2582%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2581%25D8%25B1%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7-%25D9%2582%25D8%25A8%25D9%2588%25D9%2584-%25D9%2588%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7-%25D8%25B1%25D9%2581%25D8%25B6-%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25AD>) the plan, but rather “subjected it to a process of careful hollowing out” that seemingly amounted to the same end result as Berri’s objections. The pan-Arab daily *Asharq al-Awsat* described (<https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/5005241-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7->

[%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AD](#)) the Khalilan’s approach as “buying time” until a Gaza ceasefire is reached and Hochstein returns to Beirut for negotiations.

Sweetening the Deal for Hezbollah?

Although the United States and France appear to be [mostly on the same page](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-french-cooperation-preventing-israel-hezbollah-war>) regarding a potential deal on south Lebanon, they disagree on whether and how the deal should be tied to choosing Lebanon’s next president, a post that has been vacant since October 2022. While the French have refused to connect the two issues, Hochstein [has reportedly](#) (<https://www.al-akhbar.com/Politics/381543/%D8%AF%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%87%D9%88%D9%83%D8%B4%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88>) linked them—though it is unclear how reliable these reports are given that they were published by the pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar*. (Notably, the paper also claimed that Hochstein is not coordinating with Paris on this matter, and that “France is very disturbed by the way the American side has behaved.”)

By law, the presidency must be held by a Maronite Christian, but parliament’s selection of Maronite candidates has been complicated—Hezbollah is pushing for the Syria-aligned leader of the Marada Movement, Sleiman Frangieh, while opponents favor more neutral figures. This decision is relevant to the U.S.-French plan because a president will eventually be required to ratify any border agreement. Given Hezbollah’s rejection of the current terms, the group will likely seek concessions in return for moving its Radwan forces. In theory, delineating the border would seem like a sufficient tradeoff, but Hezbollah may not actually want to resolve the border dispute given that its articulated *raison d’être* is fighting the Israeli “occupation” of Lebanon. A more appealing accomplishment for the group would be securing Frangieh’s appointment as president, and Washington seems poised to consider that concession. Perhaps concerned about facilitating another six years of a weak, Iran-friendly Lebanese president, Paris has thus far been uncharacteristically hesitant to adopt such an expedient approach.

Doha Agreement Redux

The Biden administration’s apparent coupling of these issues is reminiscent of the May 2008 Doha agreement, a Qatari-brokered accord reached during a previous Lebanese domestic crisis and presidential vacuum. That crisis emerged after the formerly pro-Western government in Beirut attempted to weaken Hezbollah’s control over the country’s international airport and restrict its secure communications network, spurring the militia to march on the capital and engage in armed clashes that killed nearly a hundred people.

The resultant agreement made crucial concessions to Hezbollah, including a “blocking third” in the cabinet and effective veto power over all government decisions. Ironically, the parties also agreed to prohibit the “use of weapons and violence” to resolve domestic political disputes, giving the state full “security and military authority over Lebanese nationals.” Regarding the vacant presidency, they agreed that parliament would convene and name LAF commander Gen. Michel Suleiman to the post within twenty-four hours of signing the accord. Hezbollah apparently viewed Suleiman as acceptable because the LAF had abstained from intervening during the group’s assault on Beirut. Unsurprisingly, he never once challenged Hezbollah’s writ during his subsequent six years in office.

In short, the Doha agreement was a boon for Hezbollah, consolidating its domestic political dominance at no cost. The group predictably ignored its commitment to renounce violence against its fellow citizens—since 2008, Hezbollah is the leading suspect in at least seven assassinations of [prominent opponents](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-matters-episode-one-murder-lokman->

slim-justice-delayed-lebanon) in the political and security establishment, among numerous other examples of attacking or intimidating people who get in the way of its local activities. Likewise, Hezbollah—not the “state”—remains the top military and security authority in Lebanon.

Conclusion

Although negotiating a deal for a new status quo on the border might temporarily defer the next war between Israel and Hezbollah, doing so at the cost of installing a president who is obeisant to the militia will not help U.S. interests, let alone the interests of the Lebanese people. Since 2019, the country has been reeling from a financial crisis, but rather than helping its fellow citizens extricate themselves from this predicament, Hezbollah is **actively exploiting** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis>) the crisis while opposing necessary reforms. A pro-Hezbollah president is just as unlikely to pursue such reforms. Moreover, the perception that the Biden administration is considering concessions to Hezbollah while apparently avoiding consultations with the group’s Lebanese critics may give U.S. partners in the Middle East further reason to question Washington’s reliability.

Even more important than the perception problem, however, is the likelihood that Hezbollah will not adhere to any deal Beirut reaches with Washington and Paris. The lesson from 2008 is that the group will pocket whichever provisions benefit its position at home and the interests of its sponsors in Iran while ultimately disregarding the rest. Tragically, this lesson was punctuated in brutal fashion five years after the Doha agreement, when former Lebanese minister Mohamad Chatah wrote an open letter to Iranian president Hassan Rouhani pleading for support on implementing Security Council Resolution 1701, including the provisions on deploying the LAF to the border and ending hostilities with Israel. Just days later, Chatah was assassinated, almost certainly by Hezbollah. Hence, any new deal that perpetuates Hezbollah and Iran’s control over Lebanon is doomed to fail in the long run.

Even a deal’s principal short-term benefit—de-escalating **ongoing hostilities** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border>) between Hezbollah and Israel—could prove to be moot. With Blue Line negotiations on the table, Hezbollah may choose escalation to secure a better deal, **as it did** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/securing-or-insecuring-israel-assessing-israel-lebanon-maritime-agreement>) during the lead-up to the 2022 maritime agreement. The group might also decide to continue firing on Israel even after a Gaza ceasefire. With nearly 80,000 Israeli citizens still evacuated from the north, the Netanyahu government is under growing pressure to take action that enables their return, potentially including military action. Amid new combat operations in Rafah and reported Hezbollah mobilizations in Lebanon, Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant recently warned that “it could be a hot summer” in the north. Given the complications and costs of getting to a border agreement, he may be right.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics. Previously, he served as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs from 2019 to 2021. ❖

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