

The Day After in Lebanon

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

Oct 13, 2024

Also published in Rawabet Center

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.



Articles & Testimony

Absent a policy shift in Beirut, Lebanon will remain a satrapy of Iran, and the current window of opportunity to eradicate the Hezbollah threat will close.

After eleven months of tolerating Hezbollah's war of attrition, with major combat operations winding down in Gaza, Israel turned its attention to the northern front. During an intense two week period, Israel killed or maimed thousands of Hezbollah Radwan Special Forces, decapitated the leadership—eliminating the shura and jihad councils and killing Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah—and destroyed a significant amount of Hezbollah's strategic and smart missiles. Lately, the Israeli Defense Forces have been conducting ground operations in south Lebanon, capturing arms caches and dismantling Hezbollah infrastructure. It has been a remarkable turn of events, demonstrating not only Israel's air superiority, but its intelligence dominance. In the intervening 16 years since its mediocre performance in the 2006 war, Israel clearly did its homework.

Perhaps more importantly, though, the ferocious campaign displayed Israel's new, post-October 7 approach to Iranian proxies. While Hamas in Gaza perpetrated an enormous atrocity, prior to the massacre, the group was perceived merely as a dangerous challenge. Hezbollah, on the other hand, with its vast capabilities and arsenal and free hand in Lebanon, has long been seen by Israel as an existential threat. October 7 changed Israel and the way it operates. Under siege on nearly seven fronts, Israel now has a much higher tolerance for operational risk and escalation. It also has a higher tolerance for international public criticism. This is evident in how Israel has militarily engaged with Hamas and more recently with Hezbollah. In the coming weeks and months, this same approach will undoubtedly be exhibited in Israel's targeting of Iran and its other militia armies, including the Houthis in Yemen and the Hashd in Iraq.

After its initial intelligence and military failure in preventing Hamas' October 7 attack, Israel has racked up some impressive battlefield achievements. Israel's prowess on the battlefield is not in question. The real challenge for the

Jewish state, is translating these battlefield victories into political achievements.

Iran is the biggest strategic challenge for Israel. To date, with the assistance of western partners and friendly Arab states, Israel has managed to largely defeat two significant Iranian barrages totaling more than 300 ballistic missiles and 200 attack drones. Yet the theocracy in Tehran continues its march toward nuclear weapons, and can already be characterized as a “threshold” nuclear state. Israel can set back the nuclear program militarily, perhaps, but cannot deal the program a knockout blow, particularly without active US participation. Worse, it’s not clear (based on the statements of the current Vice Presidential candidates) that future US Administrations will commit to the longstanding policy—since President George W. Bush—that Washington “will not allow Iran to get a nuclear weapon.”

Gaza, too, represents a conundrum for Israel. Since its October 7 attack, Israel has reportedly killed some 17,000 of the group’s fighters, has degraded the capabilities and leadership of the organization, and has destroyed much of its tunnel network. And yet, Israel lacks a plan for the day after the war in Gaza. Israel, Washington, and much of the world agrees that Hamas can no longer rule Gaza. The obvious alternative is the Palestinian Authority, which has governed the West Bank since the early 1990s. But the PA is weak, corrupt, authoritarian, and largely seen by its constituents as illegitimate, and it’s widely recognized that absent the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Hamas would likely take over that territory, too. Facing hundreds if not thousands of Hamas remnants with light arms, it will be difficult for an anemic PA to assert itself again in Gaza. Facing a possible Hamas insurgency, few Arab states would be willing to deploy troops, either. This is another front where Israel, having achieved military objectives, will have difficulty reaching a stable viable political status quo.

The arena where Israel has perhaps the best opportunity for translating battlefield success to a more positive political outcome is Lebanon. With Hezbollah militarily diminished, Israel has predicated a ceasefire in Lebanon on the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. While Israel never fulfilled its responsibilities under 1701—in particular, ending overflights of Lebanon—Beirut, too was derelict. The Government of Lebanon never directed the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to carry out its mission, i.e., to work with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon to ensure that after the 2006 war Hezbollah did not reestablish its presence and positions south of the Litani River. In fact, since 2006 the LAF has coordinated, collaborated, and de-conflicted with Hezbollah to prevent UNIFIL from carrying out its mandate, obstructing and limiting access of the peacekeepers in the south.

Given the divisions in the UN Security Council, no new meaningful resolutions are possible on Lebanon. If a ceasefire is to be reached, then, 1701 will have to be implemented. To achieve this will require some significant decisions in Beirut reflecting Government sovereignty. The ministerial statements of all Lebanese Governments in recent history have legitimated and blessed Hezbollah’s weapons and, effectively, the organization’s operational autonomy. The LAF, too, has historically recognized the legitimacy of “the resistance,” and its arsenal. To implement 1701, the Government will have to reassert sovereignty, at least in south Lebanon, supplanting Hezbollah forces with the LAF. And the LAF will have to work with UNIFIL to seek out take possession of Hezbollah’s weapons, dismantle its infrastructure, and prevent in the future the re-deployment of the group’s forces in the south. UNIFIL also will have to start being more aggressive and determined in carrying out its mandate.

It will be a difficult decision to make. Some 15,000 Hezbollah militiamen remained armed in Lebanon. Hezbollah has a long history of killing its political opponents in Lebanon, and the LAF, which is comprised of all Lebanon’s sectarian groups, will not militarily engage with Hezbollah. If the Government does not task the LAF with this mission, however, it’s almost certain that Israel will not agree to a full ceasefire. Instead, the IDF will continue to target Hezbollah in the south at will until it is reasonably satisfied that conditions are safe enough to allow nearly 70,000 displaced Israelis to return to their homes in northern Israel.

So far, at least, Washington is supporting Israel in its approach to Hezbollah. It remains to be seen how hard this Administration will press the Miqati Government in Beirut on 1701. Depending on the results of US elections,

however, it is possible that the next Administration will condition future US funding to the LAF on fulfilling the UN mandate in the south. At present, the Biden Administration appears narrowly focused on convincing perennial Speaker of the Parliament and Hezbollah ally Nabih Berri to convene the parliament to elect a president, a post that has been vacant for nearly two years.

Other relevant UN resolutions, while unlikely to be implemented, should also become part of the conversation. UNSCR 1559, for example, which among other things mandates that the Government of Lebanon disarm militias, is a central one. Likewise, UNSCR 1680 calls for Syria to delineate its borders with Lebanon, which is also important. It could potentially resolve the Shebaa Farms controversy, ending Hezbollah's false claims of Israeli occupation of other "Lebanese territory." More importantly, and more feasibly, will be Lebanon's responsibility to finally secure its border with Syria, which is the primary point of transshipment of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah.

There has been much hand wringing about the absence of Israeli strategy during the last year. The critique is to a large extent valid. In Lebanon, though, there appears to be a realistic goal of significantly degrading if not eradicating Hezbollah's presence on Israel's northern border. This objective will be possible only if Lebanon's political elites—frustrated with the destruction and suffering that this Iranian proxy's decades-long war against Israel has wrought—take a new approach. Absent a policy shift in Beirut, Lebanon will remain a satrapy of Iran. Meanwhile, Israel will continue to target Hezbollah assets in Syria and in Lebanon, denying Lebanon any respite. October 7 changed Israel and its approach to Hezbollah. The question now is whether the past few months have changed Lebanon's political elites.

This article was originally published on the Rawabet Center website (<https://rawabetcenter.com/en/?p=10028>). ❖

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