

# The Hezbollah-Israel Ceasefire and U.S. Leadership: What Comes Next

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## Four experts discuss the agreement's detailed security provisions, the prospects for successful implementation, and the potential impact on other regional players.

On December 2, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with David Schenker, Hanin Ghaddar, Assaf Orion, and Matthew Levitt. Schenker is the Institute's Taube Senior Fellow and former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in the first Trump administration. Ghaddar is the Institute's Friedmann Senior Fellow and author of *Hezbollahland: Mapping Dahiya and Lebanon's Shia Community* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community>). Brig. Gen. Orion (Ret.) is the Institute's Rueven International Fellow and former head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Strategic Planning Division. Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Senior Fellow and director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

### David Schenker

The U.S.-brokered ceasefire that went into effect on November 27 may not hold, but its contents are still noteworthy. The agreement centers on implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which called for the removal of any armed Hezbollah presence south of the Litani River following the 2006 war with Israel. Yet the ceasefire also references Resolution 1559, which stipulated that Hezbollah be disarmed throughout the entire country. Importantly, the Lebanese government is asked to prevent the group from rearming, and Beirut's obligations to dismantle Hezbollah military infrastructure and confiscate weapons are supposed to "start" south of the Litani but then continue in the north later.

The ceasefire also acknowledges both Israel and Lebanon's inherent right to self-defense. In addition, a U.S.-Israel side letter reportedly affirms Israel's right to use military action against any threats that are not addressed by the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) or the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

The LAF has most of the manpower and equipment needed to carry out this mission, but the organization has been diminished by Lebanon's ongoing financial crisis. It may therefore require some foreign support and training for its expanded duties in the south and along Lebanon's border with Syria. Congress is unlikely to support further U.S. funding for LAF salaries, but other partners could fill the gap, such as Qatar, other Gulf states, or France. The Military Technical Committee for Lebanon (MTC4L), set up by the United States and France, will determine what additional resources are required.

Given the LAF's two-decade failure to implement Resolution 1701 and its record of collaboration with Hezbollah, the incoming Trump administration should condition future funding on the force's performance and parcel it out slowly. Since 2005, the U.S. has invested some \$3 billion in the LAF. Now is the time for the army to step up and take on the mission of securing Lebanon, even at the risk of confrontation with Hezbollah.

Israel wanted this ceasefire, but Hezbollah needed it—a potentially important distinction to keep in mind as the difficult implementation phase commences. The ceasefire itself might not last, but if Lebanon embraces the associated agreement, it could make some progress toward becoming a sovereign state.

### Hanin Ghaddar

Unlike in 2006, Hezbollah is at its weakest point and cannot afford to go back to war. Its strategy at the moment is to lay low and try to recover, which it seems to view as a multistage process:

1. **Relegitimize its arms.** Hezbollah will presumably decry the LAF for allowing Israel to continue conducting airstrikes after the ceasefire with no response. Arguing that the weapons of the "resistance" are Lebanon's only means of fighting back against Israel, the group will push the next government to relegitimize its possession of military arms by adopting the same loaded phrase that has appeared in past ministerial statements—namely, that Lebanon's security is based on "the army, the people, and the resistance."
2. **Restructure its financial system**, much of which has been demolished in the war. At minimum, it hopes to cover compensation payments to its members, their families, and other core supporters.
3. **Assess the scope of its military losses** and try to rearm.
4. **Work with the Lebanese Shia community** to make sure discontent does not surface.
5. **Influence the presidential election**, which parliament is currently set to hold on January 9. The group will then try to make sure its favored candidates are chosen in the next round of security appointments.

Yet Hezbollah will face tremendous challenges in carrying out this agenda, having lost credibility, deterrence, most of its strategic weapons and commanders, and any semblance of its past "victory" narrative. As a result, its four pillars of power in Lebanon—strategic weapons, political alliances, money, and the Shia community—are all shaking.

The current financial situation is particularly different from 2006, when Iran flooded Hezbollah with money to cover its wartime losses and the Gulf states took care of Lebanon's reconstruction. This time, money is not as abundant in Iran, and the Gulf states will no longer help if Hezbollah is still in the picture. The group's senior commander losses might also affect its role as Iran's main proxy arm in the region.

In short, Hezbollah has become a liability for the Lebanese, the Shia, and Iran alike. The group is no longer a success story, and it cannot guarantee another "victory" given Israel's well-demonstrated military and intelligence superiority.

Accordingly, Hezbollah leaders will likely look to Syria as the key to their future strength in Lebanon, for two reasons. First, Syria serves as part of Iran's

“land bridge” to Lebanon. If events in Syria result in this bridge being cut, it would have major implications for the situation in Lebanon. Second, Hezbollah’s partners in Syria—the Assad regime and Iran—still hold a strong hand in the country and remain inextricably tied together. As long as Iran remains in Syria and keeps the land bridge running up to Lebanon’s border, Hezbollah stands a chance of eventually rehabilitating its strength. Without Syria, however, Hezbollah will suffocate in Lebanon—a consideration that should weigh strongly in the minds of those responsible for implementing Resolution 1701.

## Assaf Orion

The ceasefire terms between Israel and Hezbollah now have three layers: Resolution 1701, the new ceasefire agreement, and the side letter with the United States. For Israel, the most important aspect is the self-defense provisions regarding its right to take action against Hezbollah violations. Lebanon asserts that Israel has violated the ceasefire over fifty times, and Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate. Thus far, Washington has not offered any strong protests against Israel’s expanded definition of the right to self-defense, but this issue will likely remain a sensitive one.

Another important issue is the expansion of the tripartite mechanism between UNIFIL, the LAF, and the IDF. It has now become a five-party forum, led by the United States and including France.

A third key issue is defining the phrase “south of the Litani area,” which has been expanded northward near the river bend—a tactical change intended to prevent short-range threats into Israel. All of this will be tested during the agreement’s implementation phase.

Unlike what happened after the 2006 agreement, the United States and like-minded countries must do whatever they can to incentivize the Lebanese government, LAF, and UNIFIL to fulfill their commitments to the new agreement. In the post-October 7 era, Israel will no longer acquiesce to Hezbollah’s buildup of threats and creeping violations. Unlike in 2006, significant IDF units remain on the ground in Lebanon to continue degrading the group’s capabilities. Similarly, Israel is unlikely to watch from the sidelines as Iran’s “axis of resistance” builds up in Syria.

At the same time, the parties need to differentiate between places where the IDF has a presence and places where it does not. One valuable test case would be to apply the implementation mechanism against violations in places where the IDF is not operating.

As for returning evacuated residents to their homes in northern Israel, the government and IDF must ensure strong defenses along the border and resolved responses to any threats. They must also provide strong government support for rebuilding damaged communities, recalibrate public expectations about Lebanon (i.e., no “total victory,” and no IDF-held security buffer inside Lebanon), and establish public trust that October 7 will never happen again.

Indeed, the new ceasefire has many moving parts. Nevertheless, the parties involved are much more experienced this time than in 2006. Israel holds an advantageous negotiating position, and the United States is hopefully committed to pursuing this mission for the long term.

## Matthew Levitt

The Lebanon ceasefire presents new challenges for Hezbollah’s fellow Iranian client Hamas—and, perhaps, new opportunities for a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release. With Hezbollah delinking itself from Hamas by agreeing to a Lebanon ceasefire without a parallel one in Gaza, and with Iran stepping back from directly targeting Israel, Hamas now stands alone. Hezbollah’s loss of so many strategic assets is a loss for Iran, and Tehran may now seek to cut its losses with Hamas as well. Moreover, Hamas surely realizes that its strongest point of leverage has a limited shelf life—the hostages are most valuable alive, and many are believed to be frail.

As for next steps, the United States, Turkey, Qatar, and Egypt have embarked on a renewed diplomatic effort, with meetings this past weekend in Cairo. Hamas officials have reportedly departed Qatar for Turkey, following Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s November call for more concerted pressure on Hamas. The group appears to be feeling this pressure and seems eager for movement toward a ceasefire of its own, as it may have signaled by releasing the recent proof-of-life video for Israeli-American hostage Edan Alexander.

Hamas also realizes that President-elect Trump has made clear he wants the hostages freed resolved before he takes office, providing further leverage for ceasefire negotiations. With so much unknown during this transition period, Hamas is likely scared that Israel will take Trump’s “hell to pay” statement as license to do whatever it feels is necessary to conclude the war.

Beyond near-term ceasefire diplomacy, the next administration will need to lead an international effort to frustrate Iran’s efforts to rearm and re-fund its proxies. The international community can no longer sit back and consider the region calm when ceasefires take hold and Iran keeps arming terrorist groups to the teeth. The events of the past year—and again in Syria this past week—are proof of this logical fallacy. America’s core allies, including Israel, understand that degrading the capabilities of armed groups is no longer enough. Ultimately, they must address the threats posed by Iran, the malign actor who sponsors so many of these groups.

The past several presidential administrations have sought to pivot away from the Middle East toward Asia. Unfortunately, America’s adversaries get a say in this pivot through their actions. In this sense, threats in the Middle East will continue to vex the incoming Trump administration.

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