

Lebanon Ceasefire: Status and Prospects of the Israel-Hezbollah Truce

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Khalil Helou is an associate professor and researcher at Saint Joseph University of Beirut and formerly served as a general in the LAF Rangers Regiment and the military intelligence hostage-rescue force.



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Tal Kelman formerly served as head of strategy and the Iran Directorate at the Israel Defense Forces Strategic Planning and Cooperation Directorate (J5), head of the Strategic Division, and Air Force chief of staff.



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Brief Analysis

Watch or read remarks from a former LAF general, the IDF's former head of strategic planning, and an expert Lebanon analyst during a new series of virtual panels held by The Washington

Institute.

On January 13, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum consisting of two separate, sequential video conversations: the first with Khalil Helou, and the second with Tal Kelman and Hanin Ghaddar. Helou, an associate professor at Saint Joseph University of Beirut, formerly served as a general in the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Rangers Regiment and the military intelligence hostage rescue force. Kelman formerly served as head of strategy and the Iran Directorate at the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Strategic Planning and Cooperation Directorate. Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow in the Institute's Rubin Program on Arab Politics. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Khalil Helou

After Hezbollah and Israel reached their ceasefire agreement, the LAF sought to deploy in south Lebanon but failed to do so as rapidly as expected. Although many attribute this delay to limited resources or capacity, the real issue has been lack of will. The LAF currently boasts eleven fighting regiments with 1,300 soldiers each, supported by sufficient equipment and vehicles. In comparison, it had only 50 percent of this capacity in 2006 yet still managed to deploy to the south in just a week. Today, the force clearly hopes to avoid applying military pressure and potentially clashing with Hezbollah, preferring a political solution instead.

Meanwhile, Israel has partially withdrawn from Lebanon. In the western and central sectors, the LAF successfully deployed after Israel withdrew. The eastern sector, overlooking the Houla and Galilee Plains, remains a major security concern. If Hezbollah does not increase its rate of withdrawal from this area, Israel may not leave by the agreed sixty-day deadline, and the ceasefire will not hold. Israeli military aircraft also continue to operate over Lebanon, with over 800 airspace violations since the ceasefire was implemented; they will continue targeting Hezbollah in the south with or without the ceasefire in place.

Two additional factors could slow Israel's withdrawal. First, Iran's threats to further advance its nuclear program and target Israel with more missile strikes could undermine the security of the Lebanese border, since Hezbollah still maintains an estimated 20,000-40,000 rockets and would likely support such Iranian actions. Second, Syria's instability may present a significant challenge. The country's dramatic new political developments, large swaths of uncontrolled territory, and divisions between the groups that ousted the Assad regime all pose obstacles to Lebanese and Israeli security.

Now that Joseph Aoun has been chosen as Lebanon's new president, many are euphoric that Hezbollah is on the back foot, but this sentiment is premature. The LAF is still the same, and its former commander-in-chief is now president. Determining the next commander of the LAF remains a large question mark. While we should hope for the best, we must also keep our feet on the ground.

Tal Kelman

Four weeks into the ceasefire, significant progress in the dynamics between Hezbollah and Israel warrants cautious optimism. The ceasefire began with a clear change in Hezbollah's behavior after its military capabilities and political influence were diminished. Thus far, Israeli military actions against ceasefire violations have not provoked Hezbollah retaliation. In contrast to UN resolutions that failed to maintain security in the past, the new U.S.-led mechanism works and may be able to yield longer-term success.

The ceasefire also spurred a slow LAF deployment into south Lebanon. Up until last week, Israeli authorities questioned whether the pace of this deployment was fast enough to support full IDF withdrawal by day 60. In the past few days, however, the pace of the LAF's expansion and assumption of responsibilities has increased. Coupled with the political change represented by Aoun and new prime minister Nawaf Salam, this trend increases the odds of an Israeli withdrawal by day 60. The current mechanisms against violations are functioning effectively, and the partnership with U.S. Central Command has significantly increased Israeli confidence.

Yet several concerns linger regarding the agreement's longevity. If Hezbollah's approach to ceasefire violations changes after day 60, Israel's response may have to shift as well. Moreover, the LAF must continue assuming responsibility at ceasefire violation sites. The future of Hezbollah also depends on Iran's reassessment of its proxy strategy in the region. Although Tehran's regional strategy has not changed so far, its power to advance this strategy has weakened dramatically.

For many Israeli strategists, the latest leadership changes in Lebanon and the United States represent a best-case scenario. This is a moment of opportunity, as the balance of power in Lebanon has shifted drastically and the incoming U.S. administration will support Israeli interests. This change can and should be leveraged to encourage the demilitarization of Hezbollah. Western support from the United States and France, as well as regional support from Saudi Arabia, can bolster the Lebanese economy and encourage positive momentum.

In the immediate term, Israeli leaders should adopt a balanced approach—between restoring confidence in Israeli deterrence in the north and empowering Lebanon's leaders to create change. In the longer term, Lebanon and Israel may find a road to normalization and a peaceful future.

Hanin Ghaddar

The future of Lebanon’s sovereignty is marked by cautious optimism amid significant political and security challenges. The new president and incoming government must now translate these political developments—including the changes called for in President Aoun’s acceptance speech—into practical strategies on defense and other matters. They will also need to implement judicial and economic reforms to build a better future for Lebanon.

Although Hezbollah persists, the so-called “resistance” died when the militia approved the ceasefire agreement with Israel. Hezbollah now faces growing Shia disillusionment and serious financial barriers to reconstruction in the south. The group will use its remaining resources in the political arena to push for certain political appointments and block others, but it faces a dire future.

At the same time, Hezbollah and its allies still enjoy considerable representation in parliament, so it is crucial to ensure that the current political momentum is sustained through the next legislative election, scheduled for May 2026. To prove they can be successful partners in a strong government without kowtowing to Hezbollah, President Aoun and Prime Minister Salam will need to pass three initial tests.

First, they must challenge the status quo in their initial ministerial statement. Since 2008, these statements have legitimized Hezbollah’s possession of weapons by attributing Lebanese security to “the people, the army, and the resistance.” This is the state’s sole formal legitimization of Hezbollah, so removing this language would strip the group of any legal pretense for maintaining its arsenal.

Second, the new leadership must make strategic appointments that challenge Hezbollah’s control of the state. Of particular concern are the next LAF commander, the head of the General Security Directorate, and the governor of the Central Bank.

Third, Aoun and Salam must empower—and push—the LAF to assume its full responsibilities in terms of implementing the ceasefire agreement and other international resolutions. This requires pressure, political will, and the restructuring of army appointments.

If Lebanon’s new leaders pass these tests, they will enter the 2026 election cycle at the helm of a stronger government and nation. Aoun and Salam have been empowered to generate meaningful change and seem eager to do so, but the international community must remain resolute on these preconditions to ensure Lebanon’s sovereignty and security.

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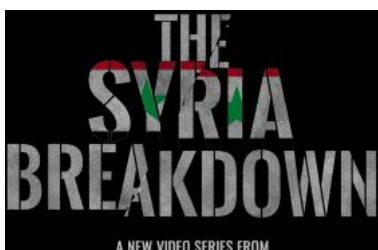
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