

# Next Steps in Lebanon: From Ceasefire Extensions to Government Formation

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**[Fadi Daoud \(/experts/fadi-daoud\)](#)**

Fadi Daoud retired from the LAF after serving as commander of the 1st Operational Group and leading army units to victory over the Islamic State during Operation Fajr al-Joroud. He has also served as head of security for the LAF's Mukafaha counterterrorism unit and as a military advisor for Lebanon



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Makram Rabah is an assistant professor of history at the American University of Beirut and author of the 2020 book, "Conflict on Mount Lebanon: The Druze, the Maronites and Collective Memory." Rabah is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



**[Efraim Defrin \(/experts/efraim-defrin\)](#)**

Efraim Defrin retired from the IDF last year after a distinguished three-decade career that included serving as head of the International Cooperation Division and leading the 162nd Division's efforts during the 2006 Lebanon war.



**[Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](#)**

Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Res.) is The Washington Institute's Rueven International Fellow, a senior research fellow at the INSS, and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division.

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## **Former military officials and experts from Lebanon and Israel discuss how Beirut's unsettled political dynamics might affect ongoing implementation of the ceasefire and future peacebuilding efforts.**

*On February 13, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum consisting of two separate, sequential video conversations: one with Fadi Daoud and Makram Rabah, and another with Efraim Defrin and Assaf Orion. Daoud retired from the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) after serving as commander of the 1st Operational Group. Rabah is an assistant professor at the American University of Beirut and author of Conflict on Mount Lebanon: The Druze, the Maronites, and Collective Memory. Defrin retired from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) after a distinguished three-decade career that included serving as head of the International Cooperation Division. Orion is the Institute's Rueven International Fellow, a senior research fellow at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

### **Fadi Daoud**

The LAF has taken significant steps since the Hezbollah-Israel ceasefire began, deploying 1,500 troops to the southern border to reinforce the 4,000 already stationed there. In coordination with U.S. Central Command and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), these forces continue to monitor the border and work toward implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Thanks to these international partners, the LAF has infiltrated 550 Hezbollah positions so far and confiscated 100 of the group's weapons caches.

The way forward is far from easy, however. The biggest obstruction to progress by far is the political environment and leadership in Lebanon. On one hand, the executive branch is faltering with ambiguous statements at a time when it should be providing clear, direct, and binding orders to the Defense Ministry. Additionally, the LAF still lacks a permanent commander with full responsibilities. A window of opportunity has opened for the army to assert a monopoly over state security, but the political leadership must act decisively and strengthen the LAF command structure.

Other regional issues could also pose a challenge. For one, Israeli decisionmaking and domestic politics might impinge on progress in Lebanon. If the IDF delays its withdrawal, Hezbollah may refuse to disarm. Additionally, the Lebanese public is concerned about the unstable situation in Gaza and the political debate among Israelis about expanding their presence there. The LAF must also contend with new clashes inside Lebanon and insecurity on its eastern border.

The good news is that the LAF is capable of taking on the remnants of Hezbollah, which has already lost 80-90 percent of its arsenal. Yet persistent domestic institutional obstacles and regional security threats mean that finishing the job will require more than just military might.

### **Makram Rabah**

With the February 18 ceasefire deadline fast approaching, Lebanon sits at a critical juncture. The new government has been slow to initiate judicial and military reforms, which are badly needed to overcome the legacy of outdated systems. Pushing key decisions through the political leadership is the next step toward peace.

One meaningful action the cabinet could take to begin rebuilding Lebanon is empowering the judiciary to seek accountability, for the Beirut port explosion in particular. Authorities should also consider sanctions against figures who have aligned with Hezbollah's narrative, to help ensure that the group and its supporters do not derail national efforts to instill peace and stability. The question of disarming Hezbollah is fraught with challenges, but putting the group under the spotlight and holding it accountable for any legal violations is crucial.

The notion that Hezbollah will simply fade away is a dangerous miscalculation. The LAF must challenge the group's monopoly of violence in the south and adhere to Resolution 1701—not as a concession to Israel's security, but to ensure the safety and sovereignty of Lebanon itself.

In the near future, the government should focus on disarming Hezbollah and facilitating municipal and parliamentary elections. The return of free and fair elections is critical to revitalizing Lebanon's political system, where liberal voices—particularly from the Shia community—could challenge Hezbollah's monopoly. Ultimately, the Lebanese people, regardless of sect, long for peace. And peace may come soon, but only if Lebanon resolves its internal struggles first.

### **Efraim Defrin**

The Israeli political leadership has identified three obstacles to a permanent ceasefire in Lebanon. First, the primary concern is that the agreement's conditions are met, regardless of timeline. Yet Hezbollah has already shown that it does not necessarily follow through on its agreed obligations.

Second, the LAF sent only half of the troops it initially promised to deploy in south Lebanon. Although Israel understands the security demands behind this decision, the failure to fulfill the troop commitment raises alarms about Hezbollah's ability to regain a foothold.

Third, Lebanon must assert sole military authority over its territory, but the ongoing protests at Beirut's airport show that the LAF has not fully achieved this goal. The international community should therefore think twice about funneling money into the military's general budget—a better approach would be to focus on providing equipment and placing conditions on the money earmarked for soldiers' wages. This would encourage accountability and ensure that financial support aligns with clear performance metrics.

As for Hezbollah, despite suffering severe damage to its leadership and arsenal, the group is not yet defeated. Approximately 10-20 percent of its

weapons and personnel remain operational, and Hezbollah assumes it can continue covert operations in the south. The group has deep roots in Lebanon, and some LAF elements have cooperated with it. To address this problem, the international community should consider sanctioning figures such as Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, a key Hezbollah supporter. Lebanon needs outside help to curb Hezbollah’s influence and rebuild trust in the country’s military and political institutions.

Another concern is that UNIFIL has repeatedly failed to fulfill its mandate. Rather than serving as a neutral peacekeeping force, it has become part of the problem, whether through ineffectiveness or complicity. If UNIFIL cannot be restructured to play a meaningful role in maintaining peace and security, its continued presence will do more harm than good.

Israel’s immediate priority is the safe return of its citizens to northern towns evacuated during the war, particularly since schools reopen on March 1. Yet Israel is also committed to finding a lasting border solution with Lebanon based on real security progress, not just political deadlines. In the longer term, both countries can emerge from this conflict as meaningful partners for peace, but only if they address the underlying security challenges.

## Assaf Orion

Policymakers on both sides see great potential for collaboration on security goals. Lebanon’s shift in tone signals a strategic recalibration, as leaders recognize that the goal is not just to reach a security agreement, but to ensure that it works in practice. In turn, Israel is taking a patient, performance-based approach rather than adhering to a strict timeline, focusing on the long-term relationship instead of a short-sighted security arrangement.

Since the October 7 attack, Israel’s national security stance has undergone a profound transformation in which enemy security violations will no longer be tolerated. This change has been demonstrated in Lebanon, where the IDF cooperates with UNIFIL and the LAF but also acts unilaterally when necessary. The new posture reflects both a hardened resolve and a commitment to protecting Israeli security interests—and, indirectly, Lebanon’s as well.

For Lebanon, the main challenge lies in taking decisive steps internally. Hezbollah is down, but not out. The government must therefore provide clear, strong directives to the LAF, demand UNIFIL action, and empower both forces to take on Hezbollah everywhere, including locations dubbed “private property.”

The international community has a delicate role to play in all of the above efforts. First, it should set clear conditions for supporting the LAF—namely, preventing Hezbollah provocations, dismantling the group’s infrastructure, and cooperating with international allies to target its financial, logistical, and criminal network. Foreign officials should also reassess UNIFIL’s role, ultimately deciding if the force can become relevant on the ground and, if not, whether it should be dissolved.

The LAF’s full partnership in securing Lebanon may take time; until then, Israel should continue safeguarding its security along and across the border. A gradual approach to rebuilding the LAF—one rooted in performance-based conditions—is crucial. The current cessation of hostilities is a powerful first step. Officials should now look toward a permanent ceasefire that addresses the core security threats facing both nations, mainly Hezbollah. From there, the horizon may open to more formal peacebuilding efforts. This outcome would be an ultimate defeat for Hezbollah’s narrative as the supposed protector of Lebanon.

*This summary was prepared by Audrey Kost. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

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