

Trump Should Aim for a “Riviera” in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

Beirut stands at the goal line of a major win for the Middle East, but only if America quarterbacks the last push.

On February 26, Prime Minister Nawaf Salam's new government won a crucial vote of confidence with backing from 95 out of 128 members in parliament. Even legislators affiliated with Hezbollah voted “yea,” despite the fact that the government's inaugural ministerial statement does not support “the resistance” in any form.

In Lebanon, ministerial statements outline the government's plans during its term in office, and past statements had traditionally kowtowed to Hezbollah by emphasizing the slogan “the people, the army, and the resistance.” Yet Salam's statement omitted that phrase and highlighted other priorities instead: financial reforms, judicial reforms, appointments based on merit and transparency, and a complete Israeli withdrawal from “occupied Lebanese territories in the south, up to the borders defined by the 1949 armistice.” The statement also emphasized the need for Lebanese “state sovereignty across all its territories exclusively with its own forces.” This included a pledge to implement President Joseph Aoun's previous commitment to assert “the state's duty in monopolizing the bearing of weapons” and “deciding on war and peace.”

The main challenge to all of these goals is twofold: fully implementing the ceasefire agreement with Israel and disarming Hezbollah across Lebanon. To meet these requirements, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) need full support and continuous synchronization with the ceasefire enforcement mechanism, which is currently headed by the United States. Indeed, Washington's presence atop the mechanism is what makes the current ceasefire more

promising than the one that ended the 2006 war and enshrined UN Security Council Resolution 1701 as the perpetually unfulfilled template for breaking the cycle of conflict. Continued U.S. leadership and funding will be more crucial than ever in the coming months, at least until all of the agreement's terms are fulfilled.

This prospect is becoming increasingly tangible as the new government notches another win and Hezbollah makes major political concessions. Today's more favorable state of affairs is largely a result of Israel's resounding battlefield victories over the terrorist group last year. Hezbollah has been weakened militarily and lost its entire central command structure, spurring a dramatic decline in morale.

As a result, the new government has a historic opportunity not seen in Lebanon for more than forty years—namely, to return to the international community, reconnect with leading Sunni Arab states, strengthen its ties with Europe, and perhaps even begin the process of joining the Abraham Accords with Israel. This opportunity is literally golden as well—if there's one country in the Middle East that knows how to develop a "Riviera," build hotels, and enjoy the good life at potentially great profit to investors foreign and domestic, it's Lebanon.

Since Hezbollah rose to power in the 1980s, however, the country has effectively been held hostage by the group and paralyzed on all fronts. Even after Israel withdrew in May 2000, Hezbollah refused to transfer security responsibilities to the LAF, severely undermining the government's sovereignty. The moment is now ripe for Washington and its European and Gulf partners to help break this decades-long cycle by focusing on the following steps:

- **Politically defeat Hezbollah and cut off all its funding sources.** Hezbollah has been weakened but still holds significant representation in government, a key ally in Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and hand-picked finance minister (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-new-government-may-walk-thin-line-between-promises-and-compromises>) Yassin Jaber, who may try to turn his office into a financial conduit for the group. Over time, Hezbollah will attempt to rebuild its position and regain de facto control if left unhindered.
- **Pressure the LAF via the ceasefire oversight mechanism.** As head of the mechanism, the United States has far-reaching leverage over the Lebanese security institutions that will be responsible for defunding and defeating Hezbollah on the ground, where it matters most. In particular, Washington should press the LAF to halt the flow of funds to Hezbollah in coordination with Saudi Arabia and other top reconstruction donors.
- **Increase U.S. security support through Foreign Military Financing (FMF),** with strict conditions tied to implementation of the ceasefire agreement. Despite the administration's ongoing review of foreign assistance levels, expediting Lebanese FMF would give Washington substantial leverage over key Lebanese decisions and bolster its efforts to set clear performance expectations for relevant ministries, monitor all their expenditures, and threaten sanctions against ministers who collaborate with Hezbollah.
- **Press for a responsible appointment as the next LAF commander,** since that individual will be responsible for fully implementing the ceasefire, preventing Hezbollah's rearmament, and working with Syria's new transitional authorities to secure the border.
- **Coordinate financial assistance with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other donors** to ensure that compliance with ceasefire terms and economic reforms is a prerequisite for any reconstruction aid.
- **Halt Lebanon's transactions with the IMF and World Bank** until it implements additional economic and legal reforms. This will help limit the risk of Hezbollah and its affiliated ministers manipulating state finances.
- **Closely monitor the eventual reconstruction process to ensure that it does not benefit hostile actors.** This means excluding Hezbollah and its local partners from all phases of the process and bypassing the long-compromised Council for South Lebanon.

Lebanon stands at the goal line of a major win for the Middle East, but only if America quarterbackes the last drive. To

enable this final push, Beirut will need the right military leadership, strategic plan, and budget for the task. Moreover, leading partners like France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates will need to work in tandem with Washington like a clenched fist against Hezbollah, an enduring opponent that has been allowed to survive and prevail too many times in the past.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Hezbollahland: Mapping Dahiya and Lebanon's Shia Community](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community>). Zohar Palti is the Institute's Viterbi International Fellow, former head of the Mossad Intelligence Directorate, and former head of the Policy and Political-Military Bureau at Israel's Ministry of Defense. ❖

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