

Moving Past “Wait and See” in South Lebanon: The U.S.-French Role

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Brief Analysis

The announcement of "working groups" between Israel and Lebanon comes at a key juncture in the ceasefire, and complementary action by the United States and France can facilitate full implementation.

On March 11, U.S. deputy special envoy for the Middle East Morgan Ortogus [announced](https://x.com/statedept_nea/status/1899482317296373769?s=43&t=h12YW2dHvEcKIOrf05SUhw) that the United States will be “bringing together Lebanon and Israel for talks aimed at diplomatically resolving several outstanding issues,” with various “working groups” focused on addressing “the release of Lebanese prisoners, the remaining disputed points along the Blue Line and the remaining 5 points where Israeli forces are still deployed.” This statement followed the [sixth military-to-military meeting](https://lb.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-french-embassies-in-lebanon-and-unifil-3/) at the UN peacekeeping headquarters in Naqoura, which brought together Israel, Lebanon, the United States, and France.

The new talks could end the atmosphere of wait-and-see that has prevailed since the deadline for Israel’s full withdrawal passed on February 18. While the [ceasefire agreement](https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-the-israel-hezbollah-ceasefire-deal/) highlighted Israel and Lebanon’s commitment to take steps toward full implementation, the two countries have a different understanding of what the first phase should be—disarmament, full withdrawal, or full deployment—and who should step in first. The U.S. initiative could enable full implementation of the agreement by finalizing the Israeli army’s withdrawal from Lebanon and demarcating the land border. As an initial goodwill gesture, Israel returned five Lebanese prisoners at the request of the United States.

From Ceasefire to Impasse

On November 26, Israel and Lebanon, with U.S. and French mediation, agreed to a sixty-day ceasefire to end more than a year of hostilities. As the deadline approached, Israel implied it would delay its withdrawal, and on January 26, the White House announced an extension until February 18.

On the eve of the new deadline, Israel Defense Forces spokesperson Lt. Col. Nadav Shoshani announced that a small number of troops would temporarily remain in five strategic points along the border to protect Israelis returning to their homes in the north. Spanning from west to east, these points [are located several hundred meters inside Lebanese territory](https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1448249/israel-to-keep-troops-at-five-strategic-points-in-lebanon-beyond-tuesday.html#:~:text=The%20five%20locations%20where%20Israeli%20forces%20will%20stay,newly%20established%20position%20along%20the%20Markaba-Houla%20road%20%28Marjayoun%29.): near Hamames Hill (Metula on the Israeli side); Wadi Saluki (Margaliot on the Israeli side); Blida, Bint Jbail, and Maroun al-Ras (Avivim and Malkia on the Israeli side); Jabal Blat (Shtula on the Israeli side); and Labbouneh (Shlomi on the Israeli side). The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), in coordination with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), redeployed to the positions the IDF ceded.

Israel also designated “buffer zones” close to al-Duhayra and Kfar Kila, saying they were needed because the LAF has not deployed quickly enough in the south. The LAF denied this, stating that it is fully prepared to deploy as it did in the rest of the south, while [President Joseph Aoun declared](https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1448305/joseph-aoun-i-do-not-fear-internal-strife.html), “The argument that the Israelis want to stay on certain strategic hills doesn’t hold water, because new war criteria and technical progress have replaced the old methods.”

It is true, nonetheless, that the LAF failed to deploy 10,000 soldiers to the south, a key goal of the ceasefire agreement. Although Israel continues to bomb positions and sites attributed to Hezbollah, the Lebanese government response has been fairly restrained. It seems clear, however, that Israel wants strong security assurances before leaving its five remaining outposts, so that northern residents can return home. It has not given a timetable for a final troop withdrawal; Lebanon, for its part, has not defined a timetable for dismantling unauthorized Hezbollah facilities.

U.S. Position on Outposts Unclear, French Offer Deemed Insufficient

While Katz [stated on February 27](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-844013) that Israel “will remain in the buffer zone in Lebanon indefinitely” and “received a green light from the United States,” no American official has confirmed—or denied—this point. As the Trump administration continues its ninety-day freeze on foreign aid, the State Department approved a Lebanese exception, unfreezing [\\$95 million in funding](https://www.axios.com/2025/03/04/lebanon-state-department-unfreezes-aid) for the LAF. This was proof of Washington’s confidence in President Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, as well as its concrete support for ceasefire implementation.

France, for its part, suggested a way to provide strong security assurances to Israel while respecting Lebanese sovereignty. Paris proposed [deploying the French UNIFIL contingent](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/news/article/lebanon-withdrawal-of-israeli-defence-forces-from-southern-lebanon-18-feb-2025) alongside the LAF at the five outposts now held by Israel, an option accepted by UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres. Yet while no Israeli official has

publicly responded to the proposal, the government clearly believes it is insufficient to ensure that UNIFIL will prevent Hezbollah from returning to those commanding heights.

Although the acceleration of events in Syria since December [has disrupted \(https://today.orientlejour.com/article/1451969/new-clashes-in-hermel-between-lebanese-clans-and-syrian-fighters.html\)](https://today.orientlejour.com/article/1451969/new-clashes-in-hermel-between-lebanese-clans-and-syrian-fighters.html) Lebanon's redeployment in the south, the LAF nevertheless intends to continue dismantling all Hezbollah facilities, infrastructure, and military positions in keeping with its commitments. Israeli outposts in Lebanon should in no way prevent Beirut from moving forward. The LAF commitment should also include giving UNIFIL access to all locations of interest and all parts of the Blue Line.

Avoiding "Occupation" and "Resistance" Narratives

From a political perspective, much has been achieved. For the first time since Israel's withdrawal in 2000, the inaugural ministerial statement formulating the new government's intended policies does not mention "the people, the army, and the resistance," a slogan that had long been perceived as [legitimizing Hezbollah's military force \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-new-prime-minister-approaches-next-crossroads-hezbollah\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-new-prime-minister-approaches-next-crossroads-hezbollah) and operational autonomy. Yet while this move sends the right signal, it will not be enough. Two recent developments—the government barring Iranian flights from landing in Beirut, and the LAF [preventing pro-Hezbollah protesters \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/tear-gas-fired-hezbollah-supporters-protesting-lebanon-blocking-iranian-flight-2025-02-15/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/tear-gas-fired-hezbollah-supporters-protesting-lebanon-blocking-iranian-flight-2025-02-15/) from entering the airport—may indicate that the army is up to the task, provided it is given a strong, clear political directive.

In the absence of Israeli guarantees, however, there is a great risk that what the Lebanese leadership is calling a new "[occupation \(https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/lebanon-israel-withdrawal-deadline-1.7461557\)](https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/lebanon-israel-withdrawal-deadline-1.7461557)" will fuel the narrative of "resistance." Hezbollah [lost much of its legitimacy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roadmap-enduring-ceasefire-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roadmap-enduring-ceasefire-lebanon) as a result of the immense destruction rained on Lebanon during the war. The funeral for the group's late leader, Hassan Nasrallah, showed that the group is alive but its domestic standing has been greatly undermined, as very few Lebanese political leaders attended. And yet, if Israel maintains an open-ended presence in Lebanon, it could help Hezbollah regain its lost legitimacy. Even though this presence is mostly outside population centers, it has led to tensions with the Lebanese public. Videos [showing hundreds of Israelis \(https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/en/justice-law/764133/israeli-settlers-enter-qabr-al-ibad-site-located-o\)](https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/en/justice-law/764133/israeli-settlers-enter-qabr-al-ibad-site-located-o) entering southern Lebanon on March 7, reportedly escorted by Israeli security forces, rekindled criticism of Beirut's inability to protect its sovereignty.

Policy Recommendations

Complementary action by the United States and France, the guarantors of the ceasefire agreement, is essential for pushing toward full implementation. The following ideas may be useful:

- **Continue to work toward Lebanese reconstruction, which is intrinsically linked to economic reforms**. France has indicated its willingness to organize a conference with Saudi Arabia when the time is ripe. After several years in which the kingdom distanced itself from Lebanon, recent high-level visits have illustrated [its determination to step in \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabias-emergence-diplomatic-broker\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabias-emergence-diplomatic-broker). However, no major announcement has been made. This suggests that Riyadh, more than in the past, is waiting for strong moves in the economic field before providing substantial support. The signing of an agreement with the IMF could be one such move.
- **Outcome-oriented working groups**. The working groups described by Deputy Special Envoy Ortagus address different subjects with differing urgency. Some, such as full LAF deployment and complete IDF withdrawal, are more urgent, while others require discussions that may take time, such as an agreement to delineate the border. To avoid undermining the entire dynamic, these tasks should not be linked.
- **Test UNIFIL by implementing the French proposal at one of the outposts, with the next renewal of UNIFIL's mandate in mind**. In August, the United States will have to adopt a position on renewal at the UN Security Council, in close cooperation with France, the penholder. In this context, the French proposal to facilitate full LAF deployment and complete IDF withdrawal could be put back on the table to test UNIFIL and assess the credibility of its strengthened posture in South Lebanon.

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