

There Is No Better Time to Disarm Hezbollah

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Articles & Testimony

With the group and its Iranian patrons at their weakest point in decades, Beirut has a real opportunity to restore its sovereignty, but waiting for another futile “national dialogue” may close that window.

Last week, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun announced that Beirut would not forcibly disarm the Iran-backed Shiite militia Hezbollah as part of its effort to gain a state monopoly on weapons. Instead, Aoun said Hezbollah would be convinced to give up its arms on its own, through dialogue and negotiations. Moreover, the president suggested the militia’s troops could then be integrated into the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). This approach, which avoids a potentially bloody face-off, will be unacceptable to both the US and Israel, and will ultimately undermine the hopeful progress Lebanon has made toward reasserting its sovereignty.

Undoubtedly, President Aoun is in a difficult position. In the December 2024 ceasefire that ended the Hezbollah-Israel war, the Lebanese government agreed to implement United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559, which require the disarmament of all militias in the country. For its part, Hezbollah agreed to move its military hardware and personnel to the area above the Litani River, but it has rejected demilitarisation elsewhere.

Since the ceasefire was signed in December, the LAF has largely fulfilled its obligations to seize the militia’s weapons and dismantle Hezbollah’s infrastructure along the frontier with Israel. Lacking sufficient numbers of troops and concerned about sparking a resumption of its sectarian civil war, however, Beirut has balked at going after Hezbollah’s arsenal north of the Litani. Meanwhile, consistent with the terms of the ceasefire, Israel continues to target Hezbollah assets and personnel throughout the state.

Default Approach

To square the circle while avoiding a seemingly inevitable confrontation with Hezbollah, Aoun has defaulted to Lebanon's perennial preferred method of dealing with uncomfortable and insoluble problems: national dialogue. Aoun is calling for a "bilateral dialogue" with Hezbollah to reach an agreement on the organisation's disarmament. Since 2005, Hezbollah has periodically engaged with the Lebanese government and political factions in dialogues focused on designing a "national defence strategy." These discussions proved sterile, largely because Hezbollah always refused to discuss ceding its weapons but also because the organisation routinely murdered Lebanese critics who had the temerity to suggest that Hezbollah surrender its arms. Accordingly, until 2025, successive Lebanese governments accepted and legitimated, in their ministerial statements, the militia's possession of weapons and "resistance."

For example, in 2010, Hezbollah participated in several rounds of talks. But Hezbollah maintained its position, and negotiations, unsurprisingly, made no progress. In 2012, then-President Michel Suleiman advocated for placing Hezbollah's arms under the authority of the LAF, but the group swiftly rejected it. In 2016, President Michel Aoun endorsed Hezbollah's arms as "complementary" to the LAF. After years of futile efforts, in 2018, negotiations finally broke down after the militia deployed to Syria to defend the Assad regime against a popular revolt.

Now, Hezbollah says it is again willing to participate in a dialogue. According to Hezbollah MP Ihab Hamadeh, this dialogue would focus on establishing a "defensive strategy" that would have to "convince" the Lebanese that the state could defend the country from Israel.

Militia officials have said they could agree to disarm if Israel withdraws from Lebanon—a reference to five hilltop locations Israel continues to occupy in Lebanon—and ends its targeting of Hezbollah. But that position has since been contradicted by the organisation's current leader, Naim Qassem, who said on 19 April that "no one will be allowed to remove the weapons of the resistance." In any event, these officials say the dialogue will not occur until after the parliamentary elections in 2026, currently slated for May.

Delay Tactic

As in previous failed national dialogues, it appears that Hezbollah is once again embracing talks as a delay tactic. The United States and Israel, as well as many critics of Hezbollah in Lebanon, understand that after sustaining so many losses in its war of choice in support of Hamas, the militia is looking to buy time to regroup and reconstitute.

For his part, President Aoun is seeking to avoid a direct confrontation with Hezbollah, but he is under pressure. US Deputy Special Envoy for the Middle East Morgan Ortagus continues to press Aoun and the Lebanese government to fulfil their ceasefire obligations vis-a-vis Hezbollah. As Ortagus recently reiterated to the Lebanese network LBCI, "that includes disarming Hezbollah and all militias."

Aoun's National Dialogue initiative and his trial balloon suggestion of incorporating Hezbollah fighters into the LAF were a well-intentioned effort to cajole Hezbollah into concessions the group is loath to make. To be sure, conscripting the militia into the LAF was the unstated policy vision for Hezbollah during the Clinton Administration. Yet Aoun clearly understands this approach won't fly with Trump's Washington.

Indeed, immediately after floating the idea, Aoun clarified that absorbing Hezbollah into the LAF would not resemble the structure of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces, known as the Hashd, into the Iraqi military. The Hashd—another Iranian-backed militia force—operates separately and outside the control of the Iraqi government. In the case of Hezbollah, Aoun said, militia members would not be permitted to operate as an independent unit like the Hashd, but would instead be recruited into the military as individuals.

Despite Aoun's assurances, the approach—in which Hezbollah loyalists would receive military training and continue

to possess weapons—is unlikely to advance the disarmament objective.

Predictable Initiative

Sadly, this initiative was predictable. On 8 October 2024—two months prior to the ceasefire and three months before Aoun was elected president—I anticipated this outcome in a paper **published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-rare-moment-opportunity>)**. At the time, I wrote: “To avoid antagonising the group (Hezbollah) while placating the West, they may be tempted to finesse the resolution to ‘incorporate’ Hezbollah into the LAF. This would be unacceptable, however.”

Seven months on, the idea remains problematic. Lebanon has committed itself to disarming all militias and establishing a state monopoly on weapons. This is the sine qua non if Lebanon hopes to become a sovereign and successful state. And it is for the first time possible because of Israeli military operations in October and November 2024 that degraded Hezbollah to an unprecedented extent.

Incorporating Hezbollah into the LAF will preserve the militia’s latent capabilities and undercut the army. Delaying efforts to disarm the militia via an interminable dialogue will provide the group with a reprieve from extreme pressure.

With both Hezbollah and its Iranian patrons at their weakest point, Lebanon has a fleeting opportunity to restore its eroded sovereignty. Washington will continue to press Beirut to seize this opportunity, but the decision ultimately rests with President Aoun and the Lebanese government.

No doubt, Hezbollah will try to delay its demilitarisation in hopes of maintaining a residual capability, and should the government persist and broaden its efforts against the group, there could be violent clashes. Despite the risks, however, there will never be a more favourable time to disarm Hezbollah—with or without its consent—than now.

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