

The Next Era of Israel-Lebanon Relations? Ceasefire Status and Political Prospects

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Brief Analysis

Three experts examine the security and political situation six months after the ceasefire agreement was signed, including the implications for next year's Lebanese election, Palestinian refugee camps, and eventual normalization with Israel.

On June 5, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Hanin Ghaddar, Assaf Orion, and Ghaith al-Omari. Ghaddar is the Institute's Friedmann Senior Fellow and a veteran Lebanese journalist. Orion is the Institute's Rueven International Fellow, a senior research fellow at INSS, and former head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Strategic Planning Division. Omari is the Institute's Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow and a former advisor to the Palestinian Authority. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Hanin Ghaddar

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have yet to show a sense of urgency in disarming Hezbollah, and their hesitation threatens to turn the country into the land of missed opportunity. Although a lot of good work is being done south of the Litani River, not much is being accomplished elsewhere. The LAF has confiscated some Hezbollah weapons north of the Litani but has not made a major dent in the group's total arsenal. Continued Israeli attacks on Hezbollah infrastructure have done more than the LAF has.

The LAF needs to understand that it is not 2006 anymore. The current ceasefire gave the IDF the right to target Hezbollah infrastructure and personnel, and Israel will not stop such operations if Lebanon decides not to confront Hezbollah. Ultimately, disarming Hezbollah will require some degree of confrontation because the group will not surrender its weapons otherwise—according to Lebanese media reports and sources close to the ongoing negotiations in Beirut, Hezbollah is refusing to surrender any more weapons before the next parliamentary election scheduled for May 2026. Its strategy is to buy time until something happens to change the regional situation, whether involving Iran or other players. Meanwhile, the new Syrian government has been **taking action** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-syria-border-talks-can-restrain-hezbollah-and-boost-security>) against Hezbollah weapons smuggling, recently intercepting a shipment of precision missiles en route from Iran to Lebanon.

Despite losing most of its military infrastructure, financial assets, and foreign support, Hezbollah still has substantial political representation inside Lebanon. Maintaining this representation by winning enough votes in 2026 would enable the group to continue wielding influence in parliament. In that sense, next May's election will be the most consequential in Lebanon's history, either making or breaking Hezbollah.

Last month's municipal elections offered a preview of the coming campaign. On one hand, Hezbollah achieved good results by holding onto local control in many communities, particularly in Shia areas. On the other hand, its margins of victory are shrinking, and Christian candidates—mostly members of Samir Geagea's "Lebanese Forces" party—won many municipalities, reducing Christian support for Hezbollah. The Sunni vote is also a concern for Hezbollah. Qatar appears to be filling the gap that Saudi Arabia left in the Lebanese Sunni community after falling out with Beirut years ago; the latest election results indicate that Doha's support for local Hamas-led Muslim Brotherhood branches (mainly al-Jamaa al-Islamiyah) is bearing fruit.

Accordingly, while the LAF and Israel target Hezbollah's remaining military power, U.S. policy should target the group's political machine, using sanctions and other tools against Hezbollah politicians and their allies. Washington can still help the military mission too, of course—most notably by supporting efforts to boost the LAF's equipment and salaries. The Trump administration should also appoint a special envoy to Lebanon. And now that Saudi Arabia is re-engaged in Beirut, Washington should work closely with Riyadh to counter Qatar's local influence.

Next door in Syria, the fall of the Assad regime dealt a big blow to Hezbollah's plans, and the group will suffer another huge setback if Ahmed al-Sharaa's new government signs onto the Abraham Accords with Israel. Hezbollah is more isolated than ever, with Damascus proving its willingness to cut off weapon supply routes stretching from Iran to Lebanon. Although the group still receives money from Iran, Iraq, and certain countries in Africa, the amounts are not enough to offset its major losses.

Assaf Orion

From 2006 until the latest war, Lebanon's security architecture was composed of the LAF and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), both of which failed in their duty to prevent Hezbollah from building up its forces in the south and attacking Israel. Today, a new architecture has emerged with two important additions: (1) an implementation mechanism led by the United States with help from France, which has invigorated the LAF to confront a degraded Hezbollah; (2) the IDF's role as the ultimate backstop, kinetically addressing any issues that are not being enforced by the new implementation mechanism.

The potency of the latter addition is demonstrated by near-daily Israeli targeting of Hezbollah members who are trying to reestablish a presence in the south and elsewhere. The group has also sought to smuggle weapons across the Syrian border. In response, the new government in Damascus has been foiling smuggling attempts, while Israel occasionally strikes cross-border smuggling routes. In all, around 200 terrorists have been killed since the ceasefire began. [Ed.—Shortly after the Policy Forum, the IDF struck Hezbollah drone production sites in Beirut and south Lebanon.] Clearly, Israel will not sit idly and watch the group take its time to rebuild, and many Lebanese officials implicitly support the IDF's role in the mechanism.

Israel also appears to have written off UNIFIL as part of a wider disconnect with the UN establishment, whose actions have seemed increasingly anti-Israel of late. As such, Jerusalem will likely oppose efforts to renew the force's mandate at the Security Council's **upcoming deliberations** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unifils-fork-road>) on the matter. Instead of preserving UNIFIL, the United States should focus on making sure that the LAF has a sufficiently strong political mandate for broader action against Hezbollah. There is also a case to be made for defunding UNIFIL's \$500 million annual budget and transferring the money to the LAF.

Israel's war goal has been to safely return northern residents to their homes, yet approximately 40 percent of these communities remain displaced many months after evacuating. Other issues that still need to be addressed include possible border talks as part of the ceasefire, Lebanese prisoners of war, and aspirational talks about peace and normalization—though the latter goal is likely further down the road.

Ghaith al-Omari

When Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas visited Lebanon recently, he offered vocal support for efforts to disarm Palestinian refugee camps there. Although such calls are important, they are largely symbolic given the PA’s **limited power** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/disarming-palestinian-factions-lebanon-means-disarming-hezbollah>) over Palestinian armed groups affiliated with Hamas and other factions. Efforts to disarm them will also depend on how serious the Lebanese government is about the related task of removing Hezbollah’s arsenal.

The twelve Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon each have different compositions and political structures, but one thing they have in common is that they have remained outside the government’s control for decades. Traditionally, Fatah was the dominant faction there, but Hamas has taken the lead since 2015, when senior official Saleh al-Arouri relocated to Beirut and began restoring the group’s relations with Hezbollah and Iran. Thus, when considering how to disarm the camps, officials are essentially talking about disarming Hamas in Lebanon.

Any such effort would have multiple security implications. First, confiscating weapons in the camps would provide a de facto rehearsal for wider efforts to disarm Hezbollah. It would also deny Hezbollah the ability to use Palestinian factions as proxies to attack Israel. Moreover, Palestinians are well aware that the Gaza war is unlikely to end unless Hamas gives up control of the Strip. If that happens, Lebanon will become the only arena in which Hamas can maintain organized armed structures—an option that officials should do whatever they can to foreclose. Preventing this scenario could help weaken Iran’s regional influence as well. Tehran has repeatedly used the Hamas presence in Lebanon to exert its interests elsewhere, as demonstrated by the recent **Muslim Brotherhood terrorist plot** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/brotherhood-may-have-pushed-jordan-too-far-time>) unveiled by Jordanian authorities.

To address Hamas’s dangerous impact on Middle East security, the Trump administration needs to formulate a policy toward the Palestinian issue as a whole, beyond the urgent matter of securing a viable ceasefire in Gaza. Washington and its partners have an important opportunity to shift the balance of power in the Palestinian arena. For its part, Hamas would consider mere survival in Gaza as a win, sending a message to Hamas camps in Lebanon that “victory” is still possible even under heavy military pressure. Finally, U.S. officials should consider addressing Qatar and Turkey’s years-long political support for Hamas, which has included financial backing and sympathetic messaging through media organs like Al Jazeera and statements by government officials.

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