

As Hezbollah Nervously Watches Iran, Washington Should Double Down on Disarmament

by [Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute's Rubin Family Arab Politics Program, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.



Brief Analysis

The possibility that its Iranian patron may be toppled is stoking Hezbollah's existential fears, giving U.S. officials an opening to step up the pressure on Beirut, accelerate the disarmament process, and stave off looming Israeli escalation.

On January 8, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi landed in Beirut with an economic delegation and, reportedly, four suitcases full of cash (<https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/5228571-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AC%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%B6-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%B4-4-%D8%AD%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA-%D9%81%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1%D8%A9>) for Hezbollah, continuing Tehran's tradition of sending officials to Lebanon as a show of power every time a crisis emerges. Yet this time feels different—the Islamic Republic's latest wave of protests and international pressure has seemingly cornered the regime, presenting Beirut with an opportunity to shift the political narrative around Hezbollah and the pace of the disarmament process on the ground.

Lebanese officials appear to sense this change—local media reports indicate that Araghchi was not allowed to bring in the money. Although this was not the first time that airport security had forced Iranian officials to return home with bags of cash, last week's incident was widely broadcast in the Lebanese media, seemingly sending a signal to

Hezbollah. Indeed, both President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam have made strong statements against the group in recent days. During a [January 11 interview \(https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/317630-hezbollah-angered-by-aoun-s-remarks-on-arms\)](https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/317630-hezbollah-angered-by-aoun-s-remarks-on-arms) with Tele Liban, Aoun stated that Hezbollah's weapons had "outlived their purpose" and become a burden on the Lebanese people, including the group's Shia constituency. A day later, during a meeting with the ambassadors of the five-nation contact group for Lebanon, Salam stated that the government is still determined to implement [the plan for disarming Hezbollah \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/salvaging-lebanon-ceasefire-amid-looming-deadlines-and-threats-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/salvaging-lebanon-ceasefire-amid-looming-deadlines-and-threats-war) north of the Litani River.

Despite the president's bolder-than-usual language, there are still no serious indications that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are prepared to translate these words into action, at least not beyond the country's southern frontier zone. Yet this week's developments highlight the new openings being created by Iran's domestic crisis—openings that Washington and its partners should jump on quickly.

Hezbollah Is Worried, Beirut Is Idle

Sources close to Hezbollah circles have told the author that the group feels very vulnerable at the moment, believing that Israeli military operations may soon target organizational infrastructure in its southern Beirut stronghold of Dahiya. Hezbollah is also facing the potential loss of its top sponsor due to the [mass protests throughout Iran \(https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/10/opinion/iran-protests-trump-regime-islamic-republic.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/10/opinion/iran-protests-trump-regime-islamic-republic.html) and threats of [U.S. military action \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-watershed-moment-case-meaningful-us-action\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-watershed-moment-case-meaningful-us-action) against the regime. Even if Tehran manages to entice Washington into some sort of deal to avoid collapse, Hezbollah fears that its own existence would be part of the price the regime is willing to pay to survive. Sources indicate that this is why the group's information machine and leadership have been silent about the protests since the crisis broke out.

Whatever happens in Iran, now is a great moment to take aim at the main pillars of Hezbollah's domestic power, particularly the financial and political infrastructure that fuel the group's ongoing threats to Lebanon, Israel, and the wider region. Beirut can best weaken Hezbollah's financial networks by targeting its [cash economy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis), while the international community can target and isolate the group's political roots in various state institutions, from Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri to the numerous government appointees and employees who act on behalf of Hezbollah and its partner Amal.

Regrettably, however, the Lebanese government is not taking advantage of Hezbollah's present fear and confusion by pressing forward with any actions of this sort, let alone the more difficult task of nationwide disarmament. Instead, Beirut is giving itself another month (see below) to assess regional developments before even receiving the LAF's plan for phase 2 of the disarmament process, which is supposed to extend from the Litani River to the Awali River. This, of course, will also give Hezbollah more time to prepare ways of obstructing the process.

Also regrettable is the LAF's [January 8 statement \(https://www.learmy.gov.lb/en/content/achieving-objectives-first-phase-army%E2%80%99s-disarmament-plan\)](https://www.learmy.gov.lb/en/content/achieving-objectives-first-phase-army%E2%80%99s-disarmament-plan) announcing the successful conclusion of phase 1, which was supposed to focus on disarmament efforts south of the Litani. Somehow, the statement avoided mentioning the words "Hezbollah" or "disarmament" at all. Instead, it spoke of "extending operational control over the territories that have come under its authority in the South Litani Sector, with the exception of lands and sites that remain under Israeli occupation." The statement then provided two indications of why the disarmament effort has been delayed: first, it blamed "continued Israeli attacks on Lebanese territory and the occupation of several sites within it," and second, it argued that "the delayed delivery of promised military capabilities to the Army constitutes a significant factor affecting the pace of mission implementation."

Israel's Response

In response to this announcement, the Prime Minister's Office in Israel stated (<https://x.com/GPOIsrael/status/2009210181754695726>) that Beirut and the LAF's efforts were "an encouraging beginning, but they are far from sufficient, as evidenced by Hezbollah's efforts to rearm and rebuild its terror infrastructure with Iranian support." In addition, the Israeli Foreign Ministry posted (<https://x.com/IsraelMFA/status/2009233067836117010>) an interactive map showing the group's remaining arsenal south of the Litani. No other actor—including the United States or other members of the ceasefire monitoring mechanism (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-french-mechanism-20-preventing-escalation-between-lebanon-and-israel>)—has publicly issued an evaluation of the LAF's performance in phase 1, so the only details that anyone is getting on this process come from Israeli officials and media.

This is a serious gap that will further complicate internal accountability and political dynamics in Lebanon. Without evidence and evaluation, Hezbollah can still tell its constituency that it is strong and well-armed in the south, while political officials can use the uncertainty to stall subsequent phases.

On January 12, U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Michel Issa said that defining "a deadline" (<https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/317631-us-ambassador-says-deadline-important-for-north-litani-disarmament>) for completing disarmament north of the Litani "is the most important thing." And in parliament, the Lebanese Forces party—the legislature's largest bloc—demanded that the LAF complete phase 2 within three months. But no practical plan for carrying out that phase has even been offered; as noted above, the LAF blamed the delay on Israel, while the government decided to postpone its scheduling decisions and give the LAF until the first week of February to submit a plan.

By waiting even that long, Beirut—and Washington—risk missing the promising but potentially narrow window of opportunity created by the Iran crisis. As discussed below, they also risk imminent military escalation inside Lebanon.

The Military Option

Amid the delays, Israel has been preparing for its own phase 2—namely, a widened air campaign against Hezbollah. Yet airstrikes can only go so far in destroying additional targets, including new weapons factories and depots in Dahiya. Only the LAF can fulfill that mission.

Of course, launching that mission would be a fateful decision for the LAF. Once the army moves north of the Litani, it may find itself in direct confrontation with Hezbollah. Despite the group's vocal threats, however, armed confrontation is not a certainty, especially given Hezbollah's many calculations and concerns regarding developments in Lebanon and Iran. One thing is clear: by beginning operations north of the Litani, the LAF would prevent a major Israeli escalation. And even if clashes with Hezbollah do unfold, they would be less damaging to Lebanon—particularly to its Shia community—than another major confrontation with Israel.

Policy Recommendations

With Iran and Hezbollah cornered by the current protest crisis, the group may be more ready to make compromises or, at least, less willing to confront the LAF militarily. Facing the most critical chapter in its history, Hezbollah is mainly focused on just surviving right now. Hence, there is no credible reason to postpone disarmament for another month; rather, this delay could cost Lebanon a golden opportunity to establish a national monopoly on weapons even sooner than originally hoped. Instead of letting Beirut waste time and hitch its planning to the still-uncertain outcome of the Iran protests, Washington should apply pressure via the following steps:

- Release a formal U.S. assessment of the LAF's performance in phase 1, which would give Lebanese officials and

citizens a reference other than the Israeli assessment.

- Ask Beirut and the LAF to submit the plan for phase 2 before the next meeting of the ceasefire mechanism.
- Urge Lebanon to set a realistic deadline for completing phase 2, with clear deliverables.
- Urge the LAF to launch initial operations north of the Litani River as soon as the plan is submitted. This would weaken Hezbollah's narrative and potentially shift voter attitudes toward the group ahead of the parliamentary election scheduled for this May.
- Urge Beirut to start targeting Hezbollah's domestic financial infrastructure, including [cash networks](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis>), crypto systems, online gambling networks, and exchange companies.
- Process and deliver U.S. assistance to the LAF as soon as possible (assuming the LAF statement was correct in noting that promised assistance has been delayed). This would remove any credible excuse for continuing to postpone phase 2. Relatedly, France has announced that it will hold a donor conference on March 5 to support the LAF, but U.S. officials should make clear that this is no reason to delay initial action on the ground.
- Guarantee that the LAF will receive additional U.S. assistance once disarmament moves forward north of the Litani, with an eye toward the possibility that Hezbollah resistance could make phase 2 more difficult. Benchmarks could be established for sending specified assistance if certain steps are achieved by certain dates.

In addition to these immediate steps, President Trump could offer to host President Aoun in Washington once Beirut successfully implements phase 2. Conversely, if Lebanese military units do not expand their activities north of the Litani soon, Washington should be prepared to suspend aspects of its security assistance to the LAF, and signal that continued stalling would put the entire assistance package in danger of cancellation.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and coauthor of its recent report “[A Roadmap for Israel-Lebanon Peace](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roadmap-israel-lebanon-peace) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roadmap-israel-lebanon-peace>).” ❖

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