

Lebanon's Failure to Disarm Hezbollah Comes With a Price

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Articles & Testimony

Through their continued unwillingness to take on the militia and break Iran's hold over Lebanon, Beirut and the LAF have effectively chosen the more calamitous path of war with Israel.

For the past 16 months, the Lebanese government and military have chosen not to choose—and risked their country's future. Lebanon, a weak and divided state, committed in its 2024 ceasefire agreement with Israel to disarm Hezbollah—but Beirut has sidestepped its obligations rather than shouldering them. That could squander the opportunity provided by Israel's 2024 pounding of Hezbollah. Rather than take on Hezbollah and risk intercommunal violence, Lebanon effectively chose war with Israel.

Taking a step back helps reveal the enormity of this blunder. March 14 marks the anniversary of the “Cedar Revolution,” the brave 2005 popular uprising that ended the decades-long Syrian occupation of Lebanon. Yet decades later, Lebanon remains both an occupied country and a failed state. Iran continues to use Hezbollah to dominate the country, dictating policy and matters of war and peace.

Last week, Hezbollah fired missiles into Israel, ending a tenuous 15-month ceasefire. Beirut had tried to insulate Lebanon from the contagion of the Iran war, but Israel's killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini on the first day of the war was a red line for Hezbollah. For the second time in less than three years, the group has dragged Lebanon into war with Israel. But Hezbollah doesn't bear sole responsibility for the conflict. The government of Lebanon also shares the blame.

Lebanese governments have a long, ignominious tradition of deferring difficult decisions. I hoped this might change when Beirut committed to disarming Hezbollah in its November 2024 ceasefire agreement with Israel. Hezbollah had emerged from the war battered, its leadership decimated, and its military capabilities degraded. Seizing the

moment, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun pledged during his January 2025 inaugural speech to take away Hezbollah's weapons. Unfortunately, fearing "civil war"—i.e., Hezbollah violence—Aoun deferred disarmament in favour of dialogue with the militia.

It took more than seven months—until the Fall of 2025—for Beirut to finally task the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) with confiscating Hezbollah's arms. Licking its wounds after its mauling by Israel, Hezbollah consented to its neutering in south Lebanon and coordinated with the LAF as it appropriated thousands of rockets and hundreds of missiles along the border with Israel. But the LAF was not proactive. Instead, Lebanese troops reacted selectively to intelligence provided by Israel to a US-led cell based in Lebanon, avoiding sites Hezbollah deemed sensitive.

Lacklustre LAF Performance

Israel described the LAF's initial disarmament efforts as "encouraging" but insufficient. Despite Israel's scepticism, in early January the LAF declared "mission accomplished" in south Lebanon, announcing that it had completed phase one of Hezbollah disarmament. Only a month later, US Central Command announced that the LAF had uncovered a "massive underground tunnel" used to store missiles and attack drones in the south. Over the past week, Israel has hit dozens of targets in south Lebanon, including missile- and rocket-launch sites and a drone-manufacturing facility.

The LAF's lacklustre performance in the south belies the army's priorities. Rather than targeting Hezbollah weapons, the LAF has focused on avoiding conflict with the group. Hezbollah tolerated some weapons collection in the south but vowed to attack the state if LAF operations continued north. The LAF blinked, and the Lebanese government said nothing, allowing the fiction of disarmament to continue.

Many Lebanese are furious at Hezbollah today for launching yet another war in the service of Iran. For good reason. Israel's renewed campaign promises to be calamitous for Lebanon. Beirut remains mired in a financial crisis and still has not started to clear and rebuild the destruction from the last round.

Beirut is also apparently annoyed—not with Hezbollah's refusal to disarm but with its decision to launch another war with Israel. Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam has since prohibited "all of Hezbollah's military activities," calling them illegal and demanding that the militia "hand over its weapons." He also banned Hezbollah's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps masters from the country and ordered their deportation.

Haykal Under Fire

The Salam government's reaffirmation of its decision to disarm Hezbollah is welcome but unlikely to be effective.

One problem is that LAF Commander Rodolphe Haykal isn't on board. He says national unity is Lebanon's priority and issued a statement suggesting the army isn't answerable to the government.

During the cabinet vote about the policy, according to the Lebanese daily Nida al Watan, Salam argued with Haykal. "We have several options," Haykal reportedly said. "Let's start with the option of coordinating with Hezbollah." To his credit, Salam responded, "Enough already! There's no such thing as security by consensus anymore."

Haykal says he needs more money for the LAF before deploying against Hezbollah. The LAF is indeed broke and insufficiently equipped for such a difficult mission. But the LAF's main problem isn't lack of capability; it's lack of will. Until recently, the Lebanese government has largely hedged on giving its political backing to the mission, and instead of defending the state's sovereignty against Hezbollah's predations, LAF leaders have tried to protect the Lebanese army from a confrontation with Hezbollah.

Predictably, Beirut is now calling for direct negotiations with Israel—not to produce peace but a resumption of the ceasefire. Israel should talk with Beirut. But Lebanon will have no peace and no enduring ceasefire until it moves to disarm Hezbollah and end the Iranian occupation of the state. As US Special Envoy Tom Barrack said, "Stop with the

bullsh—t” on disarming Hezbollah. “If it’s not real action...there’s no point.”

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