

# “Once and for All” Again? The Contours of Israel’s Latest Campaign in Lebanon

by [Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](#)

Apr 9, 2026

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](#)

Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Res.) is The Washington Institute’s Rueven International Fellow, a senior research fellow at INSS, and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division.



Brief Analysis

---

**The military and diplomatic risks of reentering south Lebanon are weighty, but Israel can mitigate them by publicly clarifying its security objectives, pursuing a bilateral political horizon, focusing its military efforts, and (finally) holding officials in Beirut accountable.**

One month after Hezbollah jumped into the Iran war by opening the Lebanon front, multiple Israel Defense Forces (IDF) ground divisions are maneuvering in the south while airstrikes hit across the country. The local Lebanese population has mostly been evacuated for its safety, and seven bridges on the Litani River have been destroyed to hinder terrorist reinforcements from the north. For its part, Hezbollah is heavily shelling a broad swath of IDF and civilian targets, particularly in northern Israel. As of this writing, the IDF campaign is moving forward despite Washington’s April 7 ceasefire with Iran, though for how long remains unclear.

Israel’s war plan demonstrates the broader security concept it is now applying on multiple fronts due to the conflicts it has been waging since October 2023: namely, deploying IDF ground units in razed, depopulated enemy territory in order to protect Israel’s border communities. This approach essentially draws new Israeli security borders outside its sovereign borders. In the current fight against Hezbollah, Israel seeks to push threats further away from its vulnerable northern communities and create a forward security zone in southern Lebanon. To be sure, this will not remove such threats altogether. Yet besides advancing the immediate goal of diminishing Hezbollah’s attack capabilities, Israel’s campaign and the new regional circumstances—including heavy damage to the group’s patron in Iran—may create further opportunities to push for its disarmament (via military and political means), foster lasting security arrangements with Beirut, and, maybe one day, reach a bilateral peace deal.

## Israel’s Strategic Challenge

Hezbollah's recent attacks highlight the residual threat that it has continued to pose even after being heavily damaged by major Israeli operations in 2024—a problem rooted in Beirut's failure to disarm the group, shortfalls in the international implementation mechanism established by the November 2024 ceasefire agreement, and the impossibility of preventing Hezbollah's reconstitution via Israeli enforcement efforts alone. As a result, the group has been able to systematically blend its military capabilities into Lebanon's civilian environment while directly threatening Israel's northern communities.

On the political front, Lebanon's government has taken important steps such as formally barring Hezbollah's weapons and military activity, but no progress has been made toward actually implementing this ban—in part because the group's partners inside the government repeatedly block such measures. Even so, Lebanese leaders have kept the prospect of political negotiations with Israel open. More broadly, the international diplomatic context remains uncertain—the Iran war has left little global attention for the situation in Lebanon, and Tehran insists that this week's ceasefire includes Lebanon, while the [United States \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-says-lebanon-is-not-part-ceasefire-deal-with-iran-pbs-reports-2026-04-08/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-says-lebanon-is-not-part-ceasefire-deal-with-iran-pbs-reports-2026-04-08/) and [Israel \(https://x.com/IsraeliPM/status/2041714156114456660?s=20\)](https://x.com/IsraeliPM/status/2041714156114456660?s=20) say it does not.

Meanwhile, Israel's strategic purpose is driving heated debate back home. Last week, an IDF official [reportedly admitted \(https://t.me/moriahdoron/29404\)](https://t.me/moriahdoron/29404) that establishing a new security zone in southern Lebanon is the goal of the current campaign, not disarming Hezbollah. In response, Defense Minister Israel Katz [affirmed \(https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/b1711vm6iwx\)](https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/b1711vm6iwx) that the ultimate goal remains to disarm Hezbollah by military and political means. Apparently, the government is trying to bridge the gap between high public expectations and what is realistically achievable at this time. In separate statements late last month, [Netanyahu \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YWJgkbDhmg\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YWJgkbDhmg) and [Katz \(https://youtu.be/EQbQhySbB7c?si=d0TQ5d5Q6daaKBnI\)](https://youtu.be/EQbQhySbB7c?si=d0TQ5d5Q6daaKBnI) promised to “fundamentally change” the situation “once and for all.” Yet neither has defined a strategic-political goal; they have focused on how to achieve the limited military objective of reducing the nearest threats to Israeli border communities, especially antitank missiles. They hardly mention the fact that sustaining this achievement beyond the short term will require a political effort toward disarming Hezbollah. Elsewhere, far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich [has opined \(https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan/kan-b/p-9996/\)](https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan/kan-b/p-9996/) that the operation should not end until Israel's new border is the Litani River. Yet such sentiments are not the same as government policy.

## Campaign Design and the Contours of the New Security Areas

The IDF's current plan is to inflict severe harm on Hezbollah throughout Lebanon while demilitarizing and isolating the southern part of the country up to the Litani. After evacuating most local residents for their safety, the IDF is establishing a [security zone \(https://t.me/moriahdoron/29605\)](https://t.me/moriahdoron/29605) in a strip of Lebanese territory near the border and facing northern Israeli communities. Deeper in Lebanon, it has deployed on hilltops along the “antitank line,” seeking to prevent Hezbollah from using antitank missiles against these communities. In the rest of the zone south of the Litani, the IDF plans to conduct intelligence-driven precision strikes against Hezbollah targets in mostly depopulated villages.

Establishing the security zone will [reportedly entail \(https://t.me/moriahdoron/29404\)](https://t.me/moriahdoron/29404) major destruction in the strip of Lebanese villages closest to the frontier, apart from Christian communities (Druze villages will probably be spared as well). The IDF [clarified \(https://t.me/moriahdoron/29243\)](https://t.me/moriahdoron/29243) that these villages will not be completely destroyed, only terrorist infrastructure discovered therein, as the goal is to prevent Hezbollah or other actors from using the villages for cross-border attacks. Yet given various Israeli statements and the Gaza model that inspired the

Lebanon operation, meeting this objective will probably produce “scorched earth” results in some cases.

By the end of the campaign, Israel’s plan is to establish the following interim security areas in southern Lebanon, starting from the UN-demarcated Blue Line:

- A temporary security zone extending three to four kilometers into Lebanon, where the IDF will deploy for as long as necessary. Echoing the postwar model established in the Gaza Strip, Israel evacuated civilians from this zone and will massively raze buildings there to prevent Hezbollah from once again using border infrastructure for terrorist purposes. This also entails preventing individuals from returning to or rebuilding these villages, at least until alternative arrangements are reached with the Lebanese government.
- An “antitank line” extending 8-10 kilometers into Lebanon, where the IDF will deploy on hilltops and conduct operations aimed at preventing direct missile launches against Israeli border communities.
- The number of IDF outposts in these two zones will increase from five to eighteen.
- In the rest of the area up to the Litani, the IDF will aim to maintain dynamic operational control and ongoing kinetic enforcement against Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations.

## Local and Regional Implications

Israel’s new security concept is already roiling its relations with neighbors, fanning the false yet prevalent “Greater Israel” narrative that it aspires to expand its borders over the entire Levant. Despite their rhetoric, Israeli leaders seem well aware that the current military campaign will not solve the Hezbollah problem, and that formal diplomatic negotiations with Beirut will be necessary. The recent appointment (<https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hybjgvi9wg>) of Ron Dermer to spearhead such diplomacy is a good signal of this intention, since he is a close associate of Netanyahu and has mentioned possible progress toward a future bilateral peace agreement. Once the current military campaign ends, Israel aims to resume formal security talks with Beirut focused on disarming Hezbollah nationwide, with the IDF continuing to enforce such efforts kinetically.

At the same time, the renewed fighting comes with substantial complications. The IDF presence in south Lebanon will raise political difficulties for the current anti-Hezbollah government in Beirut; it will also strengthen Hezbollah’s narrative of “resistance” to Israeli occupation, expand the “seven villages (https://jcfa.org/hizbullah-claims-seven-villages-in-northern-galilee-are-part-of-lebanon/)” grievance that has lingered since 1948, and likely increase the international community’s political and legal pressures on Jerusalem. Similarly, destroying bridges across the Litani will make it more difficult for Hezbollah to infiltrate toward Israel, but it will also make life harder for remaining residents in the south. Another open question is how authorities will handle the governance of Lebanese communities in IDF-controlled areas.

Militarily, the campaign will degrade—but not eliminate—Hezbollah’s capabilities close to the frontier, including cross-border raids, sniper fire, explosive devices, antitank missiles, and the short-range rockets that constitute most of its ballistic arsenal. Yet this will not prevent longer-range launches from north of the Litani, nor keep the group from using its deep experience in guerrilla warfare against IDF units inside Lebanon, or even against Israeli border communities. Indeed, a conceptual “copy-paste” from Gaza to Lebanon is risky given the substantial differences between the two theaters (in topography, size, and depth) and the various costs of conducting a long-term deployment under such conditions. IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir recently warned (<https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/defense/1019001/>) that the military might collapse from overload unless significant reinforcements are provided—a difficult prospect given continued government foot-dragging on conscripting ultraorthodox Jews and relieving worn-out reservists.

## Recommendations

To maximize the current opportunities and offset the risks and challenges, Israel must clearly articulate a long-term political horizon: namely, to advance conditions and negotiations that allow for an eventual peace agreement with Lebanon. Among these conditions are stable security arrangements and the disarmament of Hezbollah. Thus, the military campaign must be synchronized with parallel diplomatic efforts closely coordinated with Washington, all focused on the following measures:

**Establish a more effective implementation mechanism.** As with the 2024 ceasefire agreement, Israel would prefer that the United States serve as the lead guarantor of whatever mechanism is put in place after the current campaign. Another candidate for this role is the U.S.-led Board of Peace—as long as members like Turkey and Qatar are prevented from disrupting the process. In either case, the key is to learn from the failures of previous implementation mechanisms—including the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)—and instill reliable verification and documentation processes for disarming Hezbollah.

**Place tougher conditions on the Lebanese government.** Beirut should be required to present a detailed, binding national demilitarization plan with clear benchmarks and deadlines. In particular, this plan must authorize security forces to search private property, a common cover for Hezbollah assets. The government should also purge any army officials who undermine the mission or otherwise collaborate with Hezbollah. To incentivize these steps, future foreign assistance funds to the Lebanese army should be contingent on verified progress in disarming Hezbollah. Likewise, international assistance to the government must be conditioned on effective steps to prevent the transfer of weapons, money, and other resources to Hezbollah, including tightened security over airports, seaports, and land borders (with Syria's assistance).

**Exert military, legal, and financial pressure on Hezbollah's political partners.** Israeli and U.S. efforts toward this end should begin with the Amal Party and its leader, Nabih Berri, who have repeatedly undermined Lebanon's sovereignty and the government's authority.

**Emphasize that the IDF's presence and activities in Lebanese territory are temporary.** The goal is for Lebanon itself to sustainably prevent threats from its territory. The more (and sooner) it meets that benchmark, the sooner Israel can withdraw.

**Curtail Iran's influence in Lebanon.** After the Iran war broke out, the Lebanese government banned the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from its territory, revoked visa-free entry for Iranians, and directed Tehran's ambassador to leave the country (though he ignored the order). Going forward, Beirut should be encouraged to follow the example set by the United Arab Emirates (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-a-e-is-revoking-visas-stranding-iranian-residents-abroad-in-a-widening-crackdown-34667b14>) and take tough bilateral measures such as freezing flights, prohibiting money transfers, suspending diplomatic relations, closing diplomatic missions, further tightening visas, and stopping trade.

**Condition reconstruction on disarmament.** As in Gaza, evacuated residents of south Lebanon security zones should not be permitted to return home or rebuild until Beirut makes progress on disarming Hezbollah.

**Keep pressuring Hezbollah strongholds north of the Litani** while refraining as much as possible from harming Lebanon's national infrastructure or its armed forces. Once the current campaign wraps up, the IDF should favor dynamic attacks and raids over a stationary deployment inside Lebanon if possible. Even if a temporary presence proves necessary, it should be minimized to reduce exposure to guerrilla threats.

*Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion, IDF (Res.), is The Washington Institute's Rueven International Fellow, a senior research fellow at the INSS, and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division. ❖*

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [How Trump Could Still Get a Strategic Win from the Iran War](#)

Apr 9, 2026



Dennis Ross

[\(/policy-analysis/how-trump-could-still-get-strategic-win-iran-war\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [In Syria, an Amnesty Decree Without Justice?](#)

Apr 8, 2026



Hanadi al-Khatib

[\(/policy-analysis/syria-amnesty-decree-without-justice\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [How the Iran War Will Upend the Global Economy](#)

Apr 8, 2026



Henry Tugendhat

[\(/policy-analysis/how-iran-war-will-upend-global-economy\)](#)

## TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-  
analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-  
analysis/lebanon)