

# Moving from War to Diplomacy: What's Next for Iran, Lebanon, and Gaza?

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](#), [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#), [Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](#)

Michael Herzog is the Tisch Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He is a retired brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces and former Israeli ambassador to the United States.

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### [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.

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### [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.

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Brief Analysis

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**Amid major diplomatic milestones and major international security threats, three experts**

## explore what it will take to achieve success on multiple negotiating tracks at once.

**O**n April 15, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Ambassador Michael Herzog, Robert Satloff, and Hanin Ghaddar. Herzog is the Institute's Tisch Distinguished Fellow, former Israeli ambassador to the United States, and a retired brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Satloff is the Institute's Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy. Ghaddar is the Institute's Friedmann Senior Fellow and coauthor of '[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>). "The following is a rapporteurs' summary of their remarks.

### Michael Herzog

Israel is grappling with the transition from war to diplomacy on three different fronts, with two of these transitions—Iran and Gaza—being led by the United States. Although noteworthy battlefield gains have been made in each case, they have not yet been translated into durable political outcomes.

The shift to diplomacy is challenging for Israel. Both Jerusalem and Washington set high disarmament bars for any diplomatic outcome, but defiant actors on each front—Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas—have refused to meet these conditions. Instead, they have sought to maximize their asymmetric advantages and present significant costs to resuming or maintaining high-intensity armed conflict. Additionally, Israel's security doctrine hardened after the October 7 attacks, casting a shadow on any diplomatic endeavor. Jerusalem no longer feels bound to containing threats based on deterrence or third-party actions; it is now relying on IDF military action to nip these threats in the bud. The government is also in the midst of an election year, when it is difficult to expect meaningful concessions for diplomacy.

On the Iran front, the parties are now waiting to see what diplomatic outcome the United States might produce, and whether the crisis will wind up hastening regime change—which is a higher priority for Jerusalem than for Washington. Yet the military campaign already delivered measurable blows to the country's industrial base and other sectors, setting the Islamic Republic back years, so Israel should strive to make the best use of the time bought by these achievements. This means developing new defensive and offensive capabilities (e.g., a comprehensive laser defense system) and establishing a regional security architecture with the Gulf states, who are still traumatized by massive Iranian strikes. Israel must also develop a long-term strategy to deepen the divide between the Iranian regime and the Iranian people.

In Gaza, Hamas recently rejected the disarmament plan proposed by Nickolay Mladenov of the U.S.-led Board of Peace. The question now is whether the Trump administration will greenlight the resumption of Israeli military operations against Hamas-controlled portions of the territory, essentially admitting that the U.S. plan has faltered. Absent military action, the best available lever is to condition reconstruction on demilitarization, with a heavy emphasis on dismantling the remainder of Hamas's extensive tunnel network. In the meantime, Israel should facilitate the mechanisms laid out by Mladenov for integrating a governance system and security force in Gaza. Although most of the territory's residents blame Hamas for starting the war and are dissatisfied with its rule, they have not yet revolted against it.

On the Lebanese front, Israeli leaders are highly skeptical of the government's ability to disarm Hezbollah, so they have continued military operations against the group even as they negotiate with Beirut. Israeli public opinion is pushing leaders to drive the fighting there to a decisive end, not to stop it. At the same time, the unprecedented weakening of Hezbollah and the convergence of Israeli and Lebanese interests in disarming the group have created a significant opportunity.

Indeed, the Lebanon conflict has become a policy test case for integrating military and diplomatic measures. Israeli strategy should center on changing the balance of power between Beirut and Hezbollah. On one hand, this means weakening the group through decisive military strikes, disrupting Iran's ability to sponsor it, and driving a wedge between Hezbollah members and Lebanon's Shia community; on the other hand, it means strengthening the Lebanese government and encouraging a robust U.S., Saudi, and broader regional role in helping the country and guiding the diplomatic process.

### Robert Satloff

**T**he current diplomatic moment is one of unusual complexity, with three distinct tracks running simultaneously: direct U.S.-Iran engagement at the highest political level since the founding of the Islamic Republic forty-seven years ago; the Trump administration's novel Board of Peace initiative in Gaza; and traditional State Department-led negotiations between Israeli and Lebanese representatives in Washington. The cumulative stakes could not be higher, strategically or politically. The near-term strategic stakes include the U.S. interest in freedom of navigation, which goes back more than two centuries; the thirty-plus-year effort to prevent Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability; the removal of Lebanon from Tehran's regional grip; and the dismantling and replacement of Hamas as the

controlling party in Gaza.

In U.S. political terms, the current diplomacy holds implications for the future of the MAGA movement, internal developments within the Democratic Party, the outcomes of the midterm election, and the disturbingly negative trends in the U.S.-Israel relationship. Meanwhile, America's Arab Gulf partners, European allies, and adversaries are all watching closely, each with their own stake in how Washington handles these tracks.

Militarily, U.S. forces have executed their missions with skill and professionalism. If there are gaps between goals, means, and ends, it is because of murky objectives rather than failures of execution. In the Strait of Hormuz, the U.S. Navy holds a clear advantage, and the U.S. blockade could prove a useful tool to compel changes in Iranian behavior.

Media reporting on the nuclear angle of the Iran talks has not been clear, so it is difficult to judge the wisdom of the Trump administration's approach. On the question of incentivizing Tehran, the logic is simple: if it commits permanently and verifiably to ending nuclear enrichment and shipping out all of its enriched uranium, significant sanctions relief is warranted. Much narrower deals would merit much smaller rewards.

In Gaza, significant military achievements have been made, yet Hamas still controls over 40 percent of the territory. The missing link in the anti-Hamas strategy is the failure to fund, support, and empower a political and military alternative. Building a technocratic government, meaningfully engaging the Palestinian Authority, and training local security forces must be prioritized.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah has taken a significant blow but is not yet out of business, and there are objective limits to IDF military operations given that Israel will not occupy the entire country. At some point, one hopes, Hezbollah will be so weakened that the Lebanese state and its armed forces will finally be willing and able to fulfill their commitment to complete the disarmament mission. One of the most significant aspects of the recent diplomacy is that it represents a delinking of Lebanon from Iran—Washington refused to accept demands to include Lebanon in the Iran ceasefire, while Beirut refused Hezbollah's demand to forgo talks with Israel.

Running beneath all three tracks is the problem of the "phantom third party." To wit, the future of the Iranian people played such a key role in the early definition of allied war aims, but this element has been missing from the Iran talks. In Gaza, the crucial task of identifying and establishing an alternative to Hamas has been absent from recent negotiations. And the Israel-Lebanon talks so far lack a clear, explicit statement from both sides about their common interest in disarming Hezbollah. U.S. policy should find ways to address these "third-party" gaps, even if these efforts fall outside the formal negotiations.

In thinking through the prospects for diplomacy, patience is a strategic asset. It is impossible to resolve forty-seven years of U.S.-Iran conflict in just twenty-one hours of talks. Given the current situation in the region, time will work in America's favor if diplomacy is allowed to take its natural course. It is also important to jettison the notion that military pressure and diplomacy are alternatives when they are, in fact, often complementary. The application of pressure—political, economic, and sometimes military—is a key part of diplomacy.

## Hanin Ghaddar

**T**he current negotiations with Israel are a win for Lebanon's sovereignty. Tehran was unable to prevent Beirut from negotiating on its own behalf, while Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were weakened and unable to translate their military operations into greater political sway. Moreover, no surge of street protests or Hezbollah violence occurred during the talks. This suggests that the group's Shia allies—most notably Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, who heads the Amal movement—decided to reconsider their opposition to negotiations after Israeli airstrikes targeted Amal elements in Beirut last week. Previously, Berri was the primary hindrance to engaging Israel, using his political weight to prevent negotiations from going forward despite President Joseph Aoun's calls for direct talks. Yet Berri has not publicly objected since the Beirut strikes.

Lebanon and Israel came to the talks with different priorities—achieving a ceasefire and disarming Hezbollah, respectively—but a shared goal of peace. The fact that they are talking directly, with U.S. sponsorship and a common drive toward peace, is cause for optimism. Yet all parties need to understand that a ceasefire and disarmament are inherently linked. If Hezbollah is not disarmed, renewed conflict is inevitable. The Lebanese Armed Forces are the only actor that can complete this task, but Israel lacks confidence in them based on their performance thus far. Accordingly, the LAF must engage in confidence-building measures and be held to strict timelines, which can then be linked to phases in a ceasefire.

Regarding the flow of humanitarian aid, Beirut must ensure that it goes directly to citizens in need rather than being diverted through Hezbollah-controlled NGOs. The government has been working to regain sovereignty over its territory, finances, and institutions, so the United States should encourage aid distribution arrangements that reinforce rather than undermine that sovereignty. Currently, Hezbollah is channeling some aid through its own groups, while the government is still directly funding the Council for South Lebanon, which is controlled by Hezbollah and Berri.

Although Hezbollah is degraded militarily, much of its domestic power also rests on its financial and social influence. Hence, any U.S. sanctions relief on Iran would have implications for developments in Lebanon, since Tehran could empower Hezbollah by funneling some of its relief money to the group. The IRGC is still managing Hezbollah operations in Lebanon, so if IRGC elements benefit from sanctions relief, Hezbollah will too. To prevent the group from exploiting any influx of funds, international aid must be accompanied by strict scrutiny and increased monitoring.

Meanwhile, Beirut should seek to reduce Hezbollah infiltration of Lebanese institutions by cleaning up the security apparatus and appointments system. For its part, Washington should use sanctions to mitigate Hezbollah's capture of government institutions and aid channels, cutting off the group's financial networks.

Although Shia communities in the south are not a monolith, they largely understand that reconstruction cannot continue until Hezbollah is disarmed. Their allegiance is torn: they no longer have confidence that Hezbollah's chief priority is their protection, since the group dragged Lebanon into renewed conflict in support of Iran's war. As military operations continue, Hezbollah—not the government—is losing Shia support. The public wants strong, effective leadership, but the current government is still weak and lacks enforcement capacity, while Shia elements who oppose Hezbollah are still divided and competing.

*This summary was prepared by Kate Chesnutt, Nava Goldstein, and Virginia MacArthur. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Winkler Lowy Foundation. ❖*

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