

Lebanon-Israel Talks: Defining Zones of Possible Agreement

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Brief Analysis

With Washington’s help, there is a path forward for Beirut and Jerusalem to agree on something that is more limited than a full ceasefire, and that enables them to launch negotiations to advance both the disarmament of Hezbollah and the achievement of bilateral peace.

For the first time in more than four decades, political representatives of Lebanon and Israel will meet Tuesday under U.S. auspices, opening talks that could eventually produce peace negotiations. This diplomacy is occurring after a massive Israeli attack in Beirut last week targeted the Iran-backed terrorist organization Hezbollah and its local Shia ally, the Amal movement. Although the talks are a hopeful step toward expanding the circle of Arab-Israel peace, the immediate task is to find a formula that repairs the flaws in the November 2024 ceasefire agreement—which failed to produce the primary goal of disarming Hezbollah—while easing the impact of Israel’s ongoing military operations on Lebanese civilians.

Complexity of the Lebanese Front

It is important to recall that Hezbollah triggered the current round of fighting by launching rockets at northern Israel on March 2, ostensibly to support its patron Iran. In so doing, it put the nail in the coffin of the November 2024 agreement that the Biden administration mediated following Israel’s “Northern Arrows” campaign, which included the notorious exploding pagers operation.

At first, that agreement appeared to have greater chances for success than, for example, the stalled ceasefire deal in Gaza, principally because the critical third party—the duly elected government of Lebanon, backed by the U.S.-funded Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)—already existed, whereas the Gaza agreement was saddled with creating that third party from scratch. Although there was a time when Lebanese governments viewed Hezbollah as the “national resistance” against Israeli occupation, those days have passed. Most Lebanese—including large majorities of Christians and Sunnis and a growing minority of Shia—view Hezbollah as the intrusive arm of Iranian interference.

Once Israel battered the group in autumn 2024, that view coalesced into a ceasefire that envisioned the LAF progressively disarming Hezbollah.

Over time, however, the flaws of the November 2024 ceasefire became clear. Conceptually, the main flaw was the assumption that the LAF would diligently finish the job that Israeli forces had begun by disarming and dismantling Hezbollah; structurally, the deal erred by omitting a timeline for implementation. Because of these mistakes, Prime Minister Nawaf Salam's new government did not authorize the LAF to come up with a disarmament plan until seven months after President Joseph Aoun's February 2025 vow to impose a state monopoly over weapons inside Lebanon. And even then, the LAF took a gentle approach to implementing a plan that needed to be tough, avoiding any operations that might involve clashing with Hezbollah.

This decision may have stemmed from many factors: perhaps the army placed a higher priority on preserving internal stability than compelling Hezbollah to disarm, as LAF commander Rudolf Haykal has repeatedly noted; perhaps Hezbollah's tentacles are still lodged deep within the LAF; perhaps Amal leader Nabih Berri was able to use his role as speaker of parliament to sabotage any real crackdown on his ally; and perhaps too many Lebanese elites had too much invested in the opaque political world in which Hezbollah wields control behind a facade of a civilian leadership. Whatever the reasons, the outcome put a spotlight on the ceasefire's inadequacies.

To be sure, the 2024 agreement came with some useful innovations, including: a U.S.-led mechanism in which American military officers relayed Israeli intelligence about Hezbollah weapons depots to the LAF for confiscation; the de facto phasing out of the bloated, largely irrelevant UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL); and a side letter from Washington that gave Israel the ongoing right to strike Hezbollah in cases where threats were imminent or Lebanese authorities failed to act. But none of that could get around the core problem—namely, the LAF refused to risk confrontation with Hezbollah, relying instead on an ineffectual “consensual” approach to disarmament, while the political leadership did not compel the army to change course.

Just weeks before the outbreak of the current fighting, the LAF proudly claimed to have achieved “operational control” south of the Litani River. Yet large tracts of land in this crucial frontier zone were left uninspected because of the army's policy of generally not infringing on “private property,” effectively giving Hezbollah safe havens right across the Israeli border. The large-scale attacks that have rained down on Israel since March 2 and the substantial Hezbollah military infrastructure that Israeli forces have found in the south since then underscore **how deeply flawed (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-winning-race-rearm-lebanon>)** the LAF's strategy proved to be.

Fixing the Ceasefire, Building for Peace

After six weeks of conflict, Lebanese and Israeli diplomats have a rare second chance to get this right. Aoun had been calling for direct talks with Israel since this round of fighting erupted, and President Trump asked Israel to respond positively. Jerusalem acceded after delivering major military blows to Hezbollah and its allies last week, using an impressive display of air and intelligence dominance to hit over a hundred targets in just ten minutes. And by hitting Amal for the first time, Israel sent a powerful message to Berri that **he is no longer immune (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-peace-will-berri-remain-hindrance>)** from paying a price for his support of Hezbollah.

Israel's strikes also put wind in the Lebanese government's sails. Officials ordered the LAF to deploy throughout Beirut with the goal of making the capital a weapons-free zone, while Aoun appointed a single, empowered delegate to represent him in talks with Israel, sidestepping Berri's previous attempts to delay talks by withholding Shia representation from a cross-confessional delegation.

In this regard, it is important to note that the two representatives selected for this week's State Department meeting

are, in American parlance, “political appointees,” handpicked by their leaders to serve as their personal representatives in Washington. Israel chose Ambassador Yechiel Leiter, who previously served as Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s chief of staff; Lebanon chose Ambassador Nada Hamadeh Moawad, a savvy former World Bank official.

Their most immediate challenge will be addressing conflicting preferences about ongoing Israeli military operations. This is focused on sorting out the concept of “ceasefire,” which Lebanon wants and Israel rejects. Lebanese leaders shed no tears for Hezbollah or Amal fighters killed by Israel, but they want a ceasefire in order to validate their call for direct talks and ease the massive humanitarian challenge posed by the million-plus citizens who have been displaced in recent weeks. For this Israeli government—which accepted the 2024 agreement only to see Hezbollah terrorize northern communities with hundreds of rocket strikes—accepting another ceasefire without much more progress on disarming and dismantling the group first would be to invite the worst insult in Israeli politics: being a *freier* (sucker).

Despite some seemingly irreconcilable views, both sides have a strong rationale to find a compromise. Aoun needs to validate his politically bold decision to pursue direct talks with Israel, while Netanyahu needs to show President Trump and the Israeli people that he has a vision of peace, not just perpetual war. The most efficient way to square this circle may be to agree on something more circumscribed than a full ceasefire—perhaps a statement about “restraining,” “pausing,” or “limiting Israeli military operations to areas of direct confrontation with Hezbollah,” confirming in words what the Israelis have already done in practice since last week’s strikes. This provision could be focused geographically on areas where the LAF deploys to confiscate illegal weapons, with clear exemptions for when Israel needs to counter imminent threats or retaliate against Hezbollah attacks. Placing a clock on this period of restraint (e.g., two to three weeks) would increase pressure on the LAF to prove that it will perform differently than it did under the 2024 ceasefire.

In that regard, the government’s new order to secure the capital could help solve another thorny problem—how to avoid repeating the previous ceasefire’s failure to secure the southern sector closest to the border. Israeli forces have been **forming a buffer zone (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/once-and-all-again-contours-israels-latest-campaign-lebanon>)** five to eight miles deep within this sector, with a combination of technological means and sporadic forays extending this in practice to the Litani River; as such, they are unlikely to give the LAF another chance to prove itself in such a sensitive area right now. Yet the Lebanese government’s order to turn Beirut into a weapons-free zone raises the interesting option of reversing the original ceasefire plan—that is, having the LAF start its disarmament operations further north and end in the south, tackling the area closest to Israel only after proving that it can address essential issues elsewhere in the country (e.g., securing the capital; strengthening controls against smugglers **along the border with Syria (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-not-ready-wage-war-beyond-its-borders>)**).

Another innovation they should consider is expanding the involvement of the U.S.-led mechanism. This could include assigning U.S. military officers as liaisons to LAF units operating at the district and sector levels to facilitate the real-time flow of intelligence between Israel and the LAF. “Mechanism” officers could also monitor the LAF’s actual effectiveness using critical metrics such as the number and quality of weapons decommissioned and the number of Hezbollah fighters arrested.

Parallel with discussions on near-term security issues, this week’s talks could also address the longer-term goal of formal peace between Israel and Lebanon. After refusing for weeks to even respond to Aoun’s invitation, Netanyahu recently switched gears and raised the stakes by suggesting that he wants talks to have as their goal a full, bilateral peace agreement. This may be difficult for some Lebanese to swallow, especially given last week’s massive attack on Beirut. Yet Jerusalem may be surprised to find Aoun and his colleagues willing to begin that process—particularly if

Israel is willing to formally affirm that it has no territorial claims beyond the international border, final demarcation of which would only need some technical talks (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roadmap-israel-lebanon-peace>) to achieve.

An Opportunity for Washington

After the failure of Iran negotiations in Islamabad and Hamas's apparent rejection of the Gaza demilitarization plan proposed by Board of Peace representative Nickolay Mladenov, this week's Israel-Lebanon talks may be the only near-term chance for U.S. diplomacy to translate military success into diplomatic achievement. The incentive for Secretary of State Marco Rubio to produce a positive outcome is therefore especially high, and the American role in the talks may prove pivotal to their success. In addition to strengthening the 2024 mechanism, the Trump administration should prioritize two efforts:

- Incentivizing timely, effective LAF action against Hezbollah by offering fast-disbursing funds to support its personnel and capabilities—while simultaneously warning that aid will be cut off if the LAF fails to perform adequately.
- Complementing Israel's military pressure on Nabih Berri with U.S. financial sanctions (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-peace-will-berri-remain-hindrance>) on him, his family, and his associates.

Admittedly, it may require some creative diplomacy for negotiators to reach the type of agreed gameplan outlined above—namely, a joint statement that (1) affirms the common commitment of Lebanon and Israel to combat nonstate militias that threaten the sovereignty of the state, (2) notes Israel's time-bound restraint on certain military operations, and (3) announces the convening of parallel security and diplomatic talks focused respectively on disarming Hezbollah and negotiating peace. Yet it is not impossible.

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