Israel-Lebanon Talks, Round 4: The Pentagon Takes a Seat

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May 29, 2026

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Brief Analysis

U.S. and Israeli experts discuss the potential obstacles to progress in upcoming rounds of negotiations, and explain why keeping the Lebanon track separate from the Iran talks would be wise.

On May 28, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with David Schenker, Assaf Orion, and Hanin Ghaddar. Schenker is the Institute's Taube Senior Fellow, director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics, and former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs

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David Schenker

The talks in Washington have taken place without one of the main combatants. Yet while Hezbollah may not be in the room, it is an ever-present source of pressure, making its opinion known and placing constraints on Lebanese negotiators through public threats and maneuvers on the ground.

There are now two tracks in the negotiations: the military component at the Pentagon, and political discussions at the State Department. Determining the sequencing and implementation of any agreement reached via these tracks will be incredibly challenging. Lebanon's objective is to end Israeli occupation of its territory, while Israel aims to end the presence of an Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) proxy on its northern border.

Meanwhile, Tehran has been using its separate negotiations with the United States to explicitly link the Lebanon file with any permanent deal to end the Iran war and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, greatly complicating the Israel-Lebanon track. So far, Washington has largely resisted such linkage. During initial talks with Iran, U.S. officials sought to facilitate diplomacy by asking Israel to de-escalate the fighting in Lebanon and avoid further military operations in Beirut and Dahiya. Yet Secretary of State Marco Rubio also publicly stated that Israel had the right to not only respond to Hezbollah missile strikes, but also prevent their launch, giving the IDF more operational freedom.

For the Lebanese government, Iran's attempts to sway the negotiations are a double-edged sword. On one hand, Beirut seeks sovereignty and an end to Iran's longstanding domination of the Lebanese state. On the other hand, Beirut's top priority is to end Israel's military presence, so if Iranian demands can help compel that outcome, President Joseph Aoun will not protest.

Israel's ongoing operations in Lebanon are likewise double-edged: although they are advancing the goal of degrading Hezbollah, they may wind up undermining Beirut's ability to carry out unpopular policies, particularly if the public does not believe the government is truly capable of exerting sovereignty. Although there is no military reason why the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) cannot take action against Hezbollah in parallel with Israel's efforts, the IDF's continued cross-border operations are contributing to the government's sense of insecurity.

Yet the fact is that Beirut cannot meet its goal of establishing sovereignty until it compels the LAF to act against Hezbollah. The LAF previously took modest steps to disarm the group in the south, but this was a largely passive effort made with Hezbollah's de facto acquiescence and intended to fulfill the minimum requirements under the U.S.-led ceasefire monitoring mechanism. When it came to taking action in the north, however, Hezbollah threatened civil war, and the LAF balked by calling for "national consensus" and seeking to avoid armed confrontation with the group.

The recent U.S. sanctions against Lebanese officials may help spur movement on this front. By targeting various Hezbollah members of parliament, Amal movement subordinates of parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, and—most important—two security officials, Washington essentially delivered a warning to the LAF, which has a history of collaborating and deconflicting with Hezbollah. The LAF cannot see itself as a national institution while simultaneously working on Hezbollah's behalf; it must be loyal to the state and obey the orders of the democratically elected government.

For the United States, the next step is to start identifying other security officials with ties to Hezbollah and either designating them or encouraging the LAF to quietly push them out of key positions. Providing further monetary or military support to the force without reforming it may be counterproductive. Washington needs to establish clear expectations and provide incentives to demonstrate the potential benefits of peace. This could include offers to help bail Lebanon out of its protracted financial crisis and/or provide substantial investment and reconstruction aid—but only if it meets specific benchmarks on Hezbollah disarmament and reform.

Assaf Orion

After the November 2024 ceasefire halted the previous round of major combat in Lebanon, Hezbollah resumed the conflict this March as part of Iran's broader response to U.S. and Israeli military operations. Israel's primary goal in the renewed campaign has been to restore security to its northern communities, but this has not yet been achieved. The IDF established a security zone around 8-10 kilometers deep into Lebanon to prevent direct attacks and stop the use of antitank guided missiles against Israeli communities. It has also destroyed Hezbollah military assets in this area, demolished military-linked buildings, and established operational control up to the Litani River. Yet Hezbollah has first-person view (FPV) drones controlled by fiber-optic cables with a range of up to 60 kilometers, so it continues to pose threats to both northern communities and Israeli soldiers in the new security zone.

The Israeli public is increasingly frustrated by the disconnect between repeated government promises of security and the reality of daily casualties. The government is still hoping for the complete disarmament of Hezbollah, but professional assessments suggest that this will require a combination of diplomatic and military means.

In the upcoming security talks at the Pentagon, two agendas will surface. First, the IDF will insist on disarmament while retaining flexibility on the pace and sequence of this process and preserving its right to self-defense. Second, Lebanon will aim to set a timeline for IDF withdrawal from the south and an end to Israeli strikes. The irony is that Israel is fighting Hezbollah but negotiating with the Lebanese government, which has no control over Hezbollah's activity. Israel believes that continued military pressure on Hezbollah is needed to convince the LAF to contribute to the disarmament effort. The IDF also seeks to shape Hezbollah's alternatives, demonstrating the consequences if the group keeps flouting Beirut's will on disarmament and wider peace negotiations with Israel.

From my past experience leading IDF liaison with the LAF, I can say that Lebanon's pattern of failing to deliver on promises while citing capacity issues or fears of civil war is a vicious cycle that must be broken. Most recently, Beirut claimed that the LAF had cleared Hezbollah weapons from the entire area south of the Litani following the November 2024 ceasefire, yet Israel subsequently discovered significant weapons caches there, suggesting that the LAF either failed to spot them, lied about them, or both. To be effective, the LAF must take meaningful steps to purge Hezbollah collaborators and infiltrators from its ranks, among other reforms.

If Washington and Tehran reach an agreement to end the Iran war, it will likely include a ceasefire in Lebanon, thereby constraining Hezbollah's ability to attack Israel. Yet such linkage may also restrict Israel's freedom to continue striking Hezbollah, since Tehran could threaten to shut down further negotiations with the United States or once again close the Strait of Hormuz.

Hanin Ghaddar

Hezbollah's resilience cannot be understood through a military lens alone. Following the decimation of its command structure in 2024, the group was reduced to a barely functioning militia. This setback spurred the IRGC to step in directly, dispatching hundreds of commanders to Lebanon to reconstitute Hezbollah, mirroring the IRGC's foundational role in the militia's creation in the 1970s. Today, Hezbollah's operational decisions are being made by the IRGC, not by the militia's current leaders in Lebanon. Secretary-General Naim Qassem lacks the independent capacity to decide issues of war and peace without prior approval from Tehran.

Moreover, Hezbollah today is sustained more by its ecosystem than its arsenal. Even if all of its missiles, drones, and other military weapons were eliminated today, it would retain the institutional access, financial networks, and procurement channels necessary to rearm and regenerate. According to the U.S. Treasury, the group raised at least $1 billion in 2025 alone, and it continues to move money and materiel through Lebanese airports and other points of entry. As long as Beirut and other actors keep treating Hezbollah as a military problem rather than a systemic one, military action will only produce temporary setbacks, not lasting results.

Recent U.S. sanctions targeting Hezbollah and its allies are meaningful, especially those placed on figures in the General Security Directorate. The GSD has long functioned as an important Hezbollah tool for managing points of entry, forging passports for IRGC operatives, and other tasks. Yet despite sending a signal, the new sanctions are unlikely to modify anyone's behavior unless they are followed by clear demands, continued pressure, and a structured program of incentives and consequences.

When Lebanese politicians invoke the need for national consensus—often as justification for inaction—they are in practice handing Hezbollah a veto. Hezbollah is Lebanon's only armed political party, so "consensus" essentially means deferring to its demands. Instead, Lebanon needs to assert its sovereignty through the constitution, not seek Hezbollah's permission to govern.

As things stand today, however, the main obstacle to disarmament is political will. LAF units are capable of confronting Hezbollah, but no senior political decisionmaker is willing to authorize it. Many fear the legitimate threat of assassination and violence. There is also an institutional trauma rooted in 2008, when the government moved against Hezbollah with U.S. encouragement only to be abandoned when the group retaliated by assaulting Beirut and the Druze heartland. Rebuilding trust will require concrete U.S. assurances that Beirut will not be left exposed again.

Lebanon should take heart from the fact that it successfully confronted the Syrian occupation in 2005, when internal resolve and external support combined to push out the Assad regime. Today, Iran is equally entrenched in Lebanon via Hezbollah, so a similar level of effort is needed.

Two additional principles should guide upcoming negotiations. First, Lebanon must be decoupled from negotiations on the Iran war. Bundling the above issues into the U.S.-Iran track could enable the IRGC to use its presence in Lebanon as a bargaining chip and avoid important concessions elsewhere. Lebanon must be dealt with as a sovereign state on its own terms, not as a side issue in a deal with Iran.

Second, any Lebanon agreement reached while the IRGC retains its current level of control over Hezbollah would carry a significant political risk—namely, that the militia will claim victory, make promises to its Shia constituency, and emerge from the process with a domestic political boost even if it is militarily diminished. If Hezbollah scrapes out a political victory, it will not remain militarily defeated for long and will soon regain its capabilities.

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

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