Lebanon's Framework Is Stuck in Neutral: Political Will, Not Capability or Verification, Is the Key

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Brief Analysis

Beirut promised to dismantle Hezbollah as the trigger for Israeli withdrawals, but it has so far preferred to avoid conflict with the Iran-backed group instead, putting a potentially historic opportunity at risk unless some degree of verified progress is made in the "pilot zones" soon.

Four months after the United States, Israel, and Lebanon signed their June 26 Trilateral Framework agreement **(https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesman/2026/06/trilateral-framework-between-the-united-states-of-america-the-state-of-israel-and-the-republic-of-lebanon)** , implementation has stalled. The most hopeful political step between Beirut and Jerusalem in more than forty years, the framework links verified disarmament and effective Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) control to phased Israeli withdrawals and reconstruction. Yet none of the initial implementation "pilot zones" has been certified, and the October 20-22 **military talks (https://www.newarab.com/news/lebanon-israel-talks-us-end-without-breakthrough?amp=1)** at U.S. Central Command headquarters in Tampa were inconclusive, with no agreements reached on the verification process. The true obstacle to progress increasingly appears to be the absence of political will, not LAF capabilities, international aid, or third-party verification.

Promises, Promises

While the framework agreement laid out a path toward eventual peace between the two countries, its near-term focus is on the pilot zones, where the LAF committed to disarm nonstate military actors—a euphemism for Hezbollah—and dismantle their infrastructure, which would then trigger incremental withdrawals by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Both Prime Minister Nawaf Salam **(https://pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=27579)**

and President Joseph Aoun **(https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1547708/en-amont-de-la-conference-de-soutien-a-larmee-a-paris-aoun-appelle-a-eviter-un-vide-securitaire-au-sud.html)** have endorsed state authority over arms and spoken publicly about their vision for security arrangements and peace, but their declarations still require implementation.

The LAF began **(https://ebs.publicnow.com/view/5185A6E20F741D80FED31BA69A8FD745B9861D82)** operating in the first pilot areas in Froun, Srifa, and Zawtar al-Gharbiyeh on July 20 and soon reported weapons seizures. Israel argues that Hezbollah retains infrastructure and access in these villages, however, so the IDF will not withdraw further without verified clearance and effective LAF control. The framework envisioned a third-party verifier **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operationalizing-trilateral-framework-agreement)** , but the United States has so far been unable to secure agreement between the two sides on who will fill this role.

While implementation remains stuck, enemies of the framework are making strides to shore up their position. Hezbollah is reestablishing its presence by exploiting the return of displaced civilians to conflict areas, disputes over accessing private property to check for weapons, and delays in implementation. Recent Lebanese reporting **(https://cdn.naharnet.com/stories/323365-report-hezbollah-rebuilding-defensive-not-offensive-capabilities/)** suggests the group is also rebuilding defensive positions north of the Litani River and finding ways to bolster its local standing with money and weapons. As time passes and the framework's goals go unrealized, Hezbollah's Iranian patron is poised to reassert its claim that the Lebanon file should be linked to its own negotiations with the United States—just months after the courageous Lebanese decision to reject Tehran's domination and pursue a direct deal with Israel.

Three developments underscore the fact that the missing ingredient for implementation is the political will of Lebanon's leadership, not the military capabilities of its army. First, Lebanese forces intercepted a truck last month carrying roughly 780 kilograms of explosives at Dahr al-Baidar, outside the pilot zones. On October 15, Hezbollah parliamentarian Hassan Fadlallah publicly acknowledged **(https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1550914/hezbollah-says-explosives-laden-vehicle-seized-by-lebanese-security-forces-belonged-to-group.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com)** the group's ownership of the shipment and demanded the release of two detainees and the return of the vehicle and its contents. Although the government has kept control of the explosives for now, it refused the justice minister's request to forward the case to the civilian-led Judicial Council, keeping it under the supervision of the Hezbollah-dominated Permanent Military Court. The latter court has since charged thirteen people in connection with the case, but its sordid record of meting out light punishments and negligible fines suggests that Hezbollah will evade real consequences. In short, the handling of the case shows that even when state institutions are prepared to act on critical national security matters, the political leadership remains reluctant to use the full machinery of the state—including independent civilian courts—to confront Hezbollah.

Second, police completed a raid last month on a warehouse **(https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1551088/army-disperses-armed-men-who-surrounded-police-seizing-suspect-medicines.html)** full of medications near Beirut's southern suburbs despite obstruction by armed Hezbollah fighters. The group denied owning the site but claimed that security forces should have coordinated entry with Hezbollah officials beforehand, pointing to possible unofficial arrangements granting the group an informal veto over lawful state action.

Third, Israel gave the LAF specific evidence regarding Hezbollah infrastructure at Ali al-Taher **(https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/idf-press-releases-israel-at-war/september-26-pr/what-happened-in-the-ali-al-taher-ridge/)** , a vast underground complex outside the pilot zones. After Hezbollah refused to hand over these

assets and the LAF declined to address the problem, the IDF took action itself and eliminated the threat. Lebanese authorities may not have opposed the outcome, since Ali al-Taher was cleared and the government did not have to do the dirty work itself. Yet they lost the chance to show Jerusalem that they are committed to the common task of disarming Hezbollah, dismantling its infrastructure, preventing its return to the area, and thereby enabling Israeli withdrawals. Their inaction also signaled the Lebanese public that the government could not perform the task itself, thereby weakening its legitimacy in the face of Hezbollah.

Taken together, such incidents suggest that Beirut is following its familiar playbook: mixing pledges of sovereignty with claims of incapability, appeals for assistance and funds, procedural and political delays, and attempts to shift responsibility among different international sponsors. Yet its performance must be judged not by performative patrols or declarations, but by weapons retained in state custody, executed warrants, effective prosecutions, appropriate sentences, and the prevention of Hezbollah's return. Crucially, all of these processes must be carried out with or without Hezbollah's consent.

Third-Party Role

The Trilateral Framework envisions two different roles for outside parties: a coordinating function to act as a liaison between the Lebanese and Israeli militaries, and a verification function to assess whether they are fulfilling their commitments. The first role is being filled by the United States, with CENTCOM's senior military representative, **Lt. Gen. Joseph Clearfield (https://lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/lebanese-army-commander-chief-meets-us-general-joseph-clearfield-head-mcg4l-discuss-latest)** , overseeing the implementation channel, called the MCG4L (Military Coordination Group for Lebanon). His position is important, but his mandate does not include compelling Lebanese authorities to take specific measures to confront Hezbollah or prosecute its lawbreakers.

Although the United States has told Lebanon and Israel from the outset that it would not fill the second role, it has so far been unable to find another country willing to serve as the agreement's verifier—at least not one that both Beirut and Jerusalem accept. The Tampa talks offered **a good opportunity (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-lebanons-pilot-zones-work-tampa-talks-and-beyond)** for clarifying this issue, but unfortunately they occurred just as Lebanon was embroiled in the explosives case and Israel was a week away from national elections. In the end, the meetings did not resolve key issues related to verification, including agreed standards for intelligence sharing, access, inspections, certification, and responses to violations.

The result is that the process is stuck. One might think Beirut would expedite visible measures to overcome this obstacle, especially in the pilot zones, since continued impasse means that Israel will make no further withdrawals from Lebanese territory. The fact that this is not happening suggests that Beirut places a higher priority on avoiding conflict with Hezbollah than on asserting its sovereignty and securing Israel's withdrawal.

From Political Pressure to Verified Implementation

Given the growing frustration on both sides, it may be too late to simply wait for the deployment of a well-trained, prepared, and equipped third-party verification force—the framework may already be dead by that point, or the process captured by Iranian efforts to reassert control over Lebanon diplomacy. To avoid that scenario and preserve the framework as a path to potential peace, the parties should consider an interim form of verified implementation as a temporary substitute for such a force. As long as this substitute mechanism can establish actual clearance of Hezbollah arms and infrastructure along with sustained LAF control, then incremental Israeli withdrawals can begin. Any such mechanism should include the following elements:

- **Israel can provide actionable, releasable intelligence on Hezbollah sites and movements, sharing it through agreed channels for LAF enforcement and independent checks. When possible, Israel should allow for Lebanese remediation to preserve space and incentive for Beirut to exercise state enforcement.**

- The MCG4L should be equipped to receive intelligence, transfer warning information to the LAF, deconflict operations, and track Lebanese responses. A small, technical verification team—drawn from mutually acceptable countries, organizations, individual experts, contractors, corporate entities, and/or other sources—could inspect relevant sites and certify clearance using common standards. Lt. Gen. Clearfield is well-positioned to lead military implementation.
- Even with strong military mechanisms in place, verification is unlikely to progress unless U.S. political leaders press Lebanon to authorize searches, execute warrants, and honor commitments. The lesson of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is that deploying forces, counting patrols, and filing incident reports will not by itself establish disarmament. True verification requires access, inspections, certification, military follow-up when violations occur, and leadership-level pressure when progress is obstructed by political dynamics.
- Each pilot zone needs advance agreement on inspection access terms, removal of weapons and infrastructure, sustained LAF control, and the steps Israel will take once clearance is certified. A recurrence of Hezbollah activity should prompt notification, a defined remediation period, suspension of the next reciprocal step if uncorrected, and snapback measures as necessary. Any urgent threats remain subject to Israel's right to self-defense and should be rapidly deconflicted through the MCG4L.
- International assistance (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-effective-train-and-equip-mission-lebanon-post-unifil) to vetted LAF units should prioritize intelligence, engineering, weapons disposal, mobility, and rapid response. Additional funding and equipment should be conditioned on verified clearance and sustained control starting with the pilot zones. European (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/europes-offer-help-strengthen-lebanons-sovereignty-ensuring-us-coordination) and Arab partners should be expected to support these same implementation priorities.
- Reconstruction should follow certification zone by zone, giving the Lebanese government and local communities a tangible dividend for establishing effective state authority rather than rewarding unfulfilled promises. Donors should screen implementing bodies and beneficiaries to prevent reconstruction funds from reinforcing Hezbollah's patronage networks. The return of displaced civilians must not become cover for Hezbollah's renewed military access.

As a backstop to this process, Israel will respond to the absence of assertive LAF action by continuing its own efforts to prevent and counter Hezbollah threats, in line with its right to self-defense. Strategically, this will demonstrate that Hezbollah's resistance to disarmament will not lead to the group's military revival or Israel's withdrawal—rather, it will lead to further destruction of Hezbollah. This is not Israel's first choice, however, so Jerusalem should urge Washington to supplement the credible IDF military alternative with sustained political pressure on Beirut, giving Lebanese leaders extra incentive to take matters into their own hands.

On the longer-term diplomatic front, major breakthroughs should not be expected until a new Israeli government is formed **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-after-election-policy-implications-crucial-vote)** . Yet that should not prevent the parties from making important progress on implementing their commitments in the existing pilot zones—namely, Lebanon can clear its first zone by fully and visibly disarming and dismantling Hezbollah; Israel can prepare its reciprocal troop redeployment; and donors can ready their funds and plans for local reconstruction. Yet nothing is likely to progress unless Washington pushes Beirut to start doing what needs to be done.

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