

# Assessing U.S.-French Cooperation a Year After October 7

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Fighting on several Middle East fronts has revealed gaps between the allies, but they have ample room to collaborate in areas that range from ensuring Lebanese sovereignty to delivering humanitarian aid.**

Since Israel initiated ground operations in Lebanon in early October, the French and American positions have appeared to grow further apart, especially regarding the call for a ceasefire. Yet Paris and Washington continue to share the objective of de-escalating the overall Middle East conflict, which can best be achieved through close and ongoing coordination.

## Joint Statement: Proof of Close Coordination

Although bilateral cooperation [over the past year \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-french-cooperation-preventing-israel-hezbollah-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-french-cooperation-preventing-israel-hezbollah-war) to prevent an Israel-Hezbollah war has not always been smooth, and ultimately failed to prevent escalation, French president Emmanuel Macron and his U.S. counterpart, Joe Biden, launched a joint initiative for this purpose in September. Intense negotiations took place during the recent United Nations General Assembly session as Israel's pager campaign rocked the security of Hezbollah and other adversaries. Against this backdrop, Macron and Biden, in coordination with Israel and the Lebanese government—which in turn coordinated with Hezbollah—agreed on language calling for “[a temporary ceasefire to give diplomacy a chance to succeed and avoid further escalations across the border \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/25/joint-statement-by-president-biden-and-president-macron/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/25/joint-statement-by-president-biden-and-president-macron/).”

Although fast-moving events have largely rendered this initiative obsolete, and it has been criticized for not mentioning Hezbollah, it nonetheless should remain a solid foundation on which to build when the time is ripe.

## Differences on Nasrallah Killing, Other Israeli Military Activity

The French and U.S. positions have diverged on two topics in particular:

- In response to Israel's September 27 targeted killing of Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, France published a brief [statement \(https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/news/article/statement-on-the-situation-in-lebanon-28-september-2024\)](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/news/article/statement-on-the-situation-in-lebanon-28-september-2024) emphasizing the need to prevent destabilization or escalation. In contrast, President Biden declared that the leader's death would offer "[a measure of justice for his many victims \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/28/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-hassan-nasrallah/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/28/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-hassan-nasrallah/)," presumably including American and French nationals, as well as others.
- With regard to Israeli military operations in Lebanon, the terms used by [the U.S. Defense Department press secretary \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3923249/pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-holds-a-press-briefing/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3923249/pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-holds-a-press-briefing/) in an October 1 statement, the day of Iran's ballistic missile attack on Israel, were largely perceived as giving a green light to the ground operations in Lebanon. A few days later, however, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein [denied \(https://x.com/amoshochstein/status/1842307321831342301\)](https://x.com/amoshochstein/status/1842307321831342301) this interpretation, insisting that only a diplomatic resolution would allow residents of northern Israel forced to evacuate after Hezbollah's October 8, 2023, attack to return home. He nevertheless did not mention the word *ceasefire*, as was also the case in the [readout \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/10/09/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-call-with-prime-minister-netanyahu-of-israel-9/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/10/09/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-call-with-prime-minister-netanyahu-of-israel-9/) of President Biden's call with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu. France's position has been less equivocal, with both President Macron and his foreign minister repeatedly reaffirming France's opposition to Israeli ground operations in Lebanon. France never expressed approval of Israel's "[de-escalation through escalation \(https://www.axios.com/2024/09/25/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-gaza-biden-fears\)](https://www.axios.com/2024/09/25/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-gaza-biden-fears)" strategy in Lebanon, a stance made clear to all parties involved.

## France's Approach to the Middle East—and Its Limits

Paris is walking a fine line between several strategic goals that have become difficult to reconcile owing to on-the-ground developments, leading some to describe French policy as [incoherent \(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/10/07/france-struggles-diplomatically-in-the-middle-east\\_6728492\\_23.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/10/07/france-struggles-diplomatically-in-the-middle-east_6728492_23.html). President Macron has thus sought to reconcile France's nonnegotiable commitment to Israel's security and steadfast support for a two-solution with the Palestinians with unwavering defense of Lebanon's sovereignty. Such stances explain why France has consistently called for ceasefires in Lebanon and Gaza, and voiced deep concerns about Israeli military actions, including in the West Bank.

The first trips abroad by France's newly appointed foreign minister, Jean-Noel Barrot, help illuminate the attempt to pursue these three objectives simultaneously. On September 30, Barrot became the first Western ministerial-level official to visit Lebanon since Israel's bombing campaign began in September. While in Beirut, he reaffirmed France's strong support for Lebanon as well as the importance of safeguarding French citizens residing there (Lebanon's French community, 23,000 strong, is the most prominent in the Middle East). A week later, on October 7, he visited the grounds of the Nova music festival in Israel, a much-publicized site of Hamas-led murder and brutality. While there, he expressed France's solidarity with the victims, a significant number of them French ([forty-eight dead \(https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/israel-palestinian-territories/news/2024/article/gaza-death-of-yahya-sinwar-17-oct-2024\)](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/israel-palestinian-territories/news/2024/article/gaza-death-of-yahya-sinwar-17-oct-2024), two hostages still in Gaza).

The risk, however, is that French nuance is perceived as muddle and pleasing to no one. For example, Israel met President Macron's call [to stop supplying arms \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/05/macron-france-stop-arms-israel-gaza-war/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/05/macron-france-stop-arms-israel-gaza-war/) for the Gaza fight as a threat of an arms embargo—although interestingly, French officials never used this term. These remarks came a few days after France mobilized its military resources in the Middle East, [buoyed by public statements \(https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2024/10/01/conseil-de-defense-et-de-securite-nationale-sur-la-situation-au-liban-et-les-recents-developpements-de-la-crise-au\)](https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2024/10/01/conseil-de-defense-et-de-securite-nationale-sur-la-situation-au-liban-et-les-recents-developpements-de-la-crise-au)

**moyen-orient**), to defend Israeli territory against the October 1 Iranian missile barrage. Then, France's clarification—that it would continue to export components required for defensive purposes (i.e., against missile attacks)—was seen as a U-turn. In fact, it was intended to demonstrate the coherence of the French position. On the other side, many have criticized a French policy that is meant to be balanced but has not yet recognized a Palestinian state—unlike European countries such as Spain.

Binyamin Netanyahu's acerbic reaction to Macron's call proved at least one thing: France's voice continues to count, even as Paris alone has little leverage. Cooperation with Washington, though even more challenging than in the past, is all the more necessary.

## Options for U.S.-French Cooperation

The following areas offer opportunities for productive cooperation between Paris and Washington, even as war developments will likely continue to reveal strains:

**Fostering support from other international and regional actors.** France will hold an [international conference \(https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/north-africa-and-middle-east/news/article/international-conference-in-support-of-lebanon-s-people-and-sovereignty-paris#:~:text=On%20President%20Macron's%20initiative%20and,Paris%20on%2024%20October%202024.\)](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/north-africa-and-middle-east/news/article/international-conference-in-support-of-lebanon-s-people-and-sovereignty-paris#:~:text=On%20President%20Macron's%20initiative%20and,Paris%20on%2024%20October%202024.)) on October 24 in support of Lebanon's people and sovereignty, with a financial as well as political focus. [France's special position \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/frances-diplomatic-role-middle-east-post-october-7\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/frances-diplomatic-role-middle-east-post-october-7) makes it a legitimate player here—it has seven hundred UN peacekeepers on the ground as part of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and is the penholder at the Security Council. Moreover, its relationship with Israel's leadership is strong—despite the recent jabs between Macron and Netanyahu—and it is one of the few Western powers to have regular and direct high-level discussions with Iran. Paris and Washington must continue efforts to mobilize Arab and European support for Lebanon. [Saudi Arabia's disenchantment with Lebanon \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-and-lebanon-love-hate-relationship\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-and-lebanon-love-hate-relationship) resulted from both the overwhelming power of Hezbollah and perceived deceit by Riyadh's closest Lebanese allies. At a time when Hezbollah is in disarray and Saudi Arabia is attempting reconciliation with Iran, the kingdom could again be a key player in Lebanon, provided that the Lebanese government and armed forces express a clear commitment to doing their part—namely, implementing urgently needed reforms.

**Delivering humanitarian aid.** On October 2, the UN launched a \$426 million appeal for Lebanon to support one million people who have been “uprooted.” In a country where Syrian refugees have been a focal point for the past decade, this new wave of refugees poses serious challenges that must not be ignored. The [United States \(https://www.state.gov/united-states-provides-humanitarian-assistance-in-response-to-the-escalating-crisis-in-lebanon/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20will%20provide,the%20communities%20that%20host%20them.\)](https://www.state.gov/united-states-provides-humanitarian-assistance-in-response-to-the-escalating-crisis-in-lebanon/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20will%20provide,the%20communities%20that%20host%20them.)) has already announced it will provide nearly \$157 million in new humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, the European Commission announced last month that it will provide more than \$40 million in additional support, and several European Union countries—including France—delivered humanitarian aid. The challenge now is to identify ways of coordinating this aid efficiently, a task for which the Beirut airport must remain open.

**Supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces, a key component in Lebanese sovereignty, and fully implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701.** The LAF, supported mainly by the United States and Qatar, has suffered the consequences of Lebanon's crippling economic crisis. It is today in great need of additional support to purchase equipment and receive necessary training. The Paris conference will be the right place for France and other partners to announce additional funding for this critical issue, and for the LAF to present an ambitious and engaging roadmap on future redeployment. Moreover, Italy could play a role, capitalizing [on the conference it hosted in 2018](#)

[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/41472\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/41472_en)) by organizing similar events in support of the LAF. As far as full implementation of Resolution 1701, which would remove the Hezbollah threat from south Lebanon, this will require Washington and Paris to agree on its meaning in the current context.

**Choosing a president in Lebanon.** The Lebanese presidency has been unoccupied for two years. According to the national constitution, the president is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, creating a direct link to the LAF. International actors must now persuade the Lebanese leadership to convene to choose a president effective enough to deal with the current situation and strengthen Lebanon’s diplomatic credibility. Paris and Washington should remain engaged in Lebanon’s political process as part of the “Quintet” with Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

**Continuing to work toward a truce in Gaza.** Israel strongly rejects a linkage between the Lebanon and Gaza fronts. Even so, improvements in Gaza could change dynamics toward helping bring about a satisfactory and lasting end to the war in Lebanon—and vice versa. De-escalation would create room for broader diplomacy across the region and prevent the full-scale regional war the United States and France are working relentlessly to avoid. Hamas leader **Yahya al-Sinwar’s death** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-sinwars-death-could-change-war>) could make such a scenario more likely.

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## RECOMMENDED

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### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [Hamis Leader Yahya Sinwar’s Death Can Bring the Middle East Closer to Peace](#)

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◆  
Jeffrey Sonnenfeld,  
Dennis Ross,  
Steven Tian

[\(/policy-analysis/hamas-leader-yahya-sinwars-death-can-bring-middle-east-closer-peace\)](#)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [How Sinwar’s Death Could Change the War](#)

Oct 17, 2024

◆  
Ghaith al-Omari,  
Neomi Neumann

(/policy-analysis/how-sinwars-death-could-change-war)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## The Real Purpose of a U.S.-Saudi Security Agreement

Oct 17, 2024

◆  
Michael Singh

(/policy-analysis/real-purpose-us-saudi-security-agreement)

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