

# How to End the Third Lebanon War—and Prevent the Fourth

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Brief Analysis

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**The security arrangements set forth by Resolution 1701 and other past accords need to be beefed up and, more important, enforced—a task that may require an international “action group” willing to operate beyond the Security Council’s limitations.**

One year ago, Hezbollah started what has morphed into the third Lebanon war with Israel, exposing the international failure to implement security arrangements mandated after their second war in 2006. On the ground, this failure can be attributed to the Lebanese government, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), but the Security Council and UN secretary-general bear heavy responsibility as well. To end the current war and prevent the next one, any new security arrangements must acknowledge and correct the roots of this failure.

## Why 1701 Failed to Prevent War

Upon its adoption in 2006, [UN Security Council Resolution 1701](https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_res_17012006.pdf) ([https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s\\_res\\_17012006.pdf](https://unsco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_res_17012006.pdf)) ably diagnosed the main reasons for the outbreak of the second war: Hezbollah's possession of military weapons outside the government's control, and its deployment of forces in southern Lebanon along the border with Israel. To prevent a third war, 1701 wisely called on Beirut to extend its sovereignty via the LAF (supported by UNIFIL) and to establish a zone south of the Litani River that was free of any nongovernmental armed forces. The government was also asked to disarm all militias in accordance with the Taif Accord and Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1680. And the UN secretary-general was tasked with developing proposals for implementing these resolutions.

As the decades passed, however, none of these requirements was fulfilled. Disarmament of militias was never seriously addressed—instead, Lebanese officials stalled by holding an endless “dialogue on national defense,” then essentially endorsed Hezbollah's right to bear arms through the oft-heard official motto “the people, the army, and

the resistance.” Although the LAF had few qualms about going after most Sunni jihadist movements, they never disarmed Palestinian factions affiliated with terrorist groups like Hamas, let alone confronted Shia Hezbollah.

The Lebanese government and LAF, while repeating their commitment to 1701, actively colluded with Hezbollah in violating it, systematically obstructing UNIFIL access to Hezbollah military sites such as cross-border tunnels, firing ranges, and missile launch sites. The UN repeatedly complained about these violations in endless reports but did nothing in response. Against the gathering storm, UNIFIL often praised its supposed contribution to the “calm” along the border. Yet Hezbollah’s **[campaign \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hiding-plain-sight-hezbollahs-campaign-against-unifil\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hiding-plain-sight-hezbollahs-campaign-against-unifil)** of violence and intimidation against the UN force successfully deterred it from fulfilling its mandate or even accurately reporting the situation on the ground, contributing to a steady uptick in hostilities with Israel over the years that culminated in the current war. Meanwhile, Beirut betrayed its duty to protect UNIFIL by failing to bring Hezbollah **[murderers \(https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/11/15/sole-suspect-in-killing-of-pte-sean-rooney-in-lebanon-released-from-jail/#:~:text=The%20sole%20suspect%20detained%20and,in%20the%20Department%20of%20Defence.\)](https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/11/15/sole-suspect-in-killing-of-pte-sean-rooney-in-lebanon-released-from-jail/#:~:text=The%20sole%20suspect%20detained%20and,in%20the%20Department%20of%20Defence.)** and other assailants to justice.

Today, as new security arrangements are considered and negotiated, UNIFIL’s specific failures must be looked at with eyes wide open. After years of inadequate support from Lebanon and the UN, the force gradually internalized its denied access to forbidden Hezbollah sites as so-called “**[private properties \(https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/036814c74a0e1910/Article-1e4dbd840dc9291026.htm\)](https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/036814c74a0e1910/Article-1e4dbd840dc9291026.htm)**,” “areas of strategic importance,” and (now-destroyed) positions held by the fake environmental group “**[Green Without Borders \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/green-without-borders-operational-benefits-hezbollahs-environmental-ngo\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/green-without-borders-operational-benefits-hezbollahs-environmental-ngo)**.” During the current war, findings by the Israel Defense Forces prove beyond a doubt that Hezbollah turned homes, other private properties, and even entire villages into military assets, with cover-up assistance from the government and LAF. UNIFIL even came to accept that simply taking photographs in south Lebanon was off-limits—after UN cameras and electronics were repeatedly confiscated or destroyed by Hezbollah members, UNIFIL described them as being seized by “civilians.” Indeed, any attempts to bolster UNIFIL’s situational awareness were effectively blocked by Hezbollah’s partners in the government.

Despite these blatant violations, the UN secretary-general’s regular reports to the Security Council regarding the progress of 1701 downplayed the **[deteriorating \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/red-hot-blue-line\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/red-hot-blue-line)** security situation for years, emphasizing irrelevant mission statistics such as patrol numbers while spending inordinate time on matters well outside UNIFIL’s mandate (e.g., Lebanon’s political and economic crises). In turn, the Security Council did little about any of the above problems, repeatedly **[renewing \(https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/258/14/pdf/n2325814.pdf\)](https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/258/14/pdf/n2325814.pdf)** UNIFIL’s mandate without significant **[change \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pros-and-cons-salvaging-or-ditching-unifil\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pros-and-cons-salvaging-or-ditching-unifil)**.

## **An International “Action Group”?**

**T**o end the current Lebanon war and prevent the outbreak of a fourth one, the international community must take steps to avoid the conditions that led to previous outbreaks. This entails not only better security arrangements, but mostly an effective implementation mechanism. Along with the Taif Accord, previous UN resolutions—1559, 1680, and 1701—provide a legitimate basis for helping the Lebanese government establish a monopoly on arms within its borders. Yet these resolutions must be enforced by a strong implementation mechanism or they will simply fail again.

More specifically, future security arrangements must ensure that Lebanese territory is no longer used to threaten Israel—whether by Hezbollah, other Iranian proxies, Palestinian groups, or jihadists. The goal is to safeguard both Israel and Lebanon’s security and sovereignty. Israel’s current military campaign aims to facilitate this goal in two

ways: first, by degrading Hezbollah's military, destroying its assets, disrupting its organization, and weakening its grip on Lebanon; and second, by generating urgency and leverage in support of effective diplomacy.

In principle, the core of Lebanon's future security architecture should begin with the government assuming sovereign responsibility over its territory. Given Beirut's long-running weakness, dysfunction, and corruption, however, additional layers are necessary to support, monitor, incentivize, coerce, and enforce progress on this front. The UN can provide one of these layers—as long as it agrees to play a more useful role than in the past. The United States can provide another layer, together with like-minded players such as select European nations (Britain, France, Germany, Italy) and relevant regional partners. And if all else fails, Israel would step in as another layer—the final backstop in defense of its own security, with Washington's support.

To provide a legitimate source of authority for these security arrangements, Lebanon needs to **establish** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roadmap-enduring-ceasefire-lebanon>) a functional government, starting with the selection of a new president after years of political deadlock. Direct pressure should be applied against those impeding this step, including Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri. If this effort fails, external actors should move ahead regardless.

Realistically, the prospects for a significantly stronger Security Council resolution are slim given the unhelpful positions taken so far by China and Russia. Hence, a non-UN path may be required. For instance, the United States, Israel, and like-minded countries could create their own mechanism or action group to promote a new roadmap independent of the UN. This would enable them to compensate for the shortfalls in the current arrangement, on issues ranging from oversight to monitoring to coercive sanctions. Israel could provide intelligence to focus their efforts—and even military enforcement should all else fail. To address Beirut's sovereignty concerns, foreign alternatives to some of Israel's reconnaissance flights should be considered at the invitation of the Lebanese government, similar to the "Olive Harvest" sorties that U.S. forces conducted over Israel, Egypt, and Syria amid the disengagement agreements that followed the 1973 war.

To set all this in motion, the action group must compel Beirut to seek international support and live up to its own commitments. Aid to Lebanon's economy and reconstruction, as well as arms, funds, and training support to the LAF, must be conditioned on meeting clear benchmarks in the new roadmap. Any Lebanese actors closely colluding with Hezbollah should be designated as terrorist elements and dealt with accordingly.

The disarmament of militias will need to take place more gradually, phased by location and faction. The most immediate need is in the south, focusing on Hezbollah's remaining military assets and armed Palestinian factions in the southern refugee camps. To make this happen, Beirut must show sufficient political will—namely, by instructing the LAF to plan and execute this task and requesting UNIFIL support for it.

For its part, UNIFIL needs to be transformed or dissolved given its repeated failures. If retained, the force must demonstrate a willingness to fulfill its mandate by preventing all attacks from Lebanese territory, and by ensuring freedom of movement and access to all locations in its mission area, including "private properties," "strategic areas," and other sites previously prohibited on various pretexts. UNIFIL must also boost its situational awareness by establishing functional intelligence capabilities throughout its mission area. Moreover, this mission area should be expanded northward, initially to the Awali River and possibly farther.

If Beirut officially requests UN support in disarming militias, demilitarizing the south, and securing its borders, this would become UNIFIL's final test of relevance. In that case, the government and LAF would need to reciprocate by backing and protecting UNIFIL personnel. Whatever its mission becomes, UNIFIL's size needs to be adjusted to fit its actual tasks at every mandate renewal—which should occur every six months instead of annually to ensure flexibility and responsiveness to mission dynamics.

Permanent Security Council members such as China, Russia, and possibly France (given its considerations as penholder on the issue) may oppose any change to UNIFIL. If so, it would be better to dissolve the mission altogether, which the United States could do by vetoing the mandate renewal next August and withholding funds for the force's \$500 million yearly budget. In that scenario, some monitoring and liaison missions could conceivably be performed by the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), whose military observers are already embedded in UNIFIL and whose leadership has been in contact with Israel, Lebanon, and Syria since 1948.

Whatever roadmap they choose, officials should use the current war pressures being exerted on Lebanon and Hezbollah to improve postwar security arrangements, rather than opting for an immediate **ceasefire** (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-821807>) that opens up "space for diplomacy." This more patient approach would still result in ending the war, but with the major benefit of reducing Hezbollah's ability to quickly rebuild its forces, reemerge as a threat to Israel, impede Lebanese sovereignty, and bring the fourth Lebanon war.

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