

In Lebanon, a Rare Moment of Opportunity

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Brief Analysis

Israel's campaign has greatly diminished Hezbollah, presenting a chance for Beirut to end the war and push back against the group and its Iranian sponsors —if Lebanese elites are up to the task.

On September 30, after a devastating ten-day stretch culminating in Israel's killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Lebanon's caretaker prime minister Najib Mikati announced his government's support for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701. The 2006 resolution was endorsed by Beirut, but the state never implemented its most important provision—ending Hezbollah's presence south of the Litani River, adjacent to Israel. In recent months, the Biden administration endeavored unsuccessfully to convince Hezbollah to sign on to a ceasefire based on revitalizing the resolution. Now, however, with Hezbollah militarily degraded and its command and control disrupted, the organization may be reconsidering its opposition.

At present, talk of a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement is premature. Israel is still conducting ground operations targeting Hezbollah's extensive tunnel network in south Lebanon, an action required to enable 70,000 displaced Israelis to safely return to their homes. And based on precedent, Israel lacks confidence that the UN would actually enforce the resolution. Nevertheless, UNSCR 1701 will likely be one of several commitments Beirut will have to undertake to de-escalate the conflict. With Hezbollah weakened, the government of Lebanon has an opportunity not only to end the war, but also to curtail Hezbollah and Iranian hegemony and assert state sovereignty. Alas, it is not clear that Lebanon's political elites—even with backing from Washington and Paris—will be up to the task.

The Role of the Lebanese Armed Forces

Passed in the aftermath of the previous Hezbollah-Israel war, UNSCR 1701 mandated that peacekeepers from the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) assist the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to ensure that the area between

the Litani River and the frontier with Israel was “free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons” other than those of the government. Notwithstanding the resolution, Hezbollah expanded its presence and activities in the region. From 2006 to 2023, UNIFIL patrols were consistently denied access to broad swaths of territory in the south believed to be Hezbollah bases, and peacekeepers were routinely harassed and assaulted (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pros-and-cons-salvaging-or-ditching-unifil>) and periodically killed.

To be sure, UNIFIL has been feckless, but 1701 has failed largely because the LAF and the Lebanese government are not committed to the mission, with the LAF even collaborating with Hezbollah to obstruct UNIFIL activities. The problem is a lack of will, not resources. The LAF has nearly 70,000 forces, and—at least prior to the 2020 financial collapse and massive devaluation of the Lebanese lira—was “among the most capable” U.S. partner militaries in the region, according to former U.S. Central Command chief Gen. Joseph Votel. Indeed, the force fought bravely and competently during past military victories over Sunni militant groups. Since the financial crisis, the salaries of enlisted soldiers have dropped below \$100 per month, reportedly resulting in significant absenteeism. Nevertheless, the LAF maintains sufficient manpower and capabilities to deploy to the south.

Specifically, U.S. and Israeli officials indicate that implementing UNSCR 1701 would require sending around 6,000 LAF troops to patrol Lebanon’s border region with Israel, working alongside nearly 11,500 UNIFIL peacekeepers. After all of Hezbollah’s armed personnel have departed, these forces would ideally be able to move freely in all areas south of the Litani, actively searching out and taking possession of extant weapons, dismantling Hezbollah’s positions, infrastructure, launch pads, and tunnels, and ensuring that militia operatives do not re-infiltrate the area. Although such a combined LAF/UNIFIL operation is admittedly improbable, Hezbollah acquiescence could enable this effort to avoid direct military confrontation between the state and the Iran-backed militia.

A Problem of Will

To actually implement 1701, Lebanon’s caretaker government would have to proactively deploy the LAF to the south and direct it to carry out this mission. Even with Hezbollah’s forces degraded and its leadership in disarray, such an order would test the mettle of the state’s political elites. In addition to Hezbollah’s prodigious record of intimidating and murdering domestic opponents, its political party and allies control about half the seats in parliament, including Speaker Nabih Berri, who has consistently demonstrated support for Hezbollah during his thirty-two years in that role. While Prime Minister Mikati could authorize the LAF deployment, it is less clear whether he would order the confiscation and destruction of Hezbollah’s arsenal and infrastructure. He is not alone. Fearing Hezbollah’s reconstitution, many Lebanese elites will be reticent to cross the organization. To avoid antagonizing the group while placating the West, they may be tempted to finesse the resolution to “incorporate” Hezbollah into the LAF. This would be unacceptable, however.

The LAF, too, has some institutional and cultural impediments to confronting Hezbollah. For years, it has embraced the militia’s motto: “The army, the people, and the resistance.” To this day, LAF orientation manuals teach new recruits that “support for the resistance” (i.e., Hezbollah) is “a legitimate right for the Lebanese.” Additionally, given the LAF’s cross-sectarian composition and infiltration by Hezbollah supporters, discipline and cohesion could be an issue during such a controversial mission.

In the past, the LAF has disregarded government orders it deemed provocative. In 2008, it ignored a directive to dismantle Hezbollah’s dedicated fiber-optic network and remove a Hezbollah-allied LAF officer in charge of security at Beirut airport. Hezbollah responded to these government orders by sending its forces into the streets of Beirut, killing nearly one hundred civilians. During this attack, the LAF was essentially missing in action, taking no steps to secure national institutions.

The Way Forward

When Israel started its ground operations in Lebanon, the LAF “repositioned” north to barracks outside the conflict zone. It will take some time for the fighting to subside and for negotiations on 1701 to resume. In the meantime, the Lebanese government should be deploying the LAF in Lebanon’s cities, since this presence could help preempt any sectarian violence and prevent Hezbollah supporters from intimidating critics—something that is already occurring. The LAF could further help protect civilians by assisting in their evacuation from areas that Israel designates as unsafe. An overt and continuing LAF presence might instill some confidence in an anxious population and signal the state’s reemergence after a very long absence. This could be useful if the government eventually deploys the force to the south to target Hezbollah assets.

Given Lebanon’s endemic political sclerosis and Iran’s entrenched influence, changing the overall trajectory of the country’s politics is a long shot at best. But with Hezbollah diminished, now is a rare moment of opportunity to change the broken status quo in the south, if not Beirut. To do so, the United States and France will need to coordinate closely. Recent reports suggest that after nearly two years without a Lebanese president—in large part due to Hezbollah’s intransigence—parliament may soon be ready to vote on a new chief executive. This would be a welcome development, but not necessarily a game changer for Lebanon, especially if the new president lacks a bold vision for the state.

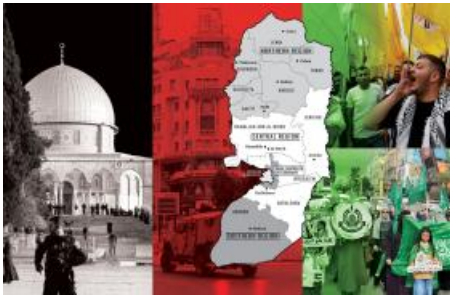
More important, especially in the near term, is to fill the vacuum on the border. As the LAF’s principal foreign funder, Washington should demand that the Lebanese government not only deploy the army to the south, but also actually carry out the mission this time. Indeed, Washington and Paris should condition future funding to Lebanon on full implementation of UNSCR 1701. The French should also focus on corralling international diplomatic and financial support for several efforts: namely, carrying out the LAF mission in south Lebanon after it commences securing Lebanon’s border with Syria, and advancing an initiative to curtail Iranian weapons smuggling to rearm Hezbollah. In any event, U.S. and French officials should make clear that they will not press Israel for a ceasefire until both Beirut and the LAF publicly commit to this UN resolution. Of course, Israel would have **obligations** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/behind-us-plan-prevent-all-out-israel-hezbollah-war>) to fulfill under 1701 as well.

Equally important for the distant hope of a stable and sovereign Lebanon is implementing UNSCR 1559, which mandates the disarmament of militias like Hezbollah. At present, 1559 may seem like a bridge too far, but it should be the ultimate objective—not just for Washington and Paris, but for those in Lebanon who are tired of incessant wars. In the near term, however, the priority must be implementing 1701 and effectively mobilizing the LAF throughout Lebanon and especially the south.

If Lebanon hopes to curtail Hezbollah dominance and become a true state, now is the time for courageous political elites—historically in limited supply in Lebanon—to step up. The alternative is that Israel will more actively and continuously target Iranian and Hezbollah assets and personnel in south Lebanon, as it has done in Syria since 2013.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics. Previously, he served as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in the Trump administration. ❖

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