



U.S. Diplomacy Won't Deter Hezbollah

Zac Schildcrout
Policy Analyst

The Biden administration is reportedly attempting to mediate an agreement that would resolve Israel and Lebanon's longstanding land border disputes and deploy the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) along the border, presumably displacing Hezbollah's dangerous presence there. However, there is little reason to believe that, even if such a deal could be reached, it could be enforced or would end continual Hezbollah attacks against Israel. Hezbollah's continued aggression, even after the implementation of the U.S.-mediated October 2022 Israel-Lebanon maritime border agreement, demonstrates that Israeli concessions and restraint in the face of Hezbollah attacks only invite more attacks. And neither Lebanese nor United Nations forces have any track record of restraining Hezbollah. Accordingly, the United States should firmly support Israel's right to militarily compel Hezbollah, particularly its elite Radwan unit, to retreat from the Israel-Lebanon border.

What Happened?

- On January 11, during a visit to Lebanon, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein [said](#), “we need to find a diplomatic solution that will allow for the Lebanese people to return to their homes in south Lebanon ... as the people of Israel need to be able to return to their homes in their north.” He also said, “we’re living in a crisis moment where we would like to see a diplomatic solution and I believe that both sides prefer a diplomatic solution.”
 - » *The Washington Post* [reported](#) on January 7 that the “near-term goal” of Hochstein’s visit “is to develop a process to start negotiating a land demarcation agreement that could delineate where and how the two sides deploy forces along the border in an effort to stabilize the situation.” Hochstein mediated the October 2022 Israel-Lebanon maritime border delineation [agreement](#).
 - » The report also cited two unnamed people familiar with the situation who said that U.S. and French officials are discussing a proposal with the Lebanese government to implement its control of areas of the Lebanon-Israel border, as opposed to Hezbollah.
- On January 4, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [told](#) Hochstein that while Israel prefers diplomacy to resolve tensions, there’s “a short window of time” for it to succeed, and “we will not tolerate the threats posed by Hezbollah and we will ensure the security of our citizens.”
 - » On December 23, Israeli Government Spokesman Eylon Levy [wrote](#) on X, “UN Security Council Resolution [UNSCR] 1701 must be enforced, pushing Hezbollah away from the border. Unless and until a satisfactory diplomatic solution is implemented, we will continue making preparations to repel the threat that has displaced 80,000 Israelis.”
 - » *The Jerusalem Post* [reported](#) on December 24, citing Israeli media, that “thousands of Hezbollah operatives from different branches of [its] armed wing were ... repositioned further away from Israeli territory, in addition to [Hezbollah’s] elite Radwan forces.” The outlet also reported that Israeli defense officials told the Israeli outlet *Walla!* that “they

believe the withdrawal was carried out with the intention of limiting the number of casualties among the Radwan special forces.”

Why Is It Important?

- The Biden administration believes that resolving longstanding land border disputes between Israel and Lebanon will contribute to calm between Hezbollah and Israel. This mirrors the administration’s [view](#) that the October 2022 Israel-Lebanon maritime border deal “[set] the stage for a more stable and prosperous region.” However, urging Israeli restraint and mediating deals involving Israeli concessions to Lebanon might convince Hezbollah that its aggression reaps rewards, incentivizing more aggression, as the maritime deal [did](#). Furthermore, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) has demonstrated that it either cannot or will not counter Hezbollah, rendering permanent LAF enforcement of a Hezbollah withdrawal from the border unlikely.
- Since Hamas’s October 7 massacre in Israel, Hezbollah and other terrorists in Lebanon have launched near-daily [attacks](#) against Israel.
 - » The threat of these Hezbollah projectile attacks and the possibility of an invasion by Hezbollah’s Radwan unit—which has [trained](#) to invade Israel—forced [roughly](#) 80,000 Israelis to flee their homes near Israel’s northern border.
 - » Permanently and verifiably pushing Hezbollah, particularly its Radwan units, away from the border as UNSCR 1701 requires is essential for restoring security to Israel’s north and enabling the area’s residents to return to their homes safely.
 - » The December 24 *Jerusalem Post* [report](#) noting that Israeli officials believe Hezbollah forces are retreating from the border due to fear of further casualties suggests that it is chiefly Israeli military force, not diplomacy and subsequent Israeli concessions, that deters Hezbollah. Accordingly, U.S. [statements](#) that urge Israeli restraint are likely to invite [more](#) attacks by the terror group.
 - » On January 8, Israel [assassinated](#) Radwan commander Wissam al-Tawil, highlighting Israel’s sense of urgency to degrade the acute threat that the unit poses to Israeli citizens.
- The Biden administration is trying to address the Hezbollah threat by negotiating a deal to resolve land border disputes between Israel and Lebanon that stem largely from the UN-delineated “Blue Line” between the two countries. The UN established the line after Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanese territory in 2000 after roughly two decades of war against Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) terrorists.
 - » The United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon’s (UNIFIL) Head of Mission and Force Commander Major General Stefano Del Col has [described](#) the Blue Line as “not a border, but a ‘line of withdrawal.’”
 - » UNSCR 1701, which ended the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, [calls for](#) “full respect for the Blue Line by both parties,” as well as only the presence of Lebanese government and UNIFIL forces south of Lebanon’s Litani River and “the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that ... there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State.”
 - » In addition to the particularly fraught areas of Shebaa Farms and Ghajar, the Israel-based Alma Research and Education Center has [identified](#) 13 areas along the Blue Line claimed by Lebanon.

- Compared to disagreements over their maritime border, which involved [four](#) potential boundary lines, the land border dispute between Israel and Hezbollah is significantly more complex.

ISRAEL-LEBANON - LAND TERRITORIAL DISPUTE



Source: [Alma Research and Education Center](#)

- Though the Biden administration views resolving the border disputes as important for mitigating tensions, deals negotiated under Hezbollah fire—as the October 2022 maritime deal was—will convince the group that its aggression is beneficial, inviting more attacks.
 - » Hezbollah [launched](#) three drones toward Israeli energy infrastructure in the Mediterranean Sea in July 2022. After finalization of the maritime deal in October 2022, Hezbollah’s aggression continued, including via a March 2023 roadside [bombing](#) in Israel that wounded one civilian and the group’s likely approval of a Hamas rocket [barrage](#) against Israel in April.
 - » Nasrallah [justified](#) repeated attacks against Israel during a July 2023 speech, asserting that “what we did with the oil, gas and maritime border delineation, today also, through complementarity and cooperation between the state and the resistance and with support from the Lebanese people and the political forces in Lebanon, we can recover our occupied land in the town of Ghajar.”
 - Such rhetoric less than a year after the maritime deal demonstrates that Hezbollah is unlikely to be mollified by future U.S.-led negotiations between Israel and Lebanon and will continue pressing its advantage to wrest further Israeli concessions.
 - On January 5, Nasrallah [said](#), “we now have an opportunity to return to us Lebanese territories that Israel took over, such as Shebaa Farms, thanks to our standing on the side of Gaza and its people, but any talk about this should only happen after the end of the war on Gaza, and this is our official position.”

- Furthermore, given the failure of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and UNIFIL to enforce the provisions of UNSCR 1701 since 2006, including the disarmament of non-state Lebanese groups, it remains unclear how a future U.S.-mediated agreement to replace Hezbollah presence with LAF forces along the border would keep Hezbollah fighters from redeploying there at a time of their choosing.
 - » As JINSA noted in its 2018 [report](#), “Israel’s Next Northern War: Operational and Legal Challenges,” the LAF has previously deployed alongside Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. In 2017, then-Lebanese President Michel Aoun said, “as long as the Lebanese military lacks the power to stand up to Israel, [Hezbollah’s] arms are essential, in that they complement the actions of the army and do not contradict them. They are a major part of Lebanon’s defense.”

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should [assert](#) that there is “[no daylight](#)” between it and Israel and that it supports Israel’s military efforts to degrade Hezbollah’s threat and compel its full retreat from the border.
- The United States should repeatedly [stress](#) in international organizations such as the UN that UN forces and the LAF have failed to enforce UNSCR 1701 and should change course by taking steps to enforce the resolution.
 - » In addition, the United States should propose a UN Security Council resolution that grants the LAF and UNIFIL a greater mandate to push Hezbollah out of southern Lebanon and that endorses Israel’s right to do so militarily.
 - » Concurrently, the United States should demand that the LAF and UNIFIL fully enforce UNSCR 1701 before any negotiations toward a final border agreement can begin.
- To avoid rewarding Hezbollah’s aggression, the United States should [eschew](#) pressuring Israel to accept an agreement with Lebanon that restrains Israel’s ability to strike the terror group in Lebanon or Syria.
- To enhance Israel’s ability to defend itself against threats from Hezbollah, the United States should [hasten](#) deliveries to Israel of precision-guided munitions (PGMs), tank shells, artillery, and other munitions, as well as sufficient Iron Dome, David’s Sling, and Arrow air defense batteries and interceptors.