

Suppressing Iran's Ring of Fire in Lebanon

How to Ensure a Ceasefire Protects Israel, Secures Lebanon, and Weakens Iran





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I. Executive Summary

For 18 years, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 (UNSCR 1701) has been a hollow shell. Rather than enforcing the demilitarization of Hezbollah and ensuring the security of the Israel-Lebanon border, as required by UNSCR 1701, the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) and United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon's (UNIFIL) negligence enabled the terror group's vast military buildup and its current war of aggression against Israel. Now, Israel's military successes against the Iran-backed terror group have created a window of opportunity to establish a new security approach to Lebanon, one that ensures Hezbollah cannot regain strength, protects Lebanese and Israelis alike, and, perhaps permanently, weakens Iran's regional terror network.

But UNSCR 1701 cannot serve as the basis for the post-10/7 security environment in Lebanon without significant changes. Leaked details of a proposed ceasefire deal being negotiated by the United States do not go far enough in addressing the resolution's lack of enforcement and narrow focus on southern Lebanon. Any acceptable deal must both guarantee Israel's freedom of action against Hezbollah moving forward and hold the LAF and UNIFIL accountable, through robust oversight and reforms, to ensure Hezbollah continues to be degraded and that Lebanon is hermetically sealed from Iranian weapons aimed at resuscitating its terror proxy. These recommendations are informed largely by the firsthand knowledge of this paper's co-author, who served for five years as head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) International Cooperation Division and, in that capacity, gained extensive insights about UNIFIL and the LAF.

Instituted after the 2006 Second Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah, UNSCR 1701 entrusted the LAF and UNIFIL with addressing the Hezbollah threat, but to tragically futile effect. Despite UNSCR 1701's injunction that Hezbollah be disarmed and UNIFIL's presence intended to accomplish that goal, Hezbollah only grew in strength over the subsequent nearly two decades. It embedded itself in the civilian infrastructure of southern Lebanon, building a vast terror infrastructure alongside the Israeli border. It gained battlefield experience and competence fighting on behalf of Bashar al-Assad in Syria's civil war, which it translated into the preparation of its Radwan forces for an invasion of Israel. And, with Iranian support, it vastly expanded its arsenal with advanced guided projectiles, combat drones, and a stockpile of roughly 150,000 rockets and missiles.

Yet, prior to Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack, although Israel found this situation problematic, under pressure from the international community it refrained from striking Hezbollah head-on, instead entrusting UNIFIL and the LAF with mitigating the Hezbollah threat. For almost 20 years, a tenuous status quo prevailed, keeping tensions at a low simmer and convincing many in Israel that Hezbollah was deterred. Though Israel, concerned by Hezbollah's growing capabilities, spent nearly a decade conducting periodic strikes on Hezbollah's funding and arms transfer network in Syria, it largely avoided Hezbollah targets inside Lebanon over fears that the international community would use uncharitable interpretations of UNSCR 1701 to accuse Israel of aggression and harm its global legitimacy.

All that changed the day after Hamas's October 7 massacre. On October 8, 2023, Hezbollah opened a second front against Israel, shattering the tense, but largely quiet, post-2006 paradigm. Although the terror group did not fully enter the conflict, it blanketed northern Israel with a steady barrage intended to remain below the threshold of a major Israeli retaliation. Israel rushed troops to reinforce its border

against a potential Hezbollah ground incursion and sought to deter its rocket launches with airstrikes across southern Lebanon that killed well over 400 Hezbollah operatives in a protracted tit-for-tat campaign.¹ Despite this, for over 11 months, the near daily exchange of fire across Israel's northern border continued, emptying nearby towns and villages as some 80,000 Israelis fled their homes.

With no sign of Hezbollah's aggression abating, in September 2024 Israel significantly raised the temperature on the Iran-backed terror group. Over the course of two weeks, it remotely detonated Hezbollah electronics, assassinated Hezbollah's longtime leader, Hassan Nasrallah, increased the tempo and objectives of its airstrikes, and initiated a ground campaign into Lebanon to dismantle Hezbollah's infrastructure. In the subsequent weeks, Israel hit over 10,000 Hezbollah targets throughout Lebanon, killed hundreds more fighters and commanders, and eliminated as much as 80 percent of the terror group's rocket and missile arsenal.

Israel's stunningly decisive tactical success against Hezbollah led Israel's defense minister to declare Hezbollah militarily defeated in early November 2024.² This achievement may soon usher in a new phase of the war. Israel, the United States, and their international partners, as never before, have the opportunity to shape future security conditions by capitalizing on Israeli military achievements to coerce Hezbollah into a ceasefire deal and, with broader strategic focus on Lebanon's future, help craft conditions that would reduce the possibility of Hezbollah's resurgence.

This unique window also offers the chance to undercut, perhaps permanently, Iran's "ring of fire" strategy to encircle Israel with terror proxies. For decades, Iran sought—with significant success—to encircle Israel and deter it from taking action against the Iranian regime's nuclear program by forcing it to reckon with the prospect of a major Hezbollah reprisal. Israel's robust response to the October 7 attack over the past 13 months has brought this strategy to a standstill, with Hamas degraded almost to the point of extinction, Hezbollah unrecognizably weak and on its back heels, and the Yemen-based Houthis capable only of sporadic and ineffective long-range projectile attacks against Israel. Ensuring that Iran cannot rebuild Hezbollah would simultaneously deprive the regime of a critical component of its power projection capabilities and remove a barrier to exerting more pressure against Tehran.

As part of this strategic transformation, Israel and the United States cannot return to the inadequate security arrangements that allowed Hezbollah's growth over the last two decades. The current war must force a reckoning with the failures of the international community to provide even the semblance of a counterweight to Hezbollah. UNIFIL in particular has proven, at best, glaringly ineffective. For years, the so-called peacekeeping force has ignored repeated Israeli requests for it to act on concrete intelligence of Hezbollah activity. The current war has further exposed UNIFIL's endemic futility, with Hezbollah serially making a mockery of UNIFIL by repeatedly firing projectiles at Israel from within 300 meters of UNIFIL facilities. Increasingly, UNIFIL only poses an obstacle to Israel's freedom of action in its current campaign against Hezbollah. Likewise, LAF's risk aversion has rendered it a poor bulwark against Hezbollah aggression.

With Israel having accomplished its primary military objectives in Lebanon, the time is opportune for a ceasefire. But it must be based on sound principles that create the foundations for building actual security in Lebanon. So far, this does not seem to be the case.

The outlines of a deal United States is currently negotiating were leaked on October 30.³ The proposed deal's details involve a phased approach over a 60-day period following the cessation of hostilities, involving several core aspects:

- Immediately upon the ceasefire going into effect:
 - » Israel and Lebanon implementing a full cessation of hostilities, after which Hezbollah and all other armed groups in Lebanon will refrain from conducting operations against Israel;
 - » Israel avoiding “any offensive military operations” against “Lebanese targets” but with Israel and Lebanon retaining the right to exercise their “inherent right of self-defense;”
 - » UNIFIL and the LAF being the only armed groups deployed south of a demarcated line specified only in Annex A, which was not among the leaked files; and
 - » Lebanon dismantling terror infrastructure south of the Annex A line.
- Within 7 days of the ceasefire going into effect:
 - » The IDF withdrawing from Lebanon “in a phased manner” and the LAF deploying to an area identified in Annex A, all to be facilitated by the tripartite mechanism (UNIFIL, Lebanon, and Israel) in coordination with the United States; and
 - » UNIFIL and LAF being the only armed groups deployed south of the Annex A line.
- Within 60 days of the ceasefire going into effect:
 - » Lebanon increasing the number of LAF troops in southern Lebanon;
 - » Lebanon dismantling and confiscating all military assets and infrastructure of non-state actors “south of the line in Annex A;” and
 - » Israel, Lebanon, and the United States establishing an international monitoring and enforcement mechanism (IMEM) to monitor the ceasefire’s implementation, with Israel and Lebanon reporting violations of the deal to the IMEM and UNIFIL.
- At the conclusion of the 60-day implementation period:
 - » IMEM assessing progress on the deal’s implementation to be followed by indirect Israel-Lebanon border negotiations facilitated by the United States, the United Nations, and other unspecified actors.
- At an unspecified time following the ceasefire going into effect:
 - » The LAF deploying its forces to all of Lebanon’s land borders, airports, and seaports, and gradually deploying 10,000 soldiers to southern Lebanon.

While promising at the theoretical level, the deal replicates too many past mistakes. Both the deal and UNSCR 1701’s language prohibiting “offensive” Israeli operations would constrain Israel and embolden Hezbollah and Iran. Further constraints are found in the leaked side letter between the United States and Israel, which suggests that Israel would have to consult the United States prior to any strike, potentially creating unnecessary friction in the bilateral relationship.

Moreover, the proposed deal's focus on southern Lebanon as the sole area for demilitarization and any Israeli defensive action risks repeating the core flaw of geographic boundedness. UNSCR 1701's narrow focus on southern Lebanon enabled Hezbollah's arms pipeline from Syria and its vast military buildup across Lebanon, with devastating consequences. Pushing Hezbollah back a mere 5 to 10 kilometers to an arbitrary line, be it the Litani River or any other such demarcation, will no longer suffice, as Hezbollah must at long last be disarmed and defanged across Lebanon.

In addition, any oversight mechanism will only have a chance of working if the United States takes a leadership role complemented by Israeli operations to strike threats as necessary. UNIFIL's deeply flawed implementation and serial aversion to force have rendered it worse than useless, now posing an obstacle to Israel's freedom of action. The proposed U.S.-led oversight mechanism must strenuously avoid falling into the same pattern.

To seize the opportunity that has been created in Lebanon, and regionally, by Israel's significant weakening of Hezbollah, any ceasefire deal should unambiguously include:

- **Support for Israel's Freedom of Action**

Any ceasefire deal must explicitly and unambiguously convey Israel's freedom of action whenever and wherever in Lebanon. Israel must be able to act freely to neutralize threats and interdict inbound weapons. Part of the deal's success will hinge on consistent U.S. rhetorical backing of Israel's continued legitimate right to self-defense against Hezbollah threats.

- **UNIFIL Overhaul**

Due to UNIFIL's inability to restrain Hezbollah, a new U.S.-led effort is needed to reform the peacekeeping force through substantial reforms to UNIFIL's mandate—including reforming its reporting and aversion to enforcement on "private property"—in the lead-up to its next renewal in August 2025. To push through these changes, the United States should exercise leverage over whichever country holds UNIFIL's rotating chair and threaten to withhold some portion of U.S. funding to the United Nations.

- **Enhanced Dialogue Channels**

The United States should reform the long-rudderless and opaque tripartite mechanism (Israel, Lebanon, and UNIFIL) by pressuring UNIFIL and Lebanon to adopt fixed protocols for regular meetings and require snap meetings on an ad hoc basis. Future tripartite meetings should include outside state observers—including the United States—and published directives to bring accountability to the institutionally risk-averse and inertia-driven LAF and UNIFIL.

- **Balance Between Strengthening and Reforming the LAF**

It is highly unrealistic to expect that the LAF will whip into shape absent external—namely U.S.—pressures to reform. A set portion of future U.S. military aid to Lebanon should be conditioned on the LAF terminating any Hezbollah cooperation, facilitating UNIFIL entry into private property, hermetically sealing Lebanon from Iranian arms, and diversifying its geographic and sectarian recruitment to hedge against Hezbollah infiltration.

- **Building an Oversight Team**

Sustained, engaged, and tough U.S. leadership will be required to prevent IMEM from devolving into an ineffective bureaucratic layer that replicates UNIFIL's inefficiency. This should involve regular U.S.-led IMEM briefings with the relevant parties—namely Israel, Lebanon, and UNIFIL. The United States should also stand up a joint operations center to oversee LAF and UNIFIL operations and provide operational insights, including by installing cameras and sensors on UNIFIL and LAF personnel and facilities.

- **Continue Changing Iran's Strategic Calculus**

The United States must work in parallel with Israel to communicate unequivocally to Iran that it will face dire consequences for trying to undermine or sabotage a ceasefire deal and make good on its word.

II. Where We Are: From Threat to Opportunity

Israel's neighbor to the north for the past 18 years has not been the Republic of Lebanon but a large quasi-state in southern Lebanon de facto governed by Hezbollah. The Iran-backed terror group, committed to Israel's destruction, has benefited handsomely from Iranian largess and arms to become the world's best-armed non-state actor. Hezbollah exploited the international community's laxity to build out its terror infrastructure, including terror compounds in some cases just meters from Israeli villages, and stockpile a fearsome arsenal of over 150,000 mortars, rockets, missiles, and drones, some of them precision-guided, in homes, tunnels, and warehouses throughout Lebanon.

On October 8, 2023, a day after Hamas's brutal attack, Hezbollah unleashed a portion of this war machine against Israel, with the looming threat of an even worse attack. As some 80,000 Israelis evacuated their homes to avoid Hezbollah's bombardment, Israel initiated an unprecedented wide-ranging campaign to degrade Hezbollah's capabilities and restore security to its northern border. After nearly a year of tit-for-tat exchanges had failed to silence Hezbollah's guns, Israel launched a major air and ground campaign into Lebanon in September 2024. Now, with Israel's major military objectives accomplished and Hezbollah on the backfoot, the time is right to pursue a ceasefire deal. Indeed, the United States and other international actors have already been negotiating an agreement, the basic parameters of have been leaked publicly.

A. Hezbollah Crosses the Rubicon

The day after Hamas's October 7, 2023 massacre, Hezbollah entered the fray, opening a second front against Israel with roughly 17,400 projectiles fired to date.

In circumstances strikingly similar to the situation on the Gaza border preceding the October 7 massacre, on October 8, Hezbollah's sprawling tunnel network, attempted incursions into Israel, short-range rockets, and special forces unit all presented unacceptable threats to Israeli towns, some of which existed mere feet from the Israel-Lebanon border. Hezbollah had constructed some 32 terror

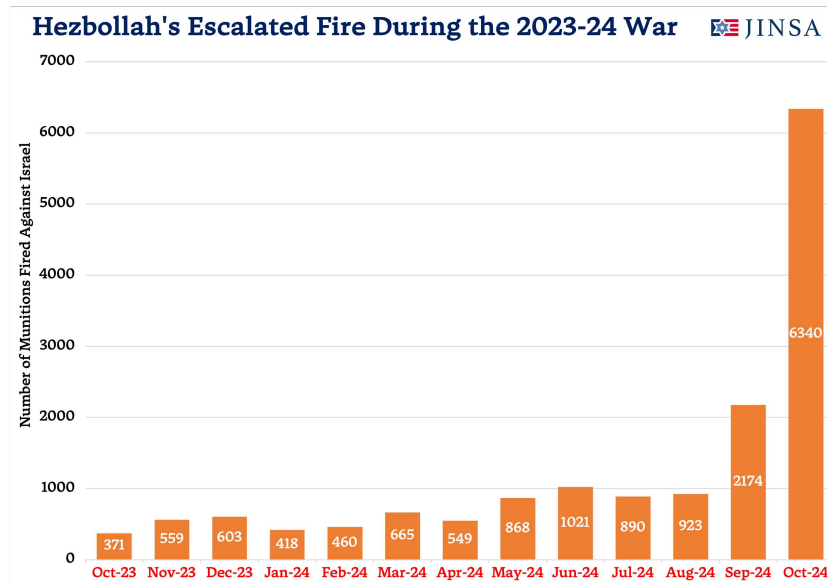
compounds along the Lebanon-Israel border, some within mere meters of now-evacuated Israeli border towns.⁴ Hezbollah's over 3,000-strong Radwan special forces were deployed on the border on October 7 to enact, but ultimately did not execute, its attack—likely due to the IDF drastically increasing its force posture along its northern border. IDF officials later released maps and documents detailing Hezbollah's mass invasion plan, which, in the assessment of the paper's authors, could have yielded carnage on a greater scale than Hamas's October 7 massacre.⁵

Hezbollah's Front-Line Compounds Before 10/7



By crossing the Rubicon and attacking Israel directly, Hezbollah announced the effective end of UNSCR 1701. Hezbollah's aggression forced some 80,000 Israelis to flee their homes, killed dozens of Israelis, and rendered much of northern Israel uninhabitable. As JINSA's Randi & Charles Wax Senior Fellow John Hannah noted, this unprecedented, life-shattering, and ongoing situation is akin, in the American context, to "two to three million people having to evacuate from [near] our southern border, emptying out all of San Diego, El Paso" due to security threats.⁶

Over the next 11 or so months, Hezbollah assailed Israel as never before, launching numerous rockets, missiles, and drones often numbering in the hundreds on a single given day. This unprecedented assault on Israelis' way of life, including near-constant sirens, also included tragic consequences—including the deaths of some 45 civilians and 31 soldiers.⁷ Hezbollah steadily increased its attacks on Israel throughout the war, punctuated by tragic high-profile incidents including the death of roughly a dozen Druze children playing soccer in the Golan Heights and a Hezbollah drone attack killing four Israeli soldiers in their base's dining hall.⁸ Israel's military bases, strategic sites, and defense industry also, for the first time in the country's history, routinely came under threat from sustained Hezbollah missile and drone attacks.



Source: JINSA's [Iran Projectile Tracker](#)

B. Operation Northern Arrows

No longer willing to tolerate Hezbollah's aggression and the threat of an October 7-style attack on its north, in September 2024 Israel launched an unprecedented campaign against Hezbollah as part of its broader fight against Iran's proxies. While simultaneously systematically degrading Hamas across Gaza, Israel shook off years of reluctance to strike Hezbollah targets in Lebanon, conducting thousands of strikes against Hezbollah's sprawling terror infrastructure across Lebanon and significantly degrading Hezbollah's munition stockpiles and command-and-control structure.

Israel achieved stunning success in its campaign, decimating Hezbollah's communications by remotely detonating thousands of Hezbollah operatives' beepers simultaneously and replicated its success days later by remotely exploding Hezbollah walkie-talkies. It also eliminated virtually all of Hezbollah's top brass, including its longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah, Nasrallah's successor, and numerous other senior Hezbollah operatives. Throughout the war, Israel has eliminated over 1,250 Hezbollah operatives, including seven commanders holding a rank equal to brigadier general, 21 commanders holding a rank corresponding to a general, and more than 25 lower-level commanders.⁹

With Hezbollah systematically embedded in Lebanon's southern villages, including a sprawling tunnel network, an air campaign would not suffice to degrade Hezbollah and bring safety back to Israel's north. On September 23, Israel initiated an offensive operation, "Operation Northern Arrows," including a ground campaign involving Israeli forces entering Lebanon to target Hezbollah terror compounds and weapon depots across southern Lebanon, complemented by airstrikes and special operation raids throughout Lebanon and strikes on dozens of targets in Syria. Aided by well over a decade of training for Lebanon's mountainous terrain and collecting intelligence on Hezbollah tactics, techniques, and procedures, Israel executed a combined-arms campaign to great effect. By the end of October, Israel's then-Defense Minister Yoav Gallant estimated that Israel's operations had eliminated some 80 percent of Hezbollah's rocket and missile arsenal.¹⁰

C. Ceasefire Negotiations

Israel's steady degradation of Hezbollah has occurred in parallel with Western-brokered negotiations for a ceasefire deal, the success of which has been made all the more likely by Israel's military achievements. Beginning in February 2024, separate French and U.S. efforts have proceeded fitfully, yielding little progress. However, Israel's rapid decapitation and degradation of Hezbollah provides considerable leverage, putting negotiators in a far stronger position to coerce Hezbollah into accepting a deal that satisfies Israel's security needs.

Following abundant media reports and pundit speculation about a deal's substance, on October 30, Israel's public broadcaster *Kan* published a leaked draft of the ceasefire deal, which also included a side letter between the United States and Israel and the framework for the creation of an international mechanism to oversee the deal's enforcement.¹¹ The leaked deal's provisions call for Israel and Lebanon to agree a ceasefire under the following terms:

- The full cessation of hostilities at a specified date and time, to include restrictions on Hezbollah attacks or Israeli "offensive military operations against Lebanese targets" followed by a 60-day period for the ceasefire deal's provisions to be implemented;
- The IDF withdrawing its troops from Lebanon within seven days in a "phased manner" and the LAF deploying to the south of an unspecified line delineated in an unreleased annex, Annex A, with assistance from the UNIFIL/Lebanon/Israel tripartite mechanism and the United States;
- Lebanon and Israel both retaining the ability to exercise an "inherent right of self-defense;"
- The LAF, after an unspecified time, deploying its forces to all of Lebanon's land borders, airports, and seaports, and preventing unauthorized arms from entering Lebanon;
- The LAF preventing non-state actors' supply and production of any weapons within Lebanon and dismantling any non-state actors' infrastructure involved in weapons manufacturing;
- Israel and Lebanon committing to UNSCR 1701's full implementation;
- The LAF being the sole armed group, aside from UNIFIL, south of the "Annex A," and dismantling and confiscating military assets and infrastructure possessed by non-state actors south of the "Annex A" line; and
- During the 60-day implementation period, the United States, Israel, and Lebanon establishing an international monitoring and enforcement mechanism (IMEM) to monitor the ceasefire's implementation, with Israel and Lebanon reporting violations of the deal to IMEM and UNIFIL, and IMEM either recommending or itself taking action—the leaked text leaves open both options—to address violations;
- Following the 60-day implementation period:
 - » The LAF confiscating all non-state military assets and infrastructure south of an unspecified line in southern Lebanon and increasing the number of its troops in southern Lebanon;

- » The United States working with countries in the Military Technical Committee for Lebanon (MTC4L)—Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom, in addition to the United States—to ensure the LAF deploys 10,000 soldiers to southern Lebanon, and to work with the international community to improve the LAF’s capabilities; and
- » IMEM evaluating progress on the deal’s implementation, and Israel and Lebanon starting indirect negotiations on UNSCR 1701 implementation and resolving border disputes concerning the Israel-Lebanon border.
- In addition to the ceasefire deal itself, the leaked documents include:
 - » A document detailing the proposed workings of IMEM, including:
 - Its membership—the United States, MTC4L countries, UNIFIL, UNESCO, and regional countries approved by Israel and Lebanon;
 - Its duties—ensuring deal’s implementation and Israel and Lebanon’s compliance with the full cessation of hostilities; and
 - For Israel and Lebanon to report to IMEM and UNIFIL any violations of the deal, and for IMEM to put in place procedures to recommend for action “by participating members” to verify and enforce compliance with the deal’s provisions.
 - » A side letter between Israel and the United States affirming that:
 - Israel has a right to defend itself via action against “imminent threats” and reiterating U.S. support for Israel working towards implementing UNSCR 1701;
 - The United States expects to chair IMEM, specifically under the leadership of a senior U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) officer and a civilian national security official;
 - The United States and Israel may share sensitive intelligence relating to any violations of the deal, including LAF-Hezbollah links;
 - The U.S. commits to preventing Iran from undermining a deal, but without specifying how; and
 - Affirming Israel’s right to act against Hezbollah if the deal is violated, but only if IMEM and LAF efforts to redress violations are first exhausted and if the United States is first consulted.
 - The side letter specifies that Israel has the right to “act in self-defense against imminent threats” in the Annex A area and outside this area against “developing threats” if Lebanon and IMEM do not first address them.
 - The side letter also specifies that Israeli flights over Lebanon will be for intelligence collection purposes only, and that any Israeli overflights for “defensive military operations against imminent or developing threats ... only be conducted when necessary” and be consistent with the side letter’s provisions.

JINSA Major Provisions of Leaked October 30 Ceasefire Deal Text

Action	Enforcement Responsibilities	Time Frame
Israel and Hezbollah ceasing hostilities; Israel not carrying out “offensive military operations”	N/A	Immediately upon ceasefire taking effect
Israel and Lebanon reiterating commitment to UNSCR 1701	N/A	Immediately upon ceasefire taking effect
Armed groups other than LAF and UNIFIL demilitarizing in southern Lebanon	LAF and UNIFIL	Immediately upon ceasefire taking effect
Prevention of arms being supplied to Lebanon’s non-state actors	Lebanon	Immediately upon ceasefire taking effect
Dismantling of weapons manufacturing sites and terror infrastructure sites in southern Lebanon	LAF (with IMEM role)	During 60-day implementation period
Dismantling of all existing weapons production sites in Lebanon	LAF	During 60-day implementation period
Israel withdrawing from Lebanon	LAF, UNIFIL, Israel, and the United States	Up to seven days from ceasefire taking effect
LAF forces deploying to Lebanon’s border crossings, airports, and seaports	LAF	Unspecified
LAF forces deploying to positions in the “Annex A” area	Lebanon, Israel, UNIFIL, and the United States	Up to seven days from ceasefire taking effect
Lebanon steadily increasing forces in southern Lebanon	LAF, MTC4L, and the United States	During 60-day implementation period
LAF increasing forces in southern Lebanon to 10,000 over time	LAF, MTC4L, and the United States	Unspecified
Establishment of an international monitoring and enforcement mechanism (IMEM)	Israel, Lebanon, and the United States (separate leaked document denotes that IMEM would be led by the United States)	During 60-day implementation period
Assessment of parties’ compliance with deal after which ceasefire becomes permanent	IMEM	At end of 60-day implementation period
Violations being reported to IMEM and UNIFIL	Israel and Lebanon	Immediately upon ceasefire taking effect

Though promising in its broad contours, any deal which broadly returns the security mantle to the LAF and UNIFIL, without explicitly providing Israel unequivocal freedom of action, risks a return to the pre-October 7 status quo of both entities tacitly accepting Hezbollah's terror activity and military buildup.

III. How We Got Here: The Slowly Burning Dynamite Fuse

Hezbollah's war against Israel, waged for over a year now, was enabled by repeated failures to create, sustain, and enforce a basic security mechanism in Lebanon to disarm the Iranian-backed terror group or, at the very least, keep it from gaining strength. Some of the fault lies with the weakness of the Lebanese state and its armed forces, which have failed to stand up to Hezbollah. But the international community also helped light the slowly burning fuse that finally detonated on October 8, 2023. Repeated international agreements, culminating with UNSCR 1701 and instantiated in UNIFIL, were either inadequate, neglected, or both.

A. The Failure of the Lebanese Armed Forces

Though the LAF will inevitably be a key component of any resolution to the current hostilities, its narrow and broadly ineffective approach to Hezbollah should not be permitted to continue. Despite the United States playing an outsized role in helping train, fund, and equip the LAF for close to two decades, these efforts have yielded little success in creating a credible national security force that is able and willing to counter Hezbollah's aggression.

Since 2006, when the LAF was supposedly deployed across southern Lebanon under the provisions of UNSCR 1701 to prevent Hezbollah's continued aggression and military buildup, Hezbollah's arms grew tenfold, including significant quantitative advances in its precision-guided missile and drone arsenals.¹² During that time, and under the nose of the LAF, Hezbollah's military build-up ensued not only in southern Lebanon but across the country. For years, Iranian and Syrian arms flowed into Beirut's Dahiyeh neighborhood, Lebanon's eastern Beqaa Valley region, and through the Beirut international airport and Lebanon's commercial seaports unchecked by the security forces ostensibly charged with keeping Hezbollah at bay.¹³

LAF's inadequate measures against Hezbollah can be attributed to a number of factors, each of which is deserving of U.S. policy attention and has important implications for Lebanon's future.

Lebanon's Sectarian Chessboard

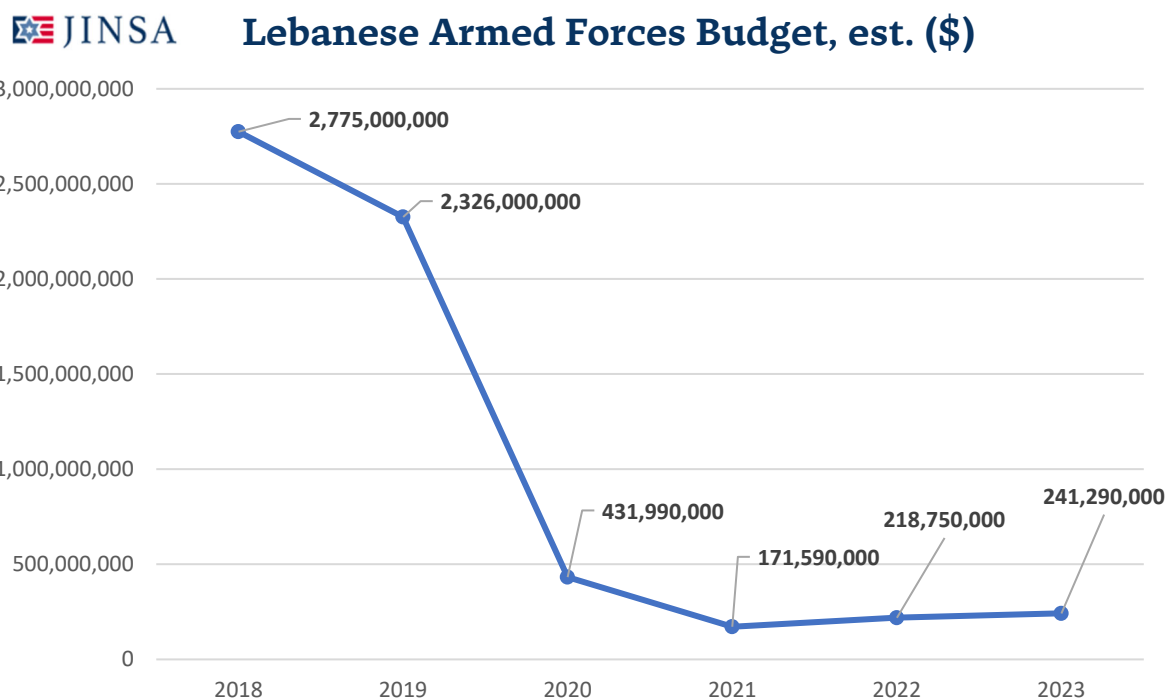
The LAF, being the byproduct of a state with significant sectarian divides, reflects those divisions in the demographic makeup of its soldiers—including their geographic origins. According to estimates, LAF troops are about a third Christian, a third Sunni Muslim and about a third Shi'ite Muslim, with the remainder being Lebanon's Druze minority.¹⁴ Many of the LAF's rank-and-file are Shi'ite soldiers from Hezbollah-dominated Shi'ite areas in southern Lebanon, raising the likelihood that many of them will, at best, have a conflict of interest and, at worst, maintain ties with Hezbollah. Though the two top posts in the LAF—Commander and Chief of Staff—are reserved for a Christian and a Druze, respectively, under the Taif Agreement, Shi'ites have reportedly begun filling many of the LAF's top commander and officer

corps posts in recent years.¹⁵ This dynamic may help explain the laxity with which the LAF has approached Hezbollah in recent years.

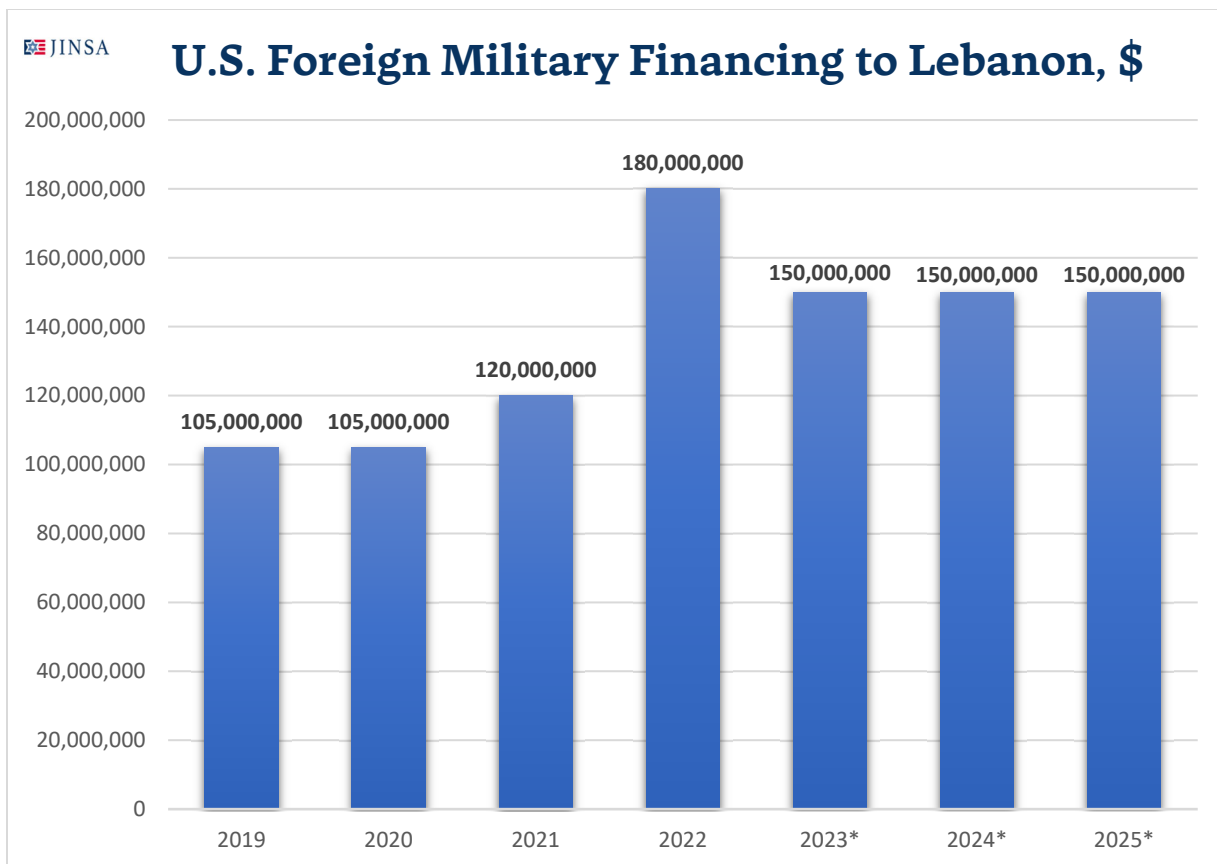
LAF's Capabilities and Will Deficit

As a result of decades of underinvestment and misappropriation, and despite billions in foreign assistance, the Lebanese Armed Forces are neither well-armed nor much of a force. They lack the training, equipment, and manpower—let alone the will—to take on Hezbollah's strength.

Hezbollah's massive covert funding arteries, though currently the focus of an extensive IDF campaign to degrade them, far outpace LAF's modest funding—even with U.S. assistance of over \$3 billion to LAF since 2006.¹⁶



Source: [Defense News](#); [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#)



Source: [Congressional Research Service](#)

* FY2023-FY2025 figures unknown. Displayed figures for those years represent budget requests.

The LAF’s budget has steadily declined in recent years due to a still unfolding economic crisis. Lebanon’s 2023 defense budget was estimated to be roughly \$241 million, just 10 percent of its 2019 budget of an estimated \$2.32 billion.¹⁷ This budgetary shortfall is being made up somewhat by international donors. The United States has provided at least \$510 million in Foreign Ministry Financing in funds to Lebanon since 2019 and over \$100 million in additional security assistance.¹⁸ Though the international community raised roughly \$200 million for the LAF in an October 2024 France-led effort—including large pledges from the United States, France, and Germany—the LAF’s total budget for the coming year is unlikely to exceed \$500 million.¹⁹ By comparison, Hezbollah receives roughly \$800 million annually from its benefactor in Tehran in addition to its other sources of revenue like drug trafficking.²⁰

What little funding the LAF does receive is not translated into military readiness. Lebanon’s defense budget reportedly has been largely turned into a patronage scheme in which the defense budget is allocated primarily to salaries rather than training, arms acquisition, and force buildup.²¹ But, due to the steep drop in Lebanon’s defense budget, even salaries are not being paid, leading an estimated 7,000 LAF personnel to resign between 2019 and May 2024.²² To stave off mass resignation, the Lebanese government has resorted to allowing troops to simultaneously work other jobs.²³ The result is that the LAF, with fewer than 80,000 troops, many of whom are not in combat units, is now outnumbered by Hezbollah’s over 90,000 terror operatives.²⁴

Though the United States has helped build up the LAF to a significant degree over the past decade-and-a-half, including wide-ranging arms sales and training, there is still a long way to go to ensure LAF's military readiness as a partner against Hezbollah.²⁵ The LAF lacks advanced air-defense systems and has just five operational jet fighters, a rudimentary missile arsenal, and just one armored regiment.²⁶

Though additional LAF soldiers—likely in excess of the 10,000-figure proposed under the U.S.-brokered draft ceasefire—will need to be deployed to southern Lebanon over time, a sheer mass of soldiers lacking the will or writ to counter Hezbollah will not succeed in restoring security to Israel's north. Quality and will, not sheer quantity, will be needed to ensure LAF's compliance with any ceasefire deal.

LAF's Leadership Deficit

Though capabilities remain an issue for the Lebanese military, a more formidable and endemic obstacle to any ceasefire deal is that the LAF is subjected to the will of Lebanon's civilian leadership—itsself largely beholden to Hezbollah interests.

Hezbollah has for years positioned itself as a formidable force in Lebanese politics. It holds seats in the Lebanese parliament, and current Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri is a member of Hezbollah-aligned Amal movement. Hezbollah operatives currently control Lebanon's Ministries of Labor and Public Works.²⁷ In a closed United Nations briefing soon after the outbreak of the war, Lebanon's Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdallah Bou Habib admitted that Lebanon as a country had been taken hostage by Hezbollah and forced to bend to its will.²⁸ Lebanese Member of Parliament Sami Gemayel publicly stated in July that "Lebanon has been hijacked ... by Hezbollah and Iran."²⁹

Hezbollah's influence extends over Lebanon's military and security apparatus as well. For years, Hezbollah reportedly pushed for specific appointments at senior levels of the LAF.³⁰ Some senior members of LAF's intelligence service have been exposed as having close ties to Hezbollah, and other senior officers in the LAF have been found to be moonlighting as Hezbollah operatives.³¹ Additionally, in 2008, Hezbollah forced a governmental crisis by forcibly taking over much of Beirut in response to a government effort to dismiss the Hezbollah-linked head of airport security.³² The crisis was resolved by the formation of a new government structure under which Hezbollah and its political allies had veto rights over governmental policy, presumably including over military affairs.³³

Communication Breakdowns

The tripartite mechanism between Israel, Lebanon, and UNIFIL has consistently fallen short of achieving its objectives of resolving disputes between the parties and addressing violations of UNSCR 1701. The co-author, who participated in numerous tripartite meetings over the course of five years in his professional capacity, found that they typically lacked clear operational directives, rarely resulted in clear conclusions, and often did not yield a clear consensus regarding how to resolve UNSCR 1701 violations or address instances of Hezbollah terror activity.

Moreover, although the co-author routinely presented detailed evidence of Hezbollah's violations of UNSCR 1701, including photographic documentation and specific geographical information, it seldom spurred action by either UNIFIL or the LAF. As a result, the lack of any party acting on Israel's intelligence enabled Hezbollah to openly militarize parts of southern Lebanon with impunity. Examples of concrete intelligence not being acted upon by either UNIFIL or the LAF, and witnessed firsthand by the co-author,

included Hezbollah gradually constructing a terror compound on the Israel-Lebanon border between April and September 2022; Hezbollah operatives briefly crossing the Blue Line in early 2023; Hezbollah harassing Israeli residents with lasers in 2022 and 2023; and Hezbollah conducting activity near the Israeli border under the false pretenses of a fake environmental group. The tripartite mechanism also lacks transparency and accountability, as meeting notes are not publicized.

The only exception to this pattern of failure is when Israeli efforts to communicate directly with the LAF were aided by U.S. involvement, with the LAF likely fearing the United States tugging on its military aid purse strings.³⁴

B. The Failure of International Efforts

For decades, under significant international pressure, Israel has reluctantly largely relied on international agreements, ostensibly enforced by UNIFIL, to secure its homeland from Hezbollah's aggression—to disastrous effect.

Taif Agreement of 1989

In 1989, the Saudi-brokered Taif Agreement, in which Israel was not involved, formally ended Lebanon's decade-and-a-half sectarian civil war. It required the "disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias ... within a period of 6 months," which also extended to expelling Syrian military forces from Lebanon. But, lacking enforcement, like other international agreements, it did nothing to end, or even reduce, the presence of armed groups in Lebanon.³⁵

UN Security Council Resolutions

Dating back decades, successive UN Security Council resolutions, supposedly enforced by UNIFIL, have not only failed to bring peace to Lebanon but, worse yet, provided the outside world with the illusion of a security mechanism in southern Lebanon to complement the beleaguered LAF, relieving external actors of any duty to intervene.

UNSCRs 425 and 426:

Following Israel's 1978 offensive into Lebanon, "Operation Litani," to remove Palestinian terror groups from near the Israeli border, the United Nations Security Council passed resolutions 425 and 426, establishing UNIFIL to halt the hostilities. The Security Council provided UNIFIL with the mandate of "confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces, restoring international peace and security and assisting the Government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area, the force to be composed of personnel drawn from Member States."³⁶ Since then, UNIFIL's mandate has been renewed on an annual basis.

UNSCR 1559:

The United Nations Security Council adopted the U.S.-sponsored UNSCR 1559 in September 2004 amid growing U.S. discontent with the decades-long meddling of the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah axis in internal Lebanese affairs. UNSCR 1559, in similar language to that of the Taif Agreement, called for "all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon," the "extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory," and the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese

militias.”³⁷ Far from defanging Hezbollah, UNIFIL’s lax enforcement of UNSCR 1559 only precipitated a major conflict between Israel and Hezbollah less than two years later.

UNSCR 1680:

Though largely geared at getting Syria to limit its destructive reach inside Lebanon, UNSCR 1680—passed in May 2006—reiterated the Security Council’s “call for the full implementation of all requirements of [UNSCR] 1559” and called for “further efforts to disband and disarm all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias and to restore fully the Lebanese Government’s control over all Lebanese territory.”³⁸ Ironically, and tragically, the resolution presaged the Second Lebanon War by mere weeks. In July 2006, Hezbollah killed three Israeli soldiers and kidnapped others in a cross-border raid which sparked a 34-day war. The 2006 Second Lebanon War saw mixed Israeli results, with a checkered Israeli tactical performance yielding some successes but largely failing to degrade Hezbollah’s weapons arsenal and resulting in over 100 IDF casualties. The war resulted in a strategic stalemate and an IDF withdrawal from Lebanon under U.S. and international pressure, leading to the passage of UNSCR 1701.

UNSCR 1701:

Responding to a U.S.-led push for genuine robust enforcement of southern Lebanon’s demilitarization, the United Nations Security Council passed UNSCR 1701 calling for Hezbollah and all other armed groups in Lebanon to disarm—with LAF and UNIFIL being the only military active presence in southern Lebanon to enforce 1701’s provisions.³⁹ It also gave UNIFIL an increase in force strength and an enhanced mandate to help ensure Lebanese territory south of the Litani River is “free of armed personnel, assets and weapons.”⁴⁰

UNIFIL’s expanded mandate also included monitoring the cessation of hostilities, supporting the LAF’s deployment, coordinating with Lebanon and Israel, and assisting Lebanon in preventing illicit arms from entering its borders. UNIFIL was also given authority to “resist attempts by forceful means to prevent it from discharging its duties under the mandate of the Security Council.”⁴¹

C. UNIFIL’s Unfulfilled Mandate

Each UN resolution’s fatal flaw was not in its substance, but rather in its lack of enforcement. The international community’s reliance on UNIFIL was significantly misplaced, as the peacekeeping force has proven unable or unwilling to enforce the very mandate it has been entrusted with since its creation in 1978—restoring peace and sovereignty to Lebanon and removing non-state armed groups—and which UNSCR 1701 considerably strengthened.

UNIFIL has serially failed to fulfill its primary functions under UNSCR 1701, namely helping the LAF enforce a permanent ceasefire, demilitarize southern Lebanon, disarm all non-state actors in Lebanon, and perform other functions needed to assist and support the LAF as necessary. Following the Second Lebanon War, UNIFIL deployed some 15,000 troops—the maximum number authorized under UNSCR 1701—throughout southern Lebanon.⁴² However, UNIFIL’s will and institutional cautiousness, not force size, have been the primary impediments to it successfully carrying out its mandate.

After a series of violent Hezbollah attacks on UNIFIL through 2007 and 2008, including a June 2007 car bombing which killed six UNIFIL peacekeepers, UNIFIL adopted a far more cautious approach towards

Hezbollah.⁴³ Since that time, UNIFIL's enforcement and interpretation of its mandate has hinged on the attitude of each force commander—a position which rotates every two to three years—and their interpretation of UNIFIL's mandate under UNSCR 1701.⁴⁴

UNIFIL's congenital avoidance of using force to ensure the freedom of movement of its own officials, enforce the terms of its mandate, and act to mitigate hostile activities and emerging threats undermines its fundamental obligations under UNSCR 1701. The international force has repeatedly failed to conduct basic enforcement functions, including detaining suspected terror operatives and seizing weaponry. This has enabled Hezbollah's extensive military build-up of southern Lebanon over the past decade-and-a-half. Successive UNIFIL reports to the UN Secretary General have even noted that Hezbollah routinely impedes UNIFIL's freedom of movement.⁴⁵

UNIFIL refuses to act even with presented by Israel with clear intelligence regarding where Hezbollah operates. The co-author of this paper routinely presented to UNIFIL, in his capacity as head of the IDF's International Cooperation Division, evidence of Hezbollah's terror activity and urged action against these clear-cut violations of UNSCR 1701. The evidence provided to UNIFIL leadership included detailed information—incorporating satellite and other imagery—demonstrating Hezbollah's vast build-up in a single year, 2022, of tunnels and above-ground terror compounds, and its use of a fake environmental organization as a pretense to construct posts near the Israeli border. Israel also presented its intelligence to the United Nations' Department of Peace Operations, the body overseeing UNIFIL, but similarly yielded no on-the-ground response. Some of Hezbollah's terror tunnels even had entrances directly next to UNIFIL buildings. In October 2023, in one of myriad examples, Hezbollah launched several rockets from three locations within 100 meters of a UNIFIL facility, including one launch site within 10 meters of the facility, eliciting no response from UNIFIL.⁴⁶

A foundational issue, aside from the force's demonstrable risk aversion, undermining UNIFIL's enforcement abilities is its claim that it lacks authority to enter into or operate on so-called private property. Given that Hezbollah is systematically embedded across southern Lebanon's civilian infrastructure, this standard operating procedure makes UNIFIL's efficacy all but impossible. Hezbollah serially operates from within southern Lebanon's villages, including storing weaponry inside homes and constructing its vast tunnel systems under civilian infrastructure—all of which are considered private property by, and therefore off-limits to, UNIFIL.⁴⁷ A former top Israeli official recently stated that “in an average village in southern Lebanon, there are more anti-tank missiles than in the whole Gaza Strip ... [there are] huge caches of weapons.”⁴⁸ According to one estimate, roughly one in three houses in southern Lebanon have been used by Hezbollah, a pattern the IDF continually has exposed publicly throughout the war.⁴⁹

Aside from its deeply inadequate efforts to demilitarize southern Lebanon, UNIFIL's failure to, as required by UNSCR 1701, “monitor the cessation of hostilities,” is another significant issue. UNIFIL's implementation reports, published at most three or four times annually, are often incomplete, inaccurate, or both, impeding both Israel's and the international community's ability to monitor developments on the ground accurately.⁵⁰

Even worse, in the current war, UNIFIL has effectively been an impediment to Israel's freedom of action. UNIFIL denied Israeli requests for peacekeepers to relocate from combat zones despite Hezbollah

having embedded itself in close proximity to UNIFIL posts and firing projectiles from those positions, expecting that Israel's concern for the peacekeepers' well-being would allow it to launch attacks with impunity.⁵¹ In a one-month span between mid-September and mid-October, Hezbollah launched over 25 rockets and missiles from sites within 300 meters—and often closer—of UNIFIL facilities.⁵²

UNIFIL's systemic flaws will require significant corrective action, including a potentially diminished role in future enforcement mechanisms under any ceasefire deal. UNIFIL has proven that, left to its own devices, it is incapable of enforcing its remit.

IV. Return to Insecurity: The Leaked Deal's Inadequate Framework

Israel's remarkable operational achievements since September 2024 have created a window of opportunity to remake the security situation in southern Lebanon, stabilize the Israel-Lebanon border, and reduce Hezbollah, and Iranian, influence in Lebanon. But realism about what can be accomplished is also needed. Hezbollah will likely continue being a latent threat for years to come and will seek to reconstitute. Given this, Israel rightfully cannot, and its international partners should not, accept a return to the failed pre-war security arrangements under which Hezbollah was able to expand its influence, grow its strength, and amass its deadly arsenal unchecked.

While the draft ceasefire deal has many positive elements, by itself it is insufficient to restore security.

A. Trusting the LAF and UNIFIL, not Israel

UNSCR 1701 enforcement cannot be entrusted to the LAF and UNIFIL without significant reform. The deal as currently written makes no provision for such reforms, nor does it recognize the repeated failure of the existing security mechanisms to confront, let alone rein in, Hezbollah over the last two decades.

To the contrary, the deal solely tries to restrain the one actor that, at least currently, has the ability and the will to prevent Hezbollah from growing back: Israel. The leaked proposal's language calls for Israel to "not carry out any offensive military operations" against Lebanese targets. However, UNSCR 1701's near identical language prohibiting Israeli "offensive military operations" has, over the years, been interpreted extremely uncharitably to Israel, with critics effectively characterizing all Israeli self-defense operations in Lebanon as offensive. Though the proposed deal states that its provisions should not "preclude either Israel or Lebanon from exercising their inherent right of self-defense," a leaked side letter between the United States and Israel called for Israel to generally restrict any actions against Hezbollah to the "Annex A" delineated area unspecified in the agreement, to only strike outside this area if Lebanon and IMEM first attempt to deal with such threats, and to consult with the United States prior to any strike.⁵³

Qualifying Israel's freedom of action to such a degree is counterproductive. So, too, is the requirement that Israel conduct consultations with the United States prior to each strike. Such a structure could very well create pressure points in the bilateral relationship and send counterproductive public signals of daylight between the partners. Iran and its proxies perceive such signals as an opening to increase their aggression, as repeated public statements from Iranian and proxy officials make abundantly clear.⁵⁴

Inevitably, at certain times, Israel will need to eliminate threats as they emerge, precluding the possibility of consultations with U.S. counterparts. In addition, any perception that Israel will be delayed in responding to its aggression will almost certainly further embolden Hezbollah.

Even given then-Defense Minister Gallant's estimation in late October that only around 20 percent of Hezbollah's rockets arsenal remains, according to JINSA data, Hezbollah could still possess well over 10,000 rockets with which to endanger northern Israel's residents upon their long-awaited return to their homes.⁵⁵ Even Hezbollah's most rudimentary short-range unguided rockets can do considerable damage to Israel's infrastructure and economy. Hezbollah projectile attacks have sparked fires burning well over 45,000 acres of land—including hundreds of acres of orchards—across northern Israel, where around 10 percent of Israel's agricultural sites are located.⁵⁶

Other Hezbollah weapons could do even more damage. The terror group's anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), which have posed a problem given Israel's inability to counter effectively this threat against civilian targets, have a range of up to roughly 10 kilometers, meaning they could still endanger Israel even if Hezbollah complied with the proposed deal. It could also target offshore Israeli gas rigs in the eastern Mediterranean and Israeli population centers with its extensive arsenal of missiles and drones.⁵⁷

B. Arbitrary Geographic Boundaries

Nor can the deal copy UNSCR 1701's geographic limitations. Under the narrow provisions of UNSCR 1701, which call for "security arrangements ... including the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani River of an area free of armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of Lebanese government and of UNIFIL," Hezbollah could retrench itself, via a technicality, in close range to Israel and position itself to, in the future, strike civilian targets and strategic sites like military bases and energy assets.⁵⁸ Yet the Litani comes as close as four kilometers to the Israeli border, including border towns to which Israel's evacuated civilians would return under any lasting agreement. Hezbollah could, therefore, position itself less than five kilometers from the Israeli border and technically still be compliant with UNSCR 1701. Additionally, Hezbollah's significantly degraded sprawling and highly advanced tunnel network could be reconstructed in the future.⁵⁹ This would leave Israel significantly vulnerable.

Though the leaked ceasefire proposal attempts to circumvent this issue by calling instead for demilitarization south of an unspecified line, detailed in an as-of-yet publicly unavailable annex, any such line will not enable the safe return of the residents of Israel's north. Hezbollah has for decades conducted much of its activity, including weapons storage and smuggling, in its operational hub in the Beqaa Valley regions abutting the Syrian border. Beirut's Dahiyeh neighborhood serves as a command node where Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leaders meet. Moreover, Hezbollah's cynical use of Beirut's airports and seaports—as demonstrated in extraordinary and tragic fashion in the August 2020 explosion of hundreds of metric tons of ammonium nitrate at a Hezbollah-controlled warehouse in Beirut's port—as well as large portions of Lebanon's other civilian infrastructure demonstrates the insufficiency of restricting the enforcement of a ceasefire deal to a segmented area.⁶⁰

Hezbollah's presence in any part of Lebanon, which the international community tacitly accepted in prior agreements fixating on southern Lebanon's demilitarization, is no longer tolerable. Israel's

freedom of action being restricted to any arbitrarily drawn region of southern Lebanon will likely result in Hezbollah being undeterred from using any ceasefire to rearm, regroup, and resume its aggression towards Israel in the future.

V. Recommendations

Over a year into a multifront war it neither sought nor anticipated, Israel does not wish to be bogged down indefinitely in Lebanon, particularly as the grueling war negatively impacts its economy, draws down munition stockpiles, and, however undeservedly, chips away at its international legitimacy. However, Israel is doubtlessly unwilling to accept a deal just for the sake of a temporary ceasefire if the deal fails to guarantee its security. The failure of past diplomatic “solutions,” including the insufficiency of UNIFIL and the LAF to meaningfully impede Hezbollah’s terror apparatus, has led to the present situation, and a failure to implement any future ceasefire deal risks resuming this untenable cycle.

The leaked ceasefire deal reportedly drafted by the United States contained many of the key ingredients for a lasting ceasefire to resolve hostilities in the north—including establishing a multilateral entity to oversee LAF and UNIFIL’s enforcement of UNSCR 1701, with the possibility of penalties for lack of compliance—but left other key issues unaddressed. In addition, Hezbollah is reportedly stonewalling talks and has signaled a reluctance to agree to the deal’s key provisions.⁶¹

Strong, creative, and U.S. diplomatic leadership will be needed in the weeks and months ahead to orchestrate a ceasefire deal that satisfies Israel’s security needs, enables the residents of Israel’s north to return to their homes, and paves a way forward for the United States and Israel to decisively degrade Iran and its ring of fire terror proxy axis. This effort should be predicated on six key principles guiding U.S. diplomats and decisionmakers in the days and weeks ahead: reaffirming Israel’s freedom of action; demanding UNIFIL carry out its mandate; enabling communications mechanisms between Israel and its security partners in Lebanon; strengthening and reforming the LAF; building in robust oversight; and pushback on Iran.

A. Reaffirm Israel’s Freedom of Action and Avoid “Bear Hugs”

Israel must not be hamstrung in its necessary self-defense actions, as the current leaked U.S.-Israel side letter and ceasefire proposal suggests it will be. Measures proposed under the leaked side letter requiring Israel to first consult with the United States before conducting self-defense strikes, and sentences indicating Israel will be limited to an arbitrary geographic area in which it can unilaterally act, fundamentally undermine any ceasefire deal by signaling to Hezbollah it can act with impunity in some areas and that Israel will be constrained in how it responds. Hezbollah will inevitably seek to exploit such measures to Israeli and U.S. detriment.

Even in its current degraded state, Hezbollah remains capable of inflicting extensive damage against Israel, serving as an—albeit much weaker—insurance policy for Iran’s spate of malign activity, including a dash to nuclear weapons capability. With Hezbollah drones, missiles, and rockets likely to pose a threat to Israeli population centers, energy and military assets, and Israel’s credibility amongst its adversaries, Israel will have to retain freedom of action across the Lebanese landscape for the foreseeable future and prevent Iran’s proxies from imperiling Israel. As Israel’s former National Security

Advisor, JINSA distinguished fellow IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror, stated, Israel will never again permit its enemies to be a “monster near our borders.”⁶²

Any deal, whether in the ceasefire agreement itself or, more likely, in a side arrangement directly with the United States, should recognize Israel’s freedom of action against Hezbollah wherever and whenever in Lebanon. Potentially resolving this issue, Israeli media reported in late October that the United States would soon provide Israel with a commitment to support Israel’s freedom of action in the case of violations by Hezbollah.⁶³ According to the reports, a forthcoming U.S.-authored agreement will include specific definitions of “immediate threat” and establishing clear timeframes for an international response before Israeli intervention.⁶⁴ These definitions should be as capacious as possible. Such an arrangement would help reduce ambiguity in any ceasefire deal’s language that could be exploited by Israel’s adversaries, enabling Israel to act quickly and decisively against emerging threats across Lebanon as they arise.

As with Israel’s campaign in Gaza and its fighting on other fronts, winning the information and legitimacy fronts are crucial elements of Israel’s success. An indispensable component of these fronts is consistent U.S. rhetorical backing of Israel’s right to self-defense. Current U.S. handwringing about Israel’s supposedly escalatory measures is counterproductive, only emboldening Hezbollah and Iran and prolonging hostilities.

Though future Israeli strikes against Hezbollah targets will inevitably invite criticism from much of the international community, the United States should proactively work to mitigate any informational or legal attacks on Israel by crafting a ceasefire deal which explicitly lays out Israel’s freedom of action across Lebanon. Assiduous U.S. rhetorical backing of future Israeli action will be required well after any ceasefire deal is instated, both to eliminate any perceived glimmers of daylight—which shared adversaries remain eager to capitalize on—between the United States and Israel and to assuage Israeli concerns that necessary self-defense measures will result in isolation and delegitimization on the world stage.

B. Overhaul UNIFIL

UNIFIL’s overt failures to restrain Hezbollah in any meaningful way mean that the United States must usher in a new era of UNIFIL with significant reforms. The peacekeeping force’s mandate should no longer be a rubber-stamp annual renewal, and the United States and its partners should pursue substantial changes to UNIFIL’s mandate in the lead-up to the next renewal in August 2025.

Instead of business-as-usual, U.S. leadership—including by exercising leverage over whichever country holds UNIFIL’s rotating chair and potentially through threatening to withhold some portion of U.S. funding to the United Nations—will be vitally needed to reform UNIFIL and effectively fulfill its mandate. UNIFIL’s mandate renewal should include written UNIFIL commitments to reform its reporting apparatus, including reports issued to the UN Secretary-General every two months documenting UNSCR 1701 violations, Hezbollah’s presence in various areas, and LAF deployment efforts. Moreover, the United States should encourage allies and partners amenable to meeting Israel’s security needs to contribute a greater share of personnel to UNIFIL and work to limit the unhelpful presence of peacekeepers from countries hostile to Israel.

IMEM, and specifically U.S., engagement will be needed to enhance the currently inadequate degree of UNIFIL-LAF security cooperation. No longer can the pretense of UNIFIL being restricted from private property preclude UNIFIL's access to Hezbollah strongholds. UNIFIL's mandate should include the LAF facilitating UNIFIL's entry to all potential Hezbollah sites, including those superficially characterized as private property, a right included in UNIFIL's mandate under UNSCR 1701 to enjoy "freedom of movement" but which should be made explicit as part of the next mandate renewal. So, too, should UNIFIL's commitment to enforcing a complete arms embargo across Lebanon to prevent the arming of non-state actors.

UNIFIL's unaccountability and opacity can no longer be permitted. UNIFIL peacekeepers, facilities, and vehicles should be fitted with cameras and sensors that transmit data to a central routing location overseen by IMEM leadership, namely the United States. To ensure accountability, UNIFIL could carry out some of its duties under the auspices of a centralized operations center overseen by IMEM.

UNIFIL should also adopt the recommendations, many yet to be implemented, put forth in a 2020 assessment report authored by a nine-member UN delegation led by Assistant Secretary-General for Middle East, Asia and the Pacific in the Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations Khaled Khiari. The co-author of this report met with Khiari several times and discussed with him the implementation of the report, which aimed to boost UNIFIL's efficacy, but many of its reforms have yet to be implemented. These include detailed measures aimed at shifting UNIFIL's force structure to be better equipped for monitoring; strengthening dialogue mechanisms between UNIFIL and both Lebanon and Israel; employing more advanced surveillance technology; repositioning UNIFIL troops along key strategic positions and; exploring potential options for improving UNIFIL's technology and data collection, analysis, and reporting.⁶⁵ The implementation of the report's suggested reforms should be a top priority for the United States and its partners.

C. Enhance Dialogue Channels

An important step for the future of Lebanon's security situation is more active and productive coordination between Israel and the LAF and UNIFIL. As the co-author observed in dozens of meetings with the relevant parties, key intelligence about Hezbollah was frequently not acted upon.

i. Help Create Direct IDF-LAF Communication Line and Liaison Mechanism

U.S. diplomats should work with Israel and Lebanon to facilitate the establishment of a direct bilateral line of communication. This dialogue channel should emphasize the fulfillment of shared goals and practicable tactical coordination where feasible. A direct communication mechanism between the IDF and the LAF would help enable off-the-record practical solutions to immediate issues and help deconflict between the two forces.

Part of a revised mechanism should include formalized liaison positions, as well as real-time information sharing, including the findings of security patrols. Of particular importance, to prevent misunderstandings, any potential LAF deployment along the Israel-Lebanon border and adjacent areas should be coordinated with Israel in advance.

ii. Facilitate a Border Dispute Resolution Forum

The above mechanisms could also advance a provision in the leaked proposal calling on Israel and Lebanon to engage in bilateral talks, with U.S. facilitation, to resolve border disputes along the Israel-Lebanon border, also known as the Blue Line. However, given the importance of sequencing events and creating conditions on the ground suitable for longer-term fixes, these disputes should not be adjudicated prior to Israel resolving its security needs and the safe return of northern Israel's residents.

iii. Revitalize the Tripartite Mechanism

The existing tripartite mechanism between Israel, Lebanon, and UNIFIL needs a series of reforms to ensure it lives up to its potential. In its current form, the unguided and unenforceable nature of the mechanism is unlikely to effectuate any change or be responsive to future Hezbollah efforts to retrench in southern Lebanon.

To avoid continuing to be a largely rudderless forum, tripartite meetings should have fixed protocols to bring direction and an added measure of structure to meetings. These should include regular meetings on a fixed schedule and snap meetings on an ad hoc basis as events unfold. In addition, meetings should include at least two state observers—including the United States—to bring an extra degree of leverage over the institutionally risk-averse LAF and UNIFIL. Past trilateral dialogues between the LAF, the United States, and Israel have had an added layer of potency compared with bilateral Israel-Lebanon meetings or tripartite mechanism meetings.

For an added layer of transparency and accountability, meeting notes should be publicized, potentially including the specific directives each party agrees to enact. There should also be a formalized mechanism for Israel to appeal to a third-party actor—likely either the IMEM forum or the United States—when it feels the LAF has insufficiently redressed issues.

D. Strike a Balance Between Strengthening and Reforming the LAF

Even with all its flaws, there is no alternative to the LAF as the long-term guarantor of stability in Lebanon to muzzle the Hezbollah threat. After major hostilities conclude, even IMEM member countries will be extremely reticent to place their troops on the ground, and even a reformed UNIFIL is unlikely to have the will or capacity to counter Hezbollah effectively. At the current juncture, the LAF will only be an effective fighting force capable of enforcing a ceasefire deal and countering Hezbollah's reemergence if both wide-ranging reforms and capacity building efforts are implemented.

Considering that the LAF is a key lever enabling UNIFIL's effective performance, it should undertake a greater role in granting UNIFIL full freedom of movement, including into the private property in which Hezbollah has long sheltered its operatives and weapons. To do so, it will have to be strengthened, an effort in which the United States should take the lead. Existing initiatives present springboards to build upon. U.S. policymakers should capitalize on and expand measures by European allies to strengthen the LAF, including the United Kingdom's extensive military funding to the LAF, training for LAF special forces, and assistance constructing over 70 LAF watchtowers on the Syrian border to thwart arms smuggling.⁶⁶ Germany has pledged large sums to the LAF, and a further opportunity is presented by Germany's Enable and Enhance Initiative program, initiated in 2017, to support the Lebanese Navy's

training and readiness.⁶⁷ Regional Arab partners not hostile to Israel's interests should also be engaged in LAF reformation efforts to the extent possible.

But strengthening the LAF without also implementing reforms and creating policy mechanisms to hold it accountable—the “financial sanctions and incentives and diplomatic measures” alluded to but not spelled out in the leaked IMEM proposal—will do little to change the pre-war status quo. Unless pressure is applied to encourage it to take Lebanese security and sovereignty seriously, foreign assistance, training, and equipment will not be enough to shake the LAF's dangerous complacency.

i. Pursue LAF Deployment, Recruitment, and Force Structure Reforms

Given its historic risk aversion, it is unrealistic to expect that the LAF will whip into shape absent external—namely U.S.—pressures to reform. A set portion of future U.S. military aid to Lebanon should therefore be conditioned on LAF fulfilling its obligations under any deal. These include the LAF: ceasing any degree of Hezbollah cooperation; facilitating UNIFIL entry into private property; deploying troops across the country to ensure an effective arms embargo; and diversifying its geographic and sectarian recruitment.

Hezbollah's current vulnerability presents a unique window of opportunity in which the LAF will feel emboldened to act against the terror group it has long feared but, as of mere weeks ago, is now a shadow of its former self. Hezbollah's command-and-control structure, funding system, and munition stocks and key sites are under threat. However, more U.S. pressure will have to be exerted over the LAF to cleanse its ranks of any Hezbollah elements. U.S. policymakers will have to walk a delicate tightrope of both building up the LAF's capabilities through funding and training, while simultaneously conditioning its assistance on the LAF undertaking reforms fundamental to any lasting ceasefire.

A core condition for securing Lebanon is that the LAF control not some, but all land crossings across the country—in particular the Lebanon-Syria border through which countless arms have flowed over the years—as well as airports and seaports across the country. This should be paired with LAF exercising monitoring capabilities to ensure Hezbollah does not continue to exploit Lebanon's infrastructure and transit hubs for its own malign activity. At the root of this effort would be, as mandated by several UN Security Resolutions, a genuine restoration of Lebanese sovereignty and the return to Lebanese governmental control of all Lebanese territory.

Crucially, the LAF needs to be pressured where needed to enter southern Lebanon's urban areas and Hezbollah's fortified strongholds to prevent the terror group's reemergence following the halting of major combat operations. Hamas's sporadic but consistent reemergence in areas of northern Gaza which the IDF previously held but left offers a cautionary tale of the kind of issues that can unfold in a military vacuum. The LAF must be empowered to undertake operations, including with increased U.S. training for the LAF's special forces, targeting Hezbollah across the country. In addition, the LAF must also work to eliminate active Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) threats in southern Lebanon's refugee camps.

Additionally, U.S. policy must ensure that LAF troops, particularly those deployed to southern Lebanon, are recruited from other parts of the country. The current heavy retention of soldiers from southern Lebanon has produced a worrisome pattern of soldiers maintaining local loyalties to Hezbollah. The

United States should consider conditioning aid on the LAF collecting metrics on geographic and sectarian recruitment and meeting certain predetermined quotas to preclude militant Shi'ite power blocs from forming within the LAF.

A key column of this effort could involve the collective efforts of the eight MTC4L member states—the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom—participating in the Italian-led Military Technical Committee for Lebanon (MTC4L), stood up in August to help build up LAF's capacity.⁶⁸ The MTC4L already operates a logistics hub, established in August 2024, to streamline LAF training. In addition, the MTC4L conducts other capacity-building efforts including infantry courses for new recruits and units with low readiness at present, potentially enabling greater Western oversight over the LAF recruitment and training process.⁶⁹

U.S. funding, including from counterterrorism-focused budgets to supplement overall foreign military aid, could play a pivotal role to better incentivize the LAF to achieve progress against Hezbollah. One such example is the Department of Defense's \$59 million in Counterterrorism Partnership Funds dispensed to the LAF to help defend its borders with Syria against Sunni terrorist organizations like the Islamic State, which yielded largely successful results.⁷⁰

However, U.S. funding should not be viewed as a blank check by Lebanon's top military and political brass. To avoid the pitfalls of effectively endorsing blank checks to the LAF, the United States should consider making a portion of its Lebanese aid contingent on benchmark requirements. Lebanon's success in meeting these criteria would be certified by the Secretary of State, following consultation with top U.S. officials—potentially including the Director of National Intelligence, the Secretary of Defense, and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, or some combination thereof—in a regular report to relevant Congressional committees affirming that the LAF in fact bolsters its presence in Hezbollah strongholds and fully terminate any ties with Hezbollah. Another U.S. imperative is to more frequently hold hearings on Lebanon, which have been few and far between in recent years. These hearings should include updates on the implementation of any ceasefire deal and the status of LAF and UNIFIL reforms and competency in the field.

Failing to meet U.S.-imposed requirements on the LAF would therefore result in a portion of U.S. aid being cut off without jeopardizing overall efforts to strengthen the Lebanese military. Previous proposed U.S. legislation, which stalled in committee, could help provide a baseline framework for such measures. One such proposed bill would have withheld 20 percent of LAF funding unless the United States certified that certain LAF reforms were being instituted.⁷¹

ii. Offer Economic Incentives

While the United States should condition some of its military aid on the LAF's ceasefire enforcement, it could also offer economic inducements molded around past aid packages. Economic aid is sorely needed to inject life into Lebanon's failing economy, and the United States can readily provide opportunities to link the U.S. private sector with Lebanon's flailing economy.⁷² The United States could reinstitute a past policy of paying the salaries of security personnel, including LAF officers, contingent on the LAF meeting certain benchmarks.⁷³ Additionally, the United States has significant leverage over how International Monetary Fund (IMF) financing is disbursed within Lebanon, presenting another important U.S. policy lever to effectuate genuine LAF reforms. A staff-level agreement reached between

the IMF and Lebanon in 2022 to suffuse Lebanon with liquidity has largely stalled, but greater U.S. engagement could grease the proverbial gears.⁷⁴

Merging these efforts under the IMEM umbrella presents a huge opportunity to make a deal that an economically devastated Lebanon cannot refuse. Reengaging “regional countries approved by both Israel and Lebanon,” as the leaked IMEM proposal calls for, provides an opportunity to engage Arab partners with a modicum of political capital inside Lebanon. By engaging friendly regional partners like Saudi Arabia, which committed \$3 billion in funding to the LAF in 2016 but reneged on the pledge, the United States could help box out unsavory actors jockeying for position in Lebanon’s future, including Qatar.⁷⁵

iii. Project a Willingness to Impose Sanctions

Though U.S. sanctions on Lebanese officials have largely been tailored to Hezbollah operatives rather than Lebanon’s political elites with Hezbollah ties, the United States should consider adopting a more muscular approach. The United States should designate additional Lebanese officials in Hezbollah’s orbit under sanctions pursuant to Executive Order 13441, “Blocking the Property of Persons Undermining the Sovereignty of Lebanon or Its Democratic Processes and Institutions,” or other pertinent executive orders. The sanctions regime should have a particular emphasis on any senior or mid-tier officers in the LAF, particularly its intelligence units, with proximate ties to Hezbollah.

E. Build an Oversight Team

The United States should work proactively to engage responsible partners to increase their stake in a more peaceful future for Lebanon. Though creating another layer of oversight merely to oversee UNIFIL, itself an oversight organization to ensure UNSCR 1701’s implementation, may seem an absurd situation, UNIFIL’s inadequacy has necessitated such a move.

Though the creation of IMEM could address the unaccountability of both UNIFIL and Hezbollah, it will have to possess robust enforcement mechanisms under U.S. leadership. These measures are referred to in the leaked draft text only as “procedures and measures, including inspections or measures as appropriate ... to recommend for action by participating members” to ensure that such reports are acted upon.⁷⁶ Ongoing and tough U.S. leadership will be required to create and apply robust means to ensure that IMEM holds UNIFIL and LAF accountable rather than devolving into another ineffective bureaucratic layer. In the absence of real enforcement, Hezbollah could return to something approximating its previous incarnation, indefinitely threatening Israel with its still formidable projectile arsenal.

Given the improbability of member countries sending officials to combat zones as part of the mechanism’s oversight, creative solutions will have to be explored. One potential tool holding promise is the creation of an IMEM oversight center with a joint operations room to oversee UNIFIL, and potentially LAF, operations. This center would emulate the Military Operations Center established by the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan during the Syrian Civil War to facilitate tactical advice while simultaneously providing oversight.⁷⁷ Both existing and as-of-yet uninstalled UNIFIL cameras and sensors, in line with some of the recommendations of the Khiari report, could transmit information to this center and form a more complete operating picture.

The United States needs to iron out the composition of the oversight mechanism, particularly given the real risk of IMEM member states exploiting the platform to promote anti-Israel narratives. The leaked proposal's dubious inclusion in IMEM of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), an organization with a long history of anti-Israel bias, and Spain, a country overtly hostile to Israel at present, could jeopardize neutral oversight of southern Lebanon's security situation.⁷⁸

U.S. leadership in the IMEM is invaluable and will be the fulcrum on which IMEM's success hinges. Specifically, the U.S. representatives designated to lead IMEM under the leaked draft—a senior U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) officer and a senior civilian national security official—should be actively engaged in information collection efforts, including holding regular briefings with the LAF, UNIFIL, Israel, IMEM, and combinations thereof. These regular briefings should focus on violations of UNSCR 1701 and the provisions of any ceasefire deal, as well as LAF and UNIFIL's degree of tactical success and reform implementation.

F. Continue Changing Iran's Strategic Calculus

The events of the last few months have flipped the script on the regime in Tehran, but the United States must not permit a ceasefire deal to be exploited by Iran and used to wriggle out of its current predicament. In addition to negotiating a ceasefire deal, the United States must work in parallel to communicate unequivocally to Iran that it will face dire consequences for trying to undermine or sabotage any such deal by rearming Hezbollah and its other proxies and attempting to reconstitute its ring of fire terror axis. In other words, a ceasefire deal should be the beginning, not the end, of a sustained pressure campaign to inflict a fatal U.S.-Israel blow to Iran's proxy strategy.

Israel's mounting achievements against Hezbollah changes the regime's overall strategic calculus, as it no longer can reliably entrust Hezbollah to serve as a meaningful deterrent. Iran's two major strikes on Israel have in part been aimed, unsuccessfully, at forestalling the rapid fall of Iran's proxy strategy that for years allowed to Iran to wreak havoc across the region and encircle Israel with threats, but at arm's length and with limited risk exposure. Hezbollah's diminished role fundamentally changes the equation between Israel and Iran, with Iran's hand considerably weakened by Israel's astonishingly decisive tactical wins over Hezbollah.

Iran has long dreaded losing Hezbollah, the regime's insurance policy and, as a former top U.S. official described it, the "sword of Damocles dangling over Israel's head."⁷⁹ However, with Hezbollah much-degraded, Iran no longer has a say in the matter—so long as a ceasefire deal, or its lack of implementation, does not allow Hezbollah to reconstitute and rearm. Iran has already voiced support for a ceasefire deal, suggesting it views any such agreement as a potential opening to bolster Hezbollah absent the current Israeli military pressure.⁸⁰

The current ceasefire negotiations, and any future deal, present the perfect opportunity to pressure Iran to fundamentally change its approach to the region. Clear and consistent U.S. messaging by the incoming administration, backed by credible threats of force, must unequivocally convey to Iran that it must stop using its terror proxy strategy in not just Lebanon and Syria but across the region to threaten Israel's security, or else risk losing assets far more consequential, irreplaceable, and closer to home.

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