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Lebanon Ceasefire Cannot Become Iranian Leverage

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The Israeli and Lebanese governments agreed to a 10-day pause in hostilities on April 16. This ceasefire concludes, for now, Israel's weekslong operation against Hezbollah after the group joined the Iran war just several days in, attacking Israel on March 2. Unfortunately, the agreement appears to have been dictated by Iran as a condition for further negotiations with the United States and/or reopening the Strait of Hormuz.

The prospects for a long-term end to the fighting on Israel's northern front, however, are dim. This is in particular because of the linkage that now appears to have been established between negotiations with Tehran and Beirut.

Indeed, in Lebanon, ceasefires—and their collapse—are nothing new. After all, a November 2024 Israel-Lebanon ceasefire, like others before it, was meant to break the vicious ceasefire-war-ceasefire loop that has characterized the security situation for years. Yet lax enforcement, and Iran's commitment to rearming its preeminent terrorist proxy, made Hezbollah's re-emergence and the next war inevitable.

If this ceasefire is to lead to a different outcome, finally removing the Hezbollah threat, both of these conditions will have to be addressed. The Trump administration must push back on Tehran's messaging and firmly de-couple the two issues headed into this weekend's reported new U.S.-Iran talks in Islamabad. And a solution will have to be found that stiffens the resolve of the Lebanese government, and the capabilities of the Lebanese Armed Forces, to take back their own country from Hezbollah. Neither task will be easy.

Negotiations and Ceasefire

Following initial backchannel negotiations, Israeli and Lebanese delegations met on April 14, in Washington—marking the first high-level direct Lebanon-Israel talks since 1993. Then, on April 16, President Donald Trump announced that a 10-day ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon had been reached thanks to U.S. mediation.

With Israel having achieved significant military success in its campaign against Hezbollah—including eliminating thousands of the group's fighters; knocking out its financial network; destroying much of its military infrastructure; and taking over its key strongholds—it felt comfortable agreeing to the temporary ceasefire, which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called "peace, through strength." Israel also sent a clear signal of resolve with its final pre-ceasefire actions: strikes on over 380 Hezbollah targets in just 24 hours.

On April 16, after the ceasefire was announced, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated he refused to trade "quiet for quiet" with Hezbollah or withdraw Israeli forces, who will instead be "remaining in Lebanon in a thickened security zone." That day, Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam praised the deal, calling it a major achievement. And, according to *The New York Times*, Hezbollah has signaled a willingness to honor the ceasefire—though that, particularly given its serial, brazen violations of past ceasefires, remains to be seen.

The ceasefire agreement, which the U.S. State Department published in full, includes:

- "A cessation of hostilities beginning on April 16, 2026, at 17:00 EST, for an initial period of ten days," which "may be extended by mutual agreement between Lebanon and Israel."

- Israel retaining the right "to take all necessary measures in self-defense, at any time, against planned, imminent, or ongoing attacks" but otherwise not conducting "any offensive military operations against Lebanese targets."

- Lebanon's government taking "meaningful steps to prevent Hezbollah and all other rogue non-state armed groups in the territory of Lebanon from carrying out any attacks, operations, or hostile activities against Israeli targets."

- All parties recognizing that "Lebanon's security forces as having exclusive responsibility for Lebanon's sovereignty and national defense; no other country or group has claim to be the guarantor of Lebanon's sovereignty." In addition, the two governments requested U.S. assistance with facilitating "further direct negotiations between the two countries with the objective of resolving all remaining issues."

The current framework listed above may itself become the backbone of a more permanent ceasefire deal. Yet many questions remain unsettled, principally what will happen at the end of the 10 days and where events go from there.

The Iranian Regime Dimension

Following the announcement of the Lebanon ceasefire, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said in an April 17 statement that "In line with the ceasefire in Lebanon, the passage for all commercial vessels through Strait of Hormuz is declared completely open for the remaining period of ceasefire." President Donald Trump, that day, said in a statement that U.S. talks with Iran are "in no way subject to Lebanon." Still, troublingly, Araghchi's comment suggests that the Iranian regime's efforts to cause chaos in the Strait of Hormuz—and its other malign activity—impact the situation in Lebanon, and vice versa.

This is particularly concerning if part of some tacit agreement with the United States, but even the perception of such a quid pro quo undermines U.S. leverage going into broader negotiations on thornier topics than Lebanon, like Iran's uranium stockpile and its missile production program.

The Lebanese Threat Feedback Loop

At face value, the current moment resembles others in recent decades. In response to Hezbollah threats to its northern region, Israeli forces entered Lebanon in 1993, 1996, 2006, and 2024, only to face, after a partial or full force withdrawal, the inevitable resumption of Hezbollah attacks. Israeli forces then had to re-enter Lebanon at a later year, and repeat.

This result was not for lack of trying. Several international efforts were undertaken to break this cycle over the years. These include United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701,

which codified Lebanon and the UN's authority and responsibility to demilitarize southern Lebanon. They also include the establishment, in 2024, of a U.S.-led, on-the-ground coordination center in Lebanon to enforce the November 2024 Israel-Lebanon ceasefire. The center was headed up by the commander of U.S. special operations forces in the Middle East.

None of these efforts had their desired effect. Worse, they resembled the semblance—if not façade—of a solution, making it seem to the international community that the Hezbollah problem had been solved.

The latest effort for peace, in 2024, also involved the assumption that Lebanon would be made sufficiently emboldened—and militarily capable—to act against Hezbollah by Israel's military successes. Yet this, too, proved wrong. Despite the Lebanese military's pledges to act forcefully against Hezbollah, it made little progress, seizing just a few thousand unguided rockets and a few hundred missiles from Hezbollah's vast arsenal by December 2025. In the whole first year after the November 2024 ceasefire took effect, as JINSA has noted, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) arrested just several hundred Hezbollah operatives out of the group's total fighting force at the time—according to U.S. officials, approximately 40,000.

Breaking the Cycle: What Will It Take Now

It is unclear whether Hezbollah will even abide by the 10-day ceasefire in the first place, given both its recent defiant statements, and its behavior after past ceasefires: gradually rearming and resuming attacks on Israel when adequately emboldened.

However, Hezbollah's compliance with this, or any other, ceasefire is particularly in doubt given Iran's efforts to link Hezbollah's military survival to its own malign activity. This includes its explicit connection of the Lebanese front to its threats against shipping in the Strait of Hormuz.

For the current Lebanon ceasefire to break this cycle, and have lasting success, it must be qualitatively different from those of the past. To that end, any lasting deal—and its practical enforcement—will require Israel's forces remaining in Lebanon until its security criteria are met, without complaints or obstruction from Beirut, and the full, energetic cooperation of the Lebanese government in disarming Hezbollah – ideally, as reports indicate may be the case, with direct U.S. support or leadership.

Moreover, the Lebanon front must be disentangled from Iran, both in the near-term—at the negotiating table and with regards to Iran's chaos-leverage strategy, and in the medium term, given Iran's inevitable aim of revitalizing Hezbollah, Tehran's second-strike capability against Israel. Unless these conditions are met, it is likely just a matter of time until war resumes.

Breaking the Iran Linkage

Washington would be wise to push back forcefully on Iran's somewhat subtle, but very problematic, signaling that it can inflict further pain on the global economy if Israel or the United States does something it does not like, whether in Iran or elsewhere. This is reminiscent of its proxy, Yemen's Houthis, dangling the threat of its own threat to global shipping over U.S. and Israeli heads in a bid to influence events in Gaza. Particularly at this critical juncture in U.S.-Iran talks, the notion that Iran can use blackmail of any sort weakens Washington's leverage, requiring a forceful U.S. rebuttal.

Unquestionably, the Lebanese situation cannot be viewed in isolation from the ongoing Iran war ceasefire and U.S.-Iran talks. Yet the direct linking of the two fronts risks a dangerous return to

what had, for years, been the status quo: Iran orchestrating events inside Lebanon, to the detriment of Israel and the benefit of Hezbollah.

Robust Security Zone Across Southern Lebanon

Given the poor track record of past ceasefire guarantors, the LAF and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), an enduring ceasefire will require Israel's on-the-ground enforcement. There is no substitute for Israeli measures to prevent a security vacuum from re-emerging in southern Lebanon.

To this end, Israel will have to maintain the security zone, extending roughly nine miles north into Lebanon, that it currently holds. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that he will not withdraw Israeli forces from the zone, even during the ceasefire period, and Lebanon reportedly dropped its demand that Israel do so. Such a buffer zone, according to Lionel Beehner, former Director of Research at West Point's Modern War Institute, is not expressly prohibited by international law nor the law of armed conflict (LOAC).

Noting the clear lessons of the past, Israel broke from precedent after its 2024 war with Hezbollah, not fully removing its troops, but instead maintaining them at five strategic outposts across southern Lebanon. In conversations with JINSA, senior Israeli military sources explained that this worked well, but not well enough. Israel's holding of discrete outposts did not prevent Hezbollah from filtering back into Lebanese villages near the border and embedding among civilians.

This necessitated, in Israel's military campaign over the past month, the clearing and holding of many villages used by Hezbollah to stage attacks; the evacuation of Lebanese civilians north of the Litani River, some 10 kilometers north inside of Lebanon; and, reportedly, the continued presence of Israeli troops throughout the area. In doing so, Israel sought to end Hezbollah's ability to leverage two major threats against Israel: its Kornet anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), which the group has often launched into Israeli border towns, and from which there are few means to protect civilian installations; and its Radwan forces, long cultivated by the group to stage a mass ground assault into Israel.

Therefore, Israel pushing Hezbollah 10 kilometers north of the border, if not more, would block the group's use of either lethal means: Kornet ATGMs have a high-end range of roughly 10 kilometers, and Radwan terror operatives would be detected and eliminated if they attempted a ground incursion from miles away from the border in area held by Israeli forces.

These operations have yielded clear results—eliminating, in tandem with airstrikes, more than 6,200 Hezbollah operatives; enabling Israeli forces to destroy numerous Hezbollah installations; and facilitating the seizure of vast amounts of Hezbollah weaponry. They also provided a treasure trove of intelligence on Hezbollah operations, according to media reports. And, with five Israeli divisions operating on the ground in Lebanon, with air support, they displayed Israel's capacity to wage major campaigns simultaneously on multiple fronts.

Israeli officials have openly stated their intention to maintain a security zone extending well into Lebanese territory—potentially up to 20 miles inside Lebanon—similar to the model it maintains in eastern Gaza along the Israeli borders to insulate Israel's territory from Hamas attack. In Lebanon, the new Israeli-controlled security zone will reportedly involve 15 new permanent Israeli outposts. Sources tell JINSA this number could expand to 20 outposts or more.

In addition, Israeli forces will need to continue, as they already have done in recent weeks, clearing and razing military infrastructure in southern Lebanon's villages. It will also include Israeli control over Hezbollah resupply routes to avoid a return to the group moving arms and fighters

around Lebanon uninhibited. That resulted in the widespread presence in southern Lebanon, as discussed, of ATGMs and fighters from Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force—which has planned and trained for years to invade Israel along the lines of Hamas's October 7 massacre.

Israel is under no obligation—legal, moral, or otherwise—to permit the resumption of this dangerous situation, neither in the near term, nor down the road. However, the prospects for lasting security in Israel's north look unusually good, given that Israel maintains its muscular security posture.

If the current ceasefire translates into a longer-term ceasefire that is, unlike those of the past, robustly enforced—principally by Israel, the most capable and incentivized guarantor of any deal—there are real chances for a paradigm shift—for the better. With Beirut's cooperation, Jerusalem's proactive measures, and Washington's strong backing, the cycle of war in Israel's northern front be broken.

The True Restoration of Lebanese Sovereignty: Disarming Hezbollah

Any lasting ceasefire will require the true restoration of Lebanon's sovereignty—by disarming Hezbollah. Israel is not a threat to Lebanon's sovereignty—Hezbollah is. Its military capabilities, for decades, surpassed those of the LAF by a large margin—creating a shadow military in Lebanon and blatantly undermining the government's state control.

In any lasting ceasefire, Hezbollah—lacking any real manned aerial or naval assets—must be denied the sole potent aspect of its weapons arsenal: drones and missiles. While its stockpile has declined significantly since the start of Israeli operations in early March, it continues to stage drone attacks on Israel.

And, while somewhat constrained by its loss of one its longtime patron—Syria's Assad regime—and the weakening of another—the Iranian regime—Hezbollah continues its efforts to import weaponry. For example, just hours before the April 16 ceasefire was announced, Syrian authorities interdicted a shipment of 6,000 explosive detonators headed to Hezbollah.

The 2024 ceasefire failed where previous ones did: in its enforcement. Few expected help from the apathetic, and often uncooperative, UNIFIL—an intrinsic feature of the entity since its founding, as JINSA has documented in detail. The Lebanese government, though, sparked cautious optimism in Washington and Jerusalem after then-Prime Minister Najib Mikati vowed the start of a "new phase" in which his government would finally act to disarm Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Yet Lebanon's pledges to move forcefully against Hezbollah did not translate into action.

Now, Israel has already done the hard part of disarming Hezbollah across Lebanon. And the Lebanese government, by officially banning Hezbollah military activity nationwide on March 2, has taken the right initial political steps towards dissolving Hezbollah as a military entity.

Complementary Israeli and Lebanese military action against the Hezbollah threat is indispensable to an enduring ceasefire. These actions must come not just in response to imminent threats, or after Hezbollah has already fired at Israel, as the terms of the November 2024 ceasefire and side letter dictated. A reactive posture, history shows and common sense affirms, enables Hezbollah's proactive aggression.