

What Iran Wants in Lebanon, and Why It Cannot Be Allowed to Get It

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Iran has moved to subsume Lebanon into the U.S.-Iran negotiation, demanding that any agreement on the Strait of Hormuz and the nuclear program include a cessation of Israeli operations against Hezbollah. The demand is a linkage play: by insisting that the disposition of Hezbollah is a matter for great-power diplomacy between Washington and Tehran rather than for the bilateral talks now underway between Lebanon and Israel, Tehran seeks to convert bare military survival into acknowledged regional standing. Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, [addressing the IRGC directly on June 5](#), slammed Iran in frustration: "It's not your country; it's our country." If the United States concedes the linkage, it will betray not only its own strategic interests and those of its Israeli ally but the Lebanese government's own effort to reclaim sovereignty from the power that has treated its south as a disposable front. Washington must reject Lebanon linkage unambiguously, shield the Israel-Lebanon talks from Iranian interference, and ensure that Iran's absence from the negotiating table produces escalating costs rather than American concessions.

Israeli forces now occupy a zone five to eight miles deep inside southern Lebanon, with operational reach extending to the Litani River and, in recent weeks, [beyond it toward the Zahrani River](#). Five Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) divisions are deployed across the south under [Operation Silver Plow](#), the expanded successor to the "limited and targeted ground operations" that began on March 16. The campaign has proceeded alongside sustained air operations across the Bekaa Valley and Beirut—Lebanon's prime minister has [stated](#) that Israel has carried out nearly 3,500 airstrikes and hundreds of controlled explosions since the April ceasefire announcement alone—and the IDF reports striking over a hundred Hezbollah sites in single overnight cycles. What the ground forces have found south of the Litani validates the premise of the operation: the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) had [claimed "operational control" of the area](#) before the war, but large tracts of land near the border were left uninspected under a policy of not infringing on "private property," effectively providing Hezbollah with safe havens from which to construct the very infrastructure that United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 was supposed to prevent.

Hezbollah itself is degraded but not destroyed. The IDF estimated that [70–80 percent of the group's rocket-fire capability](#) had been eliminated by the end of the 2024 campaign, and the war's first weeks inflicted further losses on storage facilities, command infrastructure, and what remained of the group's senior leadership after the [assassination of Hassan Nasrallah](#) in September 2024. Yet Hezbollah continues to fire. As recently as [May 30](#), the terrorist group

launched multiple rocket and drone barrages at northern Israel, triggering sirens every twenty minutes across the north and prompting former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to accuse the government of “returning to the contemptible policy of containment.” [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has identified](#) two remaining threats: the 122mm rocket arsenal and Hezbollah’s growing use of fiber-optic-guided drones, which are difficult to detect and intercept. The military logic of continued Israeli operations in Lebanon is therefore straightforward: Hezbollah’s capability is diminished but not yet reduced to the point where Israel can safely withdraw without risking the group’s reconstitution, and the ground presence south of the Litani serves a dual purpose—degrading remaining capability while establishing a buffer zone that denies Hezbollah the proximity it needs to strike Israeli communities with the close-range, hard-to-intercept weapons, such as anti-tank guided missiles, that it employed after October 7.

Against this backdrop of ongoing military operations, a parallel diplomatic track has opened between the two countries. On April 14, Lebanon and Israel [convened direct talks at the U.S. State Department](#)—the first such bilateral engagement since the collapse of the May 17 Agreement in 1983. Four rounds have now been held. The Lebanese government, under President Joseph Aoun, who has spoken of reaching “an end to the state of war with Israel, similar to the [armistice agreement of 1949](#),” entered these talks seeking a ceasefire and the restoration of territorial sovereignty. Israel entered seeking the disarmament of Hezbollah and the establishment of a permanent security architecture south of the Litani. The Israeli proposal envisions a [three-zone framework](#): an Israeli-controlled buffer along the border, a transitional zone to the Litani under joint IDF-LAF operations, and a northern zone where the Lebanese army would assume sole responsibility for preventing Hezbollah’s reconstitution. On June 4, the fourth round produced a [conditional ceasefire agreement](#) in which Israel and Lebanon agreed to a “complete cessation” of Hezbollah fire and the establishment of “pilot zones” in which the LAF would take exclusive control of territory to the exclusion of all non-state actors. The two sides agreed to reconvene the week of June 22 to pursue a comprehensive agreement. The positions are far apart, but the fact that Beirut and Jerusalem are negotiating at all, directly—and have now produced a joint framework—represents a strategic opening of the first order, one whose significance is difficult to overstate for a region in which Lebanon and Israel have been formally at war since 1948.

Hezbollah [rejected the deal within hours](#). Naim Qassem called the negotiations “absurd, humiliating and insulting,” and the framework “a roadmap to annihilate part of the Lebanese people,” declaring that his fighters would not withdraw from southern Lebanon while under attack. The following day, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri—Hezbollah’s designated political intermediary—[offered a conditional concession](#): Hezbollah would withdraw from south of the Litani in parallel with a simultaneous Israeli withdrawal and an unconditional ceasefire on land,

sea, and air. But he dismissed the remainder of the agreement as a “hybrid, unfair, rigged” text “not worth mentioning.” Israel has refused the symmetry of simultaneous withdrawal throughout the war. Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz [stated](#) that the IDF would continue operations in Lebanon, that no withdrawal was forthcoming, and that Israel retained “freedom of action, backed by the United States, to strike in Beirut in response to attacks on Israeli communities and territory.” They [rejected](#) “any attempt, by any state or non-state actor, to hold Lebanon’s future hostage.”

It is against this diplomatic opening that Iran has moved to assert its claim. In early June, Tehran [announced](#) the [suspension of communication](#) with U.S.-Iran ceasefire mediators, citing Israel’s continued operations in Lebanon—though the status of the talks has remained uncertain, with President Donald Trump [insisting](#) that negotiations continued at a “rapid pace” while Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stated that lines of communication remained open but that [no tangible progress had been made](#). What is not uncertain is the substance of Tehran’s demand. Araghchi declared the U.S.-Iran ceasefire “a ceasefire on all fronts, including in Lebanon” and that “its violation on one front is a violation of the ceasefire on all fronts.” Chief Iranian negotiator Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf [warned](#) that Tehran could move beyond suspension to direct confrontation if the Israeli campaign in Lebanon persists—a threat realized on June 7–8, when [Israel and Iran traded their most serious strikes since the April ceasefire](#), with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launching “Operation Nasr” against Israeli military bases in retaliation for Israeli strikes on Iranian radar sites and a petrochemical plant.

Both sides subsequently paused, but Iran [warned](#) that it would resume attacks if Israeli operations in southern Lebanon continue—linking the direct Iran-Israel military confrontation to the Lebanon theater explicitly. The demand amounts to an insistence that the Lebanese theater cannot be resolved bilaterally between Beirut and Jerusalem but must instead be folded into the U.S.-Iran negotiation as a component of any comprehensive settlement. In practice, Tehran is claiming a seat at a table to which neither the Lebanese government nor Israel has invited it—asserting that the disposition of Hezbollah is a matter for great-power diplomacy between Washington and Tehran rather than for the direct talks actually underway between the sovereign parties.

The Lebanese government itself recognizes the danger of this Iranian claim. On June 5, President Joseph Aoun told CNN that Iran is “[using Lebanon as a bargaining chip](#) in their negotiations with the United States,” addressing the IRGC directly: “It’s not your country; it’s our country.” He told Hezbollah chief Qassem that “[the Lebanese people are not yours](#).” Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, speaking at a UN aid appeal in Beirut, was equally direct: “[Have mercy on our south, stop treating it and its people as merely a bargaining chip](#) to improve the terms of your negotiations.” Salam called it a war “that is not being fought for our sake, but on our land

and at the expense of our people.” Araghchi [responded](#): “Had Lebanon been a bargaining chip for Iran, we’d have a deal long ago. Save Lebanon from your real foe, Mr. President.” The alignment between Hezbollah’s rejection of the Washington talks and Tehran’s insistence that Lebanon’s fate be decided within the U.S.-Iran negotiations is not coincidental; it reflects the reality that Hezbollah’s survival as an armed force and Iran’s survival as a regional power with an Israel-adjacent military presence are, at this point, the same question. What the Lebanese government is attempting, to separate its sovereignty from Iran’s regional ambitions, is exactly what Tehran’s linkage demand is designed to prevent.

Iran’s grand strategy, in both its short- and long-term dimensions, amounts to an effort to convert the war into a catapult—to transform what began as bare military survival under American and Israeli bombardment into the foundation of acknowledged great-power standing. The two hinges of this strategy, Hormuz and Lebanon, serve complementary functions in pursuit of that transformation. The [Hormuz closure](#) forces a slow American retreat from the assumption that the United States can impose costs on Iran unilaterally and without consequence: every week that the strait remains shuttered and the global economy absorbs the damage, the asymmetry that underpinned four decades of American coercive dominance erodes further. The [naval blockade](#) imposed on April 13 has not reversed this dynamic but created a mutual siege in which the [Strategic Petroleum Reserve](#) has been drawn down from its pre-war level of approximately 415 million barrels to 357 million barrels. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio is [reduced to framing Hormuz reopening](#) as “the predicate that opens the door to Phase 2,” a tacit concession that the United States needs the strait open at least as urgently as Iran needs the blockade lifted.

But Hormuz, for all its economic potency, can force a negotiation; it cannot determine the negotiation’s terms. Lebanon serves the more ambitious purpose. It is the theater through which Tehran seeks to demonstrate that its regional network of armed allies is not a residual artifact of revolutionary ideology but a permanent feature of the Middle Eastern order—one that the United States must accommodate in any settlement rather than allow Israel to dismantle under the cover of a separate bilateral track. One [analyst](#) correctly identified Tehran’s ultimate ambition as becoming “a pole in a multipolar order.” Lebanon is the proof-of-concept.

By insisting that any U.S.-Iran agreement must include a cessation of Israeli operations in Lebanon, Tehran is demanding that the United States deliver its ally’s compliance as the price of a deal—that Washington protect Hezbollah and rein in Israel in Lebanon as a precondition of progress on Hormuz talks. If Iran can force this concession, it will have demonstrated something no regional power has accomplished since the 1973 oil embargo: the ability to dictate terms to the U.S.-Israel relationship. And if the United States capitulates on Lebanon linkage, Iran will

have proven two things simultaneously—that its regional power survived the war, and that it can constrain Israeli freedom of action through Washington. That combination is the functional definition of the great-power status Tehran seeks.

Recent events illustrate the strategy at work. When Netanyahu authorized the IDF to strike Beirut’s Dahieh district, Trump called him, and according to [multiple sources](#), the conversation became heated, with the President deploying expletives and reminding the Israeli Prime Minister of past American support. Trump then [announced on Truth Social](#) that Israeli forces would not move on Beirut and that “all shooting will stop.” Netanyahu contradicted this on X within hours, stating that strikes on southern Lebanon would continue “as planned”; Defense Minister Katz denied any ceasefire in Lebanon. The June 7–8 exchange of fire between Israel and Iran escalated the pattern further: Netanyahu [stated](#) that Israel had halted attacks on Iran but refused to call it a ceasefire, while Iran warned that it would resume strikes if Israeli operations in Lebanon continued. An American president publicly claiming to have restrained an Israeli operation that the Israeli prime minister publicly refused to halt; an Iranian regime conditioning its direct military behavior on the progress of a Lebanese theater over which it claims no formal authority—this is the kind of visible daylight between Washington and Jerusalem, and the kind of operational linkage between Tehran and Beirut, that Iran’s strategy is designed to produce, and the kind that, if repeated and deepened, reshapes the calculations of every state in the region deciding where to place its bets.

The [fall of the Assad regime](#) in December 2024 deprived Tehran of its Syrian corridor; the sustained Israeli campaigns of 2024 and 2025 degraded Hezbollah’s leadership and much of its operational depth; the Houthis, though active, operate at too great a geographic remove to substitute for a presence on Israel’s border. Lebanon is the last theater in which Iran’s regional power retains meaningful military capability. If Israel succeeds in establishing durable security south of the Litani—whether through the buffer zone it is constructing on the ground or through the diplomacy under negotiation in Washington—while the U.S.-Iran track proceeds on a separate, delinked basis, Tehran will have lost the most important node of its network without extracting any concession in return. The linkage demand is therefore existential: it is the instrument through which Iran seeks to ensure that whatever settlement concludes this war ratifies, rather than liquidates, its claim to permanent regional influence extending to the Mediterranean.

The regional consequences of conceding to Iran on this point would be severe and progressively self-compounding. The Gulf states are already [divided](#) between those pursuing forward alignment with the United States and Israel—principally the United Arab Emirates (UAE), whose ambassador [publicly expressed openness](#) to joining military efforts against Tehran—and those hedging more cautiously, with Saudi Arabia [insisting on a Palestinian statehood pathway](#) as a

precondition for Abraham Accords normalization. American acquiescence on Lebanon linkage would signal to the hedging states that the war has shifted the regional balance in Iran's favor, that Tehran's proxy network survived intact, and that the United States is prepared to subordinate Israeli security requirements to the imperatives of a deal with Iran. It would punish the UAE's forward bet and vindicate Saudi caution, accelerating the centrifugal pressures already straining the post-Abraham Accords alignment.

The United States must therefore reject Lebanon linkage unambiguously and in public. The U.S.-Iran negotiation must proceed on its own terms, sequenced according to American strategic priorities, without incorporating the future of Hezbollah or the control of Israeli operations in Lebanon as subjects of U.S.-Iran bilateral discussion. The Israel-Lebanon talks in Washington must be shielded from Iranian interference—both from Tehran's demand that it hold a veto over the terms on which Lebanon negotiates and from the American temptation to sacrifice those talks on the altar of a faster Iran deal. The Lebanese government's own effort to separate its file from the Iranian track should be supported, not undermined by the very power that brokered the talks in the first place.

If Iran suspends negotiations over Lebanon, the United States should treat the suspension as an opportunity to reset the talks and demonstrate that Iran's strategy carries costs Tehran has not anticipated. The administration should tighten the naval blockade so that Iran's absence from the table produces an escalation in economic pressure rather than a pause. Simultaneously, it should accelerate the Israel-Lebanon bilateral track: increase American diplomatic investment in the Washington talks, build on the June 4 framework and the June 22 follow-up round, signal publicly that the settlement of Lebanon's future is proceeding between the sovereign parties regardless of whether Tehran participates in a separate U.S.-Iran negotiation, and make clear that every day Iran remains absent, the security situation south of the Litani solidifies and Tehran's ability to influence the outcome diminishes. The June 7–8 exchange of fire underscores the urgency: Iran has demonstrated its willingness to escalate the direct military confrontation in order to enforce its Lebanon linkage, and the United States must demonstrate equal resolve in rejecting it. The message to Iran should be stated clearly and firmly: Lebanon will be settled without Iranian input. Tehran can return to the U.S.-Iran negotiation on Hormuz and the nuclear file whenever it chooses, but it cannot hold both tracks hostage, and it will not be granted a veto over what Beirut and Jerusalem negotiate in Washington. Iran's calculation depends on the assumption that America's need for a deal will override American commitments; the surest way to prove that calculation wrong is to ensure that the cost of walking away from the table increases with every day of absence.