

People waving flags in Tyre, Lebanon, after the ceasefire went into effect

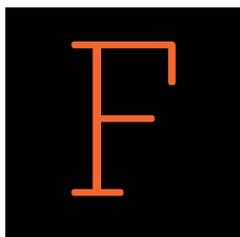
IS THE CEASEFIRE WITH HEZBOLLAH A BAD IDEA?

AS MISSILES STOP FLYING,
QUESTIONS REMAIN



“In full coordination with the United States, we retain complete military freedom of action. Should Hezbollah violate the agreement or attempt to rearm, we will strike decisively.”

—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, announcing that Israel would enter into a ceasefire with Hezbollah.



or over a year, tens of thousands of Israelis have been displaced from their homes in northern Israel because of Hezbollah’s missiles. A new ceasefire may allow them to return home—but it has been controversial, with some politicians and residents of the north saying that the IDF should have continued its fight against Hezbollah.

The deal, negotiated by the US and France, basically falls back upon the framework of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701. It says that the only armed groups allowed below the Litani River will be the Lebanese armed forces, that the Lebanese government will keep arms from crossing the country’s borders on their way to Hezbollah, and that it will keep Hezbollah from producing weapons in the country, as well as dismantling all Hezbollah facilities, starting with those south of the Litani River.

Under the deal, Israel and Lebanon can bring their complaints of violations of the ceasefire to a group of countries, headed by the US, known as the “Mechanism.”

The deal also gives Israel 60 days to withdraw its forces from Lebanon.

Alongside the ceasefire deal, the US gave Israel a promise of security in a letter that is being kept classified. Some of the details of the letter that were leaked included assurances that the US would help Israel watch for violations of the ceasefire agreement, including infiltration by Hezbollah of the Lebanese armed forces.

Apparently the letter includes a clause saying that Israel can act at any time if the terms of the ceasefire agreement are broken in regard to south Lebanon, but if there are violations farther north, Israel must allow the Lebanese military to first try to act. The language of the ceasefire deal, however, does not necessarily match what the US letter supposedly contains, and it seems more restrictive of Israel.

So far, despite some sporadic fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, the ceasefire deal seems to still be in place. But does it mean anything much? To understand more, we spoke with experts about the deal and what it might mean for the future.

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We spoke with experts to get an understanding of the ceasefire deal with Hezbollah

DAVID DAUD, SENIOR FELLOW AT THE FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES, WITH A FOCUS ON LEBANON AND HEZBOLLAH



Will the ceasefire deal allow Israelis to return to their homes in the north of the country?

It depends on what you mean by that. In the 60 days until the initial phase of the ceasefire is up, the government has told them not to return. They are still looking at this as a trial period, even though Amos Hochstein said that it is not and that the 60 days are really just a timetable for IDF withdrawal from south Lebanon. I think that there is just an abundance of caution.

What happens after that? That's a good question, because if you listen to the residents of northern Israel, they are saying that this is a bad deal, that the IDF was stopped in its tracks. For years, they could see Hezbollah operatives and they complained; they could hear the sounds of digging and they complained. And no one did anything. Then October 7 happened.

The people of northern Israel are starting to sound like the people of Sderot did before October 7—but now in the shadow of October 7.

A lot of people are saying they don't want to go back: *I have kids, I have family. You*

didn't finish the job, and how am I going to live like this?

So the question is whether desperation or time leads them back.

I don't think everyone will go back. You'll have, not a depopulated north, but a different composition. I believe the mayor of Kiryat Shmona said that they can get

70,000 people there who are super-Zionist and super-ideological, who are willing to take on anything. But if you want a viable city that people from Tel Aviv are willing to visit, you need something else.

Do you see the deal changing how Hezbollah operates in the south of Lebanon?

It depends on what you mean by that. Will they be as open as they are currently? There are still a lot of things that remain to be seen.

Hezbollah is now testing the waters of Israeli resolve.

They are also testing domestic sentiment. They are starting to take the pulse of the Lebanese people, to determine their sentiment on this. Yesterday [November 30], they had a memorial service for Hassan Nasrallah at the place of his assassination, and they are planning a funeral for him. I think they are using these as public



Lebanese army soldiers in southern Lebanon after the ceasefire

referenda. They're trying to see how many people will still come out, and it demonstrates a show of force to anyone who may be thinking of restraining them or moving against them. It says, "You may think we're easy prey, but we still have hundreds of thousands coming."

The third thing it will depend on is the oversight mechanism. In Netanyahu's statement expressing his intention to accept the ceasefire, he said that Israel will have full freedom of action. That's not true. The deal doesn't guarantee any freedom of action at all.

And the side letter from the US to Israel referred only to "imminent threats." If someone is about to fire a rocket at you, you don't need those assurances to strike; international law allows you to strike in self-defense.

If Hezbollah is building a weapons facility south of the Litani that's not about to strike Israel, then the Israelis have to turn to the Americans, complain and share their intelligence, which in turn is shared with this oversight committee, which has France and the UK on it, and then that is shared with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). If they don't act sufficiently, then Israel is entitled to act.

There are a lot of questions here. What is considered sufficient action? Will this oversight mechanism work? Will the US, because it is the head, say that they green-

"Don't forget that France is on the committee, and they have a track record of covering for Lebanon and their inaction. They talk to Hezbollah."

light an Israeli operation and then the Israeli operation is greenlit? And how much action will it be? Pinpoint strikes?

Don't forget that France is on the committee, and they have a track record of covering for Lebanon and their inaction. In late 2023, when UNIFIL's mandate was renewed, the French were trying to push the Lebanese view that UNIFIL should not have unannounced patrols. They talk to Hezbollah.

Assuming that France does not gut the mechanism of any efficacy, it will impact how Hezbollah acts.

The other thing is that Hezbollah will take the pulse of how good Israel is at detection and interdiction, and they are going to try to dance between the raindrops, so to speak.

Are there things that Israel or the US should be doing right now?

Being honest with the public about what

this deal does and doesn't do. It absolutely guarantees the regeneration of Hezbollah, because it makes the same mistakes as Resolution 1701.

The ultimate mistake is that it depends on Lebanon for enforcement, like 1701. It was a good law, but you were depending on an actor like Lebanon, which is unwilling or unable to act. This is the same thing that is happening in this deal.

They are relying again on "If you just give the Lebanese army weapons" and "If we just deploy them to the south." It's all fiction. LAF will never act. And if anything, we're already seeing Lebanese officials reinterpret the deal like they did with 1701 to gut it of any meaning.

LAF is already deployed to the border. In a street fight, if a person is knocked down, that is when you take his weapon. The Lebanese army's opportunity to act against Hezbollah is now, but they have a thousand excuses not to do it. The point is that it is not happening anytime soon. We made this mistake in 2006, and we are making it again now.

Do you see the incoming American administration acting any different in regard to this?

Trump sounds tough, but he's not really a warmonger. He likes his quiet; he likes his deals. I think the Trump administra-



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tion will just want to make deals to keep the quiet. As much as the Trump administration took a tough stance on Iran, their stance on Lebanon was practically identical to the Obama administration's, which was identical to the Bush administration's.

We don't seem to move on Lebanon, because, one, we don't understand Lebanon well enough to understand how it operates. And we get sold on this idea by Lebanese hucksters—Bashir Gemayel, Rafik Hariri, Saad Hariri—who will sell you the sky and have no ability or intention to deliver.

I don't buy the idea that Lebanon equals Hezbollah, but I also don't accept the idea that Hezbollah are Martians who have nothing to do with their country, and that there is a beautiful, pure Lebanon, and if only we could liberate it from Hezbollah... Hezbollah are Lebanese citizens. Neither the Trump administration nor this administration understand that complex relationship between Hezbollah and Lebanon.

If you don't understand the problem, how can you offer a solution? I don't see anything changing.

Has the fact that this deal was agreed to before any ceasefire in Gaza reduced Hezbollah's credibility with its allies?

No. If anything, they can spin this, and they've already started doing that.

Hezbollah has wanted a ceasefire since October 8, 2023. Naim Qassem—now the secretary general, then the deputy secretary general—said in April that they didn't expect this to last this long. They thought that the Israelis would go into Gaza for a month or two.

But then they had this commitment. If they backed down, they looked weak and ineffective.

Now they can justify it. They can say, "Look, we're a Lebanese resistance organization. The Lebanese government made this deal, so we have to listen to the gov-

A burned-out vehicle near the Roman ruins in Baalbek, Lebanon



ernment. We wanted to continue fighting for Gaza. But now the Lebanese government has told us we have to do it in different ways."

This gives them an off-ramp and a way to save face, as well as burnish their Lebanese bona fides. They are stooges of Iran, ideologically loyal to Iran—but they are 100 percent Lebanese, as well. They just have a different perception of what is good for Lebanon. So this can act as a counter to those accusing them of just being a puppet of Iran: "We stopped a war because the Lebanese government asked us to. How can you accuse us of being stooges of Iran?"

They are masters of spin. I've seen Israelis and other people online saying, "How can these idiots claim a victory?" We're not the target audience. They know their audience much better than we can. They know what works on them and what doesn't. And they have a degree of trust with them. They have the ability to spin this.

We need to put ourselves in the shoes of the 85 percent of Lebanese Shia who, according to a September poll, trust Hezbollah to some degree. Can they spin this to those people? I think they have a lot of room to do that.

Is there anything else people should understand about this situation?

We need to drill down on this dichotomy between Lebanon and Hezbollah. A few years ago, Naftali Bennett, for whom I have great respect, penned an article saying that Lebanon equals Hezbollah equals Lebanon. That's an oversimplification. But the converse—the idea that these two are entirely distinct and separate entities—is also mistaken. There is a complex relationship here. Hezbollah is a Lebanese entity. It is supported by a broad swath of Lebanese. It is not an occupying force; you cannot occupy yourself. In the last parliamentary elections, Hezbollah got 356,000 votes out of 1.8 million votes cast, in a country of 4.5 million people—the highest number of votes for any party by 150,000. Their target demographic are the Shia, who are probably (Lebanon hasn't had a census since 1932) Lebanon's largest demographic and certainly its fastest-growing demographic. They aren't an alien entity to Lebanon. These are Lebanese people who are reorienting the country in a way they see fit.

PROF. EFRAIM INBAR,
PRESIDENT OF THE JERUSALEM
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“Relying on the Lebanese army or UNIFIL to enforce the terms of the ceasefire is ridiculous. We are relying on our right to enforce it.”

Will the ceasefire deal allow Israelis to return to their homes in the north of the country?

I think that for the next two months, Hezbollah will try to keep to the ceasefire, because they want us out of Lebanon. The next two months are going to be reasonable.

Do you see the deal changing how Hezbollah operates in the south of Lebanon?

It depends on how Israel will deal with violations. So far, we are enforcing it, by force. If this continues, we'll see if south Lebanon will be more or less free of Hezbollah.

But the mechanisms that the deal puts in place will not do that?

No. Relying on the Lebanese army or UNIFIL is ridiculous. We are relying on

our right to enforce it.

Are there actions that you think the Israeli or US governments should be taking right now to ensure that the future will be better than the past has been?

Again, we should enforce this ceasefire through the use of military force. We should not allow this organization to rebuild its capabilities in southern Lebanon. The only way to do that is through military force. Not the UN, not the Lebanese army; they are all just ornaments.

Do you anticipate a difference between the Biden administration and the Trump administration in regard to how they view this deal?

Obviously the Biden administration is more influenced by the left wing of the Democratic Party, which call themselves

progressive, who are not pro-Israeli and do not understand what is happening in the Middle East. The Trump administration seems to have the elements that will be more understanding toward Israel.

Does the fact that Hezbollah accepted the ceasefire lessen their credibility in the eyes of their allies?

Everyone understands that they were hit substantially, and they were weak, and as a result of that, they accepted the ceasefire. What will happen next remains to be seen.

Is there anything else you think is important to understand about this situation?

That the Iranians will continue to try to exercise influence in Syria and in Lebanon. They'll try to use every trick in their book to be a dominant factor in this region. ●

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