

## A Year after the Ceasefire—Is Lebanon Truly Different?

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**One year after the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, the Lebanese arena is undergoing changes. These changes are reflected both in the internal balance of power between Lebanon's new leadership and Hezbollah, as well as in the balance of power between the organization and the IDF, which has not relented and continues to weaken it. However, this opportunity for change is overshadowed by Hezbollah's determination to recover and by the difficulties facing the Lebanese government, which remains weak as it attempts to compel the organization to relinquish its weapons and autonomous status. Given the growing risk of another round of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, Israel should maximize its achievements thus far and adopt a policy that combines continued essential military action with diplomatic steps to strengthen Lebanon's current leadership.**

Hezbollah's resounding defeat in the war against Israel shook the Lebanese system. In particular, it changed the political balance of power between the organization's supporters and its opponents, raising hopes for improvement in Lebanon's dire situation. Even before absorbing the war's damage, estimated at approximately \$11 billion, Lebanon was considered a failed state, mired in a deep economic crisis, held captive by both Hezbollah and Iran, and unable to provide services to its citizens.

Hezbollah's defeat created an opening for change within Lebanon's political system, centered on the consolidation of a new leadership that emerged without Hezbollah's consent. This leadership is led by President Joseph Aoun—who is a Christian and a former Lebanese army chief of staff—and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, a Sunni Muslim and former president of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Both are committed to repairing the state and strengthening Lebanon's security and sovereignty, unlike their predecessors, who belonged to the elites who had wealth and power and were primarily focused on their sectarian and personal interests.

Lebanon's new leadership has championed the promotion of reforms and the reconstruction of the economy and infrastructure, alongside strengthening Lebanon's sovereignty by eliminating the phenomenon of independent militias in the country, foremost among them Hezbollah. Regarding Israel, the government's guiding principles include a commitment to the full implementation of the UN Security Council resolution as determined in the armistice agreement between the two states from March 1949, as well as reaffirmation of the ceasefire agreement with Israel from November 27, 2024, while ensuring Lebanon's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political independence within its recognized borders.

Again, unlike its predecessors, this government has not adopted Hezbollah's resistance narrative, and its composition clearly reflects the change in Hezbollah's status and its reduced influence. Whereas in the past Hezbollah managed to control the decision-making process in

Lebanon, in the current government, only five out of 24 ministers belong to the “Shiite bloc” (two affiliated with Hezbollah, two with Amal, and one minister not associated with these groups). In this situation, Hezbollah failed to prevent the fateful decision adopted at the government meeting of August 5 regarding the “disarming” of all the militias in the country and transfer the weapons to the Lebanese Armed Forces (that is, the disarmament of Hezbollah) and settled for expressing protest by having Shiite ministers absent themselves from the vote.

However, the government has thus far failed to implement this decision due to Hezbollah’s adamant opposition. The organization continues to deter the leadership and its political opponents with the residual armed power at its disposal (which it has not hesitated to use in the past), especially as it brandishes the threat that forcibly disarming it could lead to another Lebanese civil war. Hezbollah’s deterrent power vis-à-vis the government is compounded by the weakness of the Lebanese Armed Forces, which lack the ability to carry out the difficult task assigned to them, as well as by the high proportion of Shiite soldiers in their ranks, some of whom identify with Hezbollah. In this situation, the Lebanese leadership (and accordingly also the Lebanese Armed Forces) has refrained from entering into a violent confrontation with Hezbollah and instead seeks to implement the decision through “diplomatic means,” which are insufficient to achieve the desired results.

Hezbollah is coping with the consequences of the war, while its operatives, weapons, and infrastructure are under constant IDF attacks, mainly in southern Lebanon, but also in Beirut and the Beqaa Valley. For now, it has chosen to focus on reorganizing and rebuilding its military and economic capabilities with Iran’s assistance. The organization’s new strategy includes refraining from responding to IDF strikes and assigning the government the responsibility of managing the confrontation with Israel while demanding that it seek an end to Israel’s attacks and secure Israel’s withdrawal from all Lebanese territory. Hezbollah itself is careful to avoid a violent confrontation with both the Lebanese government and the Lebanese Armed Forces. Nevertheless, it still maintains deterrent capability toward its domestic opponents.

Despite its difficulties in confronting Hezbollah, the Lebanese government has recently taken another significant step vis-à-vis Israel—one that runs counter to the organization’s position. Specifically, it decided to include Simon Karam, a diplomat representing Lebanon, in a dialogue with an Israeli civilian representative on economic cooperation at the December 3 meeting of the five-party enforcement committee (United States, France, Israel, Lebanon, and UNIFIL) that oversees the ceasefire. Ostensibly, this is a relatively small step, but it is of considerable significance given Hezbollah’s staunch opposition to any direct contact between Lebanese and Israeli representatives. This opposition mirrors its prewar position regarding negotiations over the maritime boundary between Israel and Lebanon in October 2022. At that time, Hezbollah agreed to the talks but insisted that direct dialogue not take place in order to avoid implying any change in relations between the two states. Now, Hezbollah has conditioned dialogue with Israel on Israel’s ceasing its military activity against the organization and withdrawing from all Lebanese territory. Hezbollah Secretary-General Naim Qassem claimed on December 5 that the decision contradicts all of the organization’s positions and constitutes a major Lebanese concession to Israel without any compensation, sharply criticizing the Lebanese

government and likening this decision to drilling a hole in a ship at sea that carries all the country's citizens.

The Lebanese government may have been pushed into this move out of fear of an escalating confrontation with Israel, which has threatened another round of fighting on the grounds that Hezbollah is recovering at a faster pace than the IDF is able to maintain the organization's weakness. Among the factors contributing to this are massive US pressure, including the setting of a deadline for Hezbollah's disarmament, as well as the IDF's killing on November 23 of Ali Tabatabai, Hezbollah's acting chief of staff (this was a severe blow to the organization that could have led to a response), and the Pope's visit to Lebanon on November 30, which served to boost the morale of the Christian public and to work toward a new future for Lebanon. All these factors led the Lebanese government to risk pursuing direct dialogue with Israel. Addressing the issue, President Aoun stated on December 5 that the move was not intended to appease the international community but was meant to serve Lebanon's interests and prevent another round of violence, from which there would be no turning back. This suggests that the Lebanese leadership intends to stay on the negotiating track with Israel, although its ability to do so will depend on developments in the military confrontation between the sides—both Israel's actions and Hezbollah's stance, especially if Hezbollah abandons its policy of restraint in response to IDF strikes.

This decision by the Lebanese government reflects an additional decline in Hezbollah's standing within Lebanon's political system and intensifies the dilemma it faces. The organization still possesses deterrent capability vis-à-vis the Lebanese leadership, which fears that Hezbollah could act against the government or independently trigger a military escalation with Israel. However, either move would likely further aggravate Hezbollah's situation and weaken it. At the same time, refraining from a response could embolden the Lebanese leadership to advance negotiations with Israel, continue efforts to weaken Iranian involvement, and disrupt Hezbollah's smuggling attempts, while the IDF continues to weaken the organization. Any decision Hezbollah makes on these substantive issues is also expected to be influenced by Iran's position, given Hezbollah's reliance on Iranian support (according to the US Treasury Department, Iran has transferred approximately \$1 billion to Hezbollah since the ceasefire). Moreover, Iran currently wields considerable influence over the organization—more than it did during Nasrallah's tenure.

Hezbollah is also compelled to take into account additional constraints. First, it has lost its deterrence balance vis-à-vis the IDF, which has attacked Hezbollah on an almost daily basis since the ceasefire. Although the organization has advanced its reconstruction efforts and maintained a presence in southern Lebanon—despite claims by its representatives that it has withdrawn from the area—it has not done so at the pace it desires. Over the past year, the IDF has struck Hezbollah targets approximately 700 times and has killed over 350 operatives. Second, the organization lacks its veteran political and military leadership—much of which was eliminated during and after the war—particularly Nasrallah. Third, Hezbollah is struggling to meet the needs of its Shiite supporters, particularly those harmed in the war, which has eroded support even within the Shiite community. Fourth, criticism is growing among Lebanon's broader population, given Hezbollah's perceived responsibility for Lebanon's dire situation due to the war's damage. Fifth, external pressure from outside Lebanon (which recently includes Egypt and Qatar) is mounting to calm the situation and prevent a renewed

confrontation, alongside greater international efforts to target Hezbollah's financial sources. Sixth, parallel pressure is being applied to the Lebanese government from within and without, especially by the United States, to fulfill its commitment to disarm Hezbollah.

In conclusion, a year after the ceasefire agreement entered into force, a shift in the balance of power in the Lebanese system is indeed evident between the "sovereignty camp," led by the new leadership, and Hezbollah's "resistance camp." However, this has not yet produced a substantive change in Lebanon's overall trajectory. A particularly weak link is the Lebanese Armed Forces, which cannot cope with the complex and difficult task of disarming Hezbollah and the other militias. Moreover, the state continues to struggle to extricate itself from its deep economic crisis, in part because it has failed to meet the obligations imposed upon it—not only regarding Hezbollah but also in terms of advancing reforms to address Lebanon's chronic maladies: its sectarian structure, the failed and corrupt banking system, the poor functioning of state institutions, and its dilapidated infrastructure.

From Israel's perspective, the results of the war have created opportunities to weaken Hezbollah and, at the same time, reshape Israel's relationship with Lebanon. Yet about a year later, the prospect for change is overshadowed by the difficulty of the Lebanese leadership in imposing its will on Hezbollah and by the persistent risk of another round of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, initiated by either side. Under these circumstances, to fully exploit the narrow window of opportunity for positive change, Israel should pursue a policy that combines continued military action with diplomatic steps to advance a shared objective: preserving Hezbollah's weakness while strengthening the Lebanese state. This effort should be carried out in close coordination with the United States, which plays a key role in the Lebanese arena and whose continued involvement is vital for Israel.

Within this framework, the following needs should be emphasized:

- Continued strikes against Hezbollah targets to weaken it and prevent its recovery, and, if possible, do so in coordination with the Lebanese leadership given the shared interest. At the same time, Israel should avoid a broad operation that could cause severe harm to uninvolved Lebanese civilians, which would undermine the justification for the IDF's actions and complicate the Lebanese side's position.
- Support for the strengthening of the Lebanese Armed Forces, but only in exchange for internal restructuring that includes a "cleaning of the Augean stables," particularly of officers and soldiers identified with Hezbollah.
- Agreement to any initiative that advances negotiations with Lebanon, even if progress is slow, including in political and economic cooperation. In this context, it is important to raise the need to amend Lebanese law prohibiting contact with Israelis.
- Formulation of a position on potential Israeli concessions aimed at strengthening the Lebanese leadership. In this context, options to examine include releasing prisoners that would be credited to the leadership; reducing IDF presence at points along the border; agreeing to begin advancing Trump's plan for economic development on the Lebanese side of the border (including support for reconstruction in the Shiite areas of southern Lebanon to reduce dependence on Hezbollah); and assisting in advancing economic projects that benefit

the entire Lebanese population (such as support for building an additional airport or renewing Lebanese rail traffic).

- Expansion of state-level efforts to block Hezbollah's financial sources in the international arena.
- Participation in the dialogue that has already begun on the Lebanese side regarding the deployment of an international force along the Lebanon border as an alternative to UNIFIL, in order to influence the outcome (UNIFIL's mandate is set to expire at the end of 2026, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2790).

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