

# Changing the Israel-Lebanon Status Quo: U.S. Options

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**From exploring land border talks to boosting Israel's arsenal and recasting UNIFIL, Washington should do more to slow what may be an inevitable slide toward war on this front.**

Nearly six months into the Gaza war, Israel has come to the realization that the pre-October 7 status quo in south Lebanon is no longer tenable. Whether a new status quo is established through negotiation or force of arms, something will have to give—the question is when and under what circumstances. Either way, the United States can and should take more steps to defer escalation.

## Current Status of the Lebanon Front

Israel's northern frontier has remained in a state of medium-intensity conflict (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border>) since Hamas attacked the southern frontier last October. The twenty-eight border communities evacuated months ago are still empty, with around 80,000 Israelis barred from returning home amid daily exchanges of fire and persistent fears of a Hamas-style invasion and cross-border kidnapping spree. A similar number of southern Lebanese residents remain evacuated as well.

The bulk of the fighting has been contained to the frontier region, with both sides targeting combatants for the most part. Hezbollah is mainly firing at military outposts and bases; it also periodically launches rockets and drones into emptied civilian areas. The Israel Defense Forces have directed their fire at key Hezbollah infrastructure, arms depots, and personnel, particularly the estimated 10,000 Radwan special forces that deployed along the border when the crisis began. In addition, the IDF has responded to occasional Hezbollah escalation by operating more deeply (up to 110 kilometers) inside Lebanon, striking drone factories, antiaircraft batteries, and other strategic targets in the Beqa Valley and elsewhere.

In all, around a dozen Israeli soldiers have been killed in these exchanges, along with some 300 fighters on the other side (a tally that includes Hezbollah personnel and Palestinian militants who have attacked from Lebanese territory with the **group's blessing** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/red-hot-blue-line>)). Yet while the danger of sudden escalation remains high, Hezbollah's patrons in Tehran still seemingly prefer to avoid full-scale war for the time being—partly to preserve the group's potent military capabilities, but also to deter Israeli attacks on Iran itself, including against the regime's **accelerating nuclear program** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-and-europe-need-get-same-page-regarding-irans-nuclear-progress>). (Though it should be noted that today's apparent Israeli strike on senior Iranian military officers at a consular facility in Damascus could change Tehran's calculus significantly and bears close watching for potentially imminent retaliation on the regime's proxy fronts.)

## Israel's Dilemma

**P** rime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is under increasing domestic pressure to facilitate the return of evacuated citizens to the north, especially following this week's mass protests against his government. To ensure the safety of these returnees, however, Israeli defense officials say that Radwan troops must remain around seven to ten kilometers north of the border. This demand—which reflects the approximate range of Hezbollah's lethal Kornet antitank missiles—differs from even the pre-October 7 disposition of Hezbollah's forces and would therefore require either a major concession on the group's part or a major military campaign that compels a permanent retreat. Further complicating matters, Israel hopes to achieve these new circumstances by September, reportedly to ensure that children from the north start the new school year in their home districts.

Israeli air operations have already led most Radwan units to withdraw from the border, but Israel is concerned that they will return after a ceasefire. This apprehension is well founded. Following Israel's previous war with Hezbollah in 2006, UN Security Council Resolution 1701 stipulated that the group move its forces and assets north of the Litani River. This arrangement was supposed to be guaranteed by the Lebanese government and the 15,000 peacekeepers that composed the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)—the largest concentration of peacekeepers per kilometer in the world. Yet Hezbollah eventually reestablished itself on the border anyway.

## Feasibility of a Ceasefire and Border Deal?

**T** o forestall a full-scale war, the Biden administration seeks to broker both a ceasefire and a wider deal in which Hezbollah keeps all of its forces seven kilometers from the frontier. In return, Israel would end at least some of its **air operations over Lebanon** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-look-down-struggle-over-lebanons-airspace>), while Beirut would deploy 15,000 troops from the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) south of the Litani. Led by U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein, this effort to implement elements of Resolution 1701 also calls for the two countries to commence discussions on disputed border points along the so-called Blue Line. Observers believe that such negotiations would probably result in border modifications of several hundred meters in Lebanon's favor in areas where Israel acknowledges it has gone north of the Blue Line; this includes reunifying the divided village of Ghajar.

Although Hezbollah would likely spin a ceasefire and land border deal as another “divine victory” similar to 2006, the Israeli government would still welcome such an agreement. As difficult as the Gaza war has been, a conflagration with Hezbollah would be even more demanding and destructive. Some Israelis deem such a conflict inevitable, but even they acknowledge that the state needs time to let its economy breathe again and replenish its arsenal in preparation for a challenging war in the north.

A deal may not be possible, however. Hezbollah does not want a war right now, and its stated objective remains to “resist” the Israeli “occupation” of Lebanon. Yet it is not clear that the organization actually wants a defined border

with Israel, since this outcome would undermine its rationale for maintaining an oversized militia force and dominating the Lebanese state. Even if the deal currently being discussed is finalized, Hezbollah would almost certainly claim that Israel is still occupying “Lebanese territory”—namely, the Shebaa Farms (i.e., Israeli-held Syrian land that Hezbollah claims is Lebanese) and seven villages whose disputed status dates back to the 1923 British Mandate for Palestine.

The Biden administration could try to further incentivize Hezbollah’s acquiescence by offering to support the organization’s preferred candidate—Sleiman Frangieh—for Lebanon’s presidency, a post that has been vacant for nearly two years. Yet while choosing a president is ultimately required to endorse a border agreement, stumping for Frangieh is an ill-advised gambit that would only bolster Hezbollah’s already advanced efforts to **capture the state** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reinforcing-us-diplomacy-stop-hezbollah-israel-war>).

Washington is also reportedly trying to sweeten the deal by proposing to underwrite the LAF’s salaries and economically develop south Lebanon, all in the hope of discouraging future Hezbollah adventurism against Israel. Yet this prospect would likely prove unappealing to Hezbollah, which has long sought to inhibit investment in Lebanon in order to **keep its Shia constituency dependent** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis>) on its (selective) largesse.

Israeli overflights are another potential sticking point. Given UNIFIL’s complete failure to monitor Hezbollah’s compliance with the requirement to stay north of the Litani, Israel is loath to rely on such a conflict-averse organization for the crucial task of monitoring whether Radwan forces stay away from the frontier. One idea under consideration is bolstering UNIFIL with a separate German and/or French ground monitoring presence. Yet these states have long demonstrated their own aversion to conflict in the region, so asking them to deploy is unlikely to assuage Israel. Instead, the IDF is almost certain to insist that it continue drone reconnaissance flights over south Lebanon following a ceasefire, and Hezbollah is unlikely to accept this condition.

Even if a Gaza ceasefire is achieved and Hezbollah de-escalates in response, Israel might opt to continue its current level of operations in south Lebanon. Well before the Gaza war, Hezbollah had been provoking escalation by launching drones and antitank missiles into Israel, setting up a small military outpost on Israeli territory, and detonating a roadside bomb near Megiddo, among other violations. Israel’s tepid responses seemed to erode deterrence and embolden the group. Since October 7, however, IDF strikes in Lebanon have demonstrated a high level of offensive and defensive capability, intelligence targeting and collection, and willingness to undertake escalatory risk. In short, Israel is now operating there with few constraints, much like it has against Iranian threats in Syria for the better part of a decade. Israeli officials may therefore conclude that letting the IDF exercise these new rules of engagement in south Lebanon is a better option than trusting UNIFIL or the LAF to constrain Radwan or otherwise shield frontier residents.

## Policy Recommendations

**T**he Biden administration is determined to negotiate a ceasefire in Gaza and a de-escalation between Hezbollah and Israel. This desirable goal may not be achievable, particularly at a time when many Israelis believe war with Hezbollah is a matter of when, not if. Yet Washington should still persist in these diplomatic efforts if only to forestall the inevitable, though without compromising on the Lebanese presidency. It should also help ensure that Israel is prepared for such a conflict down the road by replenishing the country’s arsenal—if necessary, stipulating that these arms are not to be used in a Rafah campaign. A better-equipped Israel may help discourage Hezbollah aggression in the near term.

Concurrently, Washington should refocus on solutions to the monitoring problem in south Lebanon. Hezbollah has proven that it will cheat on any agreement that changes the status quo of its deployments there, while UNIFIL has

proven to be ineffective since its inception. In the lead-up to renewing the force’s mandate this August, U.S. officials should spearhead a vigorous effort to change the way UNIFIL does business. In short, the monitors need monitoring. For example, UNIFIL could agree to start flying reconnaissance drones over the south and making the video feeds publicly available. Hezbollah has long called UNIFIL drones a “red line”—as sure a sign as any that the group does not want its violations of Resolution 1701 exposed.

At the same time, Washington should attempt to engage and leverage the population of south Lebanon, where many residents have little use (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community>) for Hezbollah, its endless conflict with Israel, or the evacuations they have had to endure for months. In this regard, UNIFIL’s presence does provide a pair of real benefits: increased economic activity and less chance of getting caught up in armed clashes with Israel. If southern towns want to reap these benefits, they should be expected to proactively request and welcome UN outposts and patrols, even when these deployments prove intrusive on occasion. Ideally, locals would also signal their unwillingness to tolerate militia activity in other ways. Last week, for example, residents in the primarily Christian community of Rmeich prevented Hezbollah forces from launching rockets within the city’s limits.

Ultimately, fixing UNIFIL and deploying the LAF to the south may not be sufficient to prevent a future conflagration. Yet Washington and Israel still have an interest in deferring escalation.

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