

U.S.-French Cooperation on Preventing an Israel-Hezbollah War

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Apr 26, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Washington and Paris have been pursuing convergent efforts to avoid all-out war, but more coordination is advisable and seems increasingly likely after the latest escalation.

Over the past week, French diplomacy has been particularly active on the Lebanese file. On April 18, European Union leaders adopted a [common position on Lebanon](#) (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/m5jlwe0p/euco-conclusions-20240417-18-en.pdf>) after robust lobbying from Paris. A day later, President Emmanuel Macron [hosted](#) (https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2024/04/18/emmanuel-macron-to-meet-lebanon-pm-in-paris_6668825_5.html) Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) chief Joseph Aoun. Previously, the French government had proposed a new Israeli-Lebanese security arrangement in March, eliciting a vague but positive [official letter](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/beirut-says-french-plan-lebanon-israel-truce-could-be-step-stability-2024-03-15/>) from Beirut, probably with Hezbollah’s approval.

These activities are in line with France’s overarching support to Lebanon and its diplomatic approach since the current cycle of Hezbollah-Israel hostilities erupted last October. Like Washington, Paris has [steadily sought](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/frances-diplomatic-role-middle-east-post-october-7>) a diplomatic solution to prevent all-out war, sending its foreign minister, defense minister, and other [high-level officials](#) (<https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/301993-french-delegation-to-arrive-in-beirut-from-israel>) to Israel and Lebanon multiple times. French and U.S. officials have intensified their contacts lately as well, indicating that increased cooperation is on the horizon or already in motion. What are the contours of such coordination, and what goals does each ally seek to prioritize going forward?

Comparing the French and U.S. Plans

The two governments have already developed separate plans for resolving the current Lebanon crisis, and the commonalities between these plans are striking. Both reflect wariness about regional escalation, and both seek to build on and at least partially implement [UN Security Council Resolution 1701](#) (<https://peacemaker.un.org/israellebanon-resolution1701>), whose terms were first adopted after the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war but never adequately enforced. Specifically, they seek:

- The withdrawal of Hezbollah’s armed personnel and some of its military capabilities away from the border.
- Large-scale LAF deployments to the south, backed by the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).
- An end to Israeli military overflights of Lebanese territory.
- New Israeli-Lebanese negotiations on delimiting their land border.

Paris and Washington’s parameters for these elements differ only slightly—for example, the French plan calls for Hezbollah to move ten kilometers back from the border, while the U.S. plan [calls for seven](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/changing-israel-lebanon-status-quo-us-options>). Moreover, the American plan seems broader, reportedly combining the above elements with [economic incentives](#) (<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1411532/hochstein-back-in-beirut-to-avoid-the-worst.html>), while France remains focused on security issues. Both plans are organized into three phases, but the French plan tackles the de-escalatory phase in [more detail](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/france-proposes-hezbollah-withdrawal-border-talks-israel-lebanon-truce-2024-02-12/>), with a short timeline for achieving the following:

1. An immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah.
2. Within three days, a Hezbollah withdrawal ten kilometers north of the UN-demarcated Blue Line, after which the LAF is to begin deploying south and Israeli forces are to halt overflights.
3. Within ten days, the beginning of border talks. Notably, these talks are unlikely to include the Shebaa Farms; although Hezbollah has used this disputed area as a pretext for continuing hostilities, negotiating its status would require engagement with Syria and is therefore out of bounds for now.

Moreover, France [seems eager](#) (https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/02/10/france-and-us-outline-diplomatic-solution-for-israel-lebanon-tensions_6512075_4.html) to emulate the 1996 “April understanding” (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311678119_The_1996_Grapes_of_Wrath_Ceasefire_Agreement_and_the_Israel-Lebanon_Monitoring_Group_A_Model_of_Successful_Negotiations_in_Conflict_Management), which set up a monitoring mechanism overseen by the United States, France, Lebanon, Israel, and Syria (though again, no role is envisioned for Syria in the current circumstances, and the only other international player currently capable of influencing Hezbollah—Iran—cannot play such a role either). This type of arrangement could put the future of UNIFIL’s tripartite meetings with Israeli and LAF officials in doubt—meetings that have been on hold during the Gaza war but previously served as a useful forum for exchanging information and deconflicting on issues relevant to Resolution 1701. Yet given the longstanding pressure and criticism [aimed at UNIFIL](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/red-hot-blue-line>), formulating a system similar to the 1996 mechanism would bring in more guarantors and might therefore improve confidence.

From Rivalry to Cooperation

There is no clear explanation why Paris and Washington have not put forward a joint initiative. Historically, however, the two allies have had a complex working relationship in Lebanon. Sometimes their visions did not align. Back in the 1940s, Washington [had to pressure](#) (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/book-launch-american-diplomacy-toward-lebanon-lessons-foreign-policy-and-middle-east>) Paris to grant Lebanon independence. More recently, the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” strategy against Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies made Washington [wary of](#) (<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2495556/crisis-hit-lebanon-paris-and-washington-odds-over-hezbollah>) France’s endeavors in Lebanon after the 2020 Beirut port explosion.

In contrast, the (admittedly rare) diplomatic successes in Lebanon over the past two decades—including the [2005 Syrian withdrawal \(https://www.jstor.org/stable/23012172\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23012172)—were often the result of close French and American cooperation, and the two allies appear to be visibly coordinating on the current crisis as well. During an [April 2 presser \(https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-french-foreign-minister-stephane-sejourne-at-a-joint-press-availability/\)](https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-french-foreign-minister-stephane-sejourne-at-a-joint-press-availability/) in Paris with his French counterpart, Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted, “France made proposals that were favorably received by our Lebanese partners,” implying that Washington is regularly informed about French efforts. Days later, French envoy Jean-Yves Le Drian [visited Washington \(https://x.com/amoshochstein/status/1779881413233320043\)](https://x.com/amoshochstein/status/1779881413233320043) to discuss the situation with Blinken and U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein, who [worked closely \(https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1314617/france-the-other-mediator-in-the-maritime-deal.html\)](https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1314617/france-the-other-mediator-in-the-maritime-deal.html) with Paris on the 2022 Israel-Lebanon [maritime agreement \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/securing-or-insecuring-israel-assessing-israel-lebanon-maritime-agreement\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/securing-or-insecuring-israel-assessing-israel-lebanon-maritime-agreement).

For Paris, U.S. leverage on Israel is evidently irreplaceable. American leverage is also needed in Lebanon, since U.S. fatigue (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/lessons-american-diplomacy-toward-lebanon>) can significantly limit the results of French diplomacy.

If an agreement is reached between Israel and Lebanon, U.S. and French officials will have to work closely at the Security Council—not only because of the role that UNIFIL and the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) play on the ground, but also due to last year's [difficult](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-1-hezbollah-un) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-1-hezbollah-un>) UNIFIL mandate renewal, which saw Russia and China abstain from the vote in support of Beirut and Hezbollah's request for enhanced scrutiny over the peacekeeping mission. Beijing and, to a greater extent, Moscow will likely continue such obstruction going forward, especially since Russia has been strengthening its ties with Iran during the Ukraine war.

Humanitarian and development aid. Paris and Washington could build on previous [donor conferences \(https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN255098/\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN255098/) and the [joint French-Saudi humanitarian fund \(https://twitter.com/AmbaFranceLiban/status/1611265677058510848?\)](https://twitter.com/AmbaFranceLiban/status/1611265677058510848?)

Presidential vacancy. Paris and Washington must also remain engaged in Lebanon’s political process as part of the “[Quintet \(https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1366862/berri-voices-agreement-with-quintet-on-election-of-president-made-in-lebanon.html\)](https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1366862/berri-voices-agreement-with-quintet-on-election-of-president-made-in-lebanon.html)” with Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. This means striking a delicate balance between their short-term goals (preventing all-out war) and long-term goals (governance reform). One issue in particular—the presidential vacancy that has persisted for a year and a half, and which Hezbollah’s camp is eager to fill—will no doubt prove very difficult for Beirut to negotiate, so U.S. and French officials might be tempted to turn the post into a bargaining chip. Yet they may be better off taking a resolute and unified stance on the necessity of a “third-way candidate,” to be identified and agreed upon by Lebanese parties. The “rally round the flag” effect of recent crises with Israel has not translated into more domestic political capital for Hezbollah, which remains unable to secure a majority coalition. Even its erstwhile Christian partner, the FPM, has [repeatedly rejected \(https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1409385/guerre-avec-israel-le-hezbollah-a-perdu-le-pouvoir-de-decision-selon-bassil.html\)](https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1409385/guerre-avec-israel-le-hezbollah-a-perdu-le-pouvoir-de-decision-selon-bassil.html) its preferred candidate for president, Sleiman Frangieh.

It remains unclear how Iran and Israel's recent exchange of direct fire will affect the Lebanese scene diplomatically or militarily. Clashes with Hezbollah have crossed new thresholds since last week, and the cross-border fire (<https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4982966-israeli-strikes-hit-southern-lebanon-cross-border-fire-escalates>) is continuously escalating. Indeed, Israel seems bent on continuing its operations against the group until it obtains a new status quo (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/changing-israel-lebanan-status-quo-us-options>)—a goal it may pursue even if its de-escalation with Iran sticks and an elusive ceasefire is reached in Gaza. (Notably, Hezbollah views a Gaza ceasefire as an indispensable prerequisite to any agreement on standing down in Lebanon.)

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