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Situation Assessement | 3 Decembre 2024

Israel Hezbollah Ceasefire: Drivers and Challenges

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: Situation Assessement

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Unit for Political Studies

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The US brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah came into effect at dawn on 27 November 2024, ending 14 months of fighting between the two sides. The day after Operation "Al-Aqsa Flood", launched by Hamas on 7 October 2023, Hezbollah opened up a limited front with Israel in order to support Gaza, which Israel soon escalated. Israel's aggression reached a peak on 23 September 2024, when it launched "Operation Arrows of the North", violating the rules of engagement by making Hezbollah choose between stopping the support front and open war. Israel followed with a ground invasion of southern Lebanon on 30 September.

I: Broad Outlines

The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Lebanon was based on UN Security Council Resolution 1701. The deal calls for the full implementation of the Resolution[1] and was worded in a way that leaves wide room for interpretation. For example, it indicates that Resolution 1701 stipulates the full implementation of previous Security Council resolutions on which it was based, including Resolution 1559 without explicit mention, which demands the disarmament of all armed groups, as well as Resolution 1680, which instructs the demarcation of the land border between Syria and Lebanon. The agreement also affirms the right to self-defence of both Lebanon and Israel in accordance with international law. Many consider this as allowing Israel too much freedom to strike Hezbollah under the pretext of the "right to self-defence", while Hezbollah refrains from any action against Israel for fear of slipping back into an open confrontation. The agreement also indicates that Israel will gradually withdraw its forces south of the Blue Line within sixty days, while Hezbollah will withdraw its forces north of the Litani River. This will enable displaced civilians on both sides of the border to return.

The agreement also states that in parallel with the Israeli withdrawal, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) will deploy about 10,000 troops south of the Litani River and begin dismantling infrastructure and military positions (not belonging to the Lebanese state), in addition to confiscating all unauthorised arms inconsistent with these commitments (an implicit reference to Hezbollah's weapons, sites and tunnels). Meanwhile, the LAF and Lebanese security forces are expected to monitor and prevent any unauthorised entry of arms and related materiel into and throughout Lebanon, while the Lebanese government will regulate and monitor the production of weapons in Lebanon. These were the Israeli conditions for stopping the war and practically the declared goals of the war.

The agreement further states that to enable the Lebanese state to carry out its duties, the US and France would work with the international community to provide appropriate support to the Lebanese Armed Forces, including training them to dismantle and inspect unauthorized sites and infrastructure located above and below ground. The agreement confirms that once the Israeli army completes its withdrawal to the south of the Blue Line and following the deployment of LAF south of the Litani, indirect negotiations will begin between Lebanon and Israel with US mediation to demarcate the

1 Josephine Deeb, "Full Text of the Ceasefire Agreement between Israel and Lebanon," *Middle East Eye*, 27/11/2024, accessed on 1/12/2024, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQy7

land border between them. Thus, the US has entered as a guarantor for the implementation of the deal in Lebanon because Israel believes the Lebanese government is incapable of implementing it alone, which would leave the agreement it with the same fate as Resolution 1701.

II: Israeli Motives

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is driven by countless motivations to prolong the war with Hezbollah as long as possible, most notably his quest to inflict major losses on the group, its support base, and Lebanon. Moreover, he is seeking approval from his allies in the fascist right in his government coalition and responding to the pressures of the heads of the Jewish settlements adjacent to the Lebanese border. Nevertheless, several other factors have pushed Netanyahu toward accepting the ceasefire, some of which he specified in a speech he addressed to Israelis on the eve of the Security Cabinet's approval of the deal, the most important of which are:

1. Hezbollah's acquiescence in severing the link between reaching a ceasefire agreement in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu believes this will isolate and weaken Hamas, forcing it to accept a prisoner exchange deal on Israeli terms, without necessarily ending the war on Gaza.
2. The position of the Israeli military and security establishment, which pushed for an end to the war with Hezbollah and sought a political agreement with the Lebanese state.[2] This position developed in light of the exhaustion of the Israeli army and reserve forces, after fighting for over a year in Gaza and Lebanon, and incurring significant losses, especially among elite forces such as the Golani Brigade. In addition, a high percentage of reserve forces are reluctant to respond to their call-up to serve in the army, which the leadership fears will increase significantly if the war continues.[3] In addition, the military establishment is reluctant to get embroiled in a war of attrition with Hezbollah, whether through occupying new areas in southern Lebanon or remaining in its positions along the border within Lebanese territory.[4]
3. The deal enables Israel to claim victory in its main goal from its war on Lebanon, which it announced in September 2024; the return of displaced Israelis to their areas in northern Israel. In addition to the Israeli army destroying many fortifications, a network of tunnels, and weapons depots in the strip of Lebanese territory adjacent to the Israeli border, the agreement guarantees the removal of Hezbollah forces and weapons to the north of the Litani River, and the deployment of 10,000 LAF soldiers south of the river. The agreement tasks them with preventing the return of Hezbollah forces to the area and dismantling of Hezbollah military sites and infrastructure south of the Litani.

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2 Amos Harel, "After the Agreement in the North, the Government Appears to Be Focused on the South; Not to Recover the Detainees but to Renew Settlement," *Haaretz*, 29/11/2024, accessed on 1/12/2024, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQRR (Hebrew).

3 Ibid.

4 Guy Hazot, "The Conditions Required for the Return of the Northern Residents to Their Homes – The Military Aspect," Institute for National Security Studies, 26/11/2024, accessed on 1/12/2024, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zRjl (Hebrew).

4. Both US President-elect Donald Trump and the Biden administration pressured Netanyahu to accept a ceasefire. Netanyahu also feared that the Biden administration would take steps against Israel during the remainder of his term if Netanyahu refused to accept a ceasefire, such as passing a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire and slowing down the supply of weapons to Israel. In order to persuade Netanyahu to accept a ceasefire in Lebanon, the Biden administration withheld a $693 million ammunition deal from Israel, chipping away at the Israel's military efficacy. The Biden administration quickly approved the deal once Netanyahu accepted a ceasefire.
5. It is easier to accept the agreement and end the war against Lebanon. The government coalition must pass a law in the Knesset exempting the Haredim from compulsory military service in the Israeli army, which is demanded by the Shas and United Torah Judaism parties, in order to ensure the stability of the government coalition. It is expected that the opposition in the Knesset, in Israeli public opinion and even within the military establishment to pass this law will decrease relatively after the end of Israel's war on Hezbollah.
6. Israel has achieved the majority of its goals in this war, as it was able to weaken Hezbollah's military capabilities, diminish its manpower, and remove it from the border, so that the group no longer poses a major threat to Israel as it did in the past. This gives Israel a free hand to act against Iran if it chooses to do so, in addition to disengaging Hezbollah military from Palestine, and forcing the party to engage in Lebanese politics within the Taif framework.

III: Hezbollah's Motives

Hezbollah accepted the ceasefire agreement according to the conditions it had previously rejected, agreeing to separate the course of the war in Lebanon from Gaza. This can be explained by its huge losses, especially in recent months, and specifically since Israel assassinated the party's military commander, Fuad Shukr, on 30 July. Since then, Israel has dealt painful blows to the party, starting with the bombing of pagers and walkie-talkies on 17 and 18 September, then the assassination of the leaders of the Redwan force on 20 September, before unleashing a major air campaign that culminated in the assassination of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah on 27 September. The majority of Hezbollah's first-tier political and military leadership and a many of its military cadres were subsequently killed and of a large portion of its long- and medium-range precision missile arsenal was destroyed. Moreover, its financial, health and social services network was destroyed through barbaric bombing that affected the group's social incubator. This included the devastation of entire villages in southern Lebanon and more than 400 residential buildings in the southern suburb of Dahiyeh, as far as Beqaa, where the group's social support is also concentrated. This threatens Hezbollah's very existence not only as a regional military force, but also as the most prominent political and military organization in Lebanon. The group thus accepted a ceasefire according to the conditions imposed upon it.

It would be a grave mistake to conclude that the outcome of this war heralds the end of Hezbollah. The party has weakened regionally and in its conflict with Israel, losing much of its prestige in Lebanon itself. But it remains an organized and armed political force with a popular base that must be reckoned with in Lebanese political life. This will be clear in the turnout for the planned funeral of Nasrallah, and other occasions. The party faces major challenges related to reconstruction, addressing the effects of the war on its support base and cadres, and restoring its reputation. These are concrete tasks through which it will have to prove its resilience, and which declarations of victory do not answer. The party has held its ground and regained its breath in the fighting of recent weeks in particular, but in no way has it won this war.

IV: Challenges to the Ceasefire Agreement

Israel intends to implement Security Council Resolution 1701 in its entirety, under the insistence of its political and military leaders.[5] It confirms that it will use military power, especially the air force, to strike any Hezbollah target that Israel considers a violation of the ceasefire agreement, according to its own interpretation. Israel believes that it can do this without consequences, based on guarantees from the US administration.

The Israeli military occupation of southern Lebanon for a period of sixty days, according to the terms of the agreement, violates the rights of Lebanese civilians who are trying to return to their towns and homes in southern Lebanon. Israel's insistence on preventing Hezbollah from regaining its military strength also raises concerns that it will use this as a pretext to violate Lebanese territory, as it does in Syria, where Israel routinely and almost daily launches air, missile, or artillery strikes against what it claims are Hezbollah targets or arms shipments. Serious questions remain about how the Lebanese army will dismantle Hezbollah's military infrastructure and take control of Hezbollah weapons and ammunition production facilities in Lebanon, or how it will deal with the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah from Syrian territory, and what the US role will be in supervising the implementation of the agreement. However, Israel considers all of this to be part of the agreement and has begun bombing sites where it suspects weapons are present.

Furthermore, the dispute between Israel and Lebanon over the demarcation of the borders remains a matter of concern. In the indirect negotiations with Lebanon, which are scheduled to take place in the coming months, it is unlikely that Israel will submit to the demand to withdraw from the Lebanese territories that it has long occupied, including the Shebaa Farms and part of the village of Ghajar, in addition to 13 points on the Lebanese-Israeli border, an area of about 4,850 dunams, including the western border point located on the Mediterranean coast at Ras Naqoura, which occupies strategic importance in determining not only the land border but also, and primarily, the maritime border.[6]

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5 Ibid.

6 Orna Mizrahi and Steven Cohen, "Between War and Settlement on the Borders of Lebanon – The Dispute over the Land Border," Special Bulletin, Institute for National Security Studies, 14/2/2024, accessed on 1/12/2024, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQxa (Hebrew)

Conclusion

Israel seeks to capitalize on the gains it has made in its war on Hezbollah, to prevent it from rearming and push it back from the border. Israel also hopes to work, in cooperation with the US and other regional and Lebanese powers, to remove Hezbollah from the equation in the conflict with Israel. It also seeks to diminish the group's regional role and transform it into a local party, like other Lebanese parties, so that its focus turns to Lebanon's domestic problems, to Shi'i affairs in Lebanon and its share of the Lebanese state within the framework of the sectarian political system. Israel is then expected to devote itself to dealing with the Iranian nuclear programme, especially once Donald Trump returns to the White House, and to pressure the US and the international community to impose more economic sanctions against Iran until it is ready to make a deal acceptable to Israel. In light of Hezbollah's current weakness, Netanyahu may plant the seeds to prepare the international community for the idea of Israel striking Iranian nuclear facilities, whether alone or in coordination with the United States. Once considered an Iranian reserve force to deter Israel from attacking its nuclear project, Hezbollah is now powerless to deter attacks on its own soil.