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Negotiations Under Fire: Lebanon–Israel Talks at a Crossroads

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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In the wake of two unsuccessful rounds of ambassadorial-level negotiations between Israel and Lebanon in Washington on 14 and 23 April, the White House has begun pressuring Lebanon to convene a presidential meeting in Washington. The US administration is thus seeking to bring Lebanese President Joseph Aoun and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu together without first securing an end to the ongoing Israeli assault on Lebanon or offering guarantees that such a meeting could produce results regarding withdrawal from occupied Lebanese territory. It is highly unusual in international relations for heads of state to meet directly to negotiate during wartime. They would generally be expected to come together to sign a peace treaty once agreement has been reached on the major issues. In this case, however, the proposed meeting is entirely unconditional, without even a guarantee of an end to Israeli attacks on Lebanon; the only issue on the table is cooperation in confronting Hezbollah. While Lebanon is likely to come under intense pressure during the meeting to accept full partnership with Israel in disarming Hezbollah, Netanyahu will seek to exploit the occasion to rehabilitate his international standing and break the isolation surrounding him as an international war criminal. Now that he is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the genocidal war on Gaza, many world leaders now avoid appearing alongside him. Trump, meanwhile, will likely attempt to characteristically market the meeting as another personal achievement: ending yet another war and bringing Lebanon into the framework of the Abraham Accords.

Wartime Negotiations

One week after the resumption of war between Israel and Hezbollah on 2 March 2026, the Lebanese president put forward an initiative on 9 March 2026 aimed at ending the conflict.¹ The initiative was based on a comprehensive ceasefire as the essential gateway to any settlement, accompanied by the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanese territory and the redeployment of the Lebanese army along the international border. This would enable the state to assert its authority in the south and address the issue of weapons outside the framework of the state, in exchange for entering into direct negotiations with Israel under international sponsorship to reach permanent security arrangements and end the state of conflict between the two sides.² Aoun had described Hezbollah's firing of rockets at Israel on 2 March 2026 as irresponsible. Within hours of the attack, which was the first since the ceasefire that Israel had never fully respected and had in practice operated unilaterally since 27 November 2024, he chaired a cabinet session that issued a decision reaffirming the rejection of any military activity launched from Lebanese territory and stressing that decisions of war and peace must rest exclusively in the hands of the state. The decision also stipulated the immediate prohibition of Hezbollah's security and military activities.³ Yet Israel ignored both the Lebanese president's proposal and the Lebanese government's position towards Hezbollah, insisting

1 Suheir Mahmoud, "Nawaf Salam warns against 'reckless adventurism'", *Arabian Week*, 9/3/2026, accessed 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9XM>

2 "Aoun launches initiative calling for direct negotiations with Israel," *Al-Akhbar*, 9/3/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9i9>

3 "Lebanon bans Hezbollah's military activities and demands its surrender its weapons", *AlJazeera*, 2/3/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9DF>

on destroying Hezbollah's military capabilities. However, Iran's insistence that Lebanon be included in the ceasefire reached with the US through Pakistani mediation on 8 April 2026 prompted both Washington and Israel to reconsider Aoun's proposal for direct negotiations between the two parties, with the aim of separating the Lebanese war front from Iran and concluding a peace agreement under which Lebanon would become a full partner in the process of disarming Hezbollah.

The first round of direct negotiations between Lebanon and Israel took place at ambassadorial level on 14 April 2026 at the US State Department, in the presence of Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Subsequently, the US State Department published the full text of the memorandum of understanding reached between the Lebanese and Israeli delegations. It included preliminary understandings providing for a cessation of hostilities from 16 April 2026 "to create the conditions necessary for good-faith negotiations toward enduring peace and security". It also stipulated that Israel would retain what it described as "its right to take whatever measures it deems necessary in self-defence against any imminent or existing threats", while committing to not "carry out any offensive military operations against Lebanese targets, including civilian, military, and other state targets, in the territory of Lebanon by land, air, and sea".⁴ The memorandum further stated that, once the ceasefire entered into force, "with international support, the Government of Lebanon will take meaningful steps to prevent Hezbollah and all other rogue non-state armed groups in the territory of Lebanon from carrying out any attacks, operations, or hostile activities against Israeli targets".

Following the publication of the US State Department memorandum, Trump announced in a post on his Truth Social platform a ten-day ceasefire agreement in Lebanon. In a subsequent post, he stated that he would invite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Joseph Aoun to the White House for "the first serious talks between Israel and Lebanon since 1983", referring to the negotiations that resulted in the 1983 Israel–Lebanon Agreement signed on 17 May that year.⁵

Nevertheless, despite the continuation of negotiations, Israel did not adhere to the ceasefire announced by Trump, continuing its attacks on Lebanon, most recently targeting one of Hezbollah's field commanders in the southern suburbs of Beirut.⁶ Israeli forces also continued their operations within the so called "Yellow Line", as part of a strategy which, according to Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz, aims to establish a "security zone" encompassing the entire area south of the Litani River, amounting to approximately 10 per cent of Lebanese territory.⁷ In this context, residents have been prevented from returning to their homes, while Israeli forces have continued large-scale bombardment and demolition operations, razing dozens of villages to the ground in an effort to alter the demographic reality of southern Lebanon. Netanyahu justifies these policies on the basis

4 "Ten Day Cessation of Hostilities to Enable Peace Negotiations Between Israel and Lebanon", Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, 16/4/2026, accessed 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1CNI>

5 "Trump: 10-day ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel includes Hezbollah", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 16/4/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNM4W>

6 "Lebanon: Israeli escalation targeting the southern suburbs and martyrs in the south", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 7/5/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2sTX>

7 "What is Israel's Military Objective in Lebanon?" *Le monde*, 4/4/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMFP>

of his declared objective of destroying Hezbollah, though in practice they constitute a systematic campaign of destruction and displacement against local communities. At the same time, he seeks a formal commitment from the Lebanese state, through the army, to participate in the disarmament of Hezbollah and to implement this in the coming phase. Otherwise, Israel itself will do it.

Escalating US Pressure

The second round of ambassadorial level negotiations took place on 23 April, part of which was attended by Trump, signalling his desire to reach a swift agreement that would bring Lebanon into the framework of the Abraham Accords. Although this round produced no concrete results and remained confined to preliminary discussions and preparations, Trump seized the opportunity to announce an extension of the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon for three weeks, expressing hope that a trilateral meeting would soon be convened bringing together himself, Netanyahu, and Aoun.⁸

In an intensification of pressure on Lebanon, Trump continued to reiterate his desire to host a meeting at the White House between Netanyahu and Aoun during the ceasefire period, indicating that this could take place within the following two weeks.⁹ However, he offered no guarantees as to what such a meeting might yield, while US sources limited themselves to the possibility that it could help advance Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the US embassy in Beirut stated that Lebanon stood “at a crossroads”, and that a Trump-facilitated direct meeting between Aoun and Netanyahu “would give Lebanon the chance to secure concrete guarantees on full sovereignty, territorial integrity, secure borders, humanitarian and reconstruction support, and the complete restoration of Lebanese state authority over every inch of its territory—guaranteed by the United States”.¹¹

The timeframe set by Washington for convening a meeting between Aoun and Netanyahu coincides with a request reportedly made by Netanyahu during a phone call with Trump to establish a deadline of two to three weeks, expiring in mid-May, to reach an agreement.¹² Failing this, Israel would resume its military operations in Lebanon, alongside preparations for a large-scale ground offensive extending approximately 15 kilometres inland to take control of the entire area south of the Litani River, with the aim of pressuring the Lebanese government to act against Hezbollah.¹³ It appears that

8 “Trump Announces Three-Week Extension for Israel-Lebanon Ceasefire,” *Le monde*, 24/4/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMjW>

9 “Trump says Israel-Lebanon Ceasefire to be Extended by Three Weeks,” *BBC*, 24/4/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMGe>

10 “US Urges Lebanese President to Meet Netanyahu, Suggests Sit-Down could Lead to IDF Pullout,” *The Times of Israel*, 1/5/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMwv>

11 “U.S. Embassy Beirut,” X, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNLOJ>

12 “Trump says he is the Difference this Time as Israel and Lebanon Agree to a Ceasefire,” Associated Press, YouTube, 16/4/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMnb>

13 “Israel Asks Trump to Put 2 - 3 Week Deadline on Lebanon Talks Amid Growing Hezbollah Attacks — Report,” *The Times of Israel*, 29/4/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNLY3>

President Trump does not object to the use of Israeli military pressure on Lebanon to compel it to respond to his call for a presidential-level meeting at the White House. Indeed, he has not opposed Israeli military operations in Lebanon but has instead advised that they be kept within the scope of what he described as “surgical” strikes.¹⁴

Lebanese Divisions

Lebanon is experiencing deep internal divisions regarding the framework and potential outcomes of negotiations with Israel, as well as the broader question of whether to engage in this process in the absence of clear US guarantees, particularly given that the ceasefire brokered by Washington has neither ended hostilities nor curtailed Israeli attacks.

Aoun maintains his support for direct, face-to-face talks with Israel in Washington that aim to transform the (unimplemented) ceasefire into “permanent arrangements” through negotiations, while also stressing the need for Israel to fully comply with the ceasefire. On this basis, he appointed former ambassador Simon Karam as head of the Lebanese delegation.¹⁵ In contrast, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri opposes engaging in negotiations under fire. In his view, the priority must be to end the war before embarking on any political track, and “any negotiations without guarantees of an end to the aggression are unacceptable”.¹⁶

For its part, Hezbollah has stated that the negotiations conducted by the government with Israel do not concern it and that it “will not allow their outcomes to pass”.¹⁷ From the outset, the group has rejected the Washington-sponsored negotiations, regarding them as a series of unilateral concessions to Israel. It has also emphasized that any de-escalation should not grant Israel “freedom of movement” within Lebanese territory, stressing that the continued Israeli military presence justifies its “right of resistance”.¹⁸ Although the group has adhered to the ceasefire, it attributes the ceasefire not to government negotiations but to the resilience of its fighters in the south and to pressure exerted by Iran on the United States, including through the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Hezbollah thus favours an approach based on a broader regional settlement and leveraging international or regional pressure on Israel, rather than engaging in direct negotiations without guarantees that these would lead to an end to Israeli attacks and a withdrawal from the south.¹⁹

14 “Trump Tells Netanyahu Only ‘Surgical’ Lebanon Strikes as Ceasefire Falter,” *Axios*, 29/4/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMaC>

15 “Aoun Wants End of Israeli Attacks before Negotiations, Announcement of Peace ‘from Washington’,” *L’Orient Today*, 1/5/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNLF0>

16 “Nabih Berri reiterates his position: No to negotiations between Lebanon and Israel under fire,” *MC Doualiya*, 4/5/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMtg>

17 “Hezbollah MP: We are capable of thwarting the objectives of direct negotiations with Israel,” *Swissinfo*, 3/5/2026, accessed 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMCZ>

18 “Aoun outlines Lebanon’s position on negotiations with Israel... and Hezbollah’s hands are on the trigger,” *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 17/4/2026, accessed 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMDN>

19 “Naim Qassem: 4 factors that will help us get through this stage, and surrender will not be the solution,” *Arab48*, 4/5/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMgH>

Lebanon has also witnessed attempts by Arab parties to encourage a unified domestic position on direct negotiations with Israel, including calls for a tripartite meeting bringing together President Aoun, Speaker Berri, and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam.²⁰ However, these efforts have failed to yield results, amid continuing divergences in perspectives and positions, particularly between Aoun and Berri, reflecting wider divisions within Lebanese society on the question of negotiations with Israel.²¹ It now appears that Aoun recognizes that he cannot accept Trump's invitation to meet Netanyahu without a unified Lebanese position. Accordingly, the Lebanese presidency issued a statement declaring that "timing is not appropriate for a meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu; We must first reach a security agreement and stop the Israeli attacks against us before raising the issue of a meeting".²²

Conclusion

Lebanon is facing intense US pressure, including military pressure exerted through Israel, to agree to a trilateral meeting involving Trump, Aoun, and Netanyahu, without any guarantees that such a meeting would end the ongoing Israeli assault on Lebanon since October 2023 or result in Israeli withdrawal from its occupied southern territories. While Trump seeks to secure another personal achievement, boasting that he has now ended ten wars and positioning Lebanon as the first new country to join the Abraham Accords launched during his first term, Netanyahu aims to use such a meeting to turn Lebanon into a partner in the disarmament of Hezbollah, even if this risks plunging the country into civil war. For now, it appears unlikely that Lebanon will yield, despite the immense pressure it faces, and agree to such a meeting while Israeli attacks and domestic political divisions persist. Under these circumstances, such a meeting would amount to little more than gratuitous normalization with a leader accused of war crimes, seeking to break his international isolation and obtain exoneration from his victims. Lebanon, however, cannot withstand these pressures alone; it requires a unified Arab response, one that stands behind it rather than leaving the country isolated and vulnerable to Israeli efforts to impose a capitulatory agreement, reminiscent of 1983.

²⁰ "Lebanon's Internal Splits Over Talks with Israel Trip Up Saudi Mediation Efforts," *Reuters*, 1/5/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMzK>

²¹ "Berri to Asharq Al-Awsat: There is no point in negotiating with Israel under fire. The so-called truce has allowed Tel Aviv to escalate its aggression and commit massacres." *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 1/5/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxNMdR>

²² "President Aoun receives MP Geagea and a delegation from the Strong Republic bloc and stresses that the negative atmosphere surrounding the alleged strife in Lebanon is a baseless fabrication", Lebanese Presidency, 4/5/2026, accessed on 7/5/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2sDG>