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# Negotiations under Fire: US Policy on Lebanon

Unit for Political Studies

## Negotiations under Fire: US Policy on Lebanon

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### Unit for Political Studies

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In a final mission before the US presidential elections in early November the United States Special Envoy to Lebanon, Amos Hochstein, visited Beirut to pressure the Lebanese government to accept an amended version of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701. The US administration, which supports Israel's war on Hezbollah, believes that the resolution – which ended the two sides' previous Israel's war with Hezbollah in 2006 – should form the basis for a new ceasefire, but will need additional measures to ensure it is implemented,<sup>1</sup> implying steps to keep Hezbollah away from the border with Israel.

At the same time, pressure is mounting on the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, to facilitate the election of a new president, in order to expedite a decision to send the army to the south before a ceasefire agreement is reached – despite such a scenario being nigh on impossible. This leads to only one conclusion: that the war is being exploited to precipitate the election of a president. Israel refuses to end the war until it achieves what it considers an absolute victory, while Hezbollah, through its official spokesman Muhammad Afif, has stated its flat refusal to “negotiate under fire”, insisting that Israel must halt its aggression before any political understanding can be reached, whether related to implementing Resolution 1701 or to electing a new president.

## Negotiations under Fire

Nearly a year into its confrontation with Hezbollah, which began the day after it launched its war on Gaza on 7 October 2023, Israel announced on 1 October that its forces had crossed the border into southern Lebanon to carry out what it described as “limited, localized and targeted raids against Hezbollah.”<sup>2</sup> This announcement came two weeks after a steep escalation against Hezbollah fighters and commanders, starting with the detonation of hundreds of booby-trapped Hezbollah communications devices<sup>3</sup> and the launch of intensive airstrikes in the southern suburbs of Beirut, southern Lebanon and parts of the Bekaa Valley, including the assassination of a number of Hezbollah leaders, including the party's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>4</sup>

A month in, although the fighting on the ground has remained relatively confined to the border area due to the fierce resistance shown by Hezbollah, Israel has conducted airstrikes across swathes of Lebanon, focusing in particular on Hezbollah's popular strongholds, such as the southern suburbs of Beirut and the Bekaa Valley, displacing more than a million people.<sup>5</sup> The Israeli military campaign, which has also wreaked widespread destruction on southern Lebanese villages, aims to force Hezbollah and the Lebanese government to cave to Israel's conditions: amending Security Council

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1 “Envoy Hochstein says US working with Lebanon and Israel to End Conflict for Good,” *Reuters*, 21/10/2024, accessed on 24/10/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/m5fxdd>.

2 “Israeli Military Announces Ground Invasion of Southern Lebanon,” *New York Times*, 30/9/2024, accessed on 24/10/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/2jmg6c>.

3 ACRPS, “Israel Signals Escalation with Attacks on Hezbollah Communications Devices,” Situation Assessment, 22/9/2024, <https://acr.ps/1L9zP2T>.

4 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), “After Assassinating Nasrallah, Will Israel Escalate Further?” Situation Assessment, 30/9/2024, <https://acr.ps/1L9zP83>.

5 “Israeli Troops Begin Ground Offensive Against Hezbollah in Lebanon,” *Newsweek*, 30/9/2024, accessed on 24/10/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/layk3>.

Resolution 1701 to ensure that Hezbollah disarms, or at least that it cannot regain its strength or a foothold in areas south of the Litani River.

## Return to 1701

Back in August 2006, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1701, ending the July war between Israel and Hezbollah.<sup>6</sup> The resolution calls for the deployment of Lebanese army and expanded the mandate of UN peacekeeping forces (UNIFIL) to include areas south of the Litani River near the border with Israel, while prohibiting any other force from being present in the area.<sup>7</sup> Resolution 1701 also includes provisions aimed at extending the Lebanese government's control and exercise of sovereignty over the whole of Lebanon's territory, in accordance with Resolutions 1559 and 1680 of the same year and relevant provisions of the Taif Agreement, which had ended the country's 1975 - 1990 civil war. It also stipulated that weapons should not circulate or be used without the government's approval,<sup>8</sup> implying that Hezbollah must give up its arms – something the movement strongly rejects.

UNIFIL peacekeeping forces have been deployed<sup>9</sup> in southern Lebanon since Israel invaded the country in 1978. In 2006, their mandate expanded and their numbers were increased to ensure compliance with Resolution 1701. They have been tasked with monitoring the 120-kilometre Blue Line, established by the UN after Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. Under Resolution 1701, both Israel and Lebanon are expected to give UNIFIL advance warning when they wish to carry out any activity near the Blue Line. According to the UN mission, "any crossing of the Blue Line by land or air from either side constitutes a violation of Security Council resolution 1701."<sup>10</sup>

Since its adoption on 11 August 2006, the resolution has been subject to many interpretations, often used by Israel to justify its violations of Lebanese sovereignty, on the pretext that the Lebanese state is unable to preserve that sovereignty. The shortcomings of the resolution and the ineffectiveness of its implementation are evident in the thousands of violations recorded in the UN Secretary-General's biannual reports to the Security Council regarding its implementation.<sup>11</sup>

Since launching its ground incursion into southern Lebanon at the beginning of this month, Israel began targeting UNIFIL forces in order to pressure them to withdraw from the area. The UN accused Israel of "deliberately" demolishing one of its watchtowers and a fence in Marwahin in southern

<sup>6</sup> Nazir Hussain, "The Israel-Lebanon War and Its Implications for Regional Security," *Policy Perspectives*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2007), pp. 17 - 32.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 (passed 11/8/2006), <https://acr.ps/1L9zP4W>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> How UNIFIL Meet the Challenge of Escalating Conflict in Lebanon," *The UN Intranet-iSeek for Member States*, 22/10/2024, accessed on 24/10/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/3ir2a>.

<sup>10</sup> "Israel-Hezbollah war: What is UN resolution 1701?" *Economic Times*, 24/10/2024, accessed on 24/10/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/s0ggq>.

<sup>11</sup> Tarek Mitri, *Israel's 2006 War on Lebanon: The Story of Resolution 1701* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2022, in Arabic).

Lebanon, and accused the Israeli army of “repeatedly” and “deliberately” firing at its forces’ positions.<sup>12</sup> Israel, for its part, had pointed to the UN’s “failure” to implement Resolution 1701 as a cause of the war,<sup>13</sup> as the US and Israel stepped up their rhetoric that the resolution was insufficient and must be amended.

## Proposed Israeli Amendments to Resolution 1701

According to American media sources, Israel has handed Washington a document containing its conditions for a diplomatic solution to end the war in Lebanon. The US envoy, Amos Hochstein, carried it with him on his recent visit to Beirut. In it, Israel demanded that its forces be allowed to move “actively” to ensure that Hezbollah does not rearm or rebuild its military capabilities near the border, as conditions for a diplomatic solution to end the war in Lebanon and allow displaced civilians to return to their homes.<sup>14</sup>

Israel also demanded freedom of action for its air force in Lebanese airspace. Although these two demands clearly run counter to Resolution 1701, which stipulates that the Lebanese Armed Forces and UNIFIL are responsible for enforcing the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, the US agreed to deliver the message to Lebanon. Accordingly, Hochstein arrived in Beirut on 22 October and met with caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. After their meeting, Berri stated that there is consensus in Lebanon on Resolution 1701, but he personally rejected any “attempt to amend it in any way.”<sup>15</sup>

Although Hochstein refused to lay out Israel’s demands at a press conference held in Beirut at the end of his visit, he indicated that Lebanon and Israel had never fully implemented Resolution 1701, which would be the basis for a “formula” to end the conflict “once and for all.”<sup>16</sup> Hochstein asserted that a solution must be based on Resolution 1701, but that “we have to put things in place (in addition to the resolution) that give both sides the confidence that things will be different this time around.”<sup>17</sup> This implies that Washington wants to amend Resolution 1701 to ensure that the Lebanese army is the only armed force present in southern Lebanon.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “UN Peacekeeping Force UNIFIL Accuses Israeli Army of Bombing its Observation Tower in Lebanon,” *BBC Arabic*, 10/10/2024, accessed 24/10/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zP8n>.

<sup>13</sup> “The U.N. Resolution at the Heart of the Israel-Lebanon Conflict,” *Foreign Policy*, 2/10/2024, accessed on 24/10/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/awj dj>.

<sup>14</sup> Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Israel gave the White House its Demands for Ending the War in Lebanon,” *Axios*, 20/10/2024, accessed on 24/10/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/4scwt>.

<sup>15</sup> “Berri: Hochstein’s visit to Lebanon is Washington’s last chance to end the war,” *Al-Arabiya*, 20/10/2024, accessed 24/10/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://n9.cl/9vx82>.

<sup>16</sup> “US says it is seeking lasting end to war in Lebanon ‘as soon as possible,’” *Al Jazeera*, 21/10/2024, accessed 25/10/2024, <https://acr.ps/1L9zOlX>.

<sup>17</sup> Ravid.

<sup>18</sup> “Israeli truce demands said to include access to Lebanese airspace to disarm Hezbollah,” *Times of Israel*, 21/10/2024, accessed on 24/10/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/m0e1k>.

The contradiction lies in the fact that Israel believes that the Lebanese army will only be the sole armed force in Lebanon if Israel itself guarantees this – by being deployed on the ground itself. Israel has not forgotten the experience of its invasion in 1982, and knows that it cannot rely solely on Lebanese factions that oppose Hezbollah. Thus, it insists on having a role itself, perhaps alongside allied international forces in the future.

On the eve of Hochstein's arrival in Beirut, to help him pressure Hezbollah and encourage other Lebanese political forces to accept his proposals, Israel launched a massive air campaign across Lebanon, targeting Hezbollah's Al-Qard Al-Hassan Foundation, including its headquarters in the Dahiya southern suburb of Beirut. The Israeli military justified its campaign by saying that the foundation operates independently of the Lebanese financial system and is not subject to the supervision of the government or the central bank, and that it receives hundreds of millions of dollars from Iran annually and plays a major role in financing Hezbollah's operations.<sup>19</sup>

## Pressure on Berri

Yet Hochstein failed to reap the results of Israel's massive military pressure, which has impacted every aspect of Hezbollah's military and financial strength, including its network of social, health and educational services with the aim of pushing its popular base to turn against it and weakening it vis-à-vis Lebanon's other political forces, which have started to blame Hezbollah for the unfolding crisis. This has placed growing pressure on Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri to make two moves: firstly, to submit to Israel's conditions for an amended Resolution 1701, in his capacity as Hezbollah's main negotiator, and secondly, to convene a session of Parliament to elect a president of the republic, a position that has been vacant since the former President Michel Aoun's term ended in November 2022, due to Lebanese political factions' inability to agree on a candidate.

This renewed pressure has come from two sources. The first is economic, and is exercised by Washington. On 18 October, Congressmen Darin LaHood and Darrell Issa – who are both of Lebanese origin – addressed an open letter to US President Joe Biden, a copy of which was deposited with Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, to apply pressure for the election of a Lebanese president. The letter directly held Berri responsible for obstructing such a move:

“Over the last 20 months, Speaker Nabih Berri, has specifically obstructed the electoral process and is clearly not acting in the best interest of Lebanon and its people. He continues to be a main barrier to the opening of Parliament and this and any intentional prevention of a timely presidential election must be viewed for what it is –exceedingly harmful to Lebanon's citizens and potential future recovery,” it read.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ravid.

<sup>20</sup> Darin LaHood and Darrell Issa, open letter to President Joe Biden, 18/10/2024, <https://acr.ps/1L9zOHG>.

In conclusion, the letter clearly alludes to sanctions to be imposed on those obstructing the process, in a veiled threat to Berri unless he shifts his position and allows the election of a president.<sup>21</sup> The letter argues that the US administration has an opportunity to achieve this: “Hezbollah is today dramatically weakened through the targeting of Hezbollah militants and leadership. As Hezbollah’s grip on Lebanon weakens, and it continues to lose leaders, foot soldiers, infrastructure, financing, and influence.”

The second source of pressure on Berri is military. The day after the Speaker declared his rejection of any amendment to Resolution 1701, Israel began bombarding the city of Tyre with heavy airstrikes, for the first time since the beginning of its aggression against Lebanon. On 23 October, the Israeli army warned the residents of certain buildings in the city centre to evacuate their homes, as they were to be bombed, on the pretext that they contained Hezbollah facilities. Israel’s aim with these attacks appeared to be to add to the pressure on Berri, given that Tyre is his main stronghold and is also home to a base of the Amal Movement which he leads.

## Conclusion

By escalating its aggression against Lebanon, with American backing and diplomatic cover, Israel is trying to impose a shift both on the ground and in the Lebanese political scene, by weakening Hezbollah’s military capabilities, destroying its network of social, health and educational services, and pushing its popular base to abandon it. It is also ratcheting up the pressure on Lebanon’s other political forces, to push them to abandon Hezbollah and isolate the movement – another way of achieving these same goals. This seemed possible given recent statements by the head of the Free Patriotic Movement, Gebran Bassil, in which he accused Hezbollah of dragging Lebanon into a crippling war. For its part, Hezbollah will seek to prove that it is still a key player and will not accept being marginalized and weakened.

In order to thwart Israel’s efforts, Lebanese actors will need to move quickly to reach broad national agreements, including on long-shelved political and security issues, because the alternative would be Lebanon falling into a state of total chaos – something Israel is forcefully pursuing, through its systematic destruction of the Lebanese national fabric.

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<sup>21</sup> Ghada Halawy, “Implicit American threat to Berri: Presidential Elections or Sanctions,” *Al-Modon*, 19/10/2024, accessed 24/10/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOEy>.





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