

Securing Lebanon to Prevent a Larger Hezbollah-Israel War and Wider Escalation

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"A Lebanese army officer points out locations on a map to U.N. peacekeepers during a training exercise in Majediyyeh village in south Lebanon October 30, 2007. REUTERS/Karamallah Daher"

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As tensions between Israel and Hezbollah escalate, the specter of a full-scale war, with the potential to draw in the United States and Iran, demands the US' immediate attention. The Biden-Harris Administration has tasked, in response, White House Senior Advisor Amos Hochstein with the responsibility of mediating efforts to de-escalate the conflict and bring stability to the Lebanon-Israel border.

As the US tries to avoid Lebanon becoming a theater of regional war, it is difficult to envisage a durable solution to the crisis without tackling both Lebanon's governance vacuum and Iran's entrenched influence. On the one hand, the evolution of Iran-backed Hezbollah into the country's main powerbroker means that the decision to go to war does not rest with the government and calls for addressing more effectively Iran's destabilizing role within Lebanon and in the region. On the other hand, Lebanon's descent into a quasi-failed state following a financial collapse engineered by its governing elites who chronically mismanaged the country's public finances reinforces the need to prioritize improved governance and accountability. The prospect of a major military operation in Lebanon has become even more real with Israel's determination to drive Hezbollah away from the border, in response to Hezbollah's unfettered military activities in the border demarcation zone.¹ Accordingly, a determined approach to dissuading parties from provocation together with a more comprehensive roadmap for lasting stability is essential to warding off a potentially catastrophic Hezbollah-Israel war and ensuring the survivability and recovery of the Lebanese state.

Prioritizing diplomacy to avert a full-scale war therefore offers an opportunity for the US and friends of Lebanon to confront these pressing issues, including the country's erosion of sovereignty, its corrupt system of governance, and the collapse of its formal economy. This policy brief proposes a framework for robust diplomacy that would steer Lebanon away from the precipice of war and help establish a direct and sustainable path to stability and revival. This framework revolves around key elements, including stabilizing the Lebanon-Israel land border, addressing Lebanon's leadership vacuum, revitalizing its economy, and enhancing its sovereignty.

Key Policy Recommendations for the United States:

- Improve coordination with France and other regional partners in diplomatic efforts to prevent a full-scale Hezbollah-Israel war through the application of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (UNSCR 1701) and the demarcation of the land border between Lebanon and Israel.
- Prioritize engaging the Quintet – of which it is a member, along with Egypt, France, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia – in facilitating the election of a competent, reform-oriented president and the formation of a capable and technocratic government in Lebanon committed to UNSCR 1701.
- Increase support and training to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to ensure the successful deployment of up to 15,000 troops south of the Litani River, and commit to adequately resourcing the LAF in the south, post-conflict.
- Combine any diplomatic efforts to deter Iran’s nuclear ambitions with efforts to curb the influence of proxies, with a special focus on Hezbollah given its central role within the “Axis of Resistance.”

CONTEXT

Lebanon’s history has been marked by upheaval, including a violent civil war and political interference by neighboring Syria, which occupied the country until 2005. Since then, Hezbollah and Israel have been locked in a low-level conflict, except for the brief but devastating 34-day war between the two countries in 2006, and parts of Lebanon’s borders with both Syria and Israel remain contentious.

US policy and assistance towards Lebanon has sought, throughout this time, to guarantee Lebanon’s peace and prosperity, a key US national security interest given the potentially destabilizing impact of the country’s domestic turmoil on the region. Today, Lebanon faces profound challenges, grappling with an economy in freefall, the escalating dysfunction of its state institutions, the enduring repercussions of the Port of Beirut Blast, and the additional strain of hosting the world’s largest refugee population per capita. Moreover, Lebanon is on the brink of war, as gradually-escalating tensions between Israel and Hezbollah on the border threaten to boil over. This would be certain to ignite what is already a volatile regional situation, including possible cascading conflicts across the region. Hezbollah is a critical ally in Iran’s regional network, and if conflict breaks out in the south, there are risks of pro-Iran militants from Syria and Lebanon’s border area, plus increased Houthi and Iraqi militia activity, acting against US interests in the region.

¹ “Israel Ready for “All-Out War” in Lebanon, *Al Jazeera*. June 19, 2024. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/19/israel-ready-for-all-out-war-in-lebanon>.

The US played a central role in shepherding United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 (UNSCR 1701) that helped end the 2006 War between Hezbollah and Israel. However, the resolution's two main pillars—the prevention of any armed presence south of the Litani River other than that of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon—did not receive sufficient attention and follow through.² Lebanon is, as a result, at risk of becoming a focal point of regional conflict, which would almost certainly draw in the United States. Since the Hamas attack of October 7, Hezbollah has dragged Lebanon, without any involvement of the government, into a conflict with Israel in support of Hamas. This has led to escalating tit-for-tat exchanges and heightened tensions along the Lebanon-Israel border that risk spiraling into a larger war at any moment. The US quickly maneuvered, in response, strategic naval assets to the Eastern Mediterranean with the explicit focus of containing a regional spillover of the Israel-Gaza war and an implicit emphasis on deterring Hezbollah.³ Washington has been working in tandem to forestall a larger war.⁴

As of this paper's publication, there are no indications of any halt to the fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, as both parties appear to be seeking to renegotiate the rules of engagement on the battlefield. The conflict, while localized, has resulted in the displacement of over 150,000 residents from both South Lebanon and North Israel.⁵

Israeli airstrikes into South Lebanon, including the illegal use of phosphorous munitions, have forced more than 100,000 residents from their homes and caused considerable damage to the economy, environment, and infrastructure. Similarly, Hezbollah's incursions into Israel have displaced around 60,000 residents, establishing a de facto security zone within Israel and impacting North Israel's infrastructure and economy. The longer the violence endures, the greater the risk of miscalculation and a slide into an uncontrollable war. Such a devastating outcome could unfold either as a result of a preemptive decision by Israel to achieve its security objectives through military means or a possible move by Hezbollah in anticipation of a preemptive attack.

In response, the US has advanced the Hochstein initiative that seeks to leverage, despite a continuation of the tit-for-tat skirmishes, the general disinclination for broader conflict. Its overarching strategy focuses primarily on Hezbollah's critical capacities and involves the withdrawal of Hezbollah fighters some 8-10 km from the border to address Israeli security concerns and limit the proximity of direct line-of-fire and anti-tank munitions, although a key challenge is Hezbollah's longtime assertion that its fighters are residents of many of these respective territories. Such a withdrawal would be followed by an augmented LAF and UNIFIL presence south of the Litani River. Thereafter, internally displaced persons from Israel and Lebanon would be encouraged to return to their homes. Negotiations have also included discussions on resolving

² UN Security Council, Resolution 1701 (2006). August 11, 2006. Available at <https://peacemaker.un.org/israellebanon-resolution1701>.

³ Oren Libermann and Brad Lendon, "In Rare Announcement, US Says Guided Missile Sub Has Arrived in the Middle East, a Message of Deterrence to Adversaries," CNN. November 5, 2023. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/05/politics/us-missile-submarine-middle-east/index.html>.

⁴ Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Austin Warned Gallant About Israeli Military Actions in Lebanon," Axios. November 12, 2023. Available at <https://www.axios.com/2023/11/12/israel-lebanon-lloyd-austin-yoav-gallant-military>.

⁵ Euan Ward, Roni Rabin, Hwaida Saad and Michael Levenson, "Towns Empty and Farms Languish as War Stalks Israeli-Lebanese Border," The New York Times. January 4, 2024. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/04/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-civilians.html>.

longstanding territorial disputes between Israel and Lebanon, a phased approach to the withdrawal of Hezbollah fighters, financial support for South Lebanon and the LAF, international (possibly Arab) strategic monitoring of this 8–10 km area to bolster maintenance of the arrangement, and the end of Israeli violations of Lebanon’s airspace.

The situation in Gaza directly impacts negotiations on the Lebanon–Israel border. Hezbollah continues, in particular, to maintain that the war in Gaza needs to end before it will consider ending its military attacks on Israel. Biden’s recent endorsement of a ceasefire in Gaza indicated that this might be an important inflection point that would create a window of opportunity for both Hezbollah and Israel to dial down their attacks across the border. However, Israel’s strategic calculus, post October 7, has significantly changed, making the destruction of Hezbollah by striking Lebanon forcefully a national security priority.⁶ There is therefore a real concern that, once Israel concludes its military operations in Gaza, it will pivot north and use its freed-up firepower to escalate militarily.

Pillar I: Preventing a Wider Hezbollah–Israel War and Stabilizing the Israel–Lebanon Land Border

In 2022, the US, through Hochstein’s efforts, mediated the longstanding maritime dispute between Israel and Lebanon, which opened the door for the exploration of natural gas reserves and insulated this area from fighting between Israel and Hezbollah. Demarcating disputed points on the Lebanon–Israel border – recognizing that Northern Ghajjar and Shebaa Farms may be thornier than the others – can help stabilize the area and shield vulnerable civilian populations from future wars. There are, accordingly, short-, medium-, and long-term steps that can be taken to pacify this border, beginning with the enforcement of an 8–10 km buffer zone free of non-state armed actors on the Lebanese side of the border and secured exclusively by the LAF and UNIFIL, and with it a cessation of all Israeli attacks and overflights of Lebanese territory. Maintaining this buffer zone would pave the way for the implementation of UNSCR 1701.

The full disarmament of Hezbollah through a locally led and internationally supported process that enables the Lebanese government to gain full and uncontested sovereignty must remain a long-term, strategic US objective. However, the immediate risk of a war with Israel requires an incremental and phased approach that prioritizes UNSCR 1701’s call for the “establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL.”⁷ Establishing this would be a pragmatic, short-term step towards de-escalation that reinforces UNSCR 1701 even if not an end in and of itself. Only Lebanese government control over the entire country’s territory will achieve lasting stability and border security.

A bolstered LAF will be essential for the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty. While the LAF has to date been limited in its ability to position itself as the sole security provider

⁶ Emanuel Fabian and Lazar Berman, “Netanyahu Warns: We’re Ready with ‘Extremely Powerful’ Response to Hezbollah Attacks,” *The Times of Israel*. June 5, 2024. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-warns-were-ready-with-extremely-powerful-response-to-hezbollah-attacks>.

⁷ UN Security Council, Resolution 1701 (2006).

in Lebanon without entering into conflict with Hezbollah, it is one of the few remaining standing pillars of the state that is positively regarded across communities in Lebanon's polarized society. Supporting it in this instance will be critical for the success of any short-term mediation. Moving forward, increased support to the LAF is also needed for its enlarged deployment to Lebanon's border with Syria, which is used by the Assad regime and Hezbollah for illicit activities like narcotics and arms trafficking.⁸

Short- and medium-term challenges in this regard include how to isolate the Lebanon-Israel land border from the Israel-Gaza War, and how to facilitate a land border agreement during a persistent presidential vacuum in Lebanon. Here, an enduring solution should be the goal of US mediation efforts. Previous formulas, such as the 1996 ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, ended up legitimizing cross-border attacks so long as they did not cross certain red lines. This approach is in stark contrast to the spirit of UNSCR 1701, which, passed a decade later in 2006, insisted on the cessation of violence and demanded the disarmament of Hezbollah. Although implementing UNSCR 1701 is fraught with challenges, it is the only existing framework capable of sustainably restoring stability along the Lebanon-Israel border – and Hochstein's incremental approach could lead to its full implementation.

One notable difference between the negotiation of UNSCR 1701 and the current negotiations is the role played by the Lebanese government. In 2006, the Lebanese government was a partner in conceiving the resolution, so much so that it was the Lebanese government that convinced Washington to abandon invocation of UN Chapter VII (which allows the Security Council to take military action against threats to peace) to make the resolution amenable to Lebanese audiences. In contrast, Lebanon today is run by a caretaker government that is unable to enforce, let alone call for, a ceasefire in its own country, and was not consulted about Hezbollah's decision to go to war, despite demands by the majority of Lebanese to avoid war.

The US Government should:

- Improve coordination with France and other regional partners in diplomatic efforts to prevent a full-scale Hezbollah-Israel war through the application of UNSCR 1701 and the demarcation of the land border between Lebanon and Israel.
- Commit to stronger support for UNIFIL's role and the implementation of its mandate.
- Increase support and training to the LAF to ensure the successful deployment of up to 15,000 troops south of the Litani River.

⁸ Dr. Lina Khatib, "Lebanon's Role in Syria's Captagon Trade," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. March 25, 2022. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/syria-lebanon-captagon-ocindex>.

- Press Israel to remain committed to a diplomatic process by combining vocal opposition with warnings of withholding military aid if it pre-emptively strikes Lebanon while providing it with credible security guarantees should Hezbollah initiate war.
- Warn Tehran that if Hezbollah provokes all-out war with Israel, it will be met with a strong US response.

The Government of Lebanon should:

- Commit to upholding a negotiated settlement and ensure Hezbollah respects agreed upon withdrawals.
- Ensure the LAF has the capacity and support needed to deploy to the area between the Litani River and the Blue Line and ensure the buffer zone is adhered to so that the LAF and UNIFIL are the only armed presences there, post-conflict.

The international community should:

- Increase collaboration in support of the LAF – including providing substantial financial assistance to bolster its increased deployment and capabilities for stabilizing the south.
- Boost the capacities of UNIFIL in conjunction with its recently strengthened mandate to ensure that it implements its mandate in accordance with UNSCR 2650 (2022).⁹

Pillar II: Addressing Lebanon's Leadership Vacuum

For over a year, Lebanon has navigated its multiple crises under the authority of a caretaker government, without a president. Lebanon's presidency is a fixed six-year term, unlike the prime minister, who has no fixed term limit, but can be removed at any time. Although the Lebanese are responsible for electing and shaping a government, the

⁹ UN Security Council, Resolution 2650 (2022). August 31, 2022. Available at <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s-res-2650.pdf>.

US and friends of Lebanon can play a constructive role in safeguarding the ability of Lebanese lawmakers to do so free from coercion. While the US and its partners should not be in the business of advocating for any particular candidate, they should facilitate a consensus process among political factions to elect a reform-minded president – one who is committed to reform and respects state institutions – who fulfills the aspirations of a wide cross section of the Lebanese people.

Hezbollah has been obstructing the election of a president by trying to impose its candidate, Suleiman Frangieh, despite the opposition's presentation of two different candidates. However, as Lebanon's failed formula of corrupt governments beholden to Hezbollah has demonstrated, only a reform-minded president can help introduce the implementation of needed measures to shore up Lebanon's economy while ensuring that Lebanon's government is a positive force in stabilizing the Israel-Lebanon border. As such, this need should not be sacrificed in current negotiations to resolve the ongoing conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

US leadership needs, accordingly, to prioritize the engagement of the Quintet – of which it is a member, along with Egypt, France, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia – in facilitating the election of a president in Lebanon. Lack of unity among this group and absence of US leadership of it in the past has at times hindered its efficacy in responding to the presidential crisis. The Quintet should not propose its own names for president, but should shuttle among the various factions to assist them in narrowing down the list of names and facilitating a compromise. To do so, the US must continue to play a leading role in unifying the Quintet and instrumentalizing its collective diplomatic capital to support the Lebanese people's demands for a reform-oriented and capable government.

The US Government should:

- Support unequivocally the election of a competent, reform-oriented president and the formation of a capable, technocratic government in Lebanon without sacrificing those positions in border negotiations.
- Prioritize engaging the Quintet in facilitating the election of a competent, reform-oriented president and the formation of a capable and technocratic government in Lebanon committed to UNSCR 1701.

The Parliament of Lebanon should:

- Convene to elect a president in accordance with its responsibilities enshrined in the Lebanese constitution.

The international community should:

- Through the Quintet countries, speak with one voice in helping political factions find consensus on a reform-minded presidential candidate in Lebanon.

Pillar III: Restoring Sovereignty and a Functioning Economy

The weakness of the Lebanese state together with the selective implementation of the 1989 Ta'if Agreement in the years thereafter led to the state's very exploitation by state and non-state actors, perpetuating its depletion. Meanwhile, Hezbollah, backed by Iran, was enormously successful in growing grassroots support while exploiting the state's fragility to preserve its autonomy and arms. And whilst Hezbollah pursued its strategic interests, the political class, consumed by competition amongst its factions, mismanaged and exploited state resources together with business elites, driving the once middle-income economy into bankruptcy and plunging the majority of its citizens into multidimensional poverty.¹⁰

Today, addressing the entanglement of Hezbollah with the country's elite and status quo guardians and restoring the credibility of state institutions and the formal economy is vital to stabilizing Lebanon. More than four years of unmitigated crises, however, have propelled the rise of the informal sector and an unregulated cash economy, fundamentally reshaping the nation's economic landscape with profound implications. As the shadow of impunity and informality widens, the last vestiges of state legitimacy are being pushed to the breaking point. At the same time, Lebanon's hyperinflation, rising unemployment, and food insecurity have all exacerbated the vulnerability of the most precarious segments of the population. As a result, the vast majority of Lebanon's citizens live in multidimensional poverty, where basic services like electricity and clean water are increasingly scarce. Lebanon furthermore hosts the largest number of refugees per capita which is adding significant strain to the economy and society, including intensifying social tensions.¹¹ Meanwhile, critical public institutions that once defined Lebanon – like the healthcare and educational sectors – risk collapsing from the immense weight of the country's concurrent crises.

This damage, if left unchecked, risks destabilizing the region. The rise in the informal sector has turned the country into a hub for criminality, sanctions evasion, money laundering, narco-trafficking, and, as the Port of Beirut Blast laid bare, the unchecked storage and circulation of potentially harmful and explosive materials. Accountability and reform are key to upending the impunity that has allowed the destabilizing reign of

¹⁰ Lebanon 2023 IFRC Network Country Plan, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. January 3, 2023. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-2023-ifrc-network-country-plan-mgrlb001#:~:text=More%20than%2080%20per%20cent,having%20a%20means%20of%20income>.

¹¹ Nazeer Rida, "Tensions over Refugee Crisis Boil Over into Clash Between Lebanese, Syrians," Asharq Al-Awsat. October 7, 2023. Available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4589911-tensions-over-refugee-crisis-boil-over-clash-between-lebanese-syrians>.

this nexus between a hegemonic militia and a corrupt political class, deeply enmeshed with business elites. Broader reforms will also ensure that international aid to Lebanon following the end of the ongoing conflict is efficiently and inclusively directed to conflict-hit areas in the south especially and that communities are not lost to corruption, mismanagement, or elite-capture.

A starting point for jumpstarting the country's economic recovery has been the internationally-accepted International Monetary Fund (IMF)-led recovery program that aimed to restore financial sustainability and strengthen governance and transparency.¹² But vested interests — politicians and influential actors, among which banking elites — have stood in the way of the adoption and implementation of the necessary financial, banking, and governance reforms on which the aid is conditioned. Parliament and government have been to date unwilling to implement them.

The US Government should:

- Condition economic aid to the Lebanese government and Lebanese stakeholders to compliance with reforms that combat criminality, money laundering, and narco-trafficking and reviving the investigation into the Port of Beirut Blast.
- Apply a targeted sanctions regime against government spoilers who are obstructing reform and justice in Lebanon.
- Facilitate international aid for the reconstruction and recovery of conflict-hit areas in Lebanon in ways that are transparent and accountable.

The Government of Lebanon should:

- Take serious steps to combat corruption and impunity, including through the implementation of an anti-corruption strategy, building open-data platforms, and guaranteeing fundamental freedoms. The establishment of regulatory bodies to independently regulate and/or privatize state services could be implemented quickly.
- Safeguard against judicial obstruction into the Port of Beirut Blast investigation and support an international inquiry into it, which would be important steps towards justice and accountability.

¹² "IMF Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on Economic Policies with Lebanon for a Four-Year Extended Fund Facility," International Monetary Fund. April 7, 2022. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/04/07/pr22108-imf-reaches-agreement-on-economic-policies-with-lebanon-for-a-four-year-fund-facility>.

- Urgently implement recommended economic reforms, including public sector and judicial reforms, starting with an IMF-led program, to stabilize the economy and chart a path toward recovery for the country that preserves depositors' (especially small depositors') rights.
- In the framework of the LAF's deployment to the border with Israel, secure portions of the Syrian-Lebanese border to clamp down on illegal cross-border activity and criminality.

The international community should:

- Condition assistance to the Lebanese government on compliance with the rule of law, including taking serious steps to combat criminality, sanctions evasion, money laundering, and narco-trafficking, and to revive the stalled investigation into the Port of Beirut Blast.
- Support local calls for an international fact-finding mission into the Port of Beirut Blast.
- Apply, in coordination with the US, a targeted sanctions regime against spoilers who are obstructing reform and justice in Lebanon.
- Promote relief and reconstruction of conflict-affected areas in South Lebanon.

Pillar IV: A Multi-Faceted US Strategy for Lebanon and the Middle East

A robust Lebanon policy necessitates acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between Lebanon's kleptocratic political elites, who have plundered the state's resources and concentrated power among themselves, and their enabler, Hezbollah, the actor that holds the most sway over political institutions in Lebanon given its military capacity and coercive power.

Hezbollah is not simply a Lebanese problem. While it has undermined Lebanese state institutions and erodes state sovereignty, as Iran's crown jewel it has assumed a central role within the "Axis of Resistance" not only does Hezbollah serve as the main blueprint, trainer, and strategist for various regional paramilitary organizations, including the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq (PMU) and the Houthis in Yemen, but it has also

significantly contributed to the survival of the Assad regime in Syria.^{13,14} The announcement of the Iran-led "unity of fronts" strategy explicitly designated Beirut as its operational headquarters, with Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, at the helm.

Moving forward, a robust US-Iran policy needs to acknowledge Iran's disruptive role in the region and seek to manage it. This policy must comprehensively address the regional harm caused by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its proxies, holding Iran responsible for their destabilizing actions. Failure to do so will only strengthen Iran's ability to dictate pressure points across the region and exact a high cost on US strategic interests, undermining Washington's ability to effectively respond to global challenges to the international order. In this regard, any approach that seeks to apply more pressure on Iran is not inconsistent with and should complement diplomatic overtures that may simultaneously be pursued with Tehran. The US will need to combine diplomacy, with the Gulf as an important partner, to deter Iran's nuclear ambitions together with efforts to curb the influence of proxies, always keeping open the option of a display of military strength to protect US interests.

The US Government should:

- Combine any diplomatic efforts to deter Iran's nuclear ambitions with efforts to curb the influence of proxies, with a special focus on Hezbollah given its central role within the "Axis of Resistance."
- Collaborate with regional partner states to ensure a coordinated response to Iran's destabilizing regional activities, including in Lebanon, in a way that combines diplomacy, deterrence, intelligence, and military cooperation.

The people of Lebanon should:

- Encourage political actors in Lebanon committed to reform and sovereignty, including in parliament, to improve their cooperation to strengthen their influence.

¹³ Jason Burke, "Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' is a Potent Coalition But Risky Strategy," The Guardian. January 14, 2024. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/14/irans-axis-of-resistance-is-a-potent-coalition-but-a-risky-strategy>.

¹⁴ Kali Robinson and Will Merrow, "Iran's Regional Armed Network," Council on Foreign Relations. April 15, 2024. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/article/irans-regional-armed-network>.

CONCLUSION

The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel is dangerously poised, signaling a readiness on both sides to escalate. As tensions threaten to boil over, more robust US diplomacy will be critical for averting full-scale war, which could push Iran to intervene and is certain to destabilize the Middle East. The US has been focused on preventing Hezbollah–Israel cross-border exchanges from escalating into wider conflict, deploying White House Senior Advisor Amos Hochstein to help ensure the parties remain committed to negotiations and a diplomatic process. Here, the push for full implementation of UNSCR 1701, including the resolution of pending land border disputes, should not only avert war, but also provide the opportunity to move toward a lasting solution to the current border instability – and, potentially, deal with the question of Hezbollah’s arms in post-conflict Lebanon.

At the same time, Israel’s war in Gaza and its strikes within Lebanon have led to widespread destruction, displacement, and civilian deaths. Repeated incursions have played directly into the hands of Iran and Iran-backed militant groups who have taken advantage of the resulting public anger to position themselves as the only ones willing to confront Israel. The US should be cognizant of this dynamic in efforts to prevent Israel from launching a war that could spin out of control and push Iran and the US to intervene.

Tackling head-on the symbiotic relationship between Hezbollah and Lebanon’s kleptocratic political class will also be key for improving the prospect of Lebanon’s democratic outlook and ensuring middle-to long-term regional stability. A relatively modest but steadfast investment in the country’s security institutions together with a bold diplomatic response to the threat of war can ensure that the Lebanon–Israel border is secure, Iran is countered, and Hezbollah is weakened.

Lebanon is not yet lost. Most of the population still aspires to a democratic future and disengagement from regional conflicts. October 7 and its aftermath should serve as a reminder to US policymakers that there is no alternative to US leadership in the region, especially considering the potentially destabilizing effects—domestically and regionally—of Lebanon’s multiple dysfunctions. US support for Lebanon does not demand the kind of military commitments that are becoming challenging to sustain globally. However, it does require an active and robust long-term strategy, which includes the establishment of clear and enforceable tools and policies that restrain spoilers and give reformists in Lebanon a fighting chance. The success of the proposed roadmap and recommendations of this brief will certainly require persistence and bipartisanship.