Progress and Challenges on Israel's Northern Borders: Syria and Lebanon in 2026

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2026 promises to be a year of considerable transition and transformation – again – in the Levant. After decades of troubled relations along the Lebanese and Syrian borders, unfolding developments, carefully managed, could offer Israel an unprecedented opportunity for improved relationships with these key neighbors and fundamentally improve its long-term security and stability. While true normalization remains off on the horizon, this year could mark initial steps towards greater joint prosperity for all parties – or be looked back upon as a tragically missed opportunity should the US administration, Congress, and Israel not work closely together to build upon progress to date.

LEBANON

Hezbollah's Disarmament

Last year, Lebanon elected a new president and prime minister who have publicly committed to disarming Hezbollah and reasserting the state monopoly on weapons. The new Lebanese leadership has pledged to abide by the Hezbollah disarmament provisions of the 2024 Israel-Lebanon ceasefire and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 (which ended the 2006 Lebanon War).

Consistent with this pledge, the Lebanese government in August 2025 adopted the "National Shield" (Dir al-Watan) plan, a five-phase roadmap to disarm Hezbollah – informed by an earlier US proposal. While Hezbollah swiftly rejected the plan, citing Israeli violations of the ceasefire, the Lebanese government and military have moved ahead with implementation. In October 2025, the Trump Administration approved $230 million to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in support of these efforts.

- The LAF has successfully cleared numerous Hezbollah tunnels, rocket-launching sites, and other fortified positions south of the Litani River. It has removed approximately 10,000 rockets, 400 missiles, and 205,000 unexploded ordnance fragments.
- On January 8, 2026, the LAF announced the completion of the first phase of the roadmap and claimed that it now has "operational control" south of Litani – except for territory that remains occupied by the Israeli military.
- The Lebanese military acknowledged that Hezbollah has not yet been fully disarmed and that disarmament operations are still ongoing.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that the completion of phase one is an "encouraging beginning, but … far from sufficient," claiming that Hezbollah continues to pose a threat and that the 2024 ceasefire requires full, not partial disarmament. Israel's Foreign Ministry warned that Hezbollah, with Iranian support, is "rearming faster than it is being disarmed," following the 2023-2024 conflict in which Israel severely degraded Hezbollah and eliminated its leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Naim Qassem, who succeeded Nasrallah, maintains that Hezbollah

no longer has an armed presence south of Litani, but that full disarmament is against Lebanese interests. The extent of Hezbollah's presence in southern Lebanon is uncertain, but the governments of the US, Israel, and Lebanon remain committed to disarmament throughout the country.

Israel-Lebanon Negotiations and Military Escalation

It was against this backdrop that Israel and Lebanon, in December 2025, held their first direct talks between civilian representatives of the two countries since 1983. The meetings, which took place at the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) headquarters in Naqoura under the auspices of the existing US-led ceasefire monitoring mechanism, represent a significant, although tenuous development; they expand the aperture of discussions beyond crisis talks between military and/or intelligence officials that have generally characterized direct talks between the two parties in recent decades.

The talks were conceived as conflict management rather than conflict resolution, and specifically aimed to reduce the risk of unintended escalation along the Israeli-Lebanese border. The civilian nature of the discussions is especially notable as it positions the Lebanese government as the responsible party rather than Hezbollah. Recent military escalations, including Israeli strikes against southern and eastern Lebanon this month, cross-border exchanges of fire, and continued Hezbollah activity, have narrowed the scope for these negotiations but have arguably increased their strategic importance.

Politically, the recent escalation hardens public positions on both sides, pushing any discussion of normalization or even normalized cooperation further down the road. Israel's strikes against Lebanon also strengthen Hezbollah's arguments against diplomacy under fire and constrain the ability of civilian representatives to make any concessions. For Israel, active hostilities reinforce skepticism within the Netanyahu government that the Lebanese state can deliver Hezbollah's disarmament or control of the country's southern border region.

SYRIA

Last month marked one year since the downfall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. The new Syrian government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa has overseen both successes and failures during his first year in office, as he seeks to rebuild his country after more than a decade of civil war. President Al-Sharaa has achieved several diplomatic successes thus far:

- **Global Recognition:** In September, he became the first Syrian president to address the United Nations General Assembly in six decades, and in November, Al-Sharaa became the first Syrian head of state in history to visit the White House.
- **Sanctions Relief:** Back in May, President Trump and President Al-Sharaa met for the first time in Riyadh, at the behest of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin-Salman. The Syrian president successfully lobbied the American president for US sanctions relief to help rebuild Syria after the fall of Assad. Trump lifted most sanctions against Syria in

June and ultimately removed all sanctions by repealing the Caesar Act in December. Sanctions against Syria were also lifted by the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and the European Union.

- **Economic/Humanitarian Aid:** The new Syrian government has secured increased economic and humanitarian aid from the United States, United Kingdom, United Nations, European Union, and the Arab world – primarily from Saudi Arabia.

Counterterrorism

In year one, the Al-Sharaa government has taken strides toward countering terrorism and the resurgence of ISIS, but it still has much progress to make.

- **Military Integration:** The new Syrian military has sought to integrate armed groups throughout the country and unify them under the Ministry of Defense, in order to recover state control of weapons and effectively combat terrorism. This unification process is still a work in progress and, as of this writing, Syrian government forces and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are engaged in violent clashes over SDF integration.
- **Countering ISIS:** Syria has joined the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. In the wake of an ISIS attack in December that killed two US soldiers in Syria, the Al-Sharaa government issued a swift condemnation and bolstered its counterterrorism efforts. In partnership with the Syrian military and other regional partners, US Central Command subsequently launched Operation Hawkeye Strike against ISIS in Syria, killing or capturing at least 25 ISIS operatives. President Trump later praised Al-Sharaa for being "with us all the way" during the operation.
- **Weapons and Illicit Drugs:** The new Syrian government has also pledged to combat weapons and drug smuggling and destroy any remains of the chemical weapons program developed under the Assad regime.

In turn, the Trump Administration has revoked both the *Foreign Terrorist Organization* designation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the now-dissolved group formerly led by Al-Sharaa, and the *Specially Designated Global Terrorist* designation of the Syrian president. Similarly, the UN Security Council demonstrated confidence in the counterterrorism efforts of Al-Sharaa by lifting terror-related sanctions against him.

Syrian Minorities

Upon assuming power, Al-Sharaa pledged to protect all minority groups in Syria. During his one-year anniversary speech last month, he remade this pledge. Al-Sharaa has promised a transition to inclusive governance, minority representation, and political participation for Alawites, Druze, Bedouin, Kurds, Shia Muslims, Christians, among other minorities. His record thus far is mixed:

- **New Constitution:** Syria's new constitution has been criticized for failing to adequately protect minority rights.

- **Sectarian Violence:** Several waves of sectarian violence in Syria last year resulted in mass death, particularly among the Alawite and Druze populations. More than 1,400 Alawites and 2,000 Druze were killed, including at the hands of Syrian government forces and its affiliates. War crimes, extrajudicial killings, and other abuses have been documented, while Al-Sharaa has reaffirmed his commitment to protect Alawites and Druze and promised to hold the perpetrators accountable.
- **Accountability:** In November, Syria opened its first trial over the anti-Alawite violence, and in September, Syria adopted a roadmap for resolving the crisis in the Druze-majority Sweida. However, the Syrian president has insisted that "remnants" of the former Assad regime are largely responsible for the violence and that his government does not systematically target minorities.

Israel-Syria Talks and Military Entanglements

Similar to the Israel-Lebanon talks, recent US-brokered Israel-Syria discussions in Paris mark the most substantive direct engagement between the two countries in decades. While significant, these are not peace negotiations and are not currently envisaged to expand to normalization or even broader cooperation negotiations. Rather, they seek to provide a de-escalation channel and mechanisms to manage what remains a volatile border region.

The discussions simultaneously provide some degree of desired legitimacy to a new and still controversial Syrian regime, while giving Israel and the US increased leverage over the Al-Sharaa government. They also establish a much-needed channel through which to organize security arrangements palatable to Israel that limit the potential for Iran and its proxies to reassert a presence along its border or in the Golan Heights. However, the inability of the Syrian government to exert control over the disparate armed groups operating in its territory remains problematic and will for now limit the utility of any agreements reached through these negotiations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

J Street remains committed to negotiated settlements with Israel's neighbors as its only sustainable path to long-term peace and security, as well as a necessary foundation for a comprehensive 23-State Solution. Recent US-brokered direct talks between Israel and Syria and Lebanon represent an important step toward that goal. However, security instability between the parties is constraining progress and undermines the significant opportunities these negotiations represent. To ensure their viability, we recommend the following:

- **The Trump Administration** should put forward concrete policy proposals, including for demilitarized zones and joint civilian coordination committees, and use its influence to secure the parties' commitments to their implementation.
    - The administration should also integrate additional international partners into the effort, unifying any efforts being undertaken by multilateral parties such as the UN, EU, or Gulf Cooperation Council to prevent conflicting outcomes.

- **The US Congress** should continue to provide support both via policy and appropriations assistance programs, including for the Lebanese Armed Forces and UNIFIL, that help anchor these negotiations.
    - At the same time, Congress can help preserve long-term US leverage by conditioning and incentivizing economic and security assistance on quantifiable benchmarks and outcomes.

- **Israel** must be accepted as a reliable and trustworthy negotiating partner in order for these talks to ultimately broaden in scope and depth, opening the door to greater regional cooperation. To achieve that, Israel should prioritize phased confidence-building measures that incrementally build trust with Syria and Lebanon.
    - Israel should communicate clear benchmarks and expectations, and then support the provision of necessary resources and technical support for the respective governments of Syria and Lebanon to achieve them. Violations of the ceasefire agreement with Lebanon or incursions into sovereign Syrian territory should be avoided to every extent possible. Instead, the Israeli government should empower the Syrian and Lebanese governments to effectively resolve legitimate threats to Israel's security.