

Israel-Lebanon Negotiations: Political Roadblocks and Potential Agreement

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Israel and Lebanon have effectively been in a state of war since 1948. They now have a unique opportunity to end it, restore security, and eventually reap the fruits of diplomatic relations – though many challenges remain. Hezbollah and Iran are reeling from war, the United States is heavily invested in Israel-Lebanon diplomacy, and there is strategic alignment between Jerusalem and Beirut. This issue brief examines the ongoing negotiations, where Israel and Lebanon stand, the remaining challenges, and why the situation is nevertheless ripe for a diplomatic breakthrough.

Israel-Lebanon Ceasefire and Three Rounds of Talks

On April 16, Israel and Lebanon [entered](#) into a 10-day ceasefire, brokered by the United States, which was later [extended](#) by three weeks and then again by [45 days](#). Both Israel and Hezbollah have since [violated](#) the ceasefire numerous times, resulting in continued death, destruction, and displacement of civilians. Against this backdrop and continued Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, the US hosted the parties in Washington for three rounds of talks. US Ambassador to Lebanon Michel Issa, Israeli Ambassador to the US Yechiel Leiter, and Lebanese Ambassador to the US Nada Hamadeh Moawad participated in the April 14 meeting with Secretary of State Marco Rubio. **This was the first major high-level [engagement](#) between the two governments since 1993.**

The three ambassadors joined the second meeting which took place at the White House with the participation of President Trump, Vice President Vance, and US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee. Last week, the US [hosted](#) a third round of talks over two days, which for the first time included military officials from both sides. According to the [State Department](#), Israel and Lebanon “agreed upon a framework for negotiations to advance lasting peace between the two countries, full recognition of each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and establishing genuine security along their shared border.” Importantly, the US announced a “security track,” to be launched at the Pentagon on May 29, and that the “political track” will reconvene on June 2-3.

Where Lebanon Stands on Negotiations with Israel

Official Lebanese government messaging has remained intentionally vague about what Lebanon “wants,” namely a security deal or a comprehensive peace agreement. This is done for domestic political purposes and to maintain room to maneuver in negotiations with Israel.

While opposition to direct talks with Israel remains very strong among the Lebanese public, the negotiations have generally become accepted as necessary in order to prevent further destruction

and occupation of Lebanese territory. Outside of pro-Hezbollah circles, the pressing question is the extent to which concessions favorable to Lebanese territorial integrity and sovereignty can be extracted from Israel while trying to limit the domestic backlash by Hezbollah and its support base. Skeptics argue that in light of Israeli military excess without any reasonable constraints by the United States, Lebanon is unlikely to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty even after taking on the task of disarming Hezbollah. Political actors in Lebanon, seeking to preserve their hold on domestic levers of power, leverage the polarization over negotiations to achieve their goals.

- **Hezbollah** strongly opposes negotiations with Israel, viewing them as an existential threat to its political and military survival. The Iran-backed group has successfully rallied its base to protest the negotiations, further raising concerns about the possibility of domestic infighting – a dangerous precedent in Lebanon.
- **Lebanese Forces (LF)**, the most powerful Christian party in Lebanon, supports pragmatic engagement with Israel on issues related to border demarcation, security arrangements, and ceasefires. LF has consistently argued for strengthening the institutions of the state, disarmament of militias, and economic reforms.
- **Amal**, the Hezbollah-allied movement led by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, vacillates between support for the negotiations and opposition to them, primarily because of sectarian considerations within the Lebanese Shia community. Berri, and his erstwhile Druze ally and leader Walid Jumblatt, continue to hedge their political positions based on regional political changes. This hedging grew more visible over the course of the US-Israel war on Iran and stems from Berri's complex relationships with external powers that are influential in Lebanon, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the US.

While these parties all maintain that they value the preservation of Lebanese territorial integrity, they have consistently obstructed efforts led by President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam – who have displayed courage and consistency in publicly breaking with Hezbollah, outlawing parts of its activities, and pursuing a political settlement to the conflict with Israel. The public, while deeply divided on the question of Hezbollah's disarmament, is broadly supportive of efforts to restore Lebanese territory occupied by Israel and rebuild after Israeli attacks. These conditions, combined with a worsening economic crisis and an unprecedented brain drain, generally favor Lebanese policy towards that end. The question remains, by what means?

Where Israel Stands on Negotiations with Lebanon

The domestic Israeli political landscape is fairly grim in terms of peace negotiations with Lebanon. While the prime minister and his ambassador to Washington have expressed an openness to peace, they are presiding over prolonged Israeli military occupation of southern Lebanon and repeated ceasefire violations. Extremists within and beyond the coalition government are calling for Israeli annexation of Lebanese territory and even settlement construction there. Meanwhile, the leader of

the opposition and the leading candidate to replace Netanyahu have maintained their hawkish posture – signalling that support for diplomacy with Lebanon is not a sure thing if they were to return to power.

Israeli public opinion is similarly grim; polling [shows](#) much greater public support for the military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon than for diplomacy. That said, if a viable peace framework were presented to the Israeli public that outlines the many potential benefits for Israel, public opinion may shift as it did with the Abraham Accords (once the benefits of diplomatic relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan were made clear to Israelis). In the meantime, this is where key Israeli officials stand on peace with Lebanon:

- **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu:** Netanyahu recently [said](#) that “we could make peace with Lebanon and want to make peace with them tomorrow, no, yesterday.” At the same time, he insists that the Israeli military will maintain a so-called [buffer zone](#) in southern Lebanon and that a total defeat of Hezbollah is a prerequisite for peace.
- **Ambassador to the US Yechiel Leiter:** After the third round of talks, Leiter [said](#) that the “potential for success is great.” He previously [spoke](#) aspirationally about a potential future in which Israeli and Lebanese citizens travel across the borders in “business suits to conduct business or in bathing suits to go on vacation.”
- **Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich:** The far-right minister in Netanyahu’s government has [called](#) for Israel to permanently annex southern Lebanon, [saying](#) that “the new Israeli border must be the Litani.” Smotrich also [said](#) on a podcast recently that he promised his son “more destruction” in Lebanon. Many within his extremist camp [advocate](#) building Israeli civilian settlements in southern Lebanon, throwing a familiar wrench into the peace efforts.
- **Opposition Leader Yair Lapid:** The former prime minister who leads the opposition to Netanyahu in the Knesset as head of the Yesh Atid party [criticized](#) the current Israeli government for failing to remove the threat to residents of northern Israel – vowing to do so if he returns to power. While serving as prime minister in 2022, Lapid signed a [maritime agreement](#) with Lebanon, resolving a longstanding dispute between the two countries in the Mediterranean Sea. This suggests that Lapid might support diplomacy with Lebanon as part of the next coalition government – that is, if he manages to oust Netanyahu in the 2026 election.
- **Former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett:** The leading candidate to replace Netanyahu in the 2026 election [accused](#) the current Israeli government of a “policy of containment” and [urged](#) the government to “let the IDF win.” These latest comments suggest that if Bennett returns to power, he may prioritize military victory in Lebanon over peace negotiations. That said, Bennett [supported](#) the 2022 maritime agreement while serving as alternate prime minister alongside Lapid, demonstrating some pragmatism regarding Lebanon.

Israel and Lebanon Are Ripe for Agreement

- 1) **Strategic Alliance:** Unlike with previous attempts at diplomacy, Israeli and Lebanese leadership appear to be broadly aligned in terms of long-term cooperation between the parties and disarming Hezbollah. The relatively new leaders in Beirut, President Aoun and Prime Minister Salam, as well as Prime Minister Netanyahu and his representatives at the negotiations in Washington have all expressed support for some form of lasting solution. Furthermore, if Netanyahu were to be replaced in the upcoming Israeli election, his most likely successor already signed off on a previous, albeit limited, agreement with Lebanon.
- 2) **Sustained Engagement:** The willingness of the two parties to engage in direct talks for the first time in decades, their commitment to two negotiating tracks, and announcement of additional meetings are also unprecedented. Meanwhile, the US is engaged in Israel-Lebanon mediation perhaps like never before; Washington appears committed to sustained, aggressive diplomatic involvement. In addition, Gulf states have indicated that they are willing to support the rebuilding of Lebanon, a country that is desperate for an economic boost.
- 3) **Regional Changes:** Hezbollah's chief benefactor, the Islamic Republic of Iran, has been weakened by its war with the US and Israel. Since October 2023, Israel has also dealt heavy military blows to Hezbollah, including the elimination of its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. With the fall of Iran-backed Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah lost an all-important ally across the border. Collectively, these regional changes have left Hezbollah relatively vulnerable, thereby improving the chances for a diplomatic breakthrough.

Benefits of an Israel-Lebanon Agreement

The benefits of a comprehensive agreement are many. In the long-term, both sides would benefit enormously from diplomatic relations and channels of communication following an eventual exchange of embassies and ambassadors. The parties would also reap the immense economic benefits of intergovernmental and people-to-people cooperation on trade, energy, tourism, and more. In the short-term, Israel and Lebanon could finally restore security for residents of northern Israel and southern Lebanon through a permanent cessation of cross-border attacks. This would set them on a path to an agreement that could include:

- Full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, including phased IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon in parallel with LAF deployment, as well as disarmament of non-state actors in Lebanon and LAF monopoly of arms;
- Security guarantees for both sides, including protections against IDF re-entry and a verification mechanism (perhaps with external monitoring) for Hezbollah disarmament;
- Restoration of Lebanese sovereignty through resolution of territorial disputes with Israel – alongside Lebanese recognition of Israel – and further commitment by Lebanon to counter Iranian influence.