

Between the Iranian hammer and the Lebanese anvil

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 16.04.2026

The direct, historic talks that began between Israel and Lebanon are not taking place in a vacuum. They are being held in the shadow of a broader Iranian strategy aimed at imposing a “binding equation” on Israel: a multifront war of attrition designed to erode Israel’s freedom of action and shield Tehran’s core assets. To prevail in this campaign, Israel must adopt a realist approach that shatters the illusion of Lebanese sovereignty and replaces it with determined territorial control.

The reality in Beirut is clear to all: despite efforts at revival, the Lebanese state remains a hollow entity. The government in Beirut is too weak to implement its own decisions, and the Lebanese army lacks the ability and, at times, even the will to enforce government decisions regarding the disarmament of the Hezbollah terrorist organization. Accordingly, any diplomatic agreement signed with Lebanon, without physical guarantees on the ground, will not be worth the paper it is written on. Israel cannot entrust the security of its residents to a phantom sovereign that does not control its own backyard.

Faced with this governing vacuum, in which Iran and Hezbollah remain the true sovereign in Lebanon, Israel must shift from a strategy of active defense to one of creating a new reality in Lebanon. The key lies in establishing a sterile zone south of the Litani River. The direct-fire antitank threat has become Hezbollah’s main strategic tool for disrupting daily life in northern Israel. Neutralizing that threat requires physical Israeli control of the area, clearing the villages near the border of all military infrastructure, and controlling the high ground that topographically overlooks the Galilee communities in Israel.

Israel should make this clear in the negotiations: the IDFs will take and hold strategic areas south of the Litani for an unlimited period of time. This presence would not constitute a passive “security zone,” but rather a security guarantee and a strategic bargaining chip. On the operational level, Israel must prepare for a scenario in which IDF forces stationed in the buffer zone become a constant target for guerrilla attacks. Such preparation requires a shift to “offensive

defense”: the use of technological defense systems, smart fortifications and high mobility, alongside immediate lethal fire against any cell attempting to approach the line of contact. Israel’s withdrawal from the sterile zone should not be tied to timetables, but to one result alone: Hezbollah’s complete disarmament. The sterile zone thus becomes the only real lever of pressure on Hezbollah and its patrons in Tehran, who would see how their adventurism leads to the loss of Lebanese territorial assets.

At the same time, it would not be enough merely to clear the area up to the Litani. Israel must work to systematically destroy the smuggling routes from Iran and Syria, while making clear that any Hezbollah attempt to attack IDF forces remaining in southern Lebanon will be met with determined Israeli strikes on the organization’s strategic infrastructure deeper inside the country.

Also, Jerusalem must reject pressure from the Trump administration for a quick ceasefire in Lebanon, as part of a US attempt to pave the way for a broader agreement with Iran. Israel must firmly refuse any dictate linking the northern campaign to a deal with Tehran. It must make clear to its friends in Washington that halting the fighting prematurely, while leaving Hezbollah standing on the fences, would amount to a strategic victory for the axis of evil and lay the groundwork for a far more violent and deadly next round. Moreover, ending the war without ensuring the permanent reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and without removing all enriched uranium stockpiles from Iran could create a false sense of victory within the leadership in Tehran, overshadowing the severe and unprecedented price the regime has paid. Preventing such a sense of achievement requires insisting on tough conditions, and that is no less a distinctly American interest than an Israeli one. The existential security of Israeli citizens cannot serve as a bargaining chip in a package deal with Tehran.

On the broader strategic level, Israel must reject the Iranian equation that seeks to bind Lebanon’s fate to the war against Iran. It must work to sever the link between the fronts by projecting power that deters Tehran from intervening directly. The direct talks are an important tactical tool for exposing Hezbollah’s true face as Lebanon’s oppressor, but they must not become a trap of “quiet in exchange for postponing the threat.”

In conclusion, at a time when Lebanese sovereignty remains a fiction, Israel must be the security sovereign in the territory threatening its communities. Only a

combination of diplomatic pressure exposing Beirut's weakness, uncompromising ground control along the antitank line, and firm resistance to external dictates will ensure a shift in the balance against Iran and the Hezbollah terrorist organization, and enable residents to return to their homes with long-term security. Land is the only guarantee in a Middle East where words have lost their meaning.

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*The opinions expressed in Misgav publications are the authors' alone.