

Inside Israel-Hezbollah cease-fire



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OPINION

the fighting. So, what did the two sides agree to, how durable is the agreement, and what does it mean for a potential regional war and the ongoing genocide in Gaza?

One chapter in the long war Israel has waged throughout the Middle East is over. Lebanon and Israel agreed to a cease-fire that went into effect on Wednesday morning. It's been clear for several weeks that Israel and Hezbollah were both ready to take a break from

Terms of cease-fire

The text of the cease-fire calls for the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel to stop immediately.

Over the course of the next 60 days, Hezbollah will move all of its personnel and equipment north of the Litani River, some 18 miles from the border with Israel, and Israel's forces will fully withdraw from Lebanon.

Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon will be replaced by the Lebanese military, which will operate alongside the UNIFIL team.

The Lebanese army will be responsible for ensuring

that no weapons or military materiel reaches Hezbollah and that all of Hezbollah's forces and equipment are dismantled or removed from the area south of the Litani River.

Israel, Lebanon, the United States, and France will form a "Mechanism" group, which will work with UNIFIL to monitor and ensure enforcement of the commitments made by both sides.

The US and the United Nations will facilitate negotiations between Israel and Lebanon to settle the remaining border disputes between the two countries.



A man celebrates carrying a picture of the late Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut, Lebanon, following a cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah that went into effect on November 27, 2024.
● BILAL HUSSEIN/AP

'Side letter' from US to Israel

Alongside the cease-fire agreement, a letter from the United States to Israel affirms American support for Israel to "act in self-defense," a term Israel has historically stretched beyond all recognition. This was the Joe Biden administration's way of satisfying both Israel's demand that it be allowed to act against Hezbollah if it felt the need and Lebanon's refusal to compromise its own sovereignty in such an agreement. The letter also commits the United States to provide Israel with intelligence on Iranian efforts to send weapons to Hezbollah or influence politics in Lebanon, and on any attempt by Hezbollah to "in-

filtrate" the Lebanese army. Israel is to be permitted to act "in self-defense" if Hezbollah violates the cease-fire in the area south of the Litani, and can only act elsewhere in Lebanon if there is a violation that the Lebanese army is unable or unwilling to address. It also allows Israel to conduct reconnaissance flights over Lebanon as long as its aircraft don't breach the sound barrier. Lebanon and Hezbollah are not involved in the side letter, so they do not necessarily agree with its contents. Clearly, though, they are aware of it and were willing to agree to the cease-fire with the understanding that this is how the US will approach any future Israeli decision on aggressive actions in Lebanon.

Reasons to agree to cease-fire now

For Hezbollah, Israeli attacks did significant damage to the group. The loss of key leaders, the loss of much of its firepower, and the damage to the group's infrastructure were severe. While Hezbollah has been able to regroup sufficiently to beat back Israeli ground forces, the toll Israel has taken is significant. More importantly, the damage that Israel has done to Lebanese civilians and civilian infrastructure is more than Hezbollah can tolerate. Lebanon was already reeling from economic and physical calamities over the past few years. But even many who still admire the group's ability to stand up against Israel's military force are seeing too many of their children, their

siblings, and their neighbors being killed.

Hezbollah cannot afford to simply allow that kind of civilian toll on the country. While people still blame Israel primarily for its crimes, Hezbollah's status in Lebanon is going to crater if they are seen as stubbornly refusing a cease-fire when they can stop this devastation of Lebanese civilians.

On the Israeli side, neither Benjamin Netanyahu's rivals nor allies in the Knesset are supporting him, but there is reason that the criticism is more political posturing than real attempts to pressure Netanyahu out of the cease-fire.

Netanyahu was faced with the reality that Israeli forces were being stretched too thin. With fighting in Gaza ongoing and

Hezbollah's ability to resist Israel's advances on the ground proving resilient, there is a real strain on their military. Some reservists have been on duty for a year or more.

Perhaps more importantly, incoming US President Donald Trump has made it clear to Netanyahu that he wants the fighting to end. Netanyahu has no intention of stopping the genocide in Gaza, but he has every incentive to stop the fighting in Lebanon, at least for a while.

Reports that Netanyahu was pushed into the agreement by a threat from Biden to support a UN Security Council resolution are nonsense. Not only is it highly unlikely that Biden would suddenly take such a step, but if he did, the idea that

Netanyahu would stop a war he wanted based on that threat is absurd. He would much more likely call Biden's bluff and, even if Biden was serious, he'd simply defy the resolution, as Israel always has.

When Trump comes into the White House, Netanyahu can decide to try to strengthen the cease-fire sufficiently to return Israeli citizens to their homes in the north or to work with the many Iran hawks in Trump's administration to provoke a potential war for regime change in the Islamic Republic, a path which would almost certainly mean renewed fighting in Lebanon. Either way, an opportunity to lower the strain on Israel's military for a period of time will be advantageous.



Both claim victory; Who's right?

Hezbollah once again proved that despite all of the devastation and slaughter that Israel brought to bear, it can not only survive but still prevent an Israeli ground invasion. On that basis, they can claim victory if they want.

Israel, too, is claiming victory, but a realistic look throws that claim into doubt. Ultimately, for all the blood it spilled and all the infrastructure it destroyed, Hezbollah is still standing. It's damaged but will likely recover from that damage.

Netanyahu can talk about bringing Israelis back to their homes in the north, but many will rightly doubt that it's really safe for them to go back.

As much as Israel got its way in the terms of the cease-fire, they are still aware that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are no better equipped today to enforce the deal on Hezbollah than they were before. The LAF still needs to be very cautious about engaging Hezbollah as any encounter of that kind risks a quick march down the road back to civil war. Additionally, many of the LAF are going to be sympathetic to Hezbollah or, at the very least, queasy about fighting fellow Leb-

anese in defense of an agreement with Israel.

By agreeing to the cease-fire, Israel is veering away, at least for the moment, from its efforts to compromise Iran's position in the region and provoke a confrontation that settles the cold conflict that has been simmering for decades. That could change in the coming months, but for now, this is at least a pause in that effort, perhaps even a step back.

One more loser is worth mentioning, and that is international law. France was eager to be part of this process, as it often is when Lebanon, its former mandatory territory, is involved. Israel, angry that France has taken the position that it would obey the ruling of the International Criminal Court that issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, opposed French involvement.

To convince Israel to allow France to participate in the monitoring process, French authorities said that Netanyahu would be "immune" from French enforcement of the ICC warrant. This transactional approach to law is a major blow to the gains international law made with the ICC warrants.