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Beyond Disarmament: Lebanon's Path to State Control of Arms

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COVER IMAGE:
Lebanese soldiers stand guard outside a building destroyed by Israeli bombardment in Tair Harfa, southern Lebanon, 9 February 2025. Mahmoud Zayyat/AFP.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper explores the issue of non-state armed groups in Lebanon, focusing on Hezbollah within the context of the Lebanese experience and international comparisons. It suggests that the question of arms cannot be approached merely as a security or military matter; rather, it is the product of an interaction of political, social, and regional factors, rooted in the history of resistance to Israeli occupation, weak state institutions, and complexities of Lebanon's sectarian political system. The paper traces the evolution of the relationship between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state, from the group's emergence during the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli invasion, through its transformation into a major political, military, and social actor, to the developments associated with the war in Gaza and their repercussions for Lebanon between 2023 and 2026.

The paper also examines successive Lebanese attempts to address the issue of arms, ranging from the Taif Agreement and the National Dialogue to the Baabda Declaration and various proposals to consolidate the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. It argues that the primary obstacle has not been a lack of initiatives or proposals, but rather the lack of effective implementation mechanisms and the political and institutional guarantees necessary for their success.

Drawing on various comparative international experiences, the paper explores military resolutions (as in Sri Lanka and China), political settlements (as in Ireland and the Basque Country), and stalled processes (as in Turkey). It concludes that sustainable solutions cannot rely solely on coercive or technical approaches to disarmament; instead, they require comprehensive transitional pathways that address the underlying causes of armed mobilization and the political, social, and security functions that arms serve.

The paper proposes a framework for a sovereign transition based on a gradual approach, mutual commitments, and the strengthening of state institutions. This framework proposes the phased transfer of defense, social protection, and political functions to legitimate state institutions, aiming to ensure that decisions on war and peace rest exclusively with the state, without excluding any social or political component. The paper concludes that building a capable, just, and effective state is the fundamental prerequisite for the success of any sustainable path toward the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force and the restoration of national sovereignty.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Relationship Between Hezbollah and the Lebanese State Has Evolved from a Temporary Exception into a Sustained Dualism of Power and Authority.

What began as an exception, linked to resistance to Israeli occupation following the Taif Agreement, gradually evolved into a long-term political and security arrangement. This has resulted in an overlap between official state institutions and parallel military and political structures, leaving the authority to decide on war and peace contested between the state and Hezbollah.

Successive Lebanese Initiatives Have Failed to Address the Root of the Problem.

Despite numerous national dialogues and political initiatives since 2000, disagreements have persisted over implementation mechanisms and the guarantees required to transition from dual power to a state's monopoly on arms, preventing any sustainable progress.

There Is No International Model That Can Be Directly Replicated in the Lebanese Context.

International comparisons show that approaches to military resolution, political settlement, and reintegration have varied with local circumstances. However, a common thread across these cases is the existence of political and institutional arrangements that addressed the underlying causes of conflict as well as its security-related consequences.

Hezbollah's Arsenal Serves Functions That Extend Well Beyond the Military Dimension.

These arms have been linked, in varying degrees, to defense, security, political representation, social protection, and collective identity. Consequently, any approach limited exclusively to the security dimension will be incapable of addressing the factors that have sustained the existence of these arms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The State's Exclusive Control over Arms Is the Outcome of a Political and Institutional Process, Not Its Starting Point.

It is achieved by addressing the conditions that have sustained the continued presence of such arms, foremost among them being occupation and external threats, the state's historical limitations in fulfilling its defense and protection mandates, weak public institutions, and declining public confidence in the state's ability to provide security and rights equitably.

Transferring the Functions of Power Is More Important than Transferring Weapons.

Progress is not measured by the number of weapons surrendered or dismantled, but by the state's capacity to assume the functions that gave rise to these arms in the first place. As public institutions become increasingly capable of providing defense, protection, service delivery, and representation, the need for parallel armed structures diminishes.

Political and Social Guarantees Are Prerequisites for a Sustainable Transition.

No process toward achieving the state's exclusive control over arms can succeed unless it is accompanied by tangible guarantees of participation, representation, and rights. Groups do not relinquish their sources of power merely because of security arrangements; they do so when they are confident that their interests and political existence are safeguarded within legitimate institutions.

State Legitimacy Is Built Through Capacity, Not Legal Texts.

The primacy of the state is solidified when its institutions demonstrate greater capability and effectiveness than private protection networks or factional loyalties in providing security, rights, and services. As this occurs, the source of public assurance gradually shifts from specific groups to state institutions, causing parallel power structures to lose both their justification for existence and their functional purpose.

Introduction

Hezbollah's possession of a large arsenal beyond the control of the Lebanese state authority has remained one of the most significant structural challenges facing Lebanon since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war. The 1989 Taif Agreement mandated the dissolution and disarmament of all the country's militias.[1] Yet Hezbollah's arsenal remained outside this process, framed as an exception linked to resistance against the Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon. Over time, however, these arms took on domestic and regional dimensions that transcended their original, purely defensive function. As the group's political and military roles evolved, the issue of its weaponry became central to debates concerning sovereignty, the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and decision-making mechanisms governing war and peace.

Israel's withdrawal to the so-called Blue Line in 2000, the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in 2004, and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian forces following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005 brought the question of Hezbollah's arms to the forefront of domestic political debate, linking it more closely to issues of sovereignty and national defense.[2] This debate was further intensified by three major developments: the July 2006 war with Israel, the events of May 7, 2008, and Hezbollah's overt military intervention in the Syrian war in 2013.[3]

This controversy reached a new peak following Hezbollah's unilateral decision to open a "support front" for Gaza on October 8, 2023, a move taken in the absence of any national consensus or authorization from Lebanese state institutions. The ensuing confrontations escalated into a full-scale war in Lebanon, resulting in heavy human casualties and extensive damage to border villages, infrastructure, the agricultural sector, and the environment. UN reports have documented systematic bombardment and destruction across large areas of southern Lebanon, noting the destruction of over 11,000 buildings, alongside far-reaching economic and environmental damage.[4]

From 2025 onwards, mounting domestic and international pressure culminated in a government plan, introduced in August 2025, to consolidate all arms under state control.[5] This was followed, in March 2026, by Prime Minister Nawaf Salam's announcement of a ban on Hezbollah's military activities.[6] These developments dismantled the long-standing consensus that had shielded the issue of non-state weaponry for decades, transforming it from a chronic point of contention within the political system into a broader sovereign and existential crisis, one now placed squarely on the agenda of the Lebanese state and its institutions.

This paper does not seek to evaluate Hezbollah's decision to open a "support front" for Gaza, nor does it offer an exhaustive assessment of that decision's military, political, or social repercussions. Rather, it examines these events as part of a context that has reignited a national debate over the future of arms held beyond state authority, the relationship between the defensive functions performed by Hezbollah and the role of legitimate state institutions, and the political and security conditions that would be needed for any transition toward a Lebanese state monopoly on weaponry.

The paper employs a comparative analytical methodology to review Hezbollah's evolution and the course of its relationship with the Lebanese state and society, while comparing the situation of Lebanon to the experiences of other countries that have faced similar challenges involving militias and non-state armed actors. It seeks both to draw lessons and to identify the limitations of applying international templates, while taking into account the specificities of the Lebanese system. The paper concludes that the debate around the possession of arms cannot be reduced purely to its security dimension, but must consider political and social aspects as well as questions of identity, due to the issue's inherent links to occupation and resistance, the prioritization of a distinct Shiite identity within the resistance movement, and Hezbollah's ties to Iran and its regional network of influence.

The paper proposes an approach based on a gradual, negotiated transition toward the state having exclusive authority over decisions of war and peace, through an approach integrating security and political reform with economic development and a social safety net, thereby establishing a solid foundation to build a capable state and a cohesive society.

From Resistance to Isolation: Hezbollah's Military and Political Trajectories

This chapter examines Hezbollah's dual path of military operations and political engagement. The movement's combat engagements, ranging from domestic clashes and confrontations with the Israeli occupation to Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war, have solidified its position as an active military force in Lebanon and the broader region. Meanwhile, its political engagement has served as a complementary track, beginning with Hezbollah's 1985 "Open Letter" (seen as its manifesto) and evolving through its entry into the government in 2005 and its participation in official state institutions.

The interplay between these military and political dimensions has demonstrated how armed activity has, at times, bolstered the political track while at other times constraining it, reflecting the complex relationship between resistance and political power. The chapter concludes that the relationship between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state has evolved from confrontation to participation, and from entrenchment to debate over the future, with Hezbollah's weaponry remaining at the heart of discussions over its position and role within Lebanon.

Hezbollah's Rise and Early Resistance (1982–1990)

A sense of marginalization, inadequate public services, and poor political representation among broad segments of the Shiite community, combined with the legacy of Imam Musa al-Sadr, the return of religious scholars from Najaf, and the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, created a fertile environment for the emergence of a new Shiite Islamic organization during a period of state collapse and intensifying conflict in the Lebanese Civil War.[7]

The 1982 Israeli invasion served as a watershed moment, as the departure of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Beirut created a security and political vacuum. In this context, various Shiite Islamic groups, supported by Iran, notably through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), came together to form the nucleus of an organization dedicated to resisting the occupation. Over time, Hezbollah took shape as a force that embraced armed resistance, aligning its agenda with the ideology of the Islamic Revolution and the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist).[8]

Hezbollah's rejection of the May 17, 1983, agreement became a cornerstone of Hezbollah's foundational narrative and its resistance-centered discourse. The agreement was opposed by political and national forces, as well as broad segments of Lebanese public opinion, who viewed it as entrenching Israeli influence and violating Lebanon's national sovereignty. This, alongside Syrian diplomatic and political pressures, the threat of confrontation, and internal political and security developments, led to its collapse and formal dissolution in 1984.[9] In February 1985, Hezbollah officially announced its inauguration in an "Open Letter to the Oppressed in Lebanon and the World," which served as a founding manifesto that defined its identity as an "Islamic resistance movement" that combined military action with a political agenda.[10]

During the second half of the 1980s, rivalry intensified between Hezbollah and the Amal Movement over the leadership and representation of the Shiite community. This culminated in the 1988-1990 "war between brothers," which eventually concluded with a Syrian-Iranian-brokered settlement that established a division of roles: Amal would operate within official state institutions, while Hezbollah would focus on armed resistance.[11]

By the end of the 1980s, Hezbollah had evolved from a nascent armed grouping into a cohesive political-military organization and cemented its position as a key player in the Lebanese landscape, bolstered by the legitimacy of its resistance and its close ties to Iran.

The Consolidation Phase: Between Resistance and Political Presence (1990–2000)

The third article of the 1989 Taif Agreement stipulated the liberation of Lebanon from Israeli occupation and restoration of the authority of the State up to the internationally recognized Lebanese borders. It called for working toward the implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolutions that call for the complete removal of the Israeli occupation.[12] The agreement also affirms adherence to the Armistice Agreement signed on March 23, 1949, and calls for taking all necessary measures to liberate all Lebanese territory from Israeli occupation, extending the State's sovereignty over all of its land. Following this, a unique arrangement emerged under Syrian tutelage that allowed Hezbollah to retain its weapons on the basis that it was resisting the Israeli occupation in south Lebanon. This granted the movement significant military latitude in exchange for regulating its political activity. Consequently, it began to integrate armed resistance with political activity, running in the 1992 parliamentary elections and securing a bloc of 12 deputies.

Throughout the 1990s, Hezbollah continued its operations against Israel, most notably during the "Seven-Day War" in 1993 and "Operation Grapes of Wrath" in 1996.[13] The April 1996 Israeli–Lebanese Ceasefire Understanding helped establish rules of engagement and provided protection for civilians; this offered the resistance a form of indirect political cover and strengthened Hezbollah's position as an actor that combined both military and political roles.[14]



UNIFIL troops are caught in traffic near the southern Lebanese village of Qlayaat, near Marjayoun, 25 May 2000. Rabih Moghrabi/AFP.

Domestically, the events of September 13, 1993,[i] demonstrated during opposition to the Oslo Accords, highlighted the delicate nature of the relationship between the movement and the state.[15] Hezbollah chose to exercise restraint, avoiding a confrontation with the Lebanese Armed Forces. It later leveraged this incident in its political discourse,

i. On September 13, 1993, Hezbollah called on its supporters to demonstrate on the main road to Beirut Airport to oppose the Oslo Accords. Lebanese security forces confronted the demonstration with force and opened fire on the protesters, resulting in several deaths and injuries.

portraying itself as prioritizing the national interest over impulsive reactions, thus demonstrating a commitment to avoiding internal strife.[16] In parallel, Hezbollah maintained its parliamentary presence, although its number of seats fell to 10 in the 1996 elections.

In the late 1990s, Hezbollah intensified its military operations as Israeli pressure on Lebanon mounted. Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 was viewed as a victory for the resistance, solidifying Hezbollah's standing both domestically and regionally, thus paving the way for a new phase in the relationship between Hezbollah's armed wing, its political participation, and the Lebanese state.[17]

2000-2010 Liberation, But...

Following the Israeli army's withdrawal from the south in May 2000, Hezbollah presented itself as a victorious national resistance force, which bolstered its popular support and cemented its parliamentary presence, again securing 10 seats.[18] Regionally, the group solidified its position within the "Axis of Resistance" and served as an inspiration for Palestinian movements. Beyond the liberation of Lebanese territory, the issue of prisoner exchange in January 2004 marked a significant symbolic milestone. Hezbollah appeared alongside the state's leadership, President Émile Lahoud, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, and Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, reinforcing its image as a legitimate resistance force while simultaneously positioning it as an integral part of the official Lebanese state, balancing its role as a resistance movement with its political and social presence.

However, this period soon brought mounting domestic and international pressure, particularly following the adoption in 2004 of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, and growing calls for the group's disarmament.[19] After the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, the movement entered a new phase of political activity, becoming a leading force within the pro-Syria March 8 Alliance, in opposition to the March 14 Coalition, which demanded a Syrian withdrawal.[20] Following the departure of the Syrian army, Hezbollah found itself on the defensive, striving to retain its weapons while simultaneously taking part in government through the "quadripartite alliance"[ii] and successive ministerial posts.[21]

The 2006 Mar Mikhael Agreement with the Free Patriotic Movement was a turning point.[22] Yet this coincided with the July War with Israel, which showcased the group's military capabilities and cemented its image as a deterrent force, while also deepening internal divisions over its role and its possession of arms. In May 2008, this controversy escalated into a direct domestic confrontation as Hezbollah and its allies employed their military strength in response to government decisions targeting the movement's private telecommunications network, as well as the dismissal of a Hezbollah-affiliated security official from his position at Beirut Airport. Within days, the group managed to seize control of key areas in Beirut and subject its political opponents to its will on the ground, resulting in a significant number of civilian casualties in Beirut and other areas in Lebanon. While Hezbollah supporters viewed these events as a necessary step to defend the resistance, its opponents saw them as the use of armed force as a tool for domestic political coercion, sparking widespread concern over the movement's expanding influence within the state. Following these events, a Qatari-mediated agreement in May 2008 brought an end to the military clashes and the immediate security crisis; however, it established a new political equation by granting the opposition 11 seats in the government, a configuration that came to be known as the "blocking third", or the "guaranteeing third," depending on one's political stance.[23] This effectively bolstered the ability of Hezbollah and its allies to influence government decisions, and became a persistent subject of political controversy.[24]

ii. A temporary electoral alliance that emerged during the 2005 elections, aimed at distributing parliamentary seats and mitigating deep-seated divisions. It dissolved shortly after the elections concluded.



Smoke billows from the burning building of pro-government Future TV, owned by the family of former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri, in Beirut, 9 May 2008. Ramzi Haidar/AFP.

Furthermore, between 2004 and 2009,[iii] the movement faced a series of accusations by politicians and in the media that it had been involved in the assassinations of prominent Lebanese figures, most notably the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, and a subsequent string of operations targeting politicians, journalists and security officials opposed to Syria.[25] These accusations took on a judicial dimension with investigations by the international Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which concluded in 2020 by convicting a Hezbollah operative, Salim Ayyash, over Hariri's assassination, although it did not convict Hezbollah's leadership or the organization itself. The Tribunal further stated that it had received no evidence that directly implicated the group's political leadership or the Syrian state.[26] For its part, Hezbollah rejected the Tribunal's rulings, and has consistently denied playing any role in the assassination. Consequently, the question of Hezbollah's responsibility for other political assassinations has remained a subject of political and legal dispute, and no final judicial rulings have been issued in most of the cases.

Deepening Involvement in Domestic Politics 2011–2023

Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Hezbollah became involved in the fight, alongside the Assad regime, a fact it officially acknowledged in 2013. This marked a strategic shift: the group had evolved from a local resistance movement into a regional actor, becoming part of an Iranian-led network.[27] While this intervention bolstered Hezbollah's military expertise, it also deepened internal Lebanese divisions and led to a rupture with Gulf states, which designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in 2016.[28] Domestically, Hezbollah faced accusations that it was placing itself above the state and dragging Lebanon into regional conflicts, yet it maintained a solid base of popular support within its own Shiite constituency, bolstered by its social institutions and political rhetoric.

iii. Between 2004 and 2009, Lebanon saw a string of political assassinations targeting prominent political, media, and security figures. Although the frequency of these attacks later subsided, further killings have continued, including those of Major General Wissam al-Hassan in 2012 and former minister Mohamad Chatah in 2013.

Between 2014 and 2016, Hezbollah played a pivotal role in a deadlock over appointing a new Lebanese president, by boycotting parliamentary sessions to elect someone to the post until a consensus was reached to back its ally, Michel Aoun. Opponents viewed this as a calculated use of Hezbollah's capacity to obstruct the political process in order to achieve its own political objectives.[29] As its presence within state institutions grew, Hezbollah also faced accusations that it was leveraging its political influence and clout on the ground at key moments. Notable examples include the "black shirts" incident in 2011,[iv] the Tayouneh clashes in 2021,[v] and pressure exerted in connection with the investigation into the catastrophic 2020 Beirut port explosion.[vi] With the financial crisis and the protests that broke out on October 17, 2019, the criticism intensified, with many viewing Hezbollah as an integral part of the ruling establishment and a guardian of the political status quo. This broadened the controversy around the movement, shifting the focus from issues of arms and resistance to broader questions of governance, administration, and state institutions.[30]

Hezbollah's role in Lebanon has extended well beyond politics and weaponry; it has built an extensive network of social institutions that provide healthcare, education, and essential living services within its areas of influence, most notably in the South, the Bekaa Valley, and the southern suburbs of Beirut (Dahiyeh). These institutions include hospitals, schools, charitable organizations, housing projects, and micro-lending programs, funded through Iranian support, donations, and local resources. Studies by the U.S. Treasury Department and international research centers indicate that Hezbollah's funding also stems from illicit economic activities, such as smuggling, the production of narcotics, and money-laundering.[31] The group's social role has bolstered the loyalty of its grassroots constituency by offering alternatives to weak state institutions, embedding Hezbollah into the fabric of daily life. The movement has been accused of creating a "state within a state" through its social and economic infrastructure, a support network that provides essential services to its followers and to residents of its strongholds. This social structure and the services it offers are vital to Hezbollah's strength and longevity, as they ensure it has a presence in people's daily lives, not merely on the battlefield or in parliament.[32]

At the local and developmental level, Hezbollah's participation in municipal elections from 1998 onwards has also been key to its political and social trajectory. Its sweeping victories in its areas of influence, most notably the South, the Bekaa Valley, and the southern suburb (Dahiyeh) of Beirut, enabled it to evolve from a resistance movement and a parliamentary bloc into an entity directly involved in managing local affairs through municipal councils. It has undertaken infrastructure projects, provided public services, and organized the daily lives of residents, bolstering its public and political standing, cementing its image as an actor that integrates armed resistance, political engagement, and developmental services.[33]

The maritime border demarcation agreement between Lebanon and Israel in October 2022 marked a turning point, as it allowed Lebanon to consolidate its rights to explore for gas in the eastern Mediterranean. Although the negotiations officially took place between Israel and the Lebanese state, with American mediation, Hezbollah played an indirect but decisive role through a campaign of "coercive diplomacy" between June and October, during which it threatened

iv. This term gained currency in Lebanese political and media discourse following the resignation of opposition ministers from Saad Hariri's government in January 2011 and the appointment of Najib Mikati to form a new cabinet, a crisis that prompted the supporters of the movement and its allies to take to the streets of Beirut. Its opponents interpreted this as a show of force intended to exert pressure, which Hezbollah rejected, describing it as part of a political mobilization linked to the political crisis. The term thus functions more as a political and media descriptor than as an official designation for a documented or formally defined event.

v. Armed clashes erupted in the Tayouneh–Ain al-Remmaneh district of Beirut on October 14, 2021, during a demonstration organized by Hezbollah and Amal to protest the conduct of the judicial investigator probing the Beirut port explosion. The clashes, reportedly involving Hezbollah, the Lebanese Forces, and Amal, prompted intervention by the Lebanese Army and resulted in deaths and injuries. The events reignited concerns regarding a potential resurgence of political and sectarian violence, as well as the impact of armed groups on public life and state institutions. See: "Armed clashes in Beirut are 'fertile ground for a civil war'," *The Observers - France 24, October 14, 2021,* https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20211014-lebanon-beirut-armed-clashes-hezbollah-amal.

vi. Lebanese media outlets and judicial sources reported that Wafiq Safa, the head of Hezbollah's Liaison and Coordination Unit, delivered threats to Tarek Bitar, the judicial investigator in the Beirut port explosion case, in September 2021, in connection with the course of the investigation. Reuters reported that a senior Hezbollah official warned Bitar that the party would work to have him removed from the case. This sparked widespread debate over political and security-related pressures surrounding the investigation. See: "Judge survives bid to remove him from Beirut blast investigation," *Reuters, October 4, 2021,* https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-judge-investigating-port-blast-kept-case-by-judiciary-local-media-2021-10-04/.

to target Israeli gas facilities—especially the Karish field—were Israel to begin extraction absent an agreement. This military and political pressure prompted Israel to accept demarcation beyond the Hof Line and cede part of the disputed area. This positioned Hezbollah as a partner to the state in its negotiations, as it provided negotiating cover that strengthened Lebanon's position, and highlighted how the movement was able to impose an equation of deterrence against Israel over a momentous issue, and to play a role in making decisions alongside the Lebanese state.[34]

Militarily, Hezbollah maintained a balance of deterrence with Israel from the war in 2006 until a large-scale confrontation erupted in October 2023, which evolved into a daily war of attrition, marked by targeted assassinations and strikes against the group's leadership structure. The conflict further underscored Hezbollah's structural ties to Iran, positioning it as a direct vanguard of support for Tehran, and thus exposing a chronic Lebanese dilemma: a dual power structure comprising the state and Hezbollah, with the latter holding the authority to decide on war and peace without reference to official state institutions.

Hezbollah's Transformations: Between Power and Constraints

Since its inception, Hezbollah has leveraged political tools to legitimize its resistance. During the latter half of the Lebanese Civil War, it gradually built independent organizational, social, and security structures in areas where it held significant influence, eventually moving toward cautious participation in official state institutions in the era of Syrian tutelage.

Between 2000 and 2004, Hezbollah experienced a phase of harmony with the state. Yet UN Security Council Resolution 1559 opened the door to an existential conflict, which culminated in the events of May 7, 2008, an episode that firmly established Hezbollah's capacity for deterrence within Lebanon.[35] Subsequently, the function of the group's weaponry shifted from external deterrence to forcefully imposing a domestic balance of power, followed by its involvement in the Syrian war, which bolstered its regional standing but further deepened Lebanon's isolation. This period was characterized by a form of uneasy coexistence between the movement and the state, whereby its weapons remained, even as their purpose was increasingly the subject of political debate. During the tenure of Michel Aoun, the relationship evolved into a deeper partnership in confrontation; Aoun provided the group with political cover and legitimized its presence within the state apparatus, until the October 2019 uprising, the economic crisis, and the port explosion shattered its image and eroded its national legitimacy.

Today, in the wake of recent conflicts and the assassination of its leadership, Hezbollah faces unprecedented isolation, alongside internal and external pressures that severely constrain its room for maneuver. Direct negotiations between the Lebanese state and Israel have marked a radical shift: management of the conflict has moved from a dual-track dynamic, involving both the state and Hezbollah, into an exclusively state-led negotiation process. This places the future of the group and its arsenal within a political framework that lies beyond its unilateral control.

Stalled Paths Toward Restoring the State: Dual Authority and Arms in Lebanon

Lebanon has witnessed repeated attempts to address the issue of illicit weaponry and non-state actors. This began with the withdrawal of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) fighters following the 1982 Israeli invasion, which reshaped the internal balance of power. The 1989 Taif Agreement represented another turning point, as it stipulated the disbanding of militias and the surrender of their weapons to the state, based on the premise that a state monopoly on the legitimate use of force is a prerequisite for nation-building. This process took shape in 1991

through government decrees and a general amnesty law, which allowed for the integration of former combatants and the unification of the military establishment. This effectively dismantled the military structures of most factions and returned political competition to constitutional institutions.[36]

However, implementation remained incomplete due to the ongoing Israeli occupation, the Syrian presence, and the weakness of state institutions. Consequently, Hezbollah's arsenal became an exception, framed as a legitimate form of resistance against the occupation.[37] This exception created an incomplete transitional arrangement, opening a gap between constitutional principles and the mechanisms for their implementation, a gap that eventually evolved into a persistent political and security dilemma.[38] The experience of the (Christian) Lebanese Forces movement illustrates the difficulty of transitioning from military activity to political participation in the absence of mutual guarantees. Following the 1994 Our Lady of Deliverance Church bombing, the group was dissolved and its leader Samir Geagea imprisoned, only to be released in 2005. He was one of a string of Christian leaders to be removed from the political arena; General Michel Aoun was sent into exile, and Dany Chamoun was assassinated in 1990. These events reinforced a sense among many Christians that the post-war arrangements had marginalized key representative political forces, rather than ensuring a balanced form of participation.[39]

From the National Dialogue to the Baabda Declaration: Attempting to Regulate Arms Through Politics

South Lebanon's liberation from Israeli occupation in 2000 set in motion new efforts to address the issue of illicit arms. This began with a statement by Lebanon's Maronite Bishops, which called for the state to hold a monopoly over the use of force, a demand adopted in 2001 by the coalition known as the Qornet Shehwan Gathering,[vii] which made it a core component of its political agenda.[40] This trajectory continued, leading to UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of 2004, which called for the disbanding of all militias in the country, both Lebanese and non-Lebanese.[41] In response, Hezbollah, with its base of popular support and the backing of the Presidency, argued that it was not implicated in this resolution, asserting that "the resistance is not a militia." This provided the group with political cover and kept the issue of its weaponry off the official agenda. Simultaneously, the presence of arms within Palestinian refugee camps emerged as a chronic dilemma, prompting the establishment of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee to address this issue alongside the broader concerns of the refugees.[42] From this point on, the question of arms gradually evolved from a perennially deferred issue into one of the most contentious topics in Lebanese politics, with repeated attempts to link it to a "defense strategy" that would define the relationship between the "resistance" and the state.

In 2006, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri called for a national dialogue involving 14 political leaders. The agenda included several key issues, such as Lebanese-Syrian relations, the Shebaa Farms, and the weaponry held by Palestinian groups and Hezbollah. Despite some partial understandings, the discussion regarding Hezbollah's arms was subsumed under the broader framework of a "defense strategy." However, implementation remained weak; the agreement failed to end the presence of Palestinian armed groups outside the camps, while the status of Hezbollah's arsenal remained unresolved.[43] The "July War" of 2006 subsequently brought the dialogue to a halt and reframed the problem, raising a fundamental question: who in Lebanon holds the authority to decide on war and peace?[44]

vii. The Qornet Shehwan Gathering was established in April 2001 at the initiative of Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir. It served as a practical manifestation of the spirit behind the 2000 statement issued by the Maronite bishops, which called for an end to arms outside state control and for the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty. The Gathering, convening in the town of Qornet Shehwan, brought together political and intellectual figures from across the Christian spectrum who opposed Syrian tutelage. Its objectives included demanding the full implementation of the Taif Agreement (specifically the provision regarding the withdrawal of the Syrian army), advocating for the state to hold a monopoly on the use of force, and defending public freedoms and the independence of national decision-making. The Gathering served as a prominent opposition framework against Syrian dominance, and paved the way for the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in 2004, which called for the disbanding of all militias, both Lebanese and non-Lebanese. Later, following the assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005, the ideas championed by the Gathering converged with those of other political forces to form the March 14 Alliance, making it a key platform that helped reshape the Lebanese political landscape based on the principles of sovereignty and independence.

Following the Doha Agreement, the national dialogue was revived under the chairmanship of President Michel Suleiman.[45] In the first session, in September 2008, the issue of a "defense strategy" took center stage. Suleiman proposed a framework centered on the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) that would also leverage the capabilities of the "resistance," yet disagreement persisted: opposition factions demanded that Hezbollah's arsenal be placed under state authority, while Hezbollah insisted that any discussion must begin by addressing the Israeli threat and the necessity of resistance.

Concurrently, Hezbollah strengthened its position within the political system, drawing on a combination of influence on the ground and political alliances. Although the concept of "resistance" had appeared, in various forms, in previous ministerial statements (notably under the governments of Rafic Hariri and Salim al-Huss), the period after the Doha Agreement saw a more explicit formalization of the formula: "Lebanon's right, through its people, its army, and its resistance," as found in a ministerial statement by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government.[46]



Lebanese President Michel Suleiman chairs a national dialogue meeting at the presidential palace in Baabda, northeast of Beirut, 11 June 2012. AFP/HO/ Dalati and Nohra.

With the outbreak of the Syrian internal war in 2011, the national dialogue took on a new dimension. The Baabda Declaration of June 2012 called for Lebanon to remain neutral vis-à-vis conflicts in the region, and urged support for the LAF, adherence to the Taif Agreement and Resolution 1701, and a prohibition on using Lebanese territory for the smuggling of weapons or fighters.[47] Subsequently, President Michel Suleiman presented a written vision for a defense strategy; rather than demanding the immediate disarmament of Hezbollah, he proposed a transitional phase during which the group's capabilities would be placed at the disposal of the LAF, ensuring that the latter would hold sole authority over the use of force. The objective was to bring the function of armed force under state authority, as a precursor to consolidating the monopoly on the legitimate use of force within state institutions.[48] However, this trajectory was derailed when Hezbollah became militarily involved in Syria in 2013, a move that

rendered the Baabda Declaration practically and politically null and void. Mohammad Raad, head of Hezbollah's "Loyalty to the Resistance" parliamentary bloc, dismissed the Declaration as "not worth the ink it was written with," signaling its collapse.[49] By the time President Michel Suleiman's term ended in 2014, the divide had deepened, and the issue of a "defense strategy" was sidelined by other crises over elections and the vacant presidency.

Ultimately, the experience of the national dialogue, from 2006 until the Baabda Declaration, reveals that the core problem was not a lack of discussion or proposed frameworks, but rather the absence of clear implementation mechanisms and guarantees. While most parties accepted the principle of strengthening the state and the army, the point of contention remained the transition phase: specifically, when and how decision-making authority over military capabilities would transfer from Hezbollah to the state. Therefore, the value of returning to dialogue today lies not merely in replicating a new round of talks, but in achieving what previous dialogues failed to accomplish, translating political consensus into the state actually taking possession of the authority to use force and arms.

From Gaza to Disarmament Plans: Hezbollah's Isolation and the Redefinition of Sovereignty

Hezbollah's decision to open a "support front" for Gaza in 2023 drew Lebanon into a regional confrontation, as the Palestinian cause was thrust back to the forefront of global attention.[50] Although some saw the move as an act of solidarity with a people facing genocide, it came at a heavy cost for both Hezbollah and Lebanon, as Israel seized the opportunity to expand its aggression, inflicting human casualties and significant material damage, plunging the country into a prolonged period of attrition. Hezbollah's decision was therefore not only military; it served as a major political turning point, exposing the inherent tension between solidarity with Palestine and Lebanon's limited capacity to bear the consequences of a confrontation of this magnitude.

Following the announcement of a ceasefire on November 27, 2024, Hezbollah ceased its military operations, realizing it could no longer dictate terms domestically as it once had. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria had significantly deepened its isolation, costing the group one of its most critical regional allies and its strategic depth. The cumulative losses sustained after the 2024 war left Hezbollah politically isolated domestically and beyond, while Lebanon entered a new phase of rebalancing, one in which the state emerged as the primary authority regarding decisions of war and peace.

By early 2025, Hezbollah was compelled to accept the election of Army Commander Joseph Aoun as President of the Republic, reversing its previous opposition to this choice, and it participated in a government led by Nawaf Salam as part of a broader political settlement.[51] This government launched an official disarmament plan aimed at consolidating military power exclusively under the state. The plan was anchored in three core principles: establishing the army as the sole, unifying framework for decisions on war and peace; the gradual integration of Hezbollah into political life; and opening channels of negotiation with the international community to secure financial and political support for Lebanon. The plan was structured in five phases, beginning with the elimination of any armed presence south of the Litani River, subsequently extending to the rest of Lebanese territory.[52]



Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam speaks following a ministerial council meeting at the Presidential Palace in Baabda, east of Beirut, 2 March 2026. Handout/Lebanese Government Press Office/AFP.

However, subsequent events exposed the fragility of the plan. In March 2026, the missile launches after the start of the U.S.-Israel-Iran war revealed that Hezbollah could still make its own decisions over the use of its weaponry. In response, the Lebanese cabinet held an emergency session, declaring its rejection of any military activity outside state institutions. It declared an immediate ban on Hezbollah's military and security operations, requiring it to surrender its arms and confine its role strictly to the political sphere.[53] In an unprecedented move, military prosecutors issued arrest warrants for Hezbollah members caught transporting missiles, deeming the act illegal and an infringement upon the state's sovereignty.[54] This legal pursuit marked a qualitative shift away from political compromises and toward the enforcement of the rule of law, thereby reinforcing the state's image as the sole authority regarding decisions of war and peace.

Ultimately, the government's plan was not merely a set of technical measures, but an attempt to reconstruct the concept of the state and cement its sovereignty. Yet it collided with the reality of Israeli occupation and the dual-power structure imposed by Hezbollah, revealing the precarity of the official position. Nevertheless, these steps contributed to Hezbollah's growing isolation, both domestically and internationally, and reignited the debate over the viability of its continued possession of arms and its twin military-political role, as well as the implications for the future of the Shiite community within a country defined by sectarian power-sharing. If the cost of Hezbollah's decision to "support Gaza" was a direct confrontation with Israel and the loss of its military and political leadership, then that of its decision to "support Tehran" was a complete rupture with the Lebanese state. Together, these two factors highlight a chronic dilemma: the sharing of authority between the state and Hezbollah, with the latter holding the power to decide on war and peace without reference to official state institutions. This has confronted Lebanon with existential challenges concerning the future of the state, its sovereignty, and its internal stability.

International Experiences in Dealing with Non-State Armed Groups

It has become common to draw parallels between the process of disarming Hezbollah and case studies around the world, as other nations have faced similar challenges in addressing the role of non-state actors. Such comparisons are grounded in a prominent theoretical framework in post-conflict literature: Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR). This framework aims to transform armed organizations into political or civic entities, reintegrate combatants into society, and ensure the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force.[55] However, since no case is identical to that of Lebanon, it is necessary to draw upon various models and distinct pathways to help construct a realistic roadmap.

There is no single formula for ending the existence of an armed force operating outside state institutions. Historical precedents reveal three main trajectories:

1. **Decisive Military Settlement:** One side succeeds in ending the duality of power through force.
2. **Political Settlement:** An armed force is dismantled or integrated into the state through a political and security agreement.
3. **Wavering between Settlement and Renewed Conflict:** A political process is initiated to halt conflict and address the issue of weaponry, but fails to produce a definitive agreement, sustainable guarantees, or effective implementation mechanisms, leading to the collapse of the process and a return to armed confrontation.

The Scenario of Decisive Military Settlement: China and Sri Lanka

A decisive military resolution entails ending the presence of an armed force that rivals the state or the established authority, not through a negotiated agreement, but through military superiority and decisive action on the battlefield. To be successful, this path typically requires a relatively cohesive state, armed forces capable of clearly asserting their dominance, and a domestic or regional environment that can sustain the high costs of such a conflict. In China, the civil war that resumed between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang following the end of the Japanese occupation concluded in 1949 with a total victory for the Communists, who proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China; the Kuomintang government retreated to Taiwan. This scenario differs from conventional disarmament: rather than the existing state defeating an armed group, the armed group itself emerged victorious and *became* the state, an extreme manifestation of a decisive military resolution.[56]

In Sri Lanka, after more than a quarter-century of conflict with the Tamil Tigers, who sought secession and the creation of an independent state in the country's north and east, the government opted to seek a decisive military resolution to the conflict. In 2006, it waged an all-out military campaign that deployed its army, navy, and air force, culminating in May 2009 with the killing of the movement's leader and its senior commanders, leading to the complete collapse of its military and political infrastructure.[57]

The Scenario of Political Settlement: Northern Ireland and the Basque Country

Seeking a political settlement is a primary method employed by states to end the role of armed forces operating outside legal frameworks. This path is based on the integration of armed organizations into the political process in exchange for gradually abandoning their arms, whereby disarmament becomes part of a comprehensive settlement that includes power-sharing, the reform of security institutions, and the guaranteed participation of all constituent groups.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement marked the end of one of Western Europe's longest-running armed conflicts, following three decades of violence between mostly Catholic republicans, who sought a united Ireland, and largely Protestant unionists, who favored remaining within the United Kingdom. The agreement did not make the surrender of arms a prerequisite; instead, it integrated disarmament into a broader political process that

encompassed power-sharing, the reform of security institutions, the release of prisoners, and the establishment of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) to oversee disarmament. The process unfolded over several years, culminating in 2005 when the Irish Republican Army (IRA) armed group announced the end of its armed campaign and the decommissioning of its weapons; this came alongside extensive police reforms and the creation of new power-sharing institutions. Although divisions persist, this process has provided relative stability for over a quarter of a century, with the state's monopoly on the use of force arising from a long-term, negotiated political process.[58]



Three ETA militants wearing white hoods and black berets deliver a statement at an undisclosed location in Spain, 20 October 2011. HO/Gara.net/AFP.

The case of Spain's Basque Country also offers significant insights into the path toward a political settlement. The Basque nationalist organization ETA[viii] waged an armed campaign for independence that lasted for decades. Despite various attempts to reach a settlement, the transition occurred only gradually, driven by a combination of security pressure, a decline in popular support for the group, and the evolution of the political process within Spain's democratic institutions. In 2011, ETA announced a definitive ceasefire; in 2017, it surrendered its weapons without formal negotiations with the Spanish government, and finally, in 2018, it announced its own dissolution. This process was steered by civil society organizations and Basque regional authorities, with the support of informal international actors who verified the ceasefire and managed the disarmament process. This lent a degree of legitimacy to the transition, even though the state refused to engage directly. In this case, the violence came to

viii. ETA is an acronym for *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, which in the Basque language means "Basque Homeland and Freedom." The movement was founded in 1959 as a Basque nationalist organization that initially sought to defend Basque identity and culture against General Francisco Franco's dictatorship. It subsequently evolved into an armed separatist movement with the goal of establishing an independent state in the Basque Country, spanning northern Spain and southern France.*

an end not due to a total military victory or a single, comprehensive settlement; rather, it stemmed from the erosion of the legitimacy of armed struggle, the expansion of political alternatives, and the opening of channels for the Basque nationalist movement to participate democratically within the Spanish system.[59]

The Unresolved Scenario: Türkiye and the PKK

The conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) represents a scenario that is distinct from cases of total military victory or comprehensive political settlement; to date, it has not led to a definitive agreement governing the relationship between the state and the armed group. Between 2013 and 2015, attempts were made at indirect negotiations, which included a ceasefire and a partial withdrawal of PKK fighters. However, this process collapsed before a binding institutional framework could be established, leading to renewed, even more intense clashes. In this case, the absence of independent verification mechanisms combined with a lack of agreement on the sequencing of obligations left the transition process vulnerable to failure. Yet, in 2025, the PKK announced its readiness to end the armed struggle in response to a call from its founder, Abdullah Öcalan. It began taking practical steps toward disarming and dismantling its military structure, alongside a political dialogue led by the Turkish authorities. While this nascent process remains incomplete, it reflects a mutual recognition that ending the conflict requires an organized political transition, rather than military superiority alone.[60]

Resistance Movements from France to Vietnam

The experience of the wartime French Resistance in relation to state power can be summarized as a gradual progression from legitimacy to reform and, ultimately, integration into the state. During World War II, the resistance served as an inclusive framework against the Nazi occupation and provided legitimacy to General Charles de Gaulle and his government-in-exile, paving the way for the birth of the Fourth Republic following France's liberation. From 1944 to 1946, de Gaulle led the provisional government, while liberation committees and internal resistance forces took control of state institutions. The *Conseil National de la Résistance* adopted a progressive program that introduced major reforms, most notably the restoration of civil liberties, women's suffrage, the nationalization of vital economic sectors, and the establishment of a social security system. Yet the Resistance was not a single, unified party, but a transient alliance. Following the war, divisions resurged among Communists, Socialists and Christian Democrats, leading to de Gaulle's resignation in January 1946. The adoption of the constitution of the Fourth Republic inOctober ended the unity of Resistance as an independent political force. Later, amidst the 1958 Algerian crisis, de Gaulle was called back to form a new government; he drafted the constitution for the Fifth Republic and became its first president. This marked the evolution of France's armed resistance into a strong, centralized state that integrated the networks of the Resistance into its own institutions.[61]

An examination of the Vietnamese experience with disarmament reveals a contradictory trajectory, spanning four decades. From 1945 to 1954, the Viet Minh sought to monopolize the national armed sphere by either eliminating or absorbing all rival factions, thereby paving the way for a confrontation with France. The 1954 Geneva Accords did not mandate disarmament, but rather a redeployment of forces. Conversely, the Vietnamese president's dismantling of religious militias in the South (1955–1956) stands as a rare instance of the rapid dissolution of sectarian armed groups, achieved through a combination of cutting off external funding, co-opting leaders, and employing force. Yet it ultimately left a legacy of sectarian bitterness.

From 1959 to 1975, a major confrontation raged between North Vietnam (backed by the Soviet Union and China) and South Vietnam (supported by the U.S. and its allies). It dragged on despite far-reaching amnesty programs that drew in tens of thousands of defecting fighters. The war was ultimately decided by the conventional military might of the North. The Paris Peace Accords of 1973 failed to enforce disarmament or a political settlement, as they left both armies in their respective positions, only bringing about the withdrawal of American forces. Two years later, South Vietnam collapsed; its capital Saigon fell in April 1975. Yet this victory did not lead to the integration of armed forces

or a negotiated settlement, but rather to the total erasure of the defeated side. Southern military personnel were sent to "re-education" camps, while the National Liberation Front and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) were dissolved by their northern allies. On July 2, 1976, the country was proclaimed unified, under the name Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The following year, authoritarian non-communist southern groups were formally dissolved and ceased to exist.[62] Southern leaders were also excluded from high-ranking positions, to the extent that the PRG's Minister of Justice left the country in 1978 and later published an account detailing the erasure of the Southern movement.[63] This trajectory represented the antithesis of any reintegration program: rather than being integrated into civilian life, the defeated army was detained.

The Dual Trajectory of the Algerian Experience

In the Algerian case, disarmament emerged in two contrasting forms over time. Following independence from France in 1962, the National Liberation Army (ALN) was not disbanded, but became the nucleus of the new state. The military absorbed the political leadership, rather than remaining subordinate to it, triggering bloody internal conflicts among the victorious factions. This highlights that a military victory does not necessarily lead to orderly integration or a stable settlement but can open the door to internal power struggles. A case in point was the crisis in the summer of 1962, when regional commanders clashed with the "Frontier Army" led by Houari Boumédiène—a conflict that ultimately resulted in the military seizing control of the state and establishing direct military rule.[64]

By contrast, during the civil war (1992–2006), the state faced a widespread Islamist insurgency, and eventually implemented a formal disarmament and reintegration program that relied on conditional amnesties, sustained military pressure, and exploiting internal divisions within the armed groups. The 1997 ceasefire declared by the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) served as a turning point, followed by amnesty and reconciliation laws that facilitated the reintegration of thousands of former combatants—though this did not include the political rehabilitation of their party, nor the dismantling of state-aligned militias. The resulting settlement ended the war, but it was built upon impunity and the enforced silence of the victims. Consequently, while it proved a successful model for ending armed violence, it remains highly controversial from the perspective of transitional justice

The main conclusion to be drawn from historical and political experiences is that a decisive military victory does not guarantee long-term stability. Instead, it leaves deep societal wounds and sets the stage for a period of exclusion and unrest. Conversely, a successful political settlement requires clear commitments from all parties, as well as comprehensive reforms that extend beyond the security and political spheres to encompass the economy, social justice, and public freedoms, thereby rebuilding trust between the state and its citizens.

In most cases, this phase is preceded by a transition during which the use of weapons was suspended or their operational role neutralized, prohibiting their independent use or movement and restricting their use to an agreed-upon framework, until comprehensive alternatives become available that eventually allow combatants to lay them down voluntarily. This is frequently accompanied by a holistic package of reforms that ultimately leads to the construction of institutions capable of exercising a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, providing social safety nets, and ensuring effective political participation, all of which diminish the need for armed allegiances.

Thus, the issue of Hezbollah's weaponry cannot be separated from the state-building project and the need for comprehensive reform in Lebanon. This is more than a security matter: it is part of a broader question over the future of the country's political and social order. Consequently, the debate over this weaponry opens the door to a deeper question: What is the solution for Lebanon?

From Binary Power to a Sovereign Transition: Toward a Restored State with a Monopoly on Arms

The case studies outlined above demonstrate that a state's monopoly on the use of force cannot be achieved through an administrative decree, a shift in the domestic balance of power, or a technical disarmament process that is detached from the political and security context that caused the resort to arms in the first place. Sociologist Max Weber defines the state as an entity that holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within the bounds of a specific territory. This implies that the state serves as the ultimate authority, legally empowered to employ coercion and enforce laws through its military, security, and judicial institutions. From this perspective, the legitimacy of a state is rooted not only in its capacity to maintain public order, but also in subjecting its exercise of power to the rule of law and accountability, as well as its ability to provide security and public services to its citizens.[65] In countries that have successfully ended situations of "dual power," this was achieved either through a decisive, albeit divisive, rupture, or through a political-security-institutional process that addressed the root causes of militarization and the roles of the weaponry in question, in parallel with the transition of those roles to the state.

The State, Legitimacy, and Monopoly on the Means of Coercion

In Lebanon, the problem extends beyond the existence of these weapons, to a deeper crisis of state-building, a consequence of accumulated exemptions, weak institutions, and the persistence of a sectarian power-sharing system. Today's challenges bring to mind the experience of the Lebanese Forces following the Taif Agreement, which demonstrated that disarmament, while necessary, can also trigger legitimate concerns regarding political representation and the balance of power within the system. Therefore, the issue of Hezbollah's arms cannot be addressed through a security-focused approach alone; it must be accompanied by political and institutional guarantees that prevent the marginalization or exclusion of the group's constituency. Establishing the state's exclusive control over arms and building a state based on citizenship and strong institutions are, in fact, two interdependent processes. Sustainable disarmament cannot be achieved without a genuine political partnership; likewise, a strong state cannot be built while multiple centers of armed power persist.

The Roles of Arms

Any serious approach to the disarmament of Hezbollah must begin with an understanding of the multiple functions its weaponry serves. It has functioned not only as a military tool, but as an entire political, social, and security system. It has been linked to defense against occupation, to political influence within a political system of sectarian quotas, and to social safety nets that have filled the void left by the state's absence. In this sense, these arms have become a source of protection and reassurance, as well as a guarantee of status, entrenching them within a collective conviction that is difficult to transcend. Yet acknowledging these concerns does not justify maintaining such arms as a permanent guarantee; the continued retention of independent armed power by any group renders the existence of a functional state impossible.

Here is an overview of the functions of Hezbollah's arsenal.

- **The Military Function:** Restoring the state begins with ending the occupation and securing the rights of the population, while simultaneously transferring authority for national defense to legitimate state institutions, transforming defense into a comprehensive national endeavor, managed by the state, which holds the exclusive decision-making authority over war, peace, and the instruments of deterrence.

- **The Political Function:** Hezbollah's arms have provided it with political influence through its participation in governance and control over resources, serving as a means to consolidate its position within a sectarian system built on clientelism and personal loyalties.

- **The Social Function:** Beyond the political realm, this arsenal has played a social role, through networks of services and protection, networks that have made the citizens' ties to the group stronger than their bonds to the state. Therefore, the state's monopoly on the use of force can only be fully realized through the building of institutions that are able to offer equitable access to rights and services, ensuring that belonging to a particular group is no longer a prerequisite for accessing them.

A Path Toward a Sovereign Transition

This framework rests upon five interconnected principles: a gradual approach that avoids creating a vacuum; the parallel implementation of security, political, and institutional tracks; mutual commitments between the state, domestic forces, and the international community; strengthening the capacity of the state before charging it with full responsibility; and preserving civil peace as both a prerequisite and an inherent objective.

A sovereign transition requires national legitimacy, a clear separation between armed activity and political engagement, and precise mechanisms to measure progress toward an "institutional point of no return."

- **Legitimacy and the Institutional Framework:** A broad-based national government should establish a charter for the sovereign transition. A national body with a defined mandate should manage the process in coordination with the military and state institutions, ensuring that every function transferred to the state is supported by a corresponding financial, logistical, and training program.

- **Post-Disarmament Guarantees:** The transfer of military capabilities to the state should not entail the dissolution of Hezbollah or the exclusion of its constituency; rather, this process should allow for its continued participation as a political and social actor, with full rights within legitimate institutions.

- **Measuring Sovereignty and the Point of No Return:** Clear, public timelines and indicators must be established to track tangible progress, until the state becomes capable of independently performing its defense and security functions.

The transition process rests on four interrelated shifts: transferring the authority to decide on war and peace to constitutional institutions; transferring the functions of defense to the state; entrusting social and political protection to public institutions; and bringing the management of external security and military relations under the exclusive purview of the state, in parallel with ending the occupation and retaking possession of occupied land.

The goal is not to weaken one group or strengthen another, but rather to transform the power accumulated by these groups into a unifying national institution, effectively stripping all factions of the privilege to bear arms, and placing that authority in the hands of the state. The essence of this equation lies in shifting the responsibility for providing a sense of security from the group to the state, through institutions that are both capable and trusted.



A man casts his vote during municipal elections in Nabatieh, southern Lebanon, 24 May 2025. Mahmoud Zayyat/AFP.

External involvement in this process remains a double-edged sword. It can act as a catalyst when it contributes to ending the occupation and halting attacks, provides security guarantees, supports the army, bolsters state capabilities, and assists in the economic and social transition. Conversely, it becomes an obstacle when it shifts toward dictating terms, imposing timelines and outcomes beyond what Lebanese institutions can deliver, or when it gives the process the appearance of subjugation to a particular Lebanese group, through a shift in the balance of power. In short, outside efforts should serve as a lever for a sovereign Lebanese process, not as a substitute for it.

It is also worth noting that the transition toward exclusive state control over arms cannot be limited to formal arrangements between the government and political factions. It also requires the engagement of civil society and non-state actors. Drawing on the Spanish experience with ETA, in which local and international civil society organizations helped push for a peaceful resolution, build trust, and open channels of dialogue that complemented the official track, Lebanon could benefit from the participation of national associations, labor unions, local initiatives, and civic bodies in shaping the social and political guarantees necessary to make the transition more inclusive and sustainable.

Ultimately, treating Hezbollah's arsenal as the sole problem is a methodological error. Two factors have contributed to the emergence and persistence of armed groups operating outside the state: First, the Israeli occupation, which provides a justification for such weaponry under the banner of "resistance"; and second, the historical absence of a functioning state, capable of managing public affairs and maintaining a monopoly on the use of force.

The 2019 financial crisis serves as the clearest illustration of this incapacity. The state failed to protect the livelihoods and savings of its citizens, nor could it restore the rights they had lost due to the converging interests of the ruling elite, the Central Bank, and commercial banks. Consequently, it became even more difficult to convince the Lebanese public that the state is capable of ensuring their security or confronting the dangers they face.

Accordingly, Lebanon does not need a state that disarms Hezbollah merely to satisfy foreign demands, nor does it need a Hezbollah that retains its weapons on the pretext of state failure and persistent threats. Instead, it needs a state that reclaims its territory, sovereignty, and core functions, gradually becoming capable of performing the very tasks that have, for decades, been used to justify the existence of arms outside the state's control. In this context, the benchmark for success is not disarmament alone, but the state's ability to fully exercise its sovereign functions and hold the exclusive authority to decide on the use of force.

Regarding the financial dimension, international experience demonstrates that successful DDR programs do not rely solely on external funding, but on a combination of international support and national ownership of the process. Several cases have demonstrated that multi-donor funding is most effective when managed through state institutions and linked to the development of national capacity in DDR programs. Conversely, other experiences have shown that an over-reliance on external actors can undermine sustainability and weaken local accountability.[66] Therefore, the financing of disarmament in Lebanon cannot rely exclusively on conditional foreign aid, as this could raise concerns over the country's national sovereignty and independence. Instead, funding should be based on a balanced mix of domestic resources and international support, channeled through mechanisms that ensure transparency and accountability while preserving independent national decision-making, free from any political conditions that might exceed the scope of Lebanese consensus or infringe on the prerogatives of state institutions.

This suggests that reforming Lebanon's tax system could act as a potential source of funding. Lebanon remains overly dependent on indirect, consumption-based taxes, while taxes on wealth, income, and property remain relatively limited. Recent studies indicate that taxes on consumption account for approximately 79 percent of Lebanon's total tax revenue, placing a disproportionately heavy burden on lower-income groups.[67] Furthermore, literature in the field suggests that income and wealth are among the most under-exploited tax bases in Lebanon, by international standards. While tax revenues stood at approximately 15 percent of Gross Domestic Product prior to the crisis, this figure has fallen dramatically over the years of Lebanon's economic collapse, and remains well below that of many comparable economies. Therefore, adopting more progressive and equitable tax reforms, including the implementation of more effective levies on income, wealth, and major assets, could help finance a portion of the costs associated with disarmament and reintegration. This approach strikes a balance between the need for international support and the demands of national sovereignty and fiscal sustainability.[68]

The impact of such a strategy would extend beyond the mobilization of financial resources, forming part of a broader project to rebuild the state and strengthen its financial and institutional capacity. With a fairer tax system, which better distributes the fiscal burden according to the ability to pay, the state could promote social justice and mitigate the economic disparities that have worsened over the course of the crisis. Furthermore, linking tax collection to the improvement of public services and social protection could help restore trust between citizens and the state, shifting the nature of their relationship, from one rooted in clientelism and reliance on sectarian or partisan networks into one of citizenship, defined by mutual rights and obligations. In this sense, financing disarmament becomes an integral part of a wider process of state-building and the restoration of state legitimacy, rather than remaining an isolated, purely technical or security-related operation.

Consequently, a realistic solution cannot involve addressing the issue of arms in isolation from the environment that gave rise to them and sustained the need for them. Instead, it requires the gradual dismantling of the functions these arms serve, a process that must go hand in hand with ending the occupation and addressing external aggressions and threats. This entails adopting transitional approaches, such as freezing and decommissioning these weapons.[ix] Freezing and containment serve as a transitional option between maintaining the status quo,

ix. The Egyptian initiative on Hezbollah's weapons was not a fully-fledged, formal plan, but rather a set of ideas presented in the autumn of 2025 through visits by Egyptian officials to Beirut. Accounts varied, ranging from proposals to freeze the group's arsenal under the

where weapons remain as they are, and their complete, immediate disarmament. This approach consists of three interconnected phases: freezing, containment, and decommissioning. A critical condition is that this freezing process must be time-bound, verifiable, and linked to a clear path toward final decommissioning; otherwise, it risks becoming merely a means to perpetuate the status quo. Through this process, the state immediately regains the authority to decide on matters of war and peace, while the issue of the arsenal's ownership is addressed gradually, following a defined timeline and verification mechanisms, ultimately leading to the state's exclusive control over all weaponry. This enables the state to rebuild its capacities and institutions and to regain the trust of its citizens. The goal is not merely a state without arms beyond its control, but a state that merits the exclusive right to bear arms, as it is capable of protecting its territory, its citizens, and their rights, a strong state within a cohesive society, one that balances the demands of sovereignty with the necessities of stability.

Crucial Conditions for the Success of the Transition Process

Credible and Binding International Security Guarantees

The success of any process aimed at transferring exclusive defense functions to the Lebanese state is contingent upon addressing the security dilemma posed by external threats—first and foremost, the ongoing Israeli occupation of certain Lebanese territories and the persistent risk of Israeli military aggression. Comparative experiences with disarmament indicate that the willingness of armed actors to relinquish their military capabilities is often linked to the presence of credible security guarantees. In the Lebanese context, a key challenge lies in the absence of binding international mechanisms capable of deterring potential violations of international resolutions or future acts of aggression. Consequently, any transitional approach to disarmament remains dependent on the availability of effective, binding international security and diplomatic guarantees that are perceived as sufficiently credible by all the concerned parties.

Addressing the Regional Dimension and the Role of Iran

Furthermore, the issue of Hezbollah's arsenal cannot be treated as a purely internal Lebanese matter. The group is part of a broader network of regional alliances, and its strategic choices are linked—to varying degrees—to regional power balances and the dynamics between Iran, the U.S., and Israel. Therefore, the success of any sustainable domestic settlement may require more favorable regional conditions, or, at the very least, ensuring that the Lebanese transition process does not conflict with the strategic calculations of influential regional actors. Consequently, the approach proposed in this paper assumes that internal solutions—while necessary—may not be sufficient on their own, unless accompanied by a regional environment that is supportive, or at the very least, not obstructive.

supervision of the Lebanese Armed Forces, to a gradual disarmament process contingent upon an Israeli withdrawal. See: Scarlett Haddad, "The Egyptian initiative in Lebanon: Less than a plan, but more than an idea," *L'Orient Today, December 20, 2025,* https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1489110/the-egyptian-initiative-in-lebanon-less-than-a-plan-but-more-than-an-idea.html.



Residents wave Lebanese flags and distribute sweets to passing cars to celebrate the election of a new president in Qlayaa, southern Lebanon, 9 January 2025. AFP.

Recommendations for Implementation: A 10-Point Roadmap

1. **National Recognition and Sovereign Consensus:** A dual acknowledgment that the current war has affected Lebanon in its entirety, and that the decision to open a "support front" thrust the country into a confrontation that was beyond its means, a decision taken outside state institutions and without national consensus. This includes establishing that the authority to decide on war and peace rests exclusively with the state, while ensuring the full political participation of all components of society.

2. **The External Negotiating Track:** Suspending negotiations with Israel pending the formation of a unified national vision, then transitioning toward negotiations, under Arab and international auspices, aimed at ending the occupation, halting attacks, and restoring rights.

3. **A Defined Transition Mechanism:** The formation of a government with broad political legitimacy, and the establishment of a national body with a specific, time-bound mandate to manage the transition process. This process should follow clear, publicly announced stages, deadlines, and verification mechanisms, including addressing the status of combatants and linking the transfer of defense functions to transparent programs on financing and equipment.

4. **A Gradual Decommissioning of Arms and Capabilities:** Terminating the use of arms beyond state authority, in parallel with the gradual withdrawal of non-state armed forces from the south. Capabilities that cannot be immediately relocated should be taken out of operational readiness, in preparation for their eventual placement under state authority.

5. **A Phased Consolidation of the Monopoly on Force:** Establishment of the principle that no entity outside Lebanon's constitutional institutions may decide to wage war or deploy force. This includes conducting a comprehensive inventory of the defense and security functions currently performed by non-state actors, while ensuring that no such function is relinquished until the state possesses the actual capacity to assume it.

6. **The Return and Engagement of Local Communities:** Organizing the return of the population to the south and establishing local coordination frameworks, incorporating municipalities, civil society, women, and the youth, to foster participation and build trust in the state.

7. **Building State Capacity:** Launching a program to strengthen the military and the security apparatus; securing sovereign funding for the transfer of defense functions to these institutions; addressing the status of combatants; and restoring the state's social and service-delivery roles, notably through reform of the tax system.

8. **Post-Disarmament Guarantees:** Ensuring that Hezbollah can continue to operate as a political and social actor with full rights, while strictly separating the state's monopoly on force from the political representation of individuals, all within the framework of law and constitutional institutions.

9. **Leveraging External Actors for Support, not as an Alternative:** Developing a sovereign framework that links the end of occupation and the cessation of hostilities to support for the national army, reconstruction, and the strengthening of state institutions. Arab and international support should serve as a catalyst for this national process, not a substitute for it, accompanied by a monitoring mechanism and guarantees to ensure Israel's compliance.

10. **Establishing a Point of No Return:** Defining clear, measurable indicators and public timelines for the transfer to the state of the authority to use force and defense capabilities, along with the recovery of occupied territories, and the gradual dismantling of independent military structures.

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