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Middle East

# Lebanon's Ceasefire is No "Divine Victory"

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**Could the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Lebanon be a new "divine victory"? That was how the agreement that ended the Israeli onslaught on Lebanon in 2006 was characterized by Hezbollah. Then, the party displayed that phrase on huge billboards featuring a picture of its Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, in a clear play on words, as the slogan could be read as both a victory attributed to God and a victory led by Nasrallah, whose name in Arabic means "God's victory".**

Regardless of this alleged divinity, the claim of victory made sense indeed in 2006, when Israel's onslaught failed to deliver a decisive blow to the party, which faced it with fierce resistance. The Zionist state was forced to stop its war by relying on an international resolution, UN Security Council Resolution No. 1701, that provided no real guarantee for its implementation – even if only that of its first clause, which called for the withdrawal of the party's forces to north of the Litani River, let alone the clause reasserting previous UNSC resolution 1559 (2004) calling for the disarmament of Hezbollah – the only organization that insisted on continuing to carry weapons in Lebanon after 1990 in the name of resisting the Israeli occupation.

The party was able to heal the wounds of the 2006 war, which claimed more than a thousand victims and witnessed widespread destruction in the areas of party dominance, in accordance with what was later known as the "Dahiya Doctrine". Iranian funding enabled Hezbollah to pay compensation for lives and property, just as Iranian armament enabled it not only to compensate for the loss of military equipment, but also to increase its firepower many times over, both in quantity and quality, in order to acquire a deterrent capability against the Zionist state. As is well known, the party's military force and Iran's support for it increased subsequently through its intervention in Syria to shore up the Assad regime, and its de facto transformation into a division of the Quds Force – the wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard specialised in operations abroad – entrusted with military missions that included Iraq and Yemen.

The current situation and the ceasefire agreement that has been negotiated on a low flame for months and on a very intense flame in recent weeks are completely different from what they were in 2006. The first, and most important, difference is that the blow that the Zionist armed forces have been able to inflict on the party is much greater today than it was in 2006, even if not fatal. Israel is under no illusion, anyway, that it can eliminate the party by merely bombing it, since Lebanon offers various local and regional shelters – unlike the Gaza Strip, which has remained a large prison despite the network of tunnels dug by Hamas.

The offensive launched by the Zionist armed forces in Lebanon two and a half months ago, starting with the explosion of the communications devices in the hands of Hezbollah cadres, allowed it to decapitate the party by killing most of its leaders and to focus on destroying its military capabilities and infrastructure much more effectively than it did eighteen years ago, thanks to more effective intelligence benefiting from technological developments achieved in recent years. Hezbollah will emerge from this war exhausted beyond comparison with what happened to it in 2006, and its ability to rebuild its force, let alone magnify it, will be very limited compared to what followed that year.

As Israel's ambassador to the United Nations recently put it, they have learned the "lessons of 2006 and 1701", meaning that this time the Israelis will be keen to verify the complete withdrawal of Hezbollah forces to north of the Litani River, as well as to prevent Iran from rearming the party through Syrian territory. They asked for an official US guarantee regarding these two matters while maintaining their freedom to strike any movement that contradicts the agreement, like the freedom they enjoy in striking Iranian movements on Syrian territory. There has even been talk of Israel requesting Russia to cooperate in this area, in the spirit of the agreement between both states, according to

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which Russian aircraft and air defence systems deployed on Syrian territory do not intercept attacks carried out by the Israeli Air Force on that same territory.

Moreover, Hezbollah's ability to heal the wounds of its popular base and its environment will be weaker this time, not only because today's wounds are greater than they were in 2006 (more than three times the number of dead, about four times the number of wounded, and a much more serious amount of destruction), but also because Tehran's financial capabilities are relatively weaker today than they were in 2006 before the United States tightened sanctions against it. This is in addition to the problems that will likely hinder Tehran's ability to transfer funds to the party as it did eighteen years ago.

Last but not least, the Zionist state is betting on Washington's efforts, in cooperation with Paris, to decisively change the Lebanese political map in the coming period, by strengthening the regular Lebanese armed forces while preventing the party from regaining its strength, in order to reach a point when the former could impose the disarmament of the latter, whether by political agreement or by force. The restoration of Lebanese government institutions, especially the election of a new president and the appointment of a new cabinet, will be a fundamental step on this path. It is well known that Washington is pushing for the election of Joseph Aoun, the current commander of the Lebanese armed forces, as president.

Whether things will proceed in this direction relatively smoothly, or whether the clash of projects will lead to a new round of proxy war on Lebanese soil, this time between Iran on one side and the United States and Israel on the other, will depend on both Iran and the United States. Everyone noticed how Tehran – after insisting on Hezbollah's rejection of a ceasefire in Lebanon before one is reached in Gaza (this position was in fact a pretext to keep the party engaged in war, in anticipation of an escalation of the clash between Israel and Iran) – changed its position and gave the party its green light to abandon the Gaza precondition. Some believe that the reason for this shift is the success of the Zionist attack on Hezbollah and Tehran's realization that the passage of time means further weakening of the party's capabilities, while others believe that it is Tehran's fear of Washington's participation in an upcoming Israeli attack on it, and on its nuclear capabilities in particular, following the return of Donald Trump, its archenemy, to the White House.

If this latter assessment is correct and Tehran seeks to conclude a "deal" with Trump, then the price must be that Tehran recommends to its regional auxiliaries, primarily Hezbollah, to engage in building the local state instead of seeking to build a parallel one, in addition to its acceptance of giving up its highly enriched uranium and of tightened control over its nuclear facilities. If this bet fails, however, Lebanon and the entire region will be heading towards new stages of violence, and the ceasefire in Lebanon will be nothing more than a temporary truce in a multi-faceted confrontation that began nearly forty years ago with the founding of Hezbollah, or even six years earlier with the birth of the "Islamic Republic".

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