

## Hezbollah's Weapons in the Crossfire of Negotiations



“My pledge is to fulfill my role as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and as head of the Supreme Defense Council by affirming the state’s exclusive right to bear arms.”

With those words, delivered during his inaugural address before Parliament on January 9, 2025, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun attempted to challenge one of the most entrenched taboos in Lebanon’s modern history—a political fault line that has persisted for more than 35 years.

The question of Hezbollah’s arms has long been one of Lebanon’s most contentious issues—domestically, regionally, and internationally—ever since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990. It lies at the intersection of the state’s authority and the “logic of resistance,” between the threat posed by the Israeli occupation and concerns over internal stability, between Lebanese sovereignty and regional (Iranian) alignments.

Since the 1989 Taif Agreement, dozens of domestic and foreign initiatives have sought to disarm the group, or at least integrate its arsenal into a national defense strategy under Lebanese Army control. All have failed, with Hezbollah steadily expanding its arsenal year after year.

That was until the group suffered its most recent and most significant blow—one that some view as a rare opportunity to achieve what has eluded Lebanon for decades.

In a surprise move that defied Lebanon's traditional balance-of-power calculus, Prime Minister Nawaf Salam's government on Tuesday, August 6, tasked the army with drafting a plan to confine Hezbollah's arms exclusively under state control.

The decision could mark the first genuine attempt to strip the group of the political legitimacy previously enshrined by the long-standing "Army, People, Resistance" formula—back when Hezbollah enjoyed unrivaled political and military influence and enjoyed the backing of both Damascus and Tehran.

This shift reflects the profound changes in Lebanon's political landscape, both in terms of its domestic sovereignty and its stance toward resisting the Israeli occupation, especially since Hezbollah remains the only force directly confronting Israel. The central question now:

Can Lebanon, this time, impose its will and bring all weapons under the state's monopoly? That question spawns two others: What will Hezbollah's response be? And what political and security price might Lebanon pay for such a move? Finally, what role is Washington playing in pushing this course of action—one that Lebanon's political and military leadership increasingly views as an "unavoidable path"?

### Why Now?

This latest push to address Hezbollah's weapons differs from all previous attempts. Today, the Iran-backed movement is arguably at its weakest point since its formation in 1982—a rare opening that many believe must be seized to break through one of the toughest barriers to full Lebanese sovereignty. Three key indicators define the moment:

**The Gaza War Fallout:** Since entering the Gaza war on October 7, 2023, as a support front for Palestinian resistance, Hezbollah has suffered heavy losses in leadership, logistics, and weaponry. The assassination of its long-time leader, Hassan Nasrallah, dealt the most symbolic blow. The group's power has since diminished, forcing it into a defensive posture to preserve what remains of its capabilities.

**Iran Under Pressure:** Tehran—Hezbollah's principal backer—has faced significant setbacks, including Israeli military and intelligence operations that have curbed its regional influence. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria late last year deprived Hezbollah of a crucial logistical and political ally.

Regional and Global Shifts: U.S. influence in the Middle East has deepened, while Israel has consolidated its aggressive posture. Arab regimes appear weakened and distracted, and other major powers—China with its economic woes and Taiwan tensions, Russia with its war in Ukraine—are preoccupied.

Seizing on these conditions, Lebanon's current leadership has decided to move beyond rhetoric toward concrete measures, even setting a timetable for resolving the issue.

### Washington's Leverage

Washington has been quick to capitalize on Hezbollah's weakened state, exerting intense pressure on the Lebanese government to resolve the matter swiftly—offering economic aid packages, grants, and accelerated reconstruction in return.

The process began in February 2025 with a visit by U.S. envoy Morgan Ortagus, who explicitly called for Hezbollah's disarmament via the Lebanese Army. Her blunt remarks—describing Hezbollah fighters as “terrorists” who should not be allowed to fire into Israel—sparked backlash in Lebanon, even among those supportive of curbing non-state arms.

Lebanese leaders, including President Aoun and Prime Minister Salam, publicly committed to the disarmament path. But Washington pressed further, sending a more diplomatic envoy, Tom Barack, in July. He presented a detailed U.S. plan for disarmament, coupling it with promises of substantial Gulf funding for southern reconstruction and economic incentives for the Shiite community—if Beirut complied.

### The Occupation Question

Critics warn that the decision goes beyond Hezbollah's arms and undermines the legitimacy of any armed resistance outside the national army, even against ongoing Israeli occupation in the south. Former minister and political historian Karim Pakradouni told the press that, starting next year, any armed action outside state institutions—such as firing on Israeli forces—would be a punishable offense.

For decades, successive Lebanese governments had endorsed the right to resist Israel “by all legitimate means,” granting implicit legitimacy to Hezbollah and other factions. Now, for the first time since the 1969 Cairo Agreement, all non-state resistance weapons risk losing their legal cover.

### Hezbollah and Tehran Respond

Hezbollah's deputy leader, Sheikh Naim Qassem, rejected any discussion of disarmament, insisting that the priority should be halting Israeli aggression,

ending the occupation, rebuilding the country, and freeing prisoners. He accused the U.S. of advancing “Israeli dictates” and dismissed the idea of putting the resistance up for negotiation or vote.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi offered muted but clear support, framing the push to disarm Hezbollah as part of a broader Israeli strategy. While stressing that Iran continues to back the group, he emphasized that Tehran would do so “from a distance” without interfering in its decisions.

### Thirty-Six Years of Failed Attempts

From the Taif Agreement to U.N. Resolution 1559 to the May 2008 Beirut clashes, Hezbollah has resisted every effort to disarm. Internal dialogues, international pressure, and even mass protests during Lebanon's 2019 economic collapse failed to shift its position. The Gaza war of 2023 and subsequent Israeli strikes, however, have created what Beirut sees as its best opening yet.

### This Time Different?

Supporters of the government's move argue Hezbollah no longer has the political, popular, or regional backing to mount a forceful response like in 2008. Others believe disarmament remains impossible—the group will treat its arsenal as a matter of survival rather than negotiation, risking escalation into a full-scale civil war.

The government has set a deadline of year's end to implement the decision, hoping that regional and international mediation can yield at least a partial breakthrough. But as tensions rise, Lebanon is navigating one of its most precarious moments in decades—where missteps could have consequences well beyond its borders.