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LEBANON AND ISRAEL: PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

Ambassador Frederic C. Hof

Good evening and thank you, Ambassador Evriviades for your kind introduction. And thank you, Professor Theophanous, for your invitation to address this prestigious organization.

Much of my professional life over the years has centered on Lebanon, a country referred to by the late Professor Michael Hudson as "The Precarious Republic."

Hudson used those words as the title for a book he wrote in 1968, just as Lebanon was beginning its descent into lawlessness and civil war. Now, nearly 60 years later, many Lebanese are permitting themselves to feel a degree of optimism about the prospects of their Precarious Republic, a country whose banking system, currency, and economy have collapsed; a country whose airspace is dominated by the air force of a foreign country; a country in which an armed proxy of Iran continues to act independently of the Lebanese government. How is optimism remotely possible under such dire circumstances?

Lebanon has, for the first time in decades, a president and a prime minister who seem to be dedicated to building a functional state. Such a state would have a monopoly on weapons of war and war-and-peace decisions. Such a state would rebuild the capacity of a civil service debilitated by decades of corruption and nepotism. Such a state would dedicate itself to reforming a broken banking system, rebuilding a ruined economy, and reconstructing infrastructure and housing damaged and destroyed by war. Such a state would work for peaceful relations and ultimately peace itself with Israel.

Ambassador Frederic C. Hof was an Army officer (Vietnam veteran), diplomat, private sector CEO, think tank executive, and professor. He served as a military attaché in civil war Lebanon and later as the mediator between Syria and Israel from 2009-2011. He is the author of Reaching for the Heights: The Inside Story of a Secret Attempt to Reach a Syrian-Israeli Peace (U.S. Institute of Peace, 2022). Among his awards from the Departments of State and Defense is the Purple Heart.

For over six months I have been involved in a project exploring the prospects for peace between two countries – Lebanon and Israel – that have been in a state of war since May 1948. The project itself is an exercise in what is referred to as "Track II Diplomacy."

Track II Diplomacy involves a non-official mediating team promoting dialogue between well-connected former officials of two or more countries to produce ideas on how to resolve or prevent serious problems, including armed conflict. These ideas that are then shared with serving officials responsible for official foreign policy. With a Canadian colleague well-versed in Track II Diplomacy, I've shuttled between Israel and Lebanon, speaking with former civilian officials and military officers about what it would take to get these two countries on a pathway to peace and normalization.

Shuttling back and forth is not the way Track II Diplomacy usually works. Normally, discussions take place face-to-face in the same room. From 2013 to 2015, for example, I was part of an American team in Track II discussions with a team from Iran, talks hosted by Denmark and supervised by a third-party Track II expert. Lebanon, however, has laws forbidding meetings with Israelis, laws my colleague and I would like to see repealed. To date, however, we have had discussions with Lebanese in Lebanon and with Israelis in Israel. While keeping the names of our contacts confidential, we share with Lebanese what the Israelis tell us and vice versa.

I'd like to share with you what we are learning from these discussions. But before I do let me review a few items pertaining to the history of relations between Israel and Lebanon.

I mentioned at the beginning that these two countries have been legally in a state of war since May 1948. That was when Israel declared its independence and Lebanon, very reluctantly, joined a multi-pronged Arab invasion.

There were two minor incursions by the Lebanese Army, in response to which Israeli forces occupied southern Lebanon up to the Litani River. In 1949 the two countries agreed to an armistice and Israeli forces withdrew completely. The terms of that armistice were respected by both sides until June 1967, when Israel declared it null and void. For its first nearly 20 years, however, the armistice line between Lebanon and Israel was unfenced and peaceful, with Israeli and Lebanese army officers meeting frequently as members of an Israel-Lebanon Mixed Armistice Commission established by the armistice.

Starting in 1968, however, Lebanon began to lose control of its southern districts to armed Palestinian fighters, who shelled and raided from Lebanon into Israel and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Israeli retaliation became routine, including periodic ground incursions into southern Lebanon. Israel also supported a cooperative Lebanese militia. In 1978 the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon – UNIFIL – was established and, in 1982, Israel launched a major ground invasion all the way to Beirut. The result was decisive: armed Palestinians were evacuated by sea, and Israeli ground and air forces pounded Syrian units located in Lebanon's Biqa Valley.

But Israel's victory over Palestinians in Lebanon would soon lead to the emergence of another non-state enemy, one established within Lebanon's impoverished and neglected Shia community by Iran with the support of Syria: Hezbollah. Iran's revolutionary regime, already at war with Iraq, envisioned Hezbollah as its foothold on the Mediterranean Sea, an organization that could someday threaten and deter Israel. For nearly 20 years Hezbollah fought Israel's occupation. In 2000 Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon.

As Israeli forces were leaving Lebanon in May 2000, the Chief Cartographer of the United Nations was directed to draw a line on a map and mark it on the ground, one intended to confirm Israel's complete withdrawal. The result was the Blue Line, dividing Lebanon and Israel.

Today Lebanon disputes several points along the Blue Line, claiming that they violate the 1949 armistice line. But the biggest dispute came about when Hezbollah, fearing that the end of Israeli occupation would also end its right to operate as a military organization, forced the Government of Lebanon to claim a small piece of the Golan Heights as Lebanese territory. With this claim in place, Hezbollah announced the continuation of Israeli occupation and its right to bear arms as the so-called "Lebanese Resistance." And for the first quarter of the 21st century Hezbollah would, at the direction of Iran and with help from Syria, build a missile and rocket force designed to deter Israel from attacking Iran.

The Hezbollah claim to the so-called "Shebaa Farms" in the Golan Heights was rejected by the United Nations. In 2004 the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1559, which called on all remaining foreign forces – in this case Syrian military units – to leave Lebanon, and it demanded "the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias." But a weak Lebanese government, completely dominated by both Hezbollah and Syria, could not comply. It said that the only country occupying Lebanon was Israel, in the Shebaa Farms. And it said that Syrian forces were in Lebanon at the request of Lebanon. In 2005, however, Syrian forces left in the wake of the assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri by Hezbollah at the request of Syria.

Then there was a Hezbollah-Israel war in 2006, prompted by Hezbollah fighters penetrating Israel and capturing some Israeli soldiers. That war ended with the passage of another important UN Security Council resolution, number 1701. Among other things this resolution cited "the importance of the extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory . . . [and] for it to exercise its full sovereignty, so that there will be no weapons without the consent of the Government of Lebanon and no authority other than that of the Government of Lebanon." It also reiterated "its strong support . . . for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon within its internationally recognized borders, as contemplated by the Israeli-Lebanese General Armistice Agreement of 23 March 1949." Yet a weak Lebanese government continued to uphold Hezbollah's status as the Lebanese Resistance and support Hezbollah's right to bear arms.

There was another war in 2023-2024, started by Hezbollah's shelling of northern Israel beginning on October 8, 2023, the day after Hamas' deadly atrocities in Israel. This last war forced tens of thousands of Israelis and Lebanese living near the Blue Line to evacuate their homes. It ended in the autumn of 2024 in a decisive Hezbollah defeat, as its charismatic Secretary-General and many key leaders were killed. And Hezbollah's ability to deter Israel from attacking Iran was destroyed.

A point worth emphasizing, I think, is that very little of the violence involving Israel and Lebanon since 1948 has been state-to-state. Rarely have the two armies engaged each other in combat. Most of the warfare between these two neighbors has involved Israel fighting armed non-state actors in Lebanon. And most of the balance has involved Israel fighting Syria in Lebanon.

Israel says it has no claims on Lebanese territory. With the very questionable exception of a small sliver of the Golan Heights, Lebanon has no territorial claim on Israel. Yes, Lebanon officially supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and yes, Lebanon wants Palestinian refugees and their descendants living in refugee camps in Lebanon to be able to return to Israel. But a prolonged legal state of war between these two countries is largely the result of Israeli conflicts with Palestinians, Syria, and Iran fought on Lebanese soil, with a Government of Lebanon often a mere spectator.

Ending the latest such conflict was the aim of a ceasefire announced on November 27, 2024. But violence has not ended. It continues to this day, perhaps even as we are meeting this evening. Indeed, it was this ongoing violence that prompted my Canadian colleague to invite me to join with him in a Track II effort aimed at ending it and putting Lebanon and Israel on a pathway to eventual peace and normalization.

The ceasefire of November 2024 involved commitments by both Lebanon and Israel; commitments that, for understandable but unfortunate reasons, have not been met. Let me be very specific.

The ceasefire commits Lebanon, starting in the area south of the Litani River close to Israel, to "dismantle all existing unauthorized facilities involved in the production of arms and related materiel, and prevent the establishment of such facilities in the future . . . [and] Starting with the Southern Litani Area, dismantle all infrastructure and military positions, and confiscate all unauthorized arms inconsistent with these commitments."

Indeed, a key provision of the 2024 ceasefire is that UN Security Council Resolution 1701 finally be fully implemented by Lebanon, "so that the only forces authorized to carry arms in Lebanon will be the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), Internal Security Forces, General Directorate of State Security, Lebanese Customs, and Municipal Police . . ." And now, for the first time in the history of Hezbollah, Lebanon has a government officially committed to the organization's disarmament and demobilization.

The ceasefire commits Israel to "not carry out any offensive military operations against Lebanese targets, including civilian, military, or other state targets, in the territory of Lebanon by land, air, or sea." It also commits Israel, in coordination with Lebanon and, with a U.S., France, and UNIFIL oversight body called "the Mechanism," to withdraw its troops to south of the Blue Line within 60 days.

The ceasefire also says that "These commitments do not preclude either Israel or Lebanon from exercising their inherent right of self-defense, consistent with international law." Indeed, there is reportedly an American side-letter assuring Israel that there would be no U.S. objection to military strikes on threats to Israeli security posed by Hezbollah.

The situation we face today, more than a year into this troubled ceasefire, is complicated. Lebanon claims that its army has established operational control over its land south of the Litani River. Israel claims that this falls short of the complete disarmament and demobilization of Hezbollah in this critical area, a region that Lebanon has not controlled since 1968. Lebanon claims that it is committed to disarming and demobilizing Hezbollah throughout Lebanon and is preparing now to expand this effort north to of the Litani River. Israel claims that these efforts are unfolding too slowly, and that Hezbollah – with the assistance of Iran – is rearming and that the Lebanese Armed Forces are penetrated by Hezbollah and collaborate with it.

Israel continues, therefore, to strike what it says are Hezbollah targets throughout Lebanon, including south of the Litani River. Israel continues to occupy several points on Lebanon's side of the Blue Line. The Lebanese government, while calling on Hezbollah to surrender its arms, accuses Israel of violating the ceasefire daily. Israel, on the other hand, accuses Lebanon of violating the ceasefire by not moving rapidly enough to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1701. And Israel regards Hezbollah's ongoing armed status as a ceasefire violation.

The body assigned the task of overseeing the ceasefire – the American-led "Mechanism" that includes France and UNIFIL – has been generally positive about the efforts of the Lebanese Armed Forces to neutralize Hezbollah south of the Litani River. But it has neither confirmed Lebanon's claim of establishing operational control nor assessed whether Hezbollah has been effectively disarmed and demobilized south of the Litani. Neither has the Mechanism succeeded in persuading Israel to give it a chance to investigate potential targets before striking. In short, there is no third party able or willing to evaluate the competing claims of the two parties.

Indeed, my Canadian colleague and I cannot make judgments about these competing claims. What we can see clearly is that the ceasefire of November 2024 has not stopped armed violence. Neither has it inspired Iran to direct its Lebanese proxy to disarm.

Our Lebanese contacts tell us that Israeli airstrikes have had no decisive effects beyond making the Lebanese Army and government look helpless. Our Israeli contacts tell us that airstrikes are vital to prevent Hezbollah from reconstituting itself as an effective military force. Hezbollah says it will not disarm until Israeli airstrikes stop, Israeli occupation ends, and Lebanon creates a national security strategy. Lebanon and Israel agree that Hezbollah has not attacked Israel since the ceasefire went into effect. Israel says Hezbollah is deterred by Israeli airstrikes and is buying time to rebuild. Lebanon believes that most of its Shia citizens want an end to warfare with Israel, and that this is having an impact on the calculations of Hezbollah's leaders. Most observers agree that Iran has the final word on how Hezbollah will act.

My Canadian colleague and I have listened carefully to what our Israeli and Lebanese colleagues have told us. Again, these are mainly well-connected former senior officials and former military officers. Let me summarize what we have heard.

Israelis are convinced that the events of October 2023 changed Israel fundamentally. Israeli citizens were and remain traumatized by Hamas' atrocities and by the decision of Hezbollah to begin shelling northern Israel one day after

those atrocities took place. No longer will Israel permit armed threats to exist on any of its borders or in any neighboring country.

Our Israeli contacts were divided on the question of whether Lebanon's new leaders sincerely wish to disarm Hezbollah. But they were united on the proposition that non-state actors would no longer be permitted to threaten Israel from Lebanese territory. They were also open to the possibility of Israel-Lebanon peace, but on the condition that Lebanon become a genuine state, one monopolizing weapons of war and decisions on war and peace. Some of our Israeli contacts maintained that airstrikes could be scaled back; that Israel need not react militarily to every indicator of Hezbollah activity. But others told us that the strikes are necessary and even enjoy Lebanese support.

Lebanese told us that their government's commitment to Hezbollah's disarmament and demobilization is genuine, and that this is so for the best of motives, namely that Lebanon will not be able to attract significant external aid and investment and recover economically if the threat of Hezbollah-Israel warfare exists. No one wants to build things only to watch them destroyed again.

As matters now stand the Lebanese government is nearly insolvent and many Lebanese soldiers have outside jobs due to low pay. For mainly practical, economic reasons, our Lebanese contacts told us that the state of war between Lebanon and Israel should be permanently terminated, and the 1949 armistice (still regarded by Lebanon as legally valid) should be reinstated and updated. They emphasized that disarmament and demobilization of Hezbollah should be pursued cautiously and, if possible, non-violently. Hezbollah, they said, still possesses powerful ground forces and is still receiving Iranian assistance.

Most importantly, however, Hezbollah still enjoys widespread support within Lebanon's largest sect: Shia Muslims. Our Shia contacts told us that they and nearly all their co-religionists want an end to warfare with Israel. But they also told us that Lebanese Shia see and fear threats from Israel, from Syria-based jihadists, and from other Lebanese, making Hezbollah's immediate disarmament, in their eyes, dangerous. They also pointed out that Hezbollah has, over the decades, raised the status of Lebanon's Shia and provided essential social services in the absence of a Lebanese government unable and unwilling to provide those services.

For these reasons Hezbollah may do well among Lebanese Shia voters in national elections to be held sometime this year. The Lebanese government would like to compete with Hezbollah for the support of Shia voters. Yet the government lacks funding and administrative capacity. And potential donors, such as Saudi Arabia, have said that significant aid will not be forthcoming until Hezbollah is disarmed.

We have, therefore, a chicken-and-egg situation. The Lebanese government lacks the resources to compete effectively with Hezbollah, but resources will be withheld until it wins that competition.

Most of our Israeli contacts showed little interest in the complexities of Lebanese politics and society. They see Lebanon simply as a security problem for Israel, and they want the Lebanese government and Army to solve that problem quickly by disarming Hezbollah, through force if necessary. Our Lebanese contacts told us that the Army – which includes many Shia officers and soldiers – will hold together and perform well if attacked by Hezbollah. But they feared that if the Army were to take the offensive, many Shia civilians would see it as an attack on Shia generally, and many Shia soldiers would simply go home.

Again, my Canadian colleague and I are in no position to judge what is true or false in any of these assertions. We are, however, convinced that Israel will no longer tolerate armed threats from Lebanon, regardless of who the Israeli prime minister is. We are convinced that nearly all Lebanese want an effective state, and they know this will require disarming and demobilizing Hezbollah. And we are convinced there is a way forward toward Israel-Lebanon peace. Let me conclude by describing what we think it looks like.

My colleague and I have recommended that the militaries of the two countries commit themselves to enhanced communication, coordination, and cooperation in Lebanon south of the Litani River. We have urged the Lebanese Army to table for discussion a plan whereby its forces, on a sector-by-sector basis as Hezbollah is completely neutralized, would relieve and replace Israeli units, enabling their return to Israel and the beginning of reconstruction. If Lebanon does not table such a plan, the Mechanism should.

Indeed, a greater role for the Mechanism is mandatory if Israel-Lebanon military cooperation is to become a reality. We have recommended that the Israel-Lebanon Mixed Armistice Commission, with the Mechanism providing the chairman, be revived temporarily to promote the needed cooperation. And we have recommended that Israel end its airstrikes south of the Litani completely and limit its airstrikes north of the Litani to targets it believes pose imminent threats. Iran must be pressured to end its military support of Hezbollah and to instruct its Lebanese proxy to disarm.

Once Israeli units have departed Lebanon and Lebanese security forces are in control south of the Litani, Lebanon-Israel talks on a bilateral security agreement can begin. Indeed, if mutually agreed, they could even begin sooner. My colleague and I believe that the 1949 armistice or something like it can be revived and updated to meet the security challenges of 2026. We also think that such an

agreement should officially terminate the state of war and resolve all Blue Line disputes. We have provided both sides with a text of what a security agreement might look like.

We are greatly encouraged that Israel-Lebanon talks at the civilian, diplomatic level have begun. As it happens, I have known and admired the Lebanese and Israeli negotiators for many years. They seem to be trying hard to set the stage for the kind of security agreement negotiation my colleague and I are recommending. But it also seems both sides need to do a better job of enforcing and observing the current ceasefire before serious negotiations can begin.

In our view, doing a better job also requires stronger ceasefire oversight. The Mechanism must be empowered by the U.S. and France to play a stronger role in assessing the situation on the ground, in promoting Israel-Lebanon military cooperation, and in serving as the post office box for security complaints from either side. UNIFIL still exists, and it contains some militarily capable units. We believe those units can be dispatched to investigate complaints and help the Lebanese Army resolve them. Until a way can be found to minimize armed violence it will be difficult for the parties to embark on a pathway toward peace. By the same token, progress toward Hezbollah's disarmament and demobilization must be seen by all as inevitable and irreversible.

Ultimately, however, my colleague and I believe that peace between Lebanon and Israel is achievable. It will require, in our view, three things.

First, bilateral confidence must be enhanced by effective military-to-military cooperation and by reaching and implementing an agreement that ends the state of war and promotes security and reconstruction on both sides of the Blue Line. For this to happen Lebanon must be prepared to focus considerable resources – military and economic – on southern Lebanon for an indefinite period, and Israel must abandon plans to carve out buffer zones on Lebanon's side of the Blue Line.

Second, Lebanon must become a country in which weapons of war and decisions on war and peace become the exclusive properties of the Lebanese state. The "Precarious Republic" must become better rooted in citizenship and less in sectarianism. And Israel must be prepared to treat Lebanon as a sovereign equal.

And third, Lebanon – even a Lebanon where Hezbollah is disarmed and morphs from Iranian proxy to Lebanese political party – will require a permissive regional context to enter formal peace talks and establish formal peace with Israel. Now, in January 2026, it appears that Saudi Arabia would play a key role in advising Lebanon whether to move forward explicitly toward peace. We see no Saudi objection to a renewed armistice or a permanent end to hostilities between

Lebanon and Israel. As of now, however, we suspect that Riyadh would oppose Lebanon joining the Abraham Accords until a pathway toward Palestinian political self-determination is established.

I would like nothing more than to conclude my professional life by facilitating peace between two countries I like and admire very deeply. Indeed, peace between Israel and Syria is also something to which I've devoted significant effort, something I'd very much like to live long enough to see. Israel and Lebanon, however, have rarely engaged in military confrontation on a state-to-state basis despite being in a state of war for over 77 years. The pathway to peace begins with reducing armed violence and permanently ending that state of war. With a modicum of mutual respect and with an end to Iran's deadly intervention in internal Lebanese affairs, the first steps on that pathway can be taken now. It is time, I think, to begin.