The International Community and the Creation of a Feasible Settlement in Lebanon

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Summary of a Zoom roundtable discussion

Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies – recently held a roundtable discussion focusing on international involvement and its role in advancing a sustainable long-term solution for Lebanon. This in light of the significant developments taken place over the past month, particularly the escalating conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.

The discussion, conducted under the Chatham House Rule, was initiated while taking several basic assumptions into account:

1. Despite the heavy blows Hezbollah has sustained in the past month, it will not disappear after the war and will remain a significant and influential player (potentially a spoiler) in the Lebanese landscape. All the parties directly involved (Israel, Hezbollah, Lebanon) are caught in a situation from which they are unable to extricate themselves on their own and will inevitably need international involvement to do so.
2. No military action, however brilliant and impressive, will be enough on its own to achieve a political settlement that meets Israel's security needs while also laying the groundwork for the rehabilitation of the Lebanese State.
3. The international community, particularly the US, France, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Gulf States, must play a pivotal role in achieving such a settlement. However, Iran's influence will also need to be considered in any future arrangements for Lebanon.
4. Previous attempts by the international community to create political settlements and stability initiatives in Lebanon have failed.

Given these assumptions, the discussion aimed to explore key questions on the ideal structure of an international settlement in Lebanon, the development of a unique, sustainable international mechanism that addresses Israel's security needs, ways to avoid failures seen in past efforts like UN Resolutions 1559 and 1701, and immediate actions the international community should promote to exit the current crisis and stabilize the region.

A. Basic assumptions

1. **Israel must recognize its limitations in influencing Lebanon's internal politics**: A key to moving forward is understanding Israel's post-war objectives while ensuring that Lebanese sovereignty is respected. This includes allowing the Lebanese people to shape their political landscape with international support, particularly from the US and France, which is more willing to engage with all parties, including Hezbollah.

2. **The international community's commitment, particularly from the US and allies, is vital for Lebanon's stabilization**: for any effective long-term solution, it is essential to establish a robust framework that includes both a UN Security Council resolution and a bilateral agreement between Israel and Lebanon. Additionally, the success of any future initiative, akin to a "Marshall Plan," hinges on the commitment to reforms and inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, particularly considering the interests of potential spoilers like Iran and Russia.

3. **Hezbollah's future influence in Lebanon must be thoroughly discussed**: This includes examining the political dynamics, security threats to Israel, the welfare of the Shia community, and the need for an effective arms embargo. Strengthening Lebanese state institutions and the Armed Forces (LAF) is crucial to diminishing Hezbollah's power. Moreover, both Israeli and Lebanese security needs must be considered to foster a sustainable relationship, ensuring that any solution acknowledges Lebanon's sovereignty while mitigating Hezbollah's capacity as a dominant force.

B. Necessary Conditions for the Creation of a Feasible Settlement in Lebanon

1. <u>Fulfilling Israel's Security Needs and Respecting Lebanese Sovereignty:</u>
   - There must be a mutual understanding of both Israel's long-term security needs and the respect for Lebanese sovereignty, including airspace. If any part of Lebanon remains under occupation or in a de facto buffer zone, it will not enhance Israel's security; rather, it will likely strengthen Hezbollah, as has happened in the past. This reality must be acknowledged in any proposed solution.
   - There has been significant focus on Israel's security, but we must also consider the security needs of Lebanon, which is a critical issue. What does security for Lebanon entail? Furthermore, how can Israel cultivate a different relationship with the concept of Lebanon's sovereignty? This question has been central to the longstanding tensions between Israel and Lebanon, and it serves as one of the justifications Hezbollah often uses to rationalize its activities. Addressing Lebanon's security needs and respecting its sovereignty are essential steps toward fostering a more stable and constructive relationship between the two nations. Acknowledging and engaging with these concerns could lead to a more sustainable resolution to the conflict.

2. <u>The Rehabilitation of the Lebanese State:</u>
   - The Lebanese political landscape must not be overlooked. It is crucial to push for the election of a Lebanese president, as the Lebanese state will likely need to undergo a rehabilitation process, irrespective of the ongoing conflict. Lebanon's political crisis predates the war and must be addressed to create a sustainable long-term solution for the region; this issue transcends mere internal politics.

- There also needs to be a path forward which respects viable state institutions in Lebanon, allowing them to develop and fulfil their rightful roles. The most effective counterweight to Hezbollah will be the establishment of accountable, effective, transparent, and respected state institutions. This is essential for progress and for meeting Israel's security needs.
- Israel should take a humble approach in considering its limitations in Lebanon; it lacks the influence to shape Lebanon's internal affairs or directly engage in its politics. Instead, it is essential to allow the Lebanese people to shape their own political landscape, with support from the international community.

3. <u>Weakening Hezbollah's Dominance in Lebanon</u>
   - There are the six main questions that affect Hezbollah's capacity to remain a dominant spoiler force within Lebanon, along with some contextual elaboration for each point:
     a) **Political Dynamics within Lebanon**: The internal political landscape plays a crucial role in Hezbollah's influence. If international assistance can facilitate a more favorable political environment, particularly in the nomination of a president, it may weaken Hezbollah's grip on power. The ability of the Speaker of Parliament to hinder this process is significant; thus, any shifts in this dynamic could partially diminish Hezbollah's influence.
     b) **Security Threat to Israel**: The mechanisms that effectively deter Hezbollah from rebuilding its military capabilities are critical. Israel views UNIFIL as ineffective in this regard. It is essential to identify alternative deterrents or strategies that could prevent Hezbollah from launching large-scale attacks, akin to the October 7th attack.
     c) **Care for the Shia Community**: Historically, the Shia community in Lebanon has relied on Hezbollah and Iran due to a lack of internal support. A failure to address this reliance has perpetuated Hezbollah's influence. Creating a support structure for the Shia community that does not involve Hezbollah is vital for reducing its power and fostering a more independent political identity.
     d) **Arms Embargo and Disarmament**: To prevent Hezbollah from regaining lost military capabilities, a robust arms embargo is necessary. Understanding and implementing mechanisms that ensure Hezbollah is unable to rearm is crucial for diminishing its threat level and influence.
     e) **Role of Iran**: Iran's calculations regarding Hezbollah's role in Lebanon significantly affect the group's power. Exploring ways to influence Iran's strategic interests concerning Hezbollah can alter the dynamics in Lebanon and reduce Hezbollah's capacity to act as a proxy.
     f) **Regional Dynamics Beyond Conflict**: The broader regional narrative plays a significant role in Hezbollah's appeal. Strategies to diminish the attractiveness of Hezbollah's and Iran's narratives within the region could undermine their influence and support. This might involve promoting

alternative narratives that prioritize stability, economic development, and regional cooperation.

- Addressing these questions requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates political, security, and socio-economic strategies to effectively weaken Hezbollah's dominance in Lebanon.

C. The role of the International Community

1. <u>Main Actors – The US, France, The Arab Gulf States, and Iran</u>
   - A central question is what the international community, particularly the **US** and its allies, is willing to commit to. In the coming months, we may see an American administration adjusting its diplomatic actions and military support to align with current regional dynamics and realistic possibilities. Given recent challenges in meeting its goals, the Biden administration is likely to prioritize pragmatic, achievable solutions moving forward.
   - Unlike the US, **France** engages in dialogue with all parties involved, including Hezbollah. This approach is advantageous, as it acknowledges the reality that Hezbollah is not going away, necessitating communication with them. Consequently, France should take on a significant role alongside the US and other Arab countries. The focus of France's diplomatic efforts should be on Hezbollah, raising the critical question of whether France can influence Hezbollah to reach a negotiated agreement.
   - **The Arab Gulf States** have made it clear that they do not wish to align with either Israel or Iran. Any involvement they have in Lebanon would not necessarily favor Israel, nor would it benefit Iran. Consequently, Israel may view the involvement of the Arab states with skepticism, as it might not ensure the security guarantees that Israel considers essential.
   - **Iran** is seeking a ceasefire, but the nature of that ceasefire is uncertain. It raises the question of whether its aim is merely to preserve Hezbollah and facilitate its rebuilding, suggesting it would reject any ceasefire that permits Israel or an international force to replace Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Alternatively, the ceasefire could be a strategic move to allow Iran to focus on internal matters, such as negotiating a nuclear deal with the West, while addressing Hezbollah at a later stage.
   - From the Iranian perspective, while Hezbollah has clearly weakened materially, on the ideological-religious sphere, this moment presents an opportunity for Iran to build upon its relationship with the group. It seems unlikely that Iran would engage in discussions that exclude Hezbollah from the equation. Instead, Iran will likely focus on ensuring that Hezbollah remains integrated within the Lebanese system and will work to help reconstruct its capabilities.

2. <u>The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), the UN and UNIFIL</u>
    *   The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are expected to play a crucial role for US policymakers in shaping the region's security landscape. Transforming the LAF into a fully functional army is a long-term process that cannot be achieved immediately, necessitating the presence of an external force. This could involve establishing a stronger version of UNIFIL.
    *   Strengthening the LAF is crucial. However, the presence of an international force on the ground is essential, ideally grounded in UN principles, with additional guarantees from other international actors being welcome. Ultimately, the UN should serve as the foundation for this effort.
    *   Israel's unprecedented attacks on UNIFIL and its growing animosity towards the UN raise significant concerns. If Israel has no confidence in any UN institution, what is the alternative? The LAF is not currently equipped to deploy and secure positions in the south. However, US officials have noted that the training and equipping of the LAF have been among the most successful initiatives.

3. <u>UN Resolution 1701</u>
    *   A long-term solution should be rooted in the principles of the 1701 UN resolution, which includes the deployment of an international force on the ground. We need to approach this with a realistic mindset regarding what can be achieved. Using 1701 as the basis for future arrangements is essential, as attempting to create something entirely new from scratch would be impractical.
    *   While it is important to assert that Resolution 1701 should serve as the basis for future settlements in the region, it is likely that Israel may view this as problematic. In its view, this resolution has historically benefitted Hezbollah, which is keen to revert to this arrangement. Therefore, we need to adopt a creative approach that capitalizes on the positive aspects of 1701 while simultaneously working toward a new, more concrete framework.

4. <u>A Lebanese "Marshall Plan"?</u>
    *   Ideally, Lebanon requires a "Marshall Plan" that would provide substantial international support to help stabilize its economy, politics, and overall social structure. Potential actors in this initiative could include the USA, the EU, and the Arab Gulf States.
    *   However, there exists another set of international alliances – namely, Iran, Russia, and potentially even China – that could act as spoilers if they are not included in Lebanon's future reconstruction efforts. These actors may disrupt progress if their interests in Lebanon are overlooked or unmet. Therefore, any comprehensive plan for Lebanon's recovery must consider the complexities of these competing interests and ensure inclusive dialogue with all relevant stakeholders.
    *   Regarding the idea of a Marshall Plan for Lebanon, a similar initiative was attempted by France in April 2018; however, not a single dollar was disbursed

because no reforms were implemented. The blockage of these reforms is attributed not only to Hezbollah but also to the entire political class and the business community in Lebanon. The Cedar conference was the last attempt to avert an IMF program, and it ultimately failed.

- It is crucial to recognize that Lebanon is in dire need of an IMF program, as this is the only viable pathway to catalyze meaningful support from the international community. Without a commitment to necessary reforms and international oversight, Lebanon's recovery will remain stymied.
- A comprehensive approach is essential, necessitating both a UN Security Council resolution and a bilateral agreement between Israel and Lebanon. This combination of international and bilateral mechanisms could pave the way for a more effective and lasting peace.

D. Challenges

1. Two main levels of argument should be addressed when speaking about a future settlement: (a) who will lead the process and set the agenda, and (b) what international instruments will be utilized. These factors present a complex set of challenges across all dynamics.
2. Regarding the agenda-setting, it is currently difficult to identify a credible mediator or actor capable of taking the lead in shaping the next steps. Israel, being part of the conflict, cannot assume this role. We must discuss what format an effective agenda-setter could take to facilitate and advance the process. After a new US administration is elected, we might have a clearer idea regarding the role it can play in this regard.
3. Additionally, there remains the challenge of determining which international instruments will be effective. UNIFIL, for instance, is perceived by Israel as inadequate, while other potential international mechanisms face significant scrutiny. Therefore, we need clearer insights from Israeli perspectives on which international instruments they consider viable and acceptable for this process. The lack of trust in the UN and its mechanisms creates a strategic void that individual actors may struggle to fill.
4. Part of the solution for Lebanon is intricately tied to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Iran. Given that these two actors are unlikely to reach a settlement regarding their issues, the realistic prospect of Lebanon achieving full stability remains low. The Iranians have made it clear that they are not willing to relinquish control over Hezbollah, which complicates the situation further. This cyclical dynamic means that as tensions escalate between Israel and Iran, the repercussions will likely be felt in the Lebanese arena as well. The interconnectedness of these conflicts underscores the challenges Lebanon faces in pursuing stability while external pressures continue to mount.

E. Lists of participants

1. Rina Bassist, Mitvim
2. Abdolrasool Divsallar, Middle East WMD-Free Zone
3. Pierre Duquensne, Middle East Institute
4. Eran Etzion, Mitvim
5. Eitan Ishai, Mitvim
6. Brian Katulis, Middle East Institute
7. Asher Kaufman, University of Notre Dame
8. Roee Kibrik, Mitvim
9. Gil Murciano, Mitvim
10. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Mitvim
11. Raz Zimmt, INSS