

FDD Media Call: Hezbollah at War: What Comes Next for Lebanon and the Region

April 09, 2026

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, David Daoud, and Hussain Abdul-Hussain

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DOUGHERTY: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Joe Dougherty, I'm Senior Director of Communications here at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. Thank you for joining us today as we discuss the latest developments regarding Lebanon, Hezbollah, and Israel, and they seem to be changing by the minute so this is a well-timed media call. Thanks for joining us.

We do have a lot to unpack, so I'm pleased to share that we have three outstanding experts on today's call. Jonathan Schanzer is FDD's Executive Director and a Middle East scholar specializing in Middle East security issues and US Middle East policy. A former terrorism finance analyst at the US Department of the Treasury, where he followed and froze the funding of Hamas, Al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups. Jonathan is the author of four books on the region, most recently, Gaza Conflict 2021: Hamas, Israel and 11 Days of War.

David Daoud is an FDD Senior Fellow focused on Lebanon and Hezbollah and US policy in the region. Fluent in Arabic and Hebrew, David closely monitors and provides analysis on the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and Lebanon. He has spent extensive time living in the Middle East, primarily in Israel and Lebanon.

Hussain Abdul-Hussain is an FDD research fellow focused on Israel-Arab nation relations and US-Arab state policy, spanning Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Sudan. The author of the just released book, The Arab Case for Israel. Hussain was raised in Beirut, Baghdad, and Baalbek. He previously served as managing editor of Beirut's The Daily Star.

Some quick housekeeping before we get into the call. Today's conversation is on the record. We will share the video of today's call shortly after the call ends and get a transcript to you sometime tomorrow morning, hopefully faster. We'll try to get that done as quickly as we can. We will have Q&A today after the opening remarks.

To ask a question, you may type it into the chat feature and I'll be happy to read it aloud, or you may use the raise hand feature and you can ask the question directly. Okay, let's get things started. Dr. Schanzer, over to you. Thank you.

SCHANZER: Thank you, Dr. Doc. Good to be with everybody today. It is a hell of a day. I don't know how we planned this day to be the day that we had this call, but things are moving very rapidly. I'm going to just try to blow through just some recent events that led us to where we are today and then try to unpack a little bit of what's going on.

Look, obviously, it all starts with October 8th. The day after the October 7th attacks, Hezbollah starts firing in Israel. This was, of course, not the first time that this has happened. Israel and Hezbollah have been waging war against one another since the early 1980s, but this really felt like the big one, the Israelis were very afraid that Hezbollah was going to unleash its arsenal of 150,000 missiles and rockets, that it was going to try to cross the border and take Israeli territory.

Those things didn't happen, but it really, I think, evolved into a war of attrition, one in which both sides suffered a lot of damage. And Israel at a certain point, as we all know, in the fall of 2024, launched that "Grim Beeper" operation killing a number of top commanders. And then going in and striking at Hassan Nasrallah, the longtime Secretary General of Hezbollah, killing him in his bunker after dropping something like 80 2,000-pound bombs in the course of 17 seconds and effectively changing the course of this conflict.

Now, what's happened since, of course, there's been a ceasefire, a US-brokered ceasefire that's been in place. It has been tenuous at best with the Israelis firing at Hezbollah, something like 500 times over the course of roughly a year and a half. So a lot of different violations, but all done according to this mechanism. And this is important: this mechanism between the US, Israel, and Lebanon has created a space for dialogue between the Lebanese government and the Israeli government in ways that we haven't seen before.

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And as that's happened, I think there was an understanding that was reached between at least elements, and I would say a majority of elements of the Lebanese government and the Israeli government, namely that these were the only two countries that truly cared about the sovereignty of Lebanon. In other words, a lot of the other countries, the Europeans, the Middle Eastern countries, they dealt with Lebanon as it was. And they were willing to leave well enough alone, even though it was really not well enough. I mean, Hezbollah was holding the country hostage. And in fact, Iran was holding the country hostage because Hezbollah was an Iran-backed terror organization.

The Israelis and the Lebanese both wanted something different. They wanted sovereignty. They wanted the Lebanese army, the Lebanese government to take back the country. A lot of the efforts that we saw over the last year and a half were unsuccessful. That's why the Israelis did most of the dirty work. The LAF [Lebanese Armed Forces] was unable, unprepared, unwilling. There was fear of civil war. There was fear of losing to Hezbollah in a direct firefight. So the LAF declined more often than not, but that didn't mean that the government gave up on the very idea of liberating the country from the clutches of Iran and the clutches of Hezbollah.

It's always been in the background when you talk to, generally speaking, the Sunnis, the Maronites, and maybe even half of the Shiite population in this complex sectarian patchwork within the government of Lebanon. There was always this sense that, wow, this could be the historic moment, this historic opportunity to remove the influence of Hezbollah, to remove the unwanted weapons in the military.

Now, what has happened over the last month, as this war against Iran erupted, as the United States and Israel jointly began attacking the Islamic Republic, I think two things happened at once. One was that there was a sense in Lebanon, and I think we're seeing this in other places around the region as well, that the Islamic Republic was in fact defeatable. That it was not as strong as perhaps it was believed, and that with the US and Israel, taking it to the Islamic Republic, that might have opened up a different way of thinking about Iranian influence in Lebanon and that maybe there was a different reality that could be achieved. I think that's number one.

Number two was the rockets, the five rockets that were fired at Israel early on in this war in March, it was an ill-advised move on the part of Hezbollah. They thought that perhaps they could get away with just a symbolic strike on Israel. The Israelis had warned one strike and that's it, there will be escalation. And that's exactly what we've seen. The Israelis have escalated. They've called up thousands upon thousands of troops. They're deploying them to southern Lebanon. And the plan right now for the Israelis, where at least as of yesterday and even as of this morning, the plan was to populate the southern security zone south of the Litani to actually inhabit a fully emptied out buffer zone of roughly two to four kilometers at the very bottom of Lebanon along the border with Israel to protect Israeli troops and Israeli villages from direct Hezbollah assault, short-range rockets, the kind where you had 30 seconds to prepare or get into shelter. That is no longer a major threat. The Israelis have done a lot of that clearing out and they're going to keep doing it.

They're going to push for a complete military control of the southern security belt. On top of that, they continue to hammer away at the Hezbollah stronghold in Dahieh in the southern suburbs of Beirut while also taking it to Hezbollah in the Beqaa Valley in the east of the country, along that border with Syria. In other words, there is a plan and Israel's plan was to fully dismantle Hezbollah.

What has happened now, and I'll end here to allow for my colleagues to analyze, but with this ceasefire, and no one knows for sure whether the ceasefire included Lebanon or it didn't, but Iran has tried to claim it that way. And Pakistan is also, I think, trying to claim it that way as well. And you're seeing condemnations of the Israeli strikes in Lebanon, especially over the last two days where we've seen a significant uptick in strikes, massive waves, perhaps the largest wave we've ever seen in terms of Israeli strikes in Lebanon. It has gotten everybody to stop short and call for a pause.

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There is a clear effort right now for the United States to help broker a new diplomatic understanding between Lebanon and Israel to possibly help facilitate the disarmament of Hezbollah. It's unclear how the LAF would do this without the help of someone else. I don't think they have the capability, but there is now a very clear intent. The government has stated that it wants to do this. It is standing up to Hezbollah. It is standing up to Iran.

They are taking advantage of this moment politically in ways that I think are surprising a lot of us. And so here comes the moment where we get to see whether Lebanon is able to follow through with the help of the United States, with the help of Israel, perhaps with the help of others. And for that, I'm going to turn it over to David Daoud. Then after that, Hussain Abdul-Hussain to help us understand exactly how this might play out and maybe some of the other things that are happening behind the scenes. David, over to you.

DAOUD: Thank you, Jon. And I think that's an excellent framing. And I want to hang on one sentence that you said or one phrase that you said, which is that Hezbollah thought they could get away with it. And that's precisely what the Iranians are trying to do now. They're trying to bind their own time, the ceasefire in Iran, which they realize that the United States wants, to the ceasefire in Lebanon -- to a concurrent ceasefire in Lebanon. This isn't because Iran cares for Lebanon or its well-being. If they did, they wouldn't have instructed their most powerful and potent proxy, Hezbollah, to initiate the fight on March 2nd or March 1st, depending on what time zone you're in.

They would've left Lebanon out of it, especially given Hezbollah's state battering that they received from the Israelis. They haven't recovered from that by that point. So what they're trying to do now is help Hezbollah get away with it, not because they want a permanent peace in the region, because they want to be able to resume the activities that they were doing prior to this conflict, prior even to October 7th of 2023.

The Iranians probably realized this whole endeavor was a miscalculation. They've been considerably set back over the past three years. They've had their achievements, of course, but overall they've seen a decimation of their regional project and the various proxies they've built up and they want to stanch the bleeding. And their regional project does not stand up without Hezbollah. Everywhere that Iran has ever gone, obviously Lebanon, but Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, everywhere you see an Iranian footprint, Hezbollah is the tip of the spear.

So what Iran is trying to do right now is to tell the United States, "Hey, this ceasefire in Iran, you like it? Well, would be a shame if something happened to it, so make sure that Lebanon, the war in Lebanon stops." Again, not for the sake of the Lebanese, but for the sake of Hezbollah.

Now, why would we assume that a mere ceasefire would lead to Hezbollah's survival? Well, because of the Lebanese track record. And not to get into Lebanese history too much, but as much as there has been ... We're seeing growing will from the Lebanese government to say things, say all the right things. Look, I think we need to give considerable credit to the Lebanese government in February of 2025 for taking the cover that Hezbollah had been given for so long by a series of Lebanese governments, including that of Rafic Hariri as a resistance organization. Every cabinet's policy statement for 30 years had called Hezbollah indirectly, had legitimized the so-called "right of resistance." And Hezbollah exploited this to continue arming itself, to continue growing its arsenal, to continue seizing upon the choice of war and peace and Lebanon.

And the Nawaf Salam government was the first government in 30 years to say, "This statement is not there. This clause is no longer there." And then they went a step further on March 2nd of 2026 after Hezbollah in defiance or in contrast to their promises to Lebanese officials to not restart the conflict, and they said, "We're prescribing all of Hezbollah's military activities." And they ordered the LAF to continue the plan that they'd allegedly started to disarm Hezbollah. Hezbollah reacted with defiance.

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April 09, 2026

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And unfortunately, while this statement was excellent, while it's taken away Hezbollah's cover as a resistance organization upon which it's relied for so long, it's taken away the excuse that Hezbollah is using to be acting in defense of Lebanon. You have no right of self-defense if the Lebanese government is saying, "You're not defending Lebanon, you're acting illegally in fact, and in defiance of Beirut's orders." The problem is we're not seeing implementation. We haven't seen implementation of any of these decisions so far. And it's because I think the Lebanese government remains beholden to this fear that has restrained it historically from acting against Hezbollah.

There's Hezbollah's arsenal is one component, and the question remains whether Hezbollah's arsenal has been degraded sufficiently, not so it no longer poses a threat to Israel -- Israel already is conventionally far superior to Hezbollah -- but whether it no longer threatens Lebanon itself, whether it no longer poses an obstacle to the LAF, were it to pursue Hezbollah's disarmament to be able to successfully do so.

The second part is the threat that Hezbollah has been playing with for the past 15 months to pursue regeneration, the threat of civil war. It's not unfair for the Lebanese to not want to go to a civil war. And for Lebanese, and Hussain can speak to this even better than I can, most Lebanese lived the civil war. The scars of the civil war are still literally on the flesh of many Lebanese, and so they don't want to return to that. And how Hezbollah has tried to frame this to its environment because of Lebanon's sectarian makeup. Even though the overwhelming majority of Lebanese don't want Hezbollah to remain armed, a lot of Shia do, perhaps the majority, the overwhelming majority of Shia do. And how Hezbollah has framed this to them is, "If our arms are taken away, you are exposed in Lebanon and you are exposed to outside threats, and this is an existential threat to you." And to the government, this looks like if we move against Hezbollah's arms, we will have a civil war to deal with, we can't do this. So they've gone to dialogue over the past 15 months with Hezbollah asking them effectively, nicely, "Hey, will you disarm?"

And of course, Hezbollah has not acted in good faith. They've made it very clear, "We're not disarming north of the Litani River, and even south of the Litani River." There was all this talk prior to the LAF's plan of 500 positions of Hezbollah's that have been taken over north, south of the Litani River, but the story changed over time. And [Hezbollah Secretary-General] Naim Qassem said very clearly on July 8th of 2025, "They've disarmed what they've seen, thank God the country is vast." And Hezbollah, again, has exploited Lebanon's fear of civil war that led to an action to continue regenerating.

And the fear now is if that Hezbollah once again gets a ceasefire and the conditions haven't changed sufficiently in Lebanon, that Lebanese inaction will follow the same inaction that we saw after November 27th of 2024. And we saw a taste of this, by the way, after the Lebanese government's decision on March 2nd. March 2nd happens, Lebanese government issues its decision, five days later, the LAF effectively says, "We're not confronting Hezbollah. We're not executing this order. We are going to continue prioritizing domestic peace and tranquility," which is exactly what Hezbollah exploits to regenerate, to continue rearming. If that is the situation after these negotiations lead to a ceasefire, some kind of cessation of hostilities, if that condition remains, then unfortunately, rather than this being the last Lebanon-Israel war, and these two countries otherwise have no reason to fight, maybe they don't have a reason to go embrace each other and engage in peace, genuine peace with all that entails tomorrow.

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Maybe that'll come over time after quiet, but they have no other reason to go to war except for Hezbollah, assuming and arrogating to itself the decision of war and peace in Lebanon. If Hezbollah is allowed to rearm, maybe in five years, maybe in 10 years, maybe in 20 years, it's been 20 years since the 2006 war, maybe in another 20 years, we're going to be here again. That would be a disaster, not just for Israel, but also for Lebanon. With that, I will turn over to my colleague, Hussain.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Thank you, David and Jon. Let me just jump straight into the news. Today, the headline you're probably hearing all the time is that Hezbollah and Iran want Hezbollah and Lebanon to be part of the Iran ceasefire, where Israel refuses that. Well, guess who else refuses to be part of the Iran ceasefire? The Lebanese government. There's a reason for that. This is about sovereignty, and the Lebanese are saying, "Iran cannot talk to Israel over our heads in Islamabad. If there's a ceasefire, we have to be part, we have to be at the table talking to the Israelis." This is important because I probably saw President Macron of France, Pedro Sanchez, Prime Minister of Spain, the EU representative of foreign policy, all of them come out and say, "The Iran ceasefire should be expanded to include Lebanon." Well, the Lebanese don't want that. So the Lebanese want to talk to Israel straight. I think Bibi Netanyahu today said that he's ready to do that. Next week, we will see the ambassadors, three ambassadors, US ambassador in Lebanon, Michel Issa, the Lebanese ambassador in Washington, and the Israeli ambassador in Washington come together and talk.

Now, the question here is that it's great. This is probably one of the first times since God knows when, that the two governments officially sat face-to-face in an official capacity to sort things out. But there's a discrepancy. President Trump and Prime Minister Salam of Lebanon said that their goal of talking to the Israelis is to stop the shooting. I think the Israelis want much more than that. They want to talk to Lebanon, not only to stop the shooting, this is easy, everyone can do that, but to make sure that the shooting does not renew, that it's not like we stop the shooting now, six months or six years down the road, we'll go back to rockets and missiles and whatnot.

The Lebanese government is saying they're willing to talk. There's an issue here, and David talked about this, there's an issue of credibility. Now, the Lebanese government, which is an elected government, President Trump has been in power for only 14 months now, the Prime Minister, the same thing. There's a problem is that they've been saying the right things, they've been voting on the right resolutions, but everything they've said has been only words, and the Israelis have been really unhappy with this.

David mentioned March 2nd, the cabinet came together, voted on disbanding the Hezbollah militia, and this was the first time they singled out Hezbollah by name, said, "We are disbanding the military wing of Hezbollah." This didn't happen. A week or so after that, they declared the Iranian ambassador in Beirut persona non grata. The ambassador is still in Beirut. They haven't been able to enforce their own decision to expel an ambassador. Today, the cabinet said that they intend to keep arms, non-state actor arms out of Beirut. No one thinks that that will happen. The point here is that even though the Lebanese government has been saying and voting on all the right things, it hasn't done anything. This affects the credibility of the Lebanese government, not only before the Israelis, but before everybody else.

The second point I want to make here is that the Israelis are being simple and easy with the Lebanese. They're offering them something. They're saying, "Listen, if you want to become a normal government with sovereignty and be responsible for any violence that originates in your territory, into our territory, we have to deal government to government. We'll be happy to do that and live in peace. But if you're not willing to take responsibility of this kind of violence, then we'll have to do it for you, even though it's your job because we need to protect our citizens." The Israeli plan at this point is to establish this, what Jon talked about, the two to four kilometers buffer zone inside of Lebanon. Like everyone is expecting, this would be depopulated. No one will be living in this strip of land. Israelis will tell Lebanon, "Listen, there's a UN Security Council Resolution 1701 to disarm Hezbollah. Enforce it and take back your land. We don't want your land. We're just keeping this to keep Hezbollah away from us."

FDD Media Call: Hezbollah at War: What Comes Next for Lebanon and the Region

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I think the Lebanese government is on board when you talk to Lebanese officials behind closed doors. They understand what's at stake, and they understand that they are at fault since Hezbollah has been the party that started the war over the last three times, 2006, 2023 and last month. So they understand that, the Prime Minister of Lebanon Nawaf Salam is coming to Washington next week. He'll probably see some US officials or not. We're not sure about his schedule. Maybe he gets to talk to Israeli officials, no one knows, but we know that he's coming and we know that things are moving really, really fast. The point here is that the Lebanese themselves want to disassociate themselves from the Iran war and the Iranian negotiations for their own sovereignty. They're doing the right thing, they're going the right direction. Once they have their political house in order, if they can't, if they don't have the capacity to enforce what they decide on, then maybe we, the United States, maybe with a hand from the Saudis, Israel, everybody else in the region, maybe we help the Lebanese do what they should do. Thank you.

SCHANZER: Before we go to Q&A, I do want to note one thing, and I've heard from a few journalists over the course of the day about which came first, the chicken or the egg, and Hussain and David, you may have some insights into this, but chicken and egg being, did the Lebanese government come out and acknowledge that it wants to work with the Israelis in order to help disarm Hezbollah? In other words, did they agree to engage in these bilateral discussions with Israel with the help of the United States and move toward that final objective because Donald Trump said that he needed them to dial back, that the Israelis needed to dial back on their war against Hezbollah? Or did Trump come in after the fact that Nawaf Salam came out and said, "Okay, well, we're going to have to work with the Israelis. We are demanding sovereignty," as Hussain, I think, mentioned this idea that, "Hey, we're not part of this Lebanese deal. We want to have our own deal. We want to have our own agreement with the Israelis, and we want to have help from the United States."

I am still not sure on which came first. Perhaps one of you gentlemen have seen it. It looked to me that we saw a statement from Nawaf Salam first before the Donald Trump stuff came out, but I'd be curious to hear from you guys because I'm fairly certain that at least one of the people on this call was curious about that question. Does anybody know exactly which came first?

DAOUD: My sense is... Oh, sorry, Hussain.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Go ahead, David.

DAOUD: My sense is President Trump and the administration had a talk with the Israelis yesterday, and there's been reporting on this, saying, "Dial it back." I mean, there was even a statement from Vice President JD Vance yesterday saying that, I forget what the exact words, like, cool it, or chill it, or something in his very idiosyncratic style. Then we saw this move from Nawaf Salam, today's move from Nawaf Salam to...

SCHANZER: And then Bibi's announcement afterwards.

DAOUD: ...Bibi's announcement afterwards, according to Barak Ravid, seems to be a direct response to the talks with President Trump and the administration yesterday. It seems like, look, Lebanon, as much as Hussein's right to touch on this, they don't want Iran to be negotiating on their behalf, but Prime Minister Nawaf Salam and the Pakistani Prime Minister held a conversation today. It seems like they don't want to be left behind either. They don't want to be, Iran caused this fight and then Lebanon continues to bear the brunt of it, and then Lebanon is left out in the cold. Now, the question remains whether these talks... These talks, the Lebanese proposal for direct talks has been on the table for about a month since the outset of this conflict. Lebanese President Joseph Aoun came out a few days after the conflict was reignited and said, "We're willing to go to direct talks with the Israelis."

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April 09, 2026

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This was misrepresented or misreported in some places as peace talks. What he was talking about, if you look at the original statement, was ceasefire talks. Right now, I remain unclear whether the Lebanese want to go to cooperation with the Israelis to disarm Hezbollah or whether they're once again trying to use these big statements that they've made to get an offramp. Then we go to what Tarek Mitri said, who's the deputy prime minister of Lebanon, said just maybe 30 minutes ago to Al Jadeed [Lebanese TV station] saying, "Look, we are a Lebanese government that represents a broad Lebanese legitimacy, meaning the political environment in Lebanon. We include ministers from Hezbollah's viewpoint, and we won't negotiate under fire. We won't do ceasefire, we won't talk under fire, and then we'll do what we've always done, which is to talk internally."

That statement sends chills up my spine, because if that reflects Nawaf Salam's position, then what the Lebanese are trying to do, again, this is the credibility issue that Hussein talked about, it seems like they're trying to say a lot to get the bombs to stop and then to return to the status quo ante in every sense of the term.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Let me just add quickly the Lebanese perspective on this. If the war stopped like Iran asked and like Hezbollah expected with the Iran ceasefire, if Israel had stopped the war, Hezbollah was going to take over the government, and the Lebanese government knows this. They were going to turn their arms inside. They did this in 2006. They were going to force Nawaf Salam's government to collapse. They were trying to reverse all the resolutions that say that Hezbollah must be disbanded. The Lebanese government understood that if the war ends, they're in trouble. That's why what you saw happen was that the Lebanese government came out to enforce to behave as a sovereign government. I think we, the United States, maybe our embassy in Beirut recommended this to us, to the Israelis. We thought, "Okay, maybe we should give these guys a hand because if they're willing to talk and they have these resolutions, even if they're unable to do them, to enforce them, then maybe we should just give them another chance."

I think this is where all the support came from, from the president over here, from Bibi Netanyahu in Israel. Everyone is now just rallying around Aoun and Salam and trying to get them to talk and hoping that this would work somehow.

DOUGHERTY: Very good, gentlemen. Thank you. We will turn it over to the Q&A section now. We had a couple of reporters join us a little bit late, so just a quick heads-up that this conversation is on the record. We will provide the link to the video shortly after the call concludes, and we'll have the transcript of the call available to you tomorrow morning. If you have a question, you may use the raised hand feature and you can ask it yourself, or you can submit it via chat and I'll be happy to ask it for you. As we wait for any questions to come in, gentlemen, what I want to throw out to each of you is you're a State Department reporter, White House reporter, or Pentagon reporter. You've got the presumed talks that are coming up. What should these reporters be looking for, what key things could be said, what key things could be done that could trigger something going one way or the other? Jon, we'll start with you on that.

SCHANZER: Yeah. I mean, I think for me, the question of seriousness probably boils down to whether there's an attempt to bring in international peacekeepers, which has been a consistently failed policy in Lebanon. The idea of having UNIFIL, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, or something similar is simply not realistic. I mean, you've heard Hussain and I both use the word sovereignty here. This is really the core, right? If Lebanon can't do this on its own, that it's government and it's military. Look, it can work with the US bilaterally, it can work with the Israelis bilaterally. I know that won't be easy, but these are things that I'm going to watch for because that will, I think, determine the seriousness of all of this. The other thing that I just want to point out here, which is I think a story that maybe could be covered and would generate some interest is that it is actually technically illegal for the Lebanese delegation to sit down with the Israelis in Washington.

FDD Media Call: Hezbollah at War: What Comes Next for Lebanon and the Region

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There is an anti-normalization law, and I'm sure Hussain can give you a chapter and verse on it, but it is actually illegal. There have been people and Lebanese citizens who've been here in the United States and have attended sessions where Israelis have also attended and they have been prosecuted according to the Lebanese legal system. The idea that the government is doing this is technically illegal, and it will raise questions. All of this is going to raise questions about the viability of that law moving forward.

DOUGHERTY: Hussain, you want to add to that?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Yeah. Well, look, if I'm a writer, journalist at any government branch, this is what I should be looking for. The ceasefire can't happen in absolute terms. This is what Iran and Hezbollah are trying to do. The reason they do that is that if the shooting stops and there's no agreement on anything, this guarantees that there'll be another round. And this is the model that Hezbollah and Iran have in mind.

What the government of Lebanon and the government of Israel and some of us here in Washington want to see happen is that shooting stops at the same time when we have clear terms of what happens next. So okay, we stopped the shooting, you disarm Hezbollah, you take our territory back. And this was in the November 2024 cessation of hostilities agreements that Lebanon signed on. Lebanon signed on enforcing [UNSCR] 1701 which stipulates disbanding Hezbollah. So this is nothing new. It has to be part of a package except at this time we need to make sure that Lebanon goes through with the package. The last time they promised to do it and they even declared that they had done it in January, they said that south Lebanon had been cleared of Hezbollah. Only it turned out that by March, Hezbollah was launching rocket attacks from south Lebanon, the same area the Lebanese state said had been cleared.

So Israel is saying, "Look, we are not willing to play this game over and over again. Let's have one package, let's agree on every stop, on every step in this, and then we'll be happy to stop the shooting." Of course, everyone on the Israeli or on the Lebanese side wants this war to end.

DOUGHERTY: Another question as a moderator. I'll take the lead on that. Who in the Trump administration could be taking a role and what are some cautions that you should share and what are some things that they need to be looking for and that they should be pressing for? What role does the administration have here?

DAOUD: I can take this, and this is the corollary to if Jon and Hussein are focusing on the word sovereignty, I would focus on action. And this is what the US administration needs to focus on. Look, the dismantlement of Hezbollah is not just an Israeli interest. It's primarily, I would say, even an American interest. And this is obscured by the fact that Hezbollah has engaged with Israel in a fight and it's committed to Israel's destruction exclusively. But Hezbollah itself has put us at the primary enemy and measures every conflict that engages in, and I'm quoting their 1985 open letter, against the conflict with the United States. So diminishing American influence in the region, diminishing American power. So it is in our interest to see that Hezbollah is diminished. It's not just doing a favor to the Lebanese or the Israelis, it is making sure that this tip of the spear of Iranian regional expansionism is no longer able to function and push us out of this region.

And what I would want to see out of the Lebanese is action. And Hussein talked about something as simple as, and I'll do a minor correction there to Hussein, that puts his point into starker contrast. It wasn't the Iranian ambassador that the Lebanese ordered declared persona non grata. He was the ambassador designate. We hadn't even assumed fully his ambassadorial role. And even there, Iran said no. And it was backed up by actors like [Speaker of the Parliament of Lebanon] Nabih Berri who gets a pass in the United States. And this is someone that we need to focus on, and I'll get to that in a second. But if you couldn't even get rid of an ambassador designate, today, after decades and after 15 months of the ceasefire, finally we hear Lebanon talk about imposing a demilitarization of Beirut. If you can't control your periphery or your center of government, how can we expect you to control the periphery?

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It's axiomatic that governments have more control in the center than the periphery. And so this brings us to a point where we're not seeing the action. And the other part is we've had these Lebanese interlocutors that have positioned themselves as friends of ours. Nabih Berri, [former security chief Major General] Abbas Ibrahim, I would include Fadi Makki, who's a minister in the cabinet, who is supposed to be a Nawaf Salam appointee. This is supposed to be an ostensibly independent, and maybe he hasn't used some of Hezbollah's tactics, but every time he has voted along the so-called "Shia line" that Hezbollah and [Lebanese Shia party] Amal have set, we need to start setting our eyes on those types of actors who are... Again, they're not Hezbollah supporters, now be admitted probably in his heart of hearts, hates Hezbollah, but because he's trying to act as Shiite kingmaker, he continues to give them the political breathing room.

And he at the same time presents himself to us as a credible interlocutor. We need to see a change there. And if we don't start to see a change there, I think there needs to start to be, from Washington signals, dots across the bow, figurative, of course, towards Nabih Berri, towards these other actors that give Hezbollah -- that buttress Hezbollah's Shiite credibility, in its image of representing the Shiite community behind which it hides to avoid disarmament.

SCHANZER: Let me just add, when we're talking about personnel, I think it first needs to be understood that Morgan Ortega was the person within this administration early on that created this mechanism that I think helped to build the process through which the Lebanese government and the Israeli government were able to speak with the US as the go between. And that I think really did help to build this. I think she deserves an enormous amount of credit for whatever we've achieved. And it's unclear what we've achieved, but the fact that we've even reached this place where bilateral talks are even possible, it's remarkable. And I do think that Morgan deserves enormous credit. By the way, she wrote the forward to Hussein's book, so you should read that and read Hussein's book. But the thing that I actually I want to point out is, and these are sensitive conversations, and I'm not going to get into exactly who I talked to and when, but I will say that in speaking to various folks representing Lebanon, Lebanon's interests, there's a lot of concern about Tom Barrack.

This is the ambassador from the Trump administration to Turkey, who also has an enormous amount of influence over the administration's Syria policy. The Turks and the Syrians, I think both would like to have more influence in Lebanon. And they are, I think, willing to play some cynical games. We have seen reports, we can say with some certainty that this is happening, that Turkey has been actually providing weapons and financing to Hezbollah. And we also know that there has been some smuggling across the Syrian border, and that border is in large part the purview of the Turkish government because of their significant presence there. And so what we've been hearing is A, a skepticism about Turkey and its role in the future or now in this region. And what we continue to hear from our Lebanese contacts is that they don't want the influence of Turkey there.

They want to deal no longer with Iran. They don't want any other regional power trying to muscle in. They want that sovereign decision without the influence of outside actors. That's what they're aiming for. And it'll be interesting to see whether they get there, whether the region, which purports to be all these different actors, say they're advocating for Muslim sovereignty, for all the different countries of the region. I think Lebanon's gotten short shrift for a very long time. It's been a regional play thing for a number of powers. We're trying to steer out of that right now, and I hope we're able to get there.

DOUGHERTY: Matt from Reuters has a question. Given the weakness of Lebanese government and the military, won't it be necessary for some kind of indirect contacts between Israel and Hezbollah, like the Gaza diplomacy, and is there any real chance of that? Jon, first crack at that?

FDD Media Call: Hezbollah at War: What Comes Next for Lebanon and the Region

April 09, 2026

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, David Daoud, and Hussain Abdul-Hussain

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

SCHANZER: Look, I think there is a chance of it. I don't think the Israelis mind passing messages through some interlocutor, and I wouldn't be surprised if it was the French or the Swiss or whomever. I don't know if I have a clear sense of who would probably play that role, but I think that if the goal is disarmament and ultimately dismantling Hezbollah, maybe providing an amnesty, maybe allowing for the group to be a political party in Lebanon. Look, I'm not saying I endorse any of these things. What I am saying is that I think they're probably going to be on the table as they look for pragmatic means to get to a final status on this. And so I don't think the Israelis are going to have a problem doing it. I don't think the US is. Let me just say, Steven Witkoff was having direct talks with Hamas not too long ago, I mean, sitting across the table from Hamas leaders.

So I wouldn't be surprised if Witkoff rolled up his sleeves and got in there and did this. I think anything is possible right now. But what I'm actually working to track, as I think about it, a really good candidate for this is probably the UAE. The UAE will speak with both Hezbollah and with the Israelis. They see Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, but my guess is they'd find somebody from within. Maybe the last thing that I'll just note is there are figures, as I understand it, that Israel has made sure not to eliminate. As we've seen these targeted killings of senior Hezbollah people, there are a handful that have survived seemingly because Israel willed it, which means some of these people may be targets for diplomatic engagement, and I'll be interested to see how that plays out.

DOUGHERTY: Hussain?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Yes. Let me add to what Jon said. Number one, the cessation of hostilities signed in November 2024 was not between this president and prime minister and Israel. It was between the previous interim cabinet, which was a Hezbollah cabinet. So [Najib] Mikati, the prime minister, was a Hezbollah guy. And Berri who was Hezbollah's ally, he was the person who was the mediator between Hezbollah and the rest of the world, including Israel. And when Lebanon agreed on the cessation of hostilities, there were two Hezbollah ministers sitting in the cabinet voting on the cessation of hostilities that stipulated that Hezbollah must be disarmed. So just to be clear, it's not unheard of. We talk to them or Israel talks to them all the time. Berri speaks on their behalf. And it's happening. And we've tried it and look what happened. And to compare this to Gaza, this is exactly my point.

They sign on things and they never do them. And we end up with Hamas keeping its arms, Israel keeping half of the [Gaza] strip, and the status quo just lives on with a security arrangement for Israel. So what the Lebanese government is trying to do is not to get bogged in what the Palestinians got bogged in. So they're thinking, okay, we don't want Israel to keep a buffer zone and Hezbollah to keep its arms. It's much better to our sovereignty as a government, as a state, as a nation state, to both get out the arms of Hezbollah's hands and get back the territory. Now, can the Lebanese military... Is it weak, not weak? Can it do it? Look, I think what they need first and foremost is consensus from the Lebanese to disarm Hezbollah. Whenever the Lebanese do this, it works. It worked in 1982 when the Lebanese came together and asked Arafat to leave Beirut.

They said, "Listen, the Israeli war is destroying the country. Please get out." And this is how it happened. He got out, and stopped. It happened in 2005 when the Lebanese also had a consensus over ejecting Assad's forces from Lebanon, and it can happen now. And by consensus, we mean that we need to convince Berri, the speaker, who's Shia and who's the ally of Hezbollah, to join the consensus. And he's halfway there. He has one foot in the anti-Hezbollah coalition and one foot with Hezbollah. But there are many points of leverage. They can pressure Berri and say, "Listen, all the Swiss bank accounts that you have might be at risk if you don't play ball." So there are ways, but none of them include relying on Hezbollah. We've tried that. They gave us their words that they will disarm. They always, always never keep their word.

DAOUD: I'll add to that. And I promise, Jon, I wouldn't go on any long historical discourses, but if you'll allow me a little bit, it's not...

FDD Media Call: Hezbollah at War: What Comes Next for Lebanon and the Region

April 09, 2026

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, David Daoud, and Hussain Abdul-Hussain

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

SCHANZER: 30 seconds. No more.

DAOUD: 30 seconds. 30 seconds. It's not historically unprecedented that Israel has negotiated with Hezbollah through various interlocutors. Hussein touched on the most recent one, but go back to April of 1996 where they negotiated through the Syrians, they've negotiated through the Germans for the release of Israeli hostages and prisoner exchanges. So it has happened. The question is, and again, Hussein touched on this, is the issue of credibility. What you're asking Hezbollah to do is to disarm much of their survival, their necessity, their utility. If you look at Hezbollah's base, most of them are not ideologues. The core kernel of Hezbollah supporters are ideological Khomeinists who are religious and they believe in the concept of velayat-e faqih [guardianship of the Islamic jurist]. As you go out, these concentric circles of support for Hezbollah, you'll find people whose lives and lifestyle resemble ours in the all but name.

And why do they support Hezbollah? Because Hezbollah offers them certain benefits as they see it, one of which, and primarily is this concept of resistance that Hezbollah is going to defend them against these outside threats that it purports are just awaiting at the door to tear them apart. So the evil Israelis and the evil jihadists. So if you take away Hezbollah's arms, you're taking away Hezbollah's reason to live. You're taking away Hezbollah's, the reason for these people, large swath of these people, to continue supporting the organization. And last I checked, organizations, even ones like Hezbollah are not in the business of suicide. So they will take these talks and they'll play with them as they see fit. Going back to more recent times after the November 27th, 2024 ceasefire, which talks about Hezbollah's requirement to disarm Hezbollah, and I'm quoting verbatim, "Starting south of the Litani River." Hezbollah takes that and says, "No, no, no, no, no. This only applies south of the Litani River."

And then what is it? So ostensibly, Hezbollah is committing to disarming and to demilitarizing south of the Litani River. And then by its own admission and in word and deed, they remained armed, they remain present and they continue to regenerate south of the Litani River. So any negotiation with Hezbollah, what they're going to do is take that breathing room and take it unless there's continued pressure on them, unless the Lebanese pick up the slack and press them from the other end, they're going to take that, they're going to take the breathing room and they're going to do what they do best, which is to continue to re-arm and to disregard the decisions from Beirut.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, David. Let's take an Artemis 2 look at this and open it up to the entire globe. Jon, you oversee all of FDD's researchers, work with the research team. This administration has a lot on its plate with Lebanon, with Iran, and everything else. What are your thoughts on the capability of the administration to juggle all these things. What are the challenges that it is facing and what are some hurdles that it should try to avoid?

SCHANZER: Yeah, there's a lot going on here. They're spread pretty thin. I mean, from fighting the war with Iran to still dealing with Ukraine, still trying to resolve the Gaza thing. Now you got Lebanon in here, and you got this rupture with NATO and the Europeans that's looming over all of it, great power competition. I mean, you name it, this administration is dealing with it. This is some serious tumult. So yeah, I've got concerns about it.

I think that the success of this is really going to depend upon the will of the Lebanese and the Israelis. I think I would trust the Israelis. Again, I think it's really important to understand they want sovereignty for Lebanon. They understand that this is their best way out of a decades-long conflict with Iran's most lethal proxy. The answer is sovereignty, so this isn't like an anti-Lebanon position. It's a very pro-Lebanon position.

And as long as they continue to approach it in that way and they find resources to direct at this problem that are consistent with Lebanese sovereignty, I see success whether or not the U.S. is involved. I mean, I do think that U.S. resources are probably going to be needed, U.S. intelligence, maybe training for the LAF, because they're definitely going to need more than whatever they've got. So there's a lot of pieces of this that I think still need to fall into place, but I think it's really a question of the will of these two countries to get this done.

FDD Media Call: Hezbollah at War: What Comes Next for Lebanon and the Region

April 09, 2026

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, David Daoud, and Hussain Abdul-Hussain

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

I mean, just to be very clear, they see the disaster that is looming. What the Israelis just did over the last two days, this massive wave of attacks, this just gave the Lebanese people a foretaste of what could happen if things continue down this road, and I do think that's why Nawaf Salam came out and raised his hand and said that he was ready for this. They don't want another disastrous war.

So this is an off-ramp. It's an amazing off-ramp right now, sparked in part by the Iran-Israel-U.S. war, sparked in part by the ceasefire that came out of that war. Somehow this opening has been created. If you ask me, it's probably the last major opening we're going to see in a long time. This is a generational opportunity. And so this is now one of those moments that requires utter seriousness from the two sides in particular and whatever the United States is able to provide.

I don't know who comes at this from the State Department or from the White House right now. Right now, a lot of these negotiations, they've all been handled by the same three or four people. I think you really want a specialist here, and you want somebody who Trump trusts implicitly. We gotta figure out who that's going to be, but I think that'll be a big story as well.

DOUGHERTY: David, Hussain, you both lived there. The Lebanese people deserve peace, do they not?

DAOUD: I think both peoples deserve peace. Look, I mean, I was born in Lebanon, one of the last Lebanese Jews to be born in the country, and my return to Lebanon was actually in 2006 in the Israeli army, and that's what sparked my interest in the country. Before that, it had been a matter of stories that my mother told me. My father disconnected entirely. I'm getting a little personal here, but there's a point. And the tragedy for me is that 18 years on, that's a lifetime. The war that I fought is 20 years ago. When it reignited, it was 18 years. Some of the kids in Israel and Lebanon that were born while I was fighting a war were then fighting wars themselves 18 years later, and I think that's a tragedy. And I think it's a tragedy, Jon just noted something, that this is perhaps a generational opportunity to end this conflict once and for all, and that if the door shuts in the wrong way ... look, Hezbollah can say everything about their ideology. They're not stupid. They make mistakes, but they make them very rarely. And I don't think they're going to give another opportunity for a very long time for the Israelis or for the Lebanese government to do away with them. And what that does is it creates quiet, sure, but it's a deceptive quiet that, God willing, when I have children and they're 18, I don't want them to be fighting Lebanese kids. And I'm sure Hussain, Hussain has family in the country. I'm sure he doesn't want his kids, his relatives, their kids, to be in a position where they're in danger.

This war needs to end once and for all, and this is a generational opportunity to end it. And both sides, both sides, including, look, obviously Lebanese Shia as well. I went to Lebanon afterwards as a tourist after the war because my interest was sparked, and Lebanese Shia are some of the most wonderful people you'll ever meet. They're salt-of-the-earth people. Unfortunately, they've been propagandized and used as a buffer environment for an organization that gives, sure, takes care of them, sure, but then ultimately uses them as cannon fodder. And I don't think Ibrahim in south Lebanon deserves any less of a peaceful life and a productive life than Avi in Tel Aviv.

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Well, just a final word from my side, Joe, to add to what Jonathan was saying, we keep on saying that the Middle East is too complicated and that America should get out of it. I don't think the global affairs work this way. If we are pivoting from the Middle East to China, it means we are facing China and the Middle East again. So the global affairs are so interconnected, whether it's Iran or Lebanon or Israel or China. And we saw that the Iranians were providing Russians with Shahed drones, and then the Ukrainians came to the rescue of the Gulf countries, trying to advise them on how to shoot down Iranian drones coming at them.

FDD Media Call: Hezbollah at War: What Comes Next for Lebanon and the Region

April 09, 2026

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, David Daoud, and Hussain Abdul-Hussain

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

So the world is really interconnected, and number one, we can't isolate ourselves as Americans and sit back and behave as if nothing will happen to us if we don't intervene. Number two, we can't really think that, okay, we're focused on China, therefore the Middle East should be out. And number three, like we see, a war with Iran brings in a bunch of other countries. Iran dragged in the GCC countries, Kuwait and the UAE and Saudi Arabia and all these people. And then you have Lebanon jumping in, Hezbollah dragging Lebanon into this war.

When I talk to the Lebanese, seriously, I grew up in Lebanon. Many of these wars, I survived many of these wars, civil war, wars with Israel. I covered many of these wars between Lebanon and Israel. And now in Washington, I'm still at it. In middle age, all I do is just say the same thing over and over again, and it's one theme really: Just get one sovereign government, let the government focus on economic growth and jobs and unemployment, and that's what anyone wants in a government. Let's just stop all the discussion about colonialism and all the big titles that everyone is ... not everyone, but some people ... are talking about.

So if we can get the simple things done like sovereignty and get the Lebanese to live in peace and no non-state actors dominating their government and dominating them, I think these are easy things, and not everything has to be awakened on the spot. I understand that everyone wants the ceasefire, myself included. My parents were very close to the bombings in Beirut yesterday and today, because Hezbollah is now hiding in the non-Hezbollah areas. So they've been scared a few times. Hopefully this passes. But I understand that I want the war to stop like the next guy, but I also want this war to stop once and for all. I don't want it to stop for the sake of, yeah, it's a ceasefire and everyone be happy, because I understand that over the past 50 years, this has been recurrent over and over again. I want us really to be focused to put one final end to all of this.

DOUGHERTY: We do have one final question from a journalist, and then we'll go into, we'll summarize things. I'm going to give each of you 30 seconds to summarize your thoughts, so we'll get to that in a moment. But Aamer of the AP asks, "Slightly off topic, but curious of the group's thoughts on sending VP Vance to Islamabad for talks. Does Vance have any greater credibility in the eyes of Iran than Witkoff or Kushner?" Jon?

SCHANZER: I think they probably prefer him, knowing that his perspective on foreign intervention is one of skepticism, so my guess is that the Islamic Republic wanted him there. I don't think it's a problem that he's there. I do think that he's going to need some help. I don't think he's ever been engaged in negotiations with this kind of weight, this kind of seriousness. This is as serious as it gets, and he's relatively new at all of this. I don't think he ever had experience in negotiating any kind of an agreement at this level. And of course, the Islamic Republic is known for fleecing its American interlocutors, and this has been the case now for quite some time in recent history.

So I do think that it's a little surprising that maybe Vance and Rubio didn't do this together, but it could be that the Islamic Republic said, "Here's who we want, here's what we don't want." But it does strike me as a little interesting that he's the guy that's leading this. He's the senior American official on this delegation, with a relative lack of experience in this space. Doesn't mean he'll fail. It just means he's got a steep learning curve here with some high stakes involved.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks, Jon. Okay. We're in the wrap-up part of the call. I want to give special thanks to Ellie Bufkin and the entire FDD Comms team for its behind-the-scenes support. In closing, a reminder that FDD is a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. You'll find all of our research at fdd.org. If you'd like to arrange a one-on-one conversation with Jonathan, David or Hussain, please email me at press@fdd.org and I'll work on scheduling that. Gentlemen, over to you for your final thoughts. Let's start with David and then Hussain, and we'll conclude with Jon.

FDD Media Call: Hezbollah at War: What Comes Next for Lebanon and the Region

April 09, 2026

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, David Daoud, and Hussain Abdul-Hussain

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DAOUD: I'll keep this brief. Look, it's no secret that over the past 15 months, I was very skeptical of the November 27th, 2024 ceasefire and what would happen, piece after piece published that shows that skepticism. What I hope moving forward is that the conditions have changed sufficiently in Lebanon that the ball will move forward, in a forward direction, where we start to see more action from the Lebanese government.

As much as the statements are important, again, I don't think it's just by chance that Wafiq Safa and other Hezbollah officials are saying, "We're going to force the Lebanese government to rescind its decision of March 2nd and pull back its disarmament decisions." The symbolic is important, but ultimately it remains symbolic, and what we need to see from the Lebanese government moving forward is that type of action that ensures that this will be the last Lebanon war and that Beirut's word will be supreme in Lebanon, and not that of a non-state actor or a militia.

DOUGHERTY: Hussain?

ABDUL-HUSSAIN: Yes. There are not many ways to do this. There's only one way, and that's one way is for the Lebanese government to act like any other normal sovereign government. And this means there should be no armed non-state actors anywhere, whether in Lebanon or Syria or Egypt or the United States. This is how things are. And I know that it might look hard, maybe impossible, but this is the only way to do it. We have to keep on it. We've been pushing for this over the past 20, 30 years, but seriously, as long as there's an armed non-state actor not accountable to the people, not accountable to the Shia where I come from, not accountable to anyone, this doesn't work. Either everyone goes by the rules, local rules, international rules, or this doesn't work.

SCHANZER: Yeah, I'll end with this, guys. I think, number one, none of this happens unless Iran was attacked by the United States and Israel. This war, I think a lot of people have raised questions about the wisdom of it, the rationale for it, et cetera. What it is doing, whether you agree with it or not is just really inconsequential. What it's done is it's actually opened up space for the countries that have suffered from Iranian proxy activity to begin to think about what happens if those proxies are not there, and I do think that that has absolutely been the case here. I think there's also a sense of how many times does Lebanon want to go to war when it's sparked by a foreign actor acting in their interest and not in their own national interest.

And so all of this comes down ... you've heard this word now a lot during the course of the last hour ... the word is sovereignty. The question of restoring sovereignty in Lebanon is now front and center. This is a rare moment where that is ... in fact, that is the only issue. It's not about Donald Trump and whether the guy gets a Nobel Peace Prize. It's not about whether Trump wins the war in Iran or not. It's about none of that right now. It's not even about the Israelis. This is about getting a non-state actor that has been plaguing the country of Lebanon and preventing it from developing in a way that I think the country, the vast majority of the people of the country, would envision for themselves.

And so right now there is this unbelievable generational opportunity for Lebanon to take its country back. I've been a little surprised at the skepticism over this, because I do believe that this is about the government doing what is necessary, finally saying what needs to be said, and now the question is can they follow up with action. I sincerely hope they can.

DOUGHERTY: Jonathan, David, Hussain, thank you for your insights. To the journalists on the call, a quick reminder, I'll get you the link to the video within the next 15, 20 minutes or so, transcript to you first thing tomorrow morning, as soon as we can turn that around. Thank you for joining us today. We know that you have a lot on your plate and you chose to spend it with us, and we're very grateful for that. Thanks for joining us. This does conclude today's call.