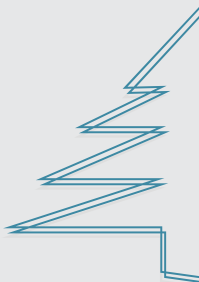


Assessment report

March 17, 2026

War on Lebanon

**Escalation and
Possible Scenarios**



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Nearly two weeks into the war between Israel and Hezbollah, which erupted on March 2, 2026, Lebanon has effectively entered the on-going regional war that began on February 28 following the joint Israeli-American military campaign against Iran. Israeli aggression continues to escalate across air, land, and sea, extending to localized ground incursions. Hezbollah, for its part, is attempting to prevent the Israeli occupying forces from achieving its objectives by maintaining the tempo of its concentrated strikes against Israeli positions, military concentrations, and areas within its fire range, and by resisting ground advances, while rejecting any framework leading to its surrender or disarmament. Concurrently, the humanitarian situation in Lebanon continues to deteriorate amid expanding waves of displacement, a rising number of casualties, and mounting pressure on the country's health and service infrastructure. Parallel to these developments, the Lebanese government has intensified its political and diplomatic activity, going so far as to put forward unprecedented proposals for direct negotiations with Israel. Thus far, however, these initiatives have elicited no response from the Israeli side.

A series of operational indicators suggests that the war has moved beyond the phase of limited strikes into a stage of broad escalation. Among the most prominent of these indicators are the issuance of widespread evacuation orders south of the Zahrani River following the earlier evacuation of the area south of the Litani River; the intensification of evacuation orders and airstrikes targeting Beirut's southern suburbs Beirut and the Bekaa Valley; the reinforcement of Israeli military deployments along the borders; and the continued daily launching of rockets and drones from Lebanon. Taken together, these developments suggest that both sides have entered a phase aimed at imposing new facts on the ground—each in accordance with its objectives and capabilities—prior to any potential political process, which thus far remains entirely elusive.

Military Developments on the Ground

On the Israeli Front

The war has rapidly evolved, revealing three distinct Israeli operational tracks within Lebanon. Within days, Israel expanded the scope of hostilities from localized strikes to a policy of mass evacuation, paving the way for heavy bombardment, ground incursions, and localized airborne landings. On March 4, 2026, Israel issued an order calling for the evacuation of the entire area south of the Litani River, instructing residents to move north of the river immediately. By March 5, 2026, the threshold was raised further, with an order for the near-total evacuation of Beirut's southern suburbs. Residents were instructed to move east and north, and were warned that any movement southward could expose them to danger. Subsequently, on March 6, 2026, evacuation orders were extended to entire villages in the Bekaa Valley, most notably Nabi Chit, Al-Khader, Sarain al-Fawqa, and Sarain al-Tahta. On March 12, the Israeli military spokesperson issued an evacuation order for villages and towns south of the Zahrani River, effectively forcing the displacement of residents from an area representing more than 10 percent of Lebanon's territory.

This campaign has been marked by sustained, intensive daily targeting of the southern suburbs, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley, alongside concentrated airstrikes across multiple regions of the country. Repeated waves of strikes have also extended to Beirut, the southern suburbs, and eastern and southern Lebanon. Notably, these operations have not been confined to what Israel labels as "arms depots" or "combat positions"; rather the Israeli Air Force systematically targeted Hezbollah's broader support infrastructure. This includes facilities with civilian, social, or financial facades, such as those linked with the Al-Qard Al-Hasan Association, which Israel identifies as part of the Hezbollah's financial apparatus. Consequently, collateral damage has expanded to encompass civilian utilities, service facilities and residential neighborhoods. This air campaign has been coupled with a persistent clear pattern of targeted assassinations against Hezbollah cadres and leaders, whenever

intelligence or tactical opportunities arise. Such actions underscore that that Israel is not merely conducting a war of widespread destruction, but is pursuing a systematic dismantling of Hezbollah's leadership, logistical, financial, media, and even social infrastructure.

The second track involves a gradual ground advance. Since the onset of hostilities, Israel has reinforced its border presence, deploying additional troops into southern Lebanon to bolster the forces already stationed in what it terms "forward defensive positions" since the 2024 conflict. According to field reports, the ground engagements have primarily centered around the town of Khiam within the Lebanese Syrian-occupied Palestinian border triangle, a strategic pivot point for any potential large-scale Israeli thrust. Subsequent reports on March 10, indicated that Israeli armored columns had advanced into additional towns in the central and southeastern border sectors. In parallel with these localized maneuvers, Israeli sources reveal that the army maintained the 91st and 210th Divisions in forward deployment along the northern front and across the lines of contact with Lebanon and Syria, while enhancing both offensive and defensive readiness. This posture suggests that Israel is not content to manage the conflict from the air, but is instead gradually mobilizing for a broader ground offensive that has yet to fully materialize. Accordingly, what is unfolding thus far appears closer to calculated incursions, localized advances, the testing of operational axes, and a gradual buildup of ground pressure, paving the way for a possible transition to a broader operation aimed at imposing a new military reality within the southern strip, should circumstances allow.

Distinct from bombardment and conventional ground incursions, the third track comprises specialized operations, with at least two significant instances recorded so far. The first occurred on the night of March 6-7 in the Nabi Sheet area, where Israeli commandos conducted a landing near Khraibeh, Yahfoufa and Maaraboun along the Lebanese-Syrian border in Eastern Lebanon, under heavy air cover. Israel later stated that the operation was connected to the Ron Arad file, but later reported no results. The second operation occurred on March 9, when Hezbollah reported detecting approximately fifteen helicopters flying over the Syrian border regions of Janta, Yahfoufa, Nabi Sheet, Aarsal, and Ras Baalbek, and stated that it engaged the infiltrating force. The rapid recurrence of these maneuvers suggests a strategic utility beyond the Ron Arad narrative; it indicates that Israel is employing special operations as an independent operational track to conduct high-value intelligence and operational tasks beyond the reach of airstrikes, while opening the way for a trajectory that may further develop in the coming days.

These three tracks can be interpreted within a broader complex Israeli strategy that goes beyond simply expanding military pressure, but rather aims to achieve a set of integrated operational objectives. Through intensive aerial bombardment, Israel seeks to destroy Hezbollah's military and logistical infrastructure by targeting weapons depots, command-and-control centers, and supply lines, while simultaneously pressuring its popular support base and, more broadly, the Lebanese state. Limited ground incursions are intended to probe the party's defensive lines, erode its combat capabilities, and assess its operational flexibility ahead of a potential expansion of operations. Meanwhile, special operations and heliborne landings are typically employed to carry out high-value missions, whether to gather precise field intelligence, target specific leaders, or signal Israel's ability to operate deep within the conflict zone. By conducting these maneuvers behind Hezbollah's primary lines, particularly in the Bekaa, Israel compels the party to disperse its forces and divide its focus, to induce overstretch, fragmentation and a loss of operational control.

On the Hezbollah front

On the opposite front, Hezbollah has, from the early days of the war, adopted a defensive-attritional pattern of combat rather than a large-scale offensive position. This approach represents an attempt to adapt to Israeli

aerial and intelligence superiority, and the sheer scale of strikes targeting the party's social base and military infrastructure. Since the start of the war on March 2, the party has maintained almost daily attacks, at times escalating in intensity, including missile fire, drone strikes, anti-armor attacks, and direct engagements with Israeli forces advancing into or stationed in southern Lebanon. Simultaneously, it has mobilized in the Bekaa to confront any potential Israeli landings or flanking attempts.

At this stage, however, Hezbollah has refrained from launching a major offensive. Its efforts remain focused on denying Israel a decisive victory, slowing the momentum of any ground thrust, and inflating the operational costs for Israeli forces, a preemptive warning of the resistance Israel would encounter should it broaden its ground campaign. Meanwhile, Hezbollah is working to maintain persistent military pressure on northern occupied Palestine, synchronized with Iranian operations that Israel repeatedly claimed are, in part, being conducted simultaneously and in coordination between Tehran and Hezbollah.

A key indicator of this combat pattern is the recurring reports of clashes and strikes targeting Israeli occupation forces south of the Litani River, an area that was theoretically supposed to be cleared of Hezbollah's military presence. This suggests that Hezbollah has succeeded, at least partially, in redeploying south of the river and restoring segments of its command-and-control apparatus, as evidenced by the pace, continuity and coordination of its operations on the ground. In this confrontation, Hezbollah leverages advantages that are not available to the same extent in other arenas, notably its arsenal of sophisticated anti-tank and anti-fortification weaponry, such as anti-tank guided missiles. Furthermore, the party is making use of rugged, mountainous terrain of southern Lebanon and its territorial depth, which grants it a margin of maneuver and deployment far wider than that available to forces in exposed arenas like Gaza.

This pattern of warfare can therefore be understood within the framework of a defensive-attritional strategy adopted by Hezbollah at this stage, aimed at achieving a set of overlapping operational objectives. On the one hand, the party is seeking to prevent Israel from achieving a rapid military end game or imposing a stable new reality on the ground in the south by slowing the ground advances and wearing down the attacking forces. On the other hand, it works to raise the human and military cost of any potential Israeli ground operation, thereby deterring its expansion or at least making it more difficult. It is also keen to maintain a sustained rate of fire against northern Israel and its military posts, in order to demonstrate that it retains the ability to act and exert influence despite the extensive strikes. At the same time, it is trying to preserve the cohesion of its fighting and command structures, and to display a degree of operational flexibility that would allow it to prolong the confrontation and prevent it from turning into a swift decisive Israeli war.

The conflict has inevitably spilled over to the Syrian-Lebanese border. Damascus recently accused Hezbollah of launching artillery fire from Lebanese territory toward Syrian army positions near Serghaya in the Damascus countryside. This occurred with Syrian troop reinforcements along the border, which Damascus characterized as defensive measures intended to secure the frontier and prevent security breaches. This development indicates that the war's repercussions are no longer confined to the Lebanese-Israeli arena, opening additional pockets of tension in the periphery.

Furthermore, this development raises the possibility of the Syrian-Lebanese border becoming an active arena of friction, or at the very least, a zone where Hezbollah's regional reach and supply lines are severed. It also represents a source of political and security pressure on the party, unlike the status quo prior to the fall of the previous regime. The erosion of this strategic depth, which historically facilitated movement, logistics, and the relief of pressure on the Lebanese front, is a significant blow. Beyond military logistics, Syria once served as a safe haven for displaced populations from Hezbollah's support base; losing this sanctuary imposes a compounded humanitarian and political burden on the party, particularly if hostilities on this front escalates.

Ultimately, these developments reveal that both sides remain in a phase of attempting to dictate the conditions on the ground and political terms of the conflict, rather than seeking a final decisive resolution. Despite its clear superiority in airpower, firepower, and intelligence, and its evident ability to expand the theater of operations and control the pace of escalation, Israel has yet to translate these advantages into a decisive military victory or break Hezbollah's capacity for sustained resistance. Conversely, Hezbollah's sustained operational tempo and continued engagement across multiple fronts signal a capacity for endurance and resilience, suggesting that it can prevent the war from becoming a short or easy Israeli operation, even as the overall balance of power remains tilted in Israel's favor.

The Humanitarian Crisis

Alongside the military escalation, the humanitarian situation in Lebanon continues to deteriorate at an alarming rate. Widespread bombing and evacuation orders have triggered a massive wave of displacement, overwhelming the capacities of the state and host communities. By mid-March, two weeks into the conflict, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) exceeded 800,000. Data from the World Health Organization (WHO), based on figures from Lebanon's Disaster Risk Management Unit indicates that 816,700 individuals are registered as displaced, including around 130,000 in collective shelters. These figures reflect the accelerating pace of displacement, as well as the daily fluctuations in numbers driven by the expanding scope of bombardment and the issuance of evacuation. Regarding casualties, the WHO reported that, as of March 15, the war has claimed at least 850 lives and 2,105 injured, including around 100 children and 47 women.

The crisis extends beyond casualty and displacement figures to affect the health and service infrastructure itself. The WHO has warned that hospitals and frontline response teams are operating under exceptional pressure, noting that five hospitals have been gone out of service, four others have sustained partial damage, and forty-seven primary healthcare centers, most of them in the south, have been forced to close. In the early days of the war, the Lebanese Ministry of Health repeatedly called for the protection of medical facilities, particularly following the damage to Bahman Hospital in Beirut's southern suburbs caused by an Israeli airstrike on an adjacent building, which resulted in injuries among staff and panic among patients.

The impact of the humanitarian crisis is not confined to the relief dimension; rather, it extends to the trajectory of the war itself. The broad deterioration in humanitarian conditions may generate mounting international pressure toward a ceasefire, or at the very least toward curbing and regulating the pace of military operations. It further impacts the domestic political environment, increasing the burden placed on the Lebanese state and its institutions in managing displacement and responding to emergencies. Furthermore, the situation is likely to exacerbate the exhaustion of Hezbollah's popular base and increase the potential for internal discontent, particularly if the war is prolonged or if domestic tensions among Lebanon's various constituencies escalate alongside the intensification of the hostilities. As the scale of human casualties and service-sector damage expands, the humanitarian situation evolves into a central factor shaping the overall landscape, rather than a mere byproduct of military operations, especially given that displacement and pressure on Hezbollah's support base constitute integral components of the Israeli approach to managing this war.

President Aoun's Initiative

On March 9, 2026, President Joseph Aoun proposed a new initiative aimed at de-escalating the conflict in Lebanon during a virtual summit convened by the European Union. The participation of leaders and high-ranking officials from thirteen Arab, regional, and European countries provided the initiative with a diplomatic weight

that transcended the purely domestic Lebanese framework. The proposal was launched amid a geographically and militarily expanding Israeli operations and followed several days of high-level communications between Aoun and French President Emmanuel Macron in a concerted effort to contain the deteriorating situation.

The initiative is structured around four interrelated points: first, the establishment of a comprehensive truce and the cessation of Israeli land, air, and maritime attacks against Lebanon; second, the provision of urgent logistical support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF); third, the immediate deployment of the LAF to areas of active tension and the seizure of weapons therein, including the disarmament of Hezbollah and the dismantling of its known depots and storage facilities based on available intelligence; and fourth, the simultaneous commencement of direct negotiations between Lebanon and Israel under international auspices to agree on the implementation of these provisions. Within this context, Aoun escalated his political rhetoric, asserting that those responsible for launching rockets from Lebanon sought the "collapse of the state," while accusing Hezbollah of pushing the country toward destruction in service of calculations linked to Iran.

This initiative constitutes part of a broader policy trajectory pursued by the Lebanese state, following government's decision to ban Hezbollah's military and security activities. This domestic shift has been accompanied by intensified diplomatic efforts; Prime Minister Nawaf Salam has affirmed the continuation of daily contacts with Arab, European, and US counterparts aimed at securing a cessation of hostilities. He has also signaled Lebanon's openness to discussing any agenda or negotiating framework conducted under international auspices.

At the political level, the initiative was received with evident satisfaction by Hezbollah's opponents. The Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party treated it as a serious attempt to secure a ceasefire, linking it in practice to the consolidation of the state's monopoly over arms and support of LAF. At the same time, two distinct obstacles emerged within the domestic political and media discourse: Hezbollah's rejection of any path that could be interpreted as a surrender or a prelude to its disarmament under fire; and, more importantly, the absence of any substantive Israeli response to the Lebanese proposal.

Regarding Hezbollah, the most explicit response came from Mohammad Raad, head of the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc. In a statement on March 9, Raad asserted that Lebanon is not faced with a choice between war and peace, but rather between "war and surrender," adding that "we have no option but to defend our existence." He also criticized the trajectory toward disarming the resistance and the openness to direct dialogue with Israel. Accordingly, Hezbollah's position appeared to amount to a rejection in practice of the core elements of Aoun's initiative, particularly with respect to the provisions for disarmament and direct negotiations.

Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri maintained a policy of not declaring any position publicly, while his media office continued to issue denials regarding the leaks attributed to him. At the same time, Berri has been active in hosting a series of meetings at his Ain al-Tineh residence. These consultations included Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, former prime ministers, and the US ambassador, as part of a broader political effort aimed at containing the current crisis and supporting ceasefire efforts.

At the international level, there has been no positive response to the initiative on the US-Israeli front; on the contrary, the strikes and escalation have persisted. Media reports, including those from *Axios*, indicated that while the Lebanese government requested that the Trump administration mediate direct talks with Israel to end the war, the American response appeared lukewarm and skeptical. These reports further suggested that the request to open this channel was rejected by Israel, given Tel Aviv's insistence on prioritizing the weakening and disarmament of Hezbollah prior to any political process. Furthermore, Israeli envoy Joshua Zarka stated that the war could only conclude upon the total disarmament of Hezbollah, clearly reflecting the ceiling of the Israeli

position toward any Lebanese initiative. France, by contrast, emerged as the most supportive external party for the Lebanese proposal; French President Emmanuel Macron maintained contact with Joseph Aoun and warned that any Israeli ground operation in southern Lebanon would constitute a "strategic mistake."

However, the prospects for this initiative's success appear limited in the near term, given the continued expansion of Israeli military operations and the absence of substantive US diplomatic engagement, coupled with Hezbollah's refusal to consider any framework that might imply its disarmament under the pressure of war. Furthermore, Israel appears, thus far, committed to maintaining military pressure in an effort to improve its position on the ground, even trying to settle the issue itself, before entering into any serious negotiations. Consequently, at this stage, the initiative appears closer to represent an attempt to open a political horizon and prevent further deterioration, rather than a mature and immediately viable path forward.

The Lebanese Army Repositions Its Forces

At the level of the military institution, the LAF has begun withdrawing and repositioning some of their units across several locations in the southern Lebanon, particularly in areas that have witnessed Israeli advances or have come under direct fire. This step reflects the difficulty of maintaining a fixed deployment amid the expanding scope of hostilities. The army's statement regarding this southern redeployment sparked widespread debate, as it linked the move to Israeli incursion, continued attacks and mounting operational pressure. The statement noted that "Israeli attacks targeting Lebanon and its citizens are obstructing the implementation of the army's plan," adding that "the command takes its decisions in accordance with the prevailing complex conditions, with the primary objective of preserving Lebanon, safeguarding its unity and maintaining the integrity of the military institution." It further emphasized that the army operates under "severe internal and external pressures with limited resources, while exerting its utmost efforts to preserve internal stability and national unity." This rhetoric drew criticism from several MPs, particularly from the Change Bloc and independent deputies, who launched a campaign against the army and its commander, Rudolph Haykal. They argued that the statement amounted to a justification for withdrawal rather than a decisive implementation of the state's decision. They further accused the military institution of leniency in enforcing the state's monopoly over arms, and of accommodating Hezbollah's presence on the ground. In response, President Joseph Aoun defended the army, stressing its role as a national institution acting solely in Lebanon's interest, and maintaining that such campaigns would not affect its performance or that of its leadership.

Fundamentally, the decision to reposition reflects an attempt by the military establishment to preserve its institutional cohesion and avoid being drawn into a direct confrontation with either belligerent. This caution is dictated by the army's limited capabilities, its delicate sectarian composition and the expanding scope of military operations. It also points to the military's effort to manage its deployment in line with the priority of maintaining internal stability and preventing the country from sliding into broader security chaos. This strategy seeks to retain a margin of maneuver, allowing for intervention when required by security and humanitarian necessities.

War Scenarios in Lebanon

Given that the war between Israel and Hezbollah is not a localized, limited conflict, but rather unfolds within a broader regional and international framework-that is intertwined with the wider confrontation between Iran and its axis on the one hand, and Israel and the United States on the other-, the factors shaping its future trajectory are highly complex and deeply interwoven. This renders the precise delineation of potential scenarios a difficult

task. Nevertheless, several broad scenarios can be outlined, while acknowledging that the actual course of events may prove more intricate and overlapping.

Scenario One: An Imminent Agreement and a Conditional Truce

This scenario rests on the possibility of reaching a near-term agreement under which Israel would consent to a ceasefire, thereby granting the Lebanese state a margin of maneuver within a broader framework of understanding, while closely monitoring the mechanisms for implementing Hezbollah's disarmament. However, this scenario does not necessarily imply a definitive end to the conflict, but rather the establishment of a conditional truce. It is unlikely that Israel would fully cease military operations or commit to a complete withdrawal without first verifying the Lebanese state's credibility and effectiveness in addressing Hezbollah's weapons.

Scenario Two: Israel's Attempt to Assert Control South of the Litani River

This scenario assumes that Israel will attempt to impose control over the area south of the Litani River and to limit its territorial ambitions to this zone, while simultaneously intensifying its strikes against Hezbollah across the rest of Lebanon. This course of action is based on Israel's effort to establish a new military and security reality in the southern strip, which it deems sufficient to achieve its immediate minimum objectives, without engaging in a broader and more costly ground expansion. Under these circumstances, the war would evolve into a combination of localized territorial control in the south and an open-ended campaign of aerial and security attrition across the Lebanese arena. However, this scenario entails significant challenges, as Israeli forces stationed south of the Litani would remain vulnerable to attacks from outside the zone, and the strategy would fall short of achieving Israel's declared objective of the total elimination of Hezbollah, thereby paving the way for the subsequent scenario.

Scenario Three: Continued Expansion of the War Without a Horizon

This scenario is based on an Israeli inclination to expand the scope of its military operations, particularly on the ground, while targeting elements of civilian infrastructure and government facilities under the pretext that they serve Hezbollah's operations. Within this trajectory, Israel may begin by attempting to control the area south of the Litani River as an initial step, before broadening its operations to pursue Hezbollah across the rest of Lebanon, seeking to impose its objectives through direct military force. Should Israel achieve tangible progress in this direction, it may subsequently pivot toward negotiations with the Lebanese state regarding the nature of their bilateral relationship. A central pillar of such negotiations would be the formalization of Hezbollah's defeat, alongside efforts to institutionalize Lebanese-Israeli relations within a new framework of arrangements.

Scenario Four: Hezbollah Success in Increasing Operational Costs and Partially Replicating the 2006 Model

This scenario is predicated on Hezbollah's ability to raise the operational costs for Israel, particularly during a ground offensive, thereby compelling the Israeli establishment to reassess the viability of an open-ended war. Alternatively, this could lead to a return to a framework of agreements or understandings that consolidates its gains without achieving the total elimination of the party. In such an event, despite the scale of its losses and casualties, Hezbollah may be able to present itself as undefeated in the war. This is a narrative the party would seek to reinforce vigorously, both politically and morally.

While certain parallels with the 2006 war are evident—notably Israel's implementation of the Dahiya Doctrine, Hezbollah's initial role in launching the operation, and preparations for a ground offensive in the south—the current

regional, domestic, and military contexts differ fundamentally. Syria is no longer an ally of Hezbollah; rather, it now appears to be a factor in its encirclement. Instead of providing strategic depth, Syria is severing the party's military supply lines and rendering the weapons it deploys in battle difficult to replace. Furthermore, Hezbollah enters this confrontation following fifteen months of grueling combat and sustained attrition, during which it has suffered the loss of thousands of fighters and a significant portion of its leadership. This is compounded by a marked decline in its capabilities and resources, particularly south of the Litani River, amid a major security breach. These challenges are further exacerbated by the exhaustion of the Iranian patron, which is currently preoccupied with internal affairs, and possesses a diminished capacity for support compared to previous phases, along with Israel's significant technological advancements. Consequently, Hezbollah-under considerable strain-finds itself compelled to distribute its forces between the Bekaa and the south, amid concerns over a potential eastern front and the risk of large-scale Israeli heliborne landing.

In the aftermath of the Gaza war, Israel appears increasingly prepared to sustain losses and engage in a protracted conflict. It has demonstrated a growing inclination to replicate the genocidal tactics it employed there, invoking the Khan Yunis model and seeking its broader application, bolstered by a wide US green light. Consequently, the cost of Hezbollah's resilience-and that of its popular base-will be extremely high. Viewed in this light, Hezbollah's ambition to replicate the 2006 experience remains contingent on developments on the ground-a task that appears far more arduous this time. This difficulty is further exacerbated by the official isolation of the party and the constraints imposed by the Lebanese state.

Across all scenarios, the conflict will likely be characterized by sustained Israeli targeting and operations across the Lebanese geography. This reflects a tendency to maintain multidimensional pressure-encompassing Hezbollah, the Lebanese state, and the broader social fabric, particularly the party's popular base. These trajectories remain fundamentally contingent on regional dynamics, from the eventual outcome of the confrontation with Iran to potential shifts in the Syria's position and the nature of its future. Concurrently, the Lebanese state faces mounting demands to exert substantive pressure on Hezbollah. This places the state in a precarious position, underscoring the tension between international demands, domestic complexities, and the inherent limits of its operational capacity. Central to this dilemma is the apprehension that the state may be compelled to grant unilateral concessions to Israel, without receiving reciprocal guarantees or substantive commitments in return.