



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

French plan for peace between Israel and Hezbollah - who's unsatisfied with stopping conflict in the Middle East from spilling over?



A French proposal to end the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah on the border with Lebanon was guaranteed to be rejected as soon as it appeared.

Such is the fate of every initial peacekeeping move in any crisis, particularly those that last for decades.

However, the content of the Paris initiative and the circumstances surrounding it offer plenty of reasons to regard it as a road map along which the crisis on the border between Israel and Lebanon could move towards its long-term peaceful resolution.

The **essence of the plan**, which the head of French diplomacy, Stéphane Séjourné, handed over to the authorities in Beirut last week, was the cessation of hostilities and forming a buffer zone on the Lebanese side.

According to the initiative, the Hezbollah forces would vacate the 10-kilometre area along the border with Israel and would be replaced by the Lebanese army. The entire process, lasting 10 days, would go through 3 phases and conclude with agreements on defining the interstate border between Israel and Lebanon.

Hezbollah has been bargaining

As expected, Hezbollah **rejected the plan**. "Gaza does not appear in any of their documents", said Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah. There will be no acceptable solution for his organisation until Israel stops attacks on Hamas in Gaza.

Hezbollah is the only factor in the circle of interested parties that explicitly rejected the Paris proposal. However, it did so in a way that could have been predicted - by conditioning the cessation of its actions on the prior conclusion of the conflict in Gaza.

Hezbollah wants to maintain tensions on Israel's northern border as part of a joint effort by Tehran's proxies

The pro-Iranian group wants to maintain tensions on Israel's northern border as part of a joint effort by Tehran's proxies in the region to use synchronised pressure to thwart and end Israel's actions.

However, as much as it tries to preserve the autonomous position of its mission, Hezbollah does not act alone.

Will the concessions be recognised?

Without a doubt, the French initiative has been one of the topics of conversation between the head of Iranian diplomacy, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and the leadership of Hezbollah in Beirut last weekend.

The Iranian minister also insisted on the "mutual deterrence" formula, at least on the part of Hezbollah, which implied that Tehran would leave room for a possible agreement on the French plan.

This document also provided a chance for a concession to Hezbollah because it did not demand its disarmament but only its withdrawal from the border zone and the replacement of its forces with the forces of the Lebanese army.

Hezbollah has several directions it could take to preserve its influence in southern Lebanon

It seems that none of the involved parties insisted on disarming Hezbollah, as required by the UN Security Council resolution from 2006 - not even the 5 countries participating in the peace efforts (US, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) or even Lebanon.

Therefore, Hezbollah has several directions it could take to preserve its influence in southern Lebanon, even as a permanent threat to Israel with long-range artillery, which was why Israel regarded the buffer zone initiative with unease.

What is Tehran's calculation?

Whether Hezbollah, in some further steps, will agree to move in that direction depends primarily on Tehran and its calculation of maintaining (and easing) pressure in the Middle East.

It is clear to Iran that the French initiative is a concrete expression of the desire of the Western allies and their regional Arab partners to prevent the **spill over of the conflict** from Gaza to the rest of the region, which has existed since day one of the conflict.

They failed in this, and Tehran, through its proxies, managed to spread the conflict to Gaza and the south of Lebanon (using Hezbollah) and even more to the Red Sea region using the Houthi militia in Yemen.

Both for Hezbollah and for Iran, the issue of Gaza and the future organisation of the Palestinian Authority remains the principal point of regional influence

Still, Iran is very limited in launching a general flood of conflict across the region, and it has been openly showing it primarily in the case of Hezbollah, through which it maintains a low level of conflict with Israel in the border zone.

Both for Hezbollah and for Iran, the issue of Gaza and the future organisation of the Palestinian Authority remains the principal point of regional influence, so by entering into a broader conflict, they would reduce their chances of benefiting from a future agreement.

Israel has reservations but also benefits

Even though France has **submitted the initiative** for a ceasefire on the border between Lebanon and Israel, it is clear to Iran that (at least) the US is behind it.

"We made proposals. We are in contact with the Americans, and it's important that we bring together all initiatives and build peace", said Mr Séjourné, head of French diplomacy.

He submitted his plan officially to the government of Lebanon, a country with which France has historical ties with about 20,000 of its citizens living in Lebanon. But the plan was also given to Israel and Hezbollah, as the parties directly involved.



We are in contact with the Americans, and it's important that we bring together all initiatives and build peace - Stéphane Séjourné

Iran, and through it, Hezbollah, will continue to insist on an end to the war in Gaza as a precondition for any future talks.

This is a form of Tehran's pressure on all other actors, and it will not give up on it. But perhaps it is time to consider the initiatives for the day after, and one of them is the French one.

Israel's principal concern is seeing the operation in Gaza concluded successfully. It also has good reason to support the French proposal, as it leads to pacification on its northern border.

It is understood, with guarantees, that Hezbollah will not reactivate attacks on Israeli territory and that it will withdraw from the border zone when the operation in Gaza ends and the Israeli hostages are released.