

Bolton: Final IDF op in Lebanon had no impact on UN truce talks

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John Bolton, who was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations during the Second Lebanon War, rejects Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's version of he launched a failed ground offensive during the war's final days.

"The Israeli military operation did not play a role in the talks on drafting UN Security Council Resolution 1701," which ended the war, Bolton told Haaretz Sunday. He was in Israel to attend the Herzliya Conference.

Bolton, who has warned in the past about the possibility of nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Syria, also said that both the United States and Israel owe their citizens a full report on what kind of facility Israel bombed in Syria last September. Media reports have identified the target as a nuclear facility.

Bolton was Washington's point man for the negotiations over 1701. He told Haaretz that on August 5, 2006, six days before the Security Council approved the resolution, he and his French colleague, who was unofficially representing Lebanon's interests, had agreed on the wording. But the Arab League objected, "so we had to make changes to obtain the Lebanese government's support and make the Arabs happy. We also understood that we had to prevent a Russian-Chinese veto in the Security Council."

However, the former ambassador said, the main reason for America's retreat from its initial position was U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who "changed her mind fundamentally" after an Israeli aerial assault killed 28 civilians in Kana on July 30. "Rice exerted enormous pressure on me to reach an agreement already," he said. "Until Kana, the U.S. wasn't interested in another typical Middle Eastern cease-fire. We thought we would exploit the fighting to fundamentally change the situation, especially in Lebanon and Syria. But under the influence of her shock over Kana, the secretary of state changed her mind and only wanted an immediate end to the fire. That was the policy Rice dictated."

After the war, Olmert claimed that he launched the 11th-hour ground operation, in which 33 soldiers were killed, because the draft UN resolution that Israel received on August 11 was detrimental to its interests. The operation, he added, improved the resolution.

Bolton, however, rejected both assertions.

First, he said, the resolution's text was no surprise to Israel, since he had kept Israel's UN ambassador, Danny Gillerman, fully briefed. "Nothing dramatic occurred in the negotiations in the last 48 hours [before August 11]," he said. "The retreat in the wording, to Israel's detriment, had been going on for almost a week... There was no sudden descent into the abyss."

Bolton also denied that the ground operation affected the outcome of his talks with French Ambassador to the UN Jean-Marc de la Sabliere. "Our talks were not affected by anything that happened on the outside," he said. "I paid no attention to what was happening on the ground in

Lebanon or to talks via other channels... Moves on the ground did not influence the resolution; nor did Israel's threat of a ground operation. After all, the Israel Defense Forces were already in south Lebanon."

Bolton said that he spoke with Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora on August 11, a few hours before the Security Council vote on the resolution, so he knew Siniora would accept it. There was good reason to believe that Hezbollah would as well, based on the organization's contacts with the Arab League via Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Berri.

Sabliere's version tallied with Bolton's, except in one particular: Bolton said they held their negotiations at France's UN embassy rather than UN headquarters to escape the media; Sabliere said it was because the embassy had better coffee.

Bolton is not very proud of his final product. "Resolution 1701 wasn't as good as the first draft, and even it hasn't been fully implemented just like previous resolutions that sought to impose order in Lebanon and reduce Syria's influence on its neighbor," he said. "Hezbollah hasn't been disarmed. The Lebanese army does not control the entire country. UNIFIL [the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon] was not expanded sufficiently."

In his view, "Hezbollah still constitutes as big a threat to Israel as in the past, and the threat it poses to the Lebanese government has only grown since the war."

Was this an Israeli failure? "The problem was the disconnect between the goals you set and the military operation," he said. "Hezbollah survived, and could portray itself as the victor. You should have said from the start that the goal was to exact a price for the soldiers' abduction."

Bolton supports Israel's attack on the alleged Syrian nuclear facility last September, but does not understand the subsequent silence. "I understand that you want the intelligence possessed by Israel and the U.S., as well as how the bombing was carried out, kept secret," he said. "But it's unacceptable that both governments are refusing to tell their people what happened here."

Bolton, who previously served as America's under secretary of state for arms control, has seen satellite pictures of the site, but warned, "We don't know enough about what is happening there." The Syrians, he added, could be trying to get rid of evidence, "which is what Iran does all the time."

He is not convinced by the new U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, which claims that Iran has halted its nuclear weapons program. "Iran is still on the path to obtaining nuclear capability," he said. "It's clear that now, President George Bush can't do anything on this matter before the end of his term in another year. Israel must now weigh its own options, especially following the arrival of nuclear fuel rods from Russia for the Bushehr reactor. In this sense, your assault on Syria was very important. It underscored Israel's capabilities and thereby gave the Iranians a chance to retreat from their program."

While Bolton offers no advice on what Israel should do, the title of his new book amply expresses his views: "Surrender is not an option."

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