

Israel Weighs New Threats From Lebanon

Contributed by Julie Stahl, CNS News
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Jerusalem (CNSNews.com) — Israeli security officials were meeting on Wednesday to discuss growing concerns about Lebanon. Hezbollah is engaged in a massive arms buildup there; and earlier this week, the Lebanese cabinet approved a policy statement validating Hezbollah's armed struggle against Israel and giving it freedom to attack the Jewish State.

The new Lebanese policy is "not a good development," said an Israeli diplomatic official on Wednesday. "Obviously Hezbollah has hijacked the government in Lebanon and now is in a position to veto [decisions]," he told CNSNews.com.

Lebanon's new unity government was formed about three weeks ago, putting an end to a political stalemate between the pro-Democracy and pro-Syrian (Hezbollah) forces in the country.

The new Lebanese policy statement implies that Hezbollah is allowed to keep its weapons and guarantees "the right of Lebanon's people, army, and resistance to liberate" what it calls "Israeli-occupied" areas and "defend the country using all legal and possible means."

"The resistance" refers to Hezbollah, a heavily armed, Iranian-backed militia that is on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations. But Hezbollah also is a political party in Lebanon, and it has the power -- along with other pro-Syrian groups -- to veto any decision that the Lebanese government makes.

According to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 that ended the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war, the Lebanese government was supposed to disarm Hezbollah.

But instead, Israeli sources say Hezbollah, with Iranian and Syrian assistance, has tripled its pre-war armaments and now has some 40,000 short- and medium-range missiles.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said recently that Resolution 1701 had failed because it didn't stop the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah.

But Dr. Eyal Zisser of Tel Aviv University said the Lebanese cabinet decision doesn't mean a lot because Hezbollah already is in charge.

"Lebanon is slowly coming under Hezbollah control," Zisser told CNSNews.com.

The cabinet decision signals the end of the so-called "Cedar Revolution" of 2005, he said, referring to the Western-backed pro-Democracy movement led by anti-Syrian elements in the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. The "revolution" sprang up spontaneously following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The pro-Democracy movement, which had international backing, forced Syrian troops to leave the country after decades of Syrian occupation. Many Lebanese blamed Syria for involvement in the murder of Hariri, who was a vocal opponent of Syria's involvement in his country.

Since the end of the Israeli-Lebanon war, Hezbollah has worked to gain political and partial military control of Lebanon.

At least some in Israel are concerned about the shifting balance of power in the region, and they say the international community should be concerned, too.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned leaders around the world recently "of the consequences of destabilizing the very delicate balance that exists in Lebanon."

"Israel is sounding the alarm," the Jerusalem Post wrote in an editorial on Tuesday. "The fragile balance of forces in Lebanon is unraveling. And the world is playing deaf."

Dr. Walid Phares, director of the Future Terrorism Project at the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said Iran is tipping the balance of power and it should worry the international community.

"The Bush administration policy in Lebanon has failed," said Phares, who was a supporter of that policy.

Syria and Iran controlled Lebanon until 2005, said Phares. When pro-democracy forces managed to push Syrian troops out of the country in 2005, the Iranians launched a counter-offensive to seize most of the control back, Phares told CNSNews.com by telephone.

“The Iranians are on the offensive [in Lebanon, Iraq and Gaza],” said Phares, and all of it during a U.S. election year when no one is willing to do anything about it, he said.

Israeli Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz said Israel and the U.S. decided to toughen sanctions against Iran to deliver a message that the free world would not allow Tehran to obtain nuclear capabilities.

Iran poses the biggest threat to Israel’s existence and world because it has its finger in a number of pies, including helping Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, Mofaz said.

The Lebanese government decision to validate Hezbollah strengthens the position of Israelis who argue that the next time Hezbollah strikes at Israel, Israel should be free to target the Lebanese government, since it has officially allied itself to Hezbollah, Zisser said.

During the 2006 war, Israel tried to limit itself to attacking Hezbollah targets. Because Hezbollah was firmly entrenched among the civilian population, however, it was impossible to avoid Lebanese civilians.

The Lebanese policy decision comes at a time when Hezbollah reportedly is trying to acquire anti-aircraft missiles, which could hinder vital Israeli reconnaissance flights over Lebanon.

Yoram Schweitzer from the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv said he is not sure that the new policy gives Hezbollah a “green light” to act against Israel.

Hezbollah definitely is trying to deter Israeli over-flights but it is not clear what will come out of it, Schweitzer said.

Bringing down an Israeli plane would be a “great accomplishment” for Hezbollah, Schweitzer told CNSNews.com.

Israel has been concerned about a Hezbollah attack since last February, when Imad Mugniyeh, a top Hezbollah official, was killed in a car bombing in Damascus. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened revenge, even though Israel denied any involvement in the attack.

Israel recently took the unusual step of sending security officials to West Africa to personally warn Israelis living there about the possibility of a Hezbollah revenge attack.

Schweitzer said the Israeli warning appeared to be based on “serious information.”