

UN Resolution 1701: A View from Lebanon

Contributed by Nicholas Blanford
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This PolicyWatch is the second in a three-part series examining the situation in Lebanon two years after the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. This series coincides with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon on October 23, 1983, an attack that continues to inform U.S. policymaking in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East.

Read the two companion PolicyWatches, "UN Resolution 1701: A View from Israel" and "UN Resolution 1701: A View from the United States."

Two years after the 2006 summer war, Hizballah and Israel continue to pay lip service to UN Security Council Resolution 1701 while focusing on preparations for the inevitable second round of conflict. Although Hizballah has not mounted a single border operation against Israel since the war, the Shiite organization has developed a new line of defense north of the Litani River and completed a massive, unprecedented recruitment, training, and rearmament drive. Meanwhile, Israel has signaled its displeasure with the inability of both the UN and the international community to halt Hizballah's military buildup.

Arms Smuggling

A week after the fighting ended on August 14, 2006, Turkish authorities reportedly intercepted five Iranian cargo planes and a Syrian aircraft carrying weapons to Hizballah. According to a Turkish newspaper, the arms included rocket launchers and crates of C-802 anti-ship missiles, the same weapon that disabled an Israeli missile boat on the third day of the war. Although Lebanon's eastern border with Syria is the traditional arms conduit for Hizballah, the party has devised alternative means of procuring weapons in the event of a closed land route.

In September 2006, a month after the fighting ended, Hizballah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, claimed that "the resistance was able to rearm itself in a few days and is now stronger than it was on July 12," the first day of the war. By revealing the organization's renewed military strength, Nasrallah admitted tacitly that Hizballah was in breach of Resolution 1701. Paragraphs 14 and 15 of the resolution mandate the Lebanese government to secure its borders against arms smuggling and mandate other governments to prevent the sale or transfer of weapons, ammunition, equipment, and training to "entities or individuals" in Lebanon.

Although the Lebanese government has deployed about 8,000 Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) troops along the eastern border, Beirut is politically incapable of sealing off the frontier. Closing the border would provoke a backlash from the impoverished, mainly Shiite residents of the eastern Bekaa Valley who rely on the porous frontier to earn a living smuggling commercial goods. As such, a UN border assessment team reported in a August 2008 followup that the eastern "Green Border [the illegal crossings] remains as penetrable as it was during the mission of team one [in 2007]."

Buildup South of the Litani?

Hizballah's military preparations north of the Litani River and in the Bekaa Valley are well known. Vast tracts of land in this mountainous spine running north from the Litani to the lower reaches of the Barouk Mountains have been placed off-limits. The sound of explosions and machine gun fire has become commonplace in parts of the Bekaa Valley where Hizballah conducts its training.

What is less evident is the scale of Hizballah's military preparations near the southern border. Although Resolution 1701, paragraph 8, designates the area between the Blue Line (the UN's 2000 border demarcation between Israel and Lebanon) and the Litani River "free of any armed personnel, assets, and weapons" other than those of the Lebanese government and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Hizballah is reportedly carrying out clandestine military preparations in the area. In late March, an armored UNIFIL patrol attempted to stop a tractor trailer driving through the western border sector late at night, but two cars and five armed men blocked the road, allowing the truck and its unknown contents to escape. In May, UNIFIL personnel encountered a group of men laying cables in the eastern sector of the UNIFIL area, where they were attacked with stones and their passage blocked by cars when they encountered a group of men laying cables in the eastern sector of the UNIFIL area. The implication was that the cables were part of Hizballah's fiber-optic communications network.

After the 2006 conflict, Hizballah abandoned most of its remote bunkers near the border, and those that UNIFIL and the

LAF have located are periodically checked for renewed activity. No one knows, however, how many bunkers, rocket-firing positions, and observation posts remain undiscovered. Civilian sources in southern Lebanon claim that Hizballah continues to provision some of its war bunkers, keeping them stockpiled and paying local residents to monitor them. The border district remains an important component of Hizballah's battle plan in a potential war with Israel, even though the organization has repositioned its front line north of the Litani. Hizballah operates discreetly near the border out of political expediency and to avoid embarrassing the LAF, which is responsible for the area's security.

Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hizballah's deputy secretary general, recently gave an unenthusiastic endorsement of the party's observance of Resolution 1701, stating in a television interview that Hizballah originally was in "overall agreement" with the resolution, and "we think we have implemented it." Despite the tepid endorsement of 1701, Hizballah's bottom line remains the same: it will not scale back its preparation for the next encounter with Israel because of UN Security Council edicts.

Israeli Ire

Israel has complained repeatedly to the UN and UNIFIL about allegations of arms smuggling across the Lebanon-Syria border and objected that Hizballah is rebuilding its military infrastructure in southern Lebanon. UNIFIL, however, insists it has seen nothing to support the Israeli claims. As UNIFIL commander Maj. Gen. Claudio Graziano reportedly told Israeli foreign ministry officials in mid September, "UNIFIL does not have proof of Hizballah operations south of the Litani, and if Israel has such intelligence, they are welcome to send it to us." To emphasize Israel's frustration with the UN, Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak reportedly told a cabinet session in early August that Resolution 1701 "did not work, doesn't work, and is a failure," given that Syria and Iran had moved "munitions, rockets, and other weapon systems" into Lebanon.

Israel, however, would likely gain a more sympathetic ear from the UN if it were to desist from its own breaches of the resolution. Two years on, Israeli troops still patrol the Lebanese end of Ghajar, a village that straddles the Blue Line. UNIFIL has been mediating an Israeli exit from the Lebanese side of Ghajar, so far without success.

Israeli aircraft continue to violate Lebanese airspace on a near-daily basis, a violation that Hizballah frequently cites. The UN's latest report on 1701 stated that UNIFIL had recorded an average of more than twenty violations per day in April and May, including seventy-two violations by unmanned aerial vehicles in one day alone. Since Israel maintains that overflights provide vital intelligence and must continue as long as Hizballah smuggles arms into Lebanon, it is unlikely Israel will cease such operations in the near future.

In addition, despite repeated entreaties from the UN, Israel refuses to hand over the cluster bomb strike data from the 2006 war. That information would assist the effort to remove the remaining unexploded submunitions, which so far have caused over three hundred casualties.

Conclusion

Given what has transpired in Lebanon over the past two years -- both on the ground and in the air -- it would appear that Hizballah and Israel will continue to breach, and not honor, Resolution 1701. Preparing for the inevitable second round of conflict has taken priority -- for both parties -- over complying with the UN resolution.

Nicholas Blanford is a Beirut-based journalist and long-time observer of Hizballah. He is author of *Killing Mr. Lebanon* (I.B. Taurus, 2006), an account of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

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