



Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria July 28-August 3, 2023

Overview

- ▶ This past week masked Lebanese cut the security fence near the village of Ghajar, waved the Hezbollah flag and chanted slogans at Israel, increasing the tension between Israel and Lebanon. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah secretary general, claimed Israel still held territories belonging Lebanon and penetrated Lebanese airspace. He warned Israel not to do "anything foolish," claiming Hezbollah maintained its deterrent capabilities against Israel at a high level. Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy secretary general, said that the organization was on prepared and developing its capabilities, as shown by Hezbollah's most recent military exercise.
- ▶ On July 29, 2023, violent clashes broke out and shots were fired in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp near Sidon, following the attempted assassination of a Salafist operative. So far, more than ten deaths (including a senior Fatah operative), and more than sixty wounded have been reported, including Lebanese army soldiers. Attempts by senior Lebanese government officials and Palestinians to calm the situation and reach a ceasefire were reported, but as of August 3, 2023, the exchanges of fire continued. In addition to the internal Palestinian conflict, the events in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp brought to the fore the problem of illegal weapons in Lebanon.
- ▶ Wassim Mansouri was appointed to serve as governor of the Lebanese Central Bank of Lebanon.
- ▶ Preparations continue to begin drilling in Lebanon's offshore gas field.

Hezbollah and Lebanon

Israel-Hezbollah tension

- ▶ This past week the Hezbollah continued its provocations along the Lebanon-Israel border. On July 30, 2023, a number of masked Lebanese went to the border in the region of the village of Ghajar, cut through the fence erected by UNIFIL, and for the first time since 2006 walked along the road, waving Hezbollah flags and chanting anti-Israeli slogans. The section of road

surrounded by a fence is in Lebanese territory. UNIFIL soldiers made unsuccessful attempts to disperse them (Israeli media, July 30, 2023).

► **Ali Shoeib, a correspondent for the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Manar network**, reported that several Lebanese cut the fence to protest the "occupation" of Ghajar and UNIFIL's closing of the Wazzani-Abbasiya [sic] road, and for the first time since 2006 walked along the road (photojournalist Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, July 30, 2023).



Masked operatives near the village of Ghajar (@fady_jouni Twitter account, July 30, 2023).

► On August 1, 2023, Gilad Erdan, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, submitted an official complaint to the UN Security Council against Lebanon. He demanded the Lebanese government and UNIFIL force be ordered to act immediately to prevent Hezbollah from continuing the construction of its military infrastructure along the Israeli-Lebanese border, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701¹ (Israeli media, August 1, 2023).

► On August 2, 2023, IDF Chief of Staff Major General Herzi Halevi and Israeli President Yitzhak Herzog toured the Israel-Lebanon border. Lebanese media outlets reported the tour and Herzog's message for the Lebanese people, which was snot to test Israel's resolve. They also published photos of him using binoculars to look at the Lebanese side of the border (MTV network, August 2, 2023).

► Last week **Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah secretary general**, addressed the border issue and tensions with Israel in a series of mostly religious speeches delivered for Ashura.² He said the following:

¹ Resolution 1701 was passed in 2006 at the end of the Second Lebanon War, and called for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, and the deployment an armed UN force and the Lebanese army in south Lebanon to prevent Hezbollah from continuing operations in south Lebanon. It also called for the disarmament of Hezbollah.

² The day of mourning in Shi'a Islam for the death of Imam Hossein bin Ali, Muhammad's grandson.

- ◆ Israel has its nerve to talk about Hezbollah provocations on the border. Israel is the provocateur, Israel trespasses into Lebanese territory and violates [Lebanese] airspace, Israel reoccupies Lebanese land and continues its past occupation of land (al-'Ahed, July 29, 2023).
- ◆ Nasrallah warned Israel not to do anything "foolish." Indeed, he said, Hezbollah would take Israel's actions seriously, would not shirk its duty for a minute, not in defense, not in deterrence, not in liberation, and it would not lower its head before "defeated and unstable" Israel. Hezbollah would be ready for every option and to deal with any Israeli mistake or "foolish action" (al-'Ahed, July 29, 2023).
- ▶ **Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy secretary general**, said in a speech that Hezbollah would be an integral part of the struggle for the liberation of Lebanese lands as long as Israel "occupied" them. He claimed the objective of Hezbollah's most recent military exercise was to show its high level of preparedness and developing capabilities (Tasnim, July 29, 2023).
- ▶ In an attempt to reduce tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, UNIFIL plans to convene a tripartite meeting between representatives of the IDF, the Lebanese Army and UNIFIL in the middle of August 2023. Two weeks ago the periodic tripartite meeting was canceled when Israel announced its representatives would not attend because of incidents on the Israeli-Lebanese border (Israeli Kan Radio Station, August 2, 2023).
- ▶ Israel warned Hezbollah not to test it. Syria- and Hezbollah-affiliated commentators were skeptical of Israel's threats against Hezbollah:
 - ◆ **Rifat Ibrahim al-Badawi** wrote in the Syrian daily al-Watan that Israel's declarations were directed inward, to the Israeli public, to prove it was capable of acting against Hezbollah. In his opinion, they were empty words intended to prevent a war that was liable to destroy the "Zionist entity." He said that given the Israeli government's failure to calm internal protests, it had no choice but to threaten Hezbollah to prevent internal disintegration. He added that in his opinion, the IDF, which is regarded as invincible, would not be able to initiate a war against Hezbollah because "Hezbollah will defeat it." He claimed that "Israel's power eroded between the 2000 and 2023, and today it issues threats in an attempt to delay its disappearance" (al-Watan, August 1, 2023).
 - ◆ **Yahya Dabbouq**, a reporter for the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese daily al-Akhbar, wrote that Israel's threats would not be translated into action because the Israeli government and its security establishment were trying to defuse internal protests by

directing attention toward "other matters" which united Israelis. He claimed that Israel's threats were intended to warn Hezbollah not to violate the "rules of the engagement" along the border and prove Israel was in fact ready for war, and were merely a statement of intent "that could be withdrawn if Israel or Hezbollah caused the situation on the ground to deteriorate" (al-Akhbar, July 31, 2023).

Internal Lebanese Affairs

Clashes in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp

► Since July 29, 2023, there have been violent clashes and exchanges of fire in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, located in the suburbs of Sidon in south Lebanon. The events were triggered by Fatah's attempt to assassinate a senior operative of Asbat al-Ansar, a Salafist Palestinian organization. The assassination attempt led to armed clashes between Asbat al-Ansar and Fatah terrorist operatives. On July 30, 2023, **Abu Ashraf al-Armoushi (a senior Fatah figure and commander of the "national security forces" in the refugee camp)** and several of his men were killed in an ambush.³ So far, more than ten deaths and more than sixty wounded have been reported. According to reports, many civilians fled from the camp (al-Nashra, August 2, 2023).

► Lebanese army forces surrounded the refugee camp to prevent more armed men from entering but did not enter themselves. **Najib Makati, prime minister of Lebanon's interim government**, condemned the events and called on the parties to obey the ordered issued by the security forces. **Mahmoud Abbas' office** condemned the Fatah deaths (al-Nashra, July 30, 2023).

► The Lebanese army said in a statement that during the clashes several soldiers were injured by a mortar shell which landed in a military base near the refugee camp, adding that several Lebanese army observation posts had been damaged. The Lebanese army warned [the rival sides] against putting its soldiers at risk, threatening that the next time they would return fire (Lebanese Army Twitter account, July 30, 2023).

³ Abu Ashraf al-Armoushi was the most senior operative in the Fatah refugee camp and he held the rank of Amid (equivalent to a general).



Right: Exchanges of fire in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp (Janoubia, July 31, 2023). Left: Operative armed with an RPG launcher in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp (syriacpress.com, August 1, 2023).



Abu Ashraf al-Armoushi (samanews.ps, July 30, 2023).

► There were several attempts to reach a ceasefire. A meeting was held by the Joint Palestinian Activity Committee and representatives of the Lebanese parties, including representatives from Hezbollah and Amal (al-Nashra, August 2, 2023). **Joseph Aoun, commander of the Lebanese army, also met with Ashraf Dabbour, the Palestinian ambassador to Lebanon** (Lebanese army Twitter account, August 2, 2023). As part of the attempts for a ceasefire, it was also agreed that a Palestinian commission of inquiry would be formed to investigate the circumstances of al-Armoushi's death (al-Nashra, July 30, 2023).

► **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, spoke on the phone with Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese parliament.** He asked Berri to intervene to stop the clashes and restore the status quo ante. Haniyeh also sent a communiqué to Nasrallah, asking him to invest more efforts in restoring calm to the refugee camp (Hamas Twitter account, August 3, 2023).

► Palestinian figures and Lebanese officials related to the events in Ain al-Hilweh and some also inserted Israel into the issue:

- ◆ **Hassan Nasrallah** called for an end to the killings in Ain al-Hilweh, condemned the exchange of fire and called the events "painful and sad" (al-Nahar, August 1, 2023). He

called for an end to be put to the fighting "in any way possible, " because it negative influenced the Palestinians and south Lebanon (Hezbollah's military information Telegram channel, August 1, 2023).

◆ **Jihad Tahe, Hamas spokesman in Lebanon**, claimed "the Zionist enemy" was the first to benefit from the conflicts, noting that Hamas was investing great efforts to restore calm. He took advantage of the events to state that Hamas would work together with other invested parties to preserve the Palestinian refugee camps and keep them "a bone in the throat of the United States and Israel" (al-Aqsa, July 31, 2023).

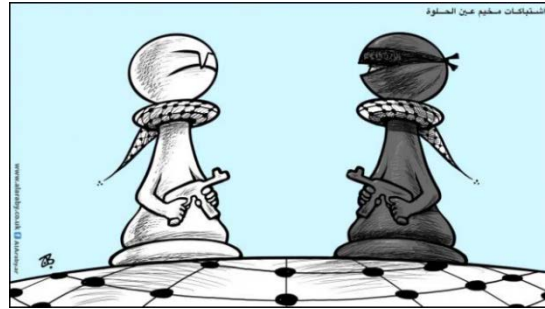
◆ **Najib Mikati, prime minister of the Lebanese interim government**, claimed that given the current regional and international situation, the timing of the clashes was "suspicious, " and in his opinion, external parties were using Lebanon as an arena for settling accounts (al-Nashra, July 30, 2023).

► The Arab media raised several hypotheses and assessments of the events:

◆ **The British newspaper Independent in Arabic** (which investigated the events) claimed there was tension in the Ain al-Hilweh camp between different Palestinian factions, which in the past had also caused killings and other incidents. According to the newspaper, the conflict in the refugee camp reflected the conflict in the Gaza Strip and the existing tensions between Hamas and Fatah (Independent in Arabic, July 31, 2023).

◆ **The Hezbollah-affiliated daily al-Akhbar** wondered if the events in Ain al-Hilweh were the result of the visit of **Majed Faraj, head Palestinian general intelligence**, to Lebanon the week before the events.⁴ The paper also claimed that Faraj had expressed an interest in Fatah's playing a role in restraining the various Palestinian organizations operating in south Lebanon, whose operatives have launched rockets at Israel in recent months (al-Akhbar, July 31, 2023).

⁴ "An official Palestinian source" denied the reports about the visit's connection to the clashes, claiming the reports in the Lebanese media had been fabricated, had no relation to the truth and were intended to create disputes among Palestinians. According to the source, an official invitation for the visit had come from the Lebanese security establishment (Wafa, July 31, 2023). The Hamas-affiliated alresala.net claimed Majed Faraj had gone to Lebanon to halt Hamas' increasing power in the refugee camps, disarm the camps and tighten control to ensure that weapons, including rockets, would not be transferred to Judea and Samaria (alresala.net, July 31, 2023).



Right: The Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp (Ahmed Rahma's Twitter account, August 1, 2023). Left: "Who will make the decisive move? " (Imad Hajaj's Twitter account, August 2, 2023).

The problem of illegal weapons in Lebanon

- ▶ The events in Ain al-Hilweh caused the problem of illegal weapons to resurface in Lebanese public discourse. The issue is not new: in October 2022 Sky News in Arabic broadcast an investigation which noted the problem was common to all Lebanese cities and districts. According to the investigation, one of the causes was the ease with which teenagers could obtain weapons. Sky News also claimed that all the illegal weapons had been "smuggled into the country" (Sky News in Arabic, October 12, 2022).
- ▶ The MTV news site stated that the problem of illegal Palestinian weapons could no longer be ignored, and acknowledged the government's helplessness and inability to enter the refugee camp to end the exchanges of fire (MTV, July 31, 2023).
- ▶ **Waddah al-Sadek, a member of the Lebanese parliament**, said the country had been taken hostage by illegal weapons, regardless of whether they were Lebanese or Palestinian. He criticized Hezbollah, which frequently uses the excuse of "resistance" not to disarm. According to Sadek, resistance was necessary when there was no state, its objective was not to overthrow it if it already existed (@WaddahSadek Twitter account, July 30, 2023).
- ▶ **Samy Gemayel, head of the Christian Phalanges Party**, said Hezbollah was directly responsible for the problem of illegal weapons in Lebanon, including in the Palestinian refugee camps, because it prevented the country from upholding its sovereignty in all of Lebanon and from confiscating illegal weapons. Furthermore, Hezbollah took sides in the Palestinian internal conflict by supporting certain factions and coordinating with them (al-Watan, August 1, 2023).

Lebanon's presidential crisis

- ▶ The presidential crisis continues and a president has not yet been elected. **Hassan Nasrallah** indirectly addressed the issue in a speech this past week, claiming that unlike others,

Hezbollah did not seek political positions and the organization's participation in government should be a means to serve the Lebanese people, and not an end in itself (al-'Ahed, July 29, 2023).

► **Na'im Qassem**, regarding the candidacy of Suleiman Frangieh, said they had not nominated him but did support his candidacy (Tasnim, July 29, 2023).

Governor of the Lebanese Central Bank appointed

► On July 31, 2023, **Wassim Mansouri** was appointed governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon, after the previous governor, **Riad Salameh**, had been terminated. According to reports, Hezbollah and its affiliates had tried to sabotage Mansouri by absencing themselves from the vote (Syria TV, July 27, 2023). **Maroun al-Khouli**, chairman of the Lebanese Federation of Labor Unions, who had expressed support for the appointment, said that granting the position to Mansouri would end a period of currency law violations, granting loans and corruption (al-Nashra, July 31, 2023).

► Mansouri is a Shi'ite from Ain al-Tineh, in the Beqa'a District, who until his appointment served as the first deputy of the governor of the Central Bank. Mansouri is close to the Amal movement and is a confidant of Nabih Berri, the leader of Amal and the Speaker of the Parliament. He has a reputation as a professional and a technocrat. It is unclear if he will continue Riad Salameh's monetary policy. In the past, Mansouri said he and Salameh had many professional disagreements (L'Orient Le Jour, July 31, 2023).



Wassim Mansouri, new Lebanese Central Bank governor (Blusat, July 31, 2023).

Preparations for drilling in the offshore Qana gas field

► Najib Mikati, prime minister of the Lebanese interim government, met with a delegation from Halliburton, the contracting company of TotalEnergies and responsible for the drilling in Block Nine (Lebanon's offshore drilling area). The company showed delegation the preparations for

drilling and the challenges facing it (Lebanese interim government Twitter account, July 27, 2023).

► **Qassem Kharib**, represented as an expert in the development of oil and gas fields, questioned the purity of TotalEnergies' intentions. He claimed the company had not handed over all the data to the Lebanese Petroleum Administration. He also claimed the Administration suffered from a lack of qualified personnel and therefore proposed external experts be appointed (Qassem Kharib's Twitter account, August 1, 2023). About a year ago Kharib gave the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Mayadeen channel an interview in which he praised Hezbollah for the position it had taken during the negotiations regarding the delineation of Lebanon's maritime border (al-Mayadeen, July 7, 2022).