



## Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria August 4-10, 2023

### Overview

- ▶ Tensions continued on the Israel-Lebanon border, but with fewer Hezbollah provocations than in previous weeks. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Galant warned Hezbollah not to make a mistake that could lead to war. The Lebanese government again claimed Israel violated UN resolutions regarding the border. Lebanese army officers conducted a tour for 15 embassy representatives of UN Security Council members and showed them the disputed sites along the Lebanon-Israel border.
- ▶ Lebanon is expected to send an official delegation to UN Headquarters in New York to advance its position for the renewal of the UNIFIL mandate in Lebanon.
- ▶ Calm returned to the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp (near Sidon) after last week's violent incidents. During the disturbances several Arab countries called on their citizens to leave Lebanon and others called on them to avoid conflict zones. A Hezbollah truck carrying weapons overturned in the Christian town of al-Kahala, southeast of Beirut, causing riots between Hezbollah operatives and local residents which resulted in the deaths of a Hezbollah operative and the local resident who shot him.
- ▶ The rig that will drill in the offshore gas field off the coast of Lebanon is scheduled to arrive on August 14, 2023.
- ▶ An airstrike in Syria attributed to Israel reportedly killed a scientist working on the Iran-Hezbollah missile precision project.

### Lebanon and Israel

#### Tension on the Israel-Lebanon border

- ▶ This past week there were fewer Hezbollah provocations along the Israel-Lebanon border. On August 3, 2023, IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi, the commander of the Northern Command and other senior officers visited the border. Ali Shoeib, a reporter for the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Manar network, issued a video documenting their visit to a position near Eita al-Shaab, about 20 kilometers (16 miles) east of Rosh HaNikra, on the Israel-Lebanon border. The video

including close-ups, shows the Chief of Staff and other officers with the caption in Hebrew and Arabic "#fromLebanon\_we\_see\_you" (photojournalist Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, August 3, 2023).



**The IDF Chief of Staff's visit as documented by Ali Shoeib (photojournalist Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, August 3, 2023).**

► On August 4, 2023, Ali Shoeib reported on two border incidents:

- ◆ Residents of Kfar Shuba held a procession and waved Lebanese flags. Shoeib noted the presence of IDF soldiers on high alert in the area (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, August 4, 2023).



**A procession of the residents of Kfar Shuba (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, August 4, 2023)**

- ◆ In the town of Yaroun, about 30 kilometers (25 miles) east of Rosh HaNikra, Shi'ite flags were planted in front of IDF posts (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, August 4, 2023).



**Shi'ite flags in front of an IDF post (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, August 4, 2023)**

- ▶ On August 4, 2023, **UNIFIL Commander Aroldo Lázaro Sáenz** met with the chiefs of the border villages of Shebaa and al-Arqoub and praised their important role in reducing tension. He noted that UNIFIL, in cooperation with the Lebanese army, continued working to achieve stability in the region (Aroldo Lázaro Sáenz' Twitter account, August 4, 2023).
- ▶ On August 5, 2023, Hezbollah operatives took media personnel on a tour along the border. It began at point B1 near al-Naqoura in the western sector and ended near al-Ghajar in the eastern sector. Guided by a Hezbollah operative, they visited the organization's military positions, including the position known as "Soleimani's Cave"<sup>1</sup> (a position located near the Salouqi River in the Nabatieh province). In the uploaded photos, journalists are seen looking at Israeli territory and standing next to weapons, including Kornet anti-tank missile launchers. Ibrahim Majed, one of the journalists, claimed that the most important thing he saw was the readiness of Hezbollah ("the resistance") to face any possible Israeli aggression against Lebanon, adding that Lebanon's internal political problems did not affect the "resistance" [anti-Israeli terrorism] (Lebanon 24 website, August 6, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> Named for Qassem Soleimani, former commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force, who was died in Iraq in an American Telegram channel in January 2020.



**Journalists on the Israel-Lebanon border. Right: A picture next to a Kornet missile. Left: Looking at Israeli territory (Lebanon 24 website, August 6, 2023).**

► On August 8, 2023, Lebanese army officers conducted a tour for 15 embassy representatives of UN Security Council members and showed them the disputed sites along the Lebanon-Israel border. The tour began in the area of Rosh HaNikra in the west and ended at the Shebaa Farms and Kafr Shuba in the east. A correspondent for the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Mayadeen network reported that the Lebanese army representatives explained to the diplomats and the accompanying media personnel about the 13 disputed points along the border, claiming Israel had to withdraw from them because they belonged to Lebanon (al-Mayadeen, August 8, 2023).

**Muneir Shehada, Lebanese government UNIFIL coordinator**, who led the tour, said Lebanon did not recognize the Blue Line previously marked by the UN at the Shebaa Farms, claiming it only marked a line of withdrawal and did not determine the border. He added that the Lebanese army did not accompany most UNIFIL tours because of its economic situation, but it was informed about them before they took place (al-Andalou News, August 8, 2023). The Hezbollah-affiliated daily al-Akhbar that "the diplomats listened a lot and commented little while local residents expressed their anger" (al-Akhbar, August 9, 2023).



**Diplomats tour the Israel-Lebanon border (al-Mayadeen, August 8, 2023)**

► According to reports, at the beginning of the tour the Lebanese army put its naval forces on alert facing IDF boats in the al-Naqoura region, claiming they had entered Lebanon's territorial

waters by about 20 meters (about 22 yards, or 0.01 miles), thereby violating Lebanese sovereignty. Al-Mayadeen TV reported the Lebanese army had documented the incident (al-Mayadeen, August 8, 2023).



**Documenting the Israeli Navy "violation" (al-Mayadeen, August 8, 2023)**

► Al-Mayadeen TV reported that according to "Lebanese military sources," Israel had built a 10-meter wide wall in the Kafr Shuba area about three meters on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line (al-Mayadeen, August 6, 2023).



**The wall built by Israel (al-Mayadeen, August 6, 2023)**

► **Defense Minister Yoav Galant** visited the Israel-Lebanon border on August 8, 2023, accompanied by senior officers. While there he warned Hezbollah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah not to "make a mistake," reminding Hezbollah it had made mistakes in the past and paid for them. He warned that if the current tensions escalated to war, Israel would send Lebanon back "to the Stone Age." He also reminded Nasrallah that when it came to Israel's security the country was united, would know how to defend itself and would not hesitate to use its full force against Hezbollah. However, Gallant emphasized, Israel did not want a war (Israeli media, August 8, 2023). Gallant visited the border area at the same time as the tour conducted by the Lebanese army for the embassy representatives, and his remarks were quoted by the Lebanese and Arab media (al-Mayadeen, August 8, 2023).

► In response, **Lebanese political commentator Yahya Dabouq**, writing in the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Akhbar, said "it is entirely natural that threats become ineffective when they are often issued and rarely or never acted on, as is the case with Israel." He claimed that if Israel wanted a war it would not threaten one, warn its enemies in advance and allow them to prepare (al-Akhbar, August 8, 2023).

### Renewal of UNIFIL's mandate

► In preparation for discussions regarding the renewal of the UNIFIL mandate in south Lebanon, which will take place towards the end of the month, an official Lebanese delegation headed by **Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Abu Habib, and Muneir Shehada, Lebanese government UNIFIL coordinator**, is expected to arrive at the UN headquarters in New York. The delegation will participate in the preparatory meetings and consultations before a vote is taken. Al-Akhbar reported that according to a "military source," the delegation will ask the Security Council to amend the "principle of freedom of movement" introduced last year. It will reportedly recommend a new formula for UNIFIL activities which does not exceed the obligation to coordinate with the Lebanese army. Al-Akhbar also reported for the past three weeks Lebanon had been conducting a quiet diplomatic campaign with Security Council member states, especially Russia and China, to ensure their support for the attempt to cancel the amendments added by Israel last year (al-Akhbar, August 9, 2023).

## Internal Lebanese Affairs

### The clashes in Ein al-Hilweh

► Last week's violent clashes in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp, located in the suburbs of Sidon in south Lebanon, began to wane. On August 5, 2023, following the declaration of a ceasefire, according to reports the fighting had completely stopped (al-Jazeera, August 5, 2023).<sup>2</sup>

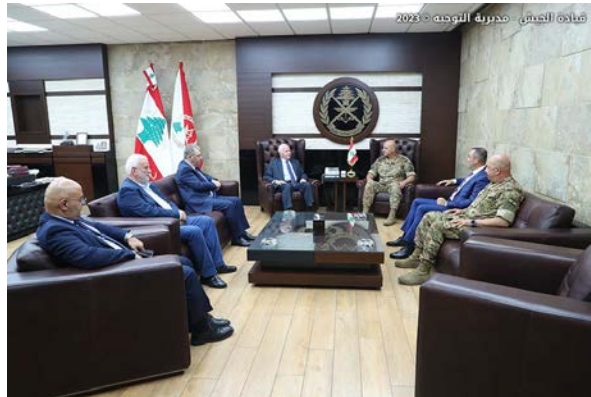
► On August 6, 2023, a Hezbollah delegation headed by **Ziyad Dhafer, responsible for the Sidon sector**, and **Fathi Abu al-Aradat, secretary of Fatah's Lebanese arena**, met at Fatah headquarters in Sidon to discuss the consequences of the events for the refugee camps and their residents. The delegation offered its condolences to the Fatah leadership on the deaths of Abu Ashraf al-Aramoushi, commander of Palestinian national security in Sidon, and his

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<sup>2</sup> For further information about the riots in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp, see the August 3, 2023, ITIC report, "Spotlight on Terrorism – Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria."

comrades, and called the incident a "crime" which harmed the security of Ein al-Hilweh, its stability and the relations between Lebanese and Palestinians (al-Nashra, August 6, 2023).

► Meanwhile, **Azzam al-Ahmed, a member of the PLO Executive Committee, met with Najib Mikati, prime minister of Lebanon's interim government, and with Joseph Aoun, Lebanese army commander.** They discussed the situation in Ein al-Hilweh and how to stabilize the ceasefire (Najib Mikati's Twitter account, August 6, 2023; Lebanese army Twitter account, August 7, 2023).



**Azzam al-Ahmed meets with Joseph Aoun (Lebanese army Twitter account, August 7, 2023)**

► The tensions in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp caused Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Arab League, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain to issue travel warnings, calling on their citizens to leave Lebanon or avoid the battle zones in Ein al-Hilweh. The calls were widely reported by the global media. The Lebanese government expressed outrage and surprise at the travel warnings and claimed they harmed Lebanon's economy by discouraging tourism. **Najib Mikati, the prime minister of the interim government,** emphasized that the security situation in Lebanon was "not exceptional." **Bassam Mawlawi, the minister of the interior,** noted Lebanon's commitment to the security of foreign citizens in its territory and claimed they had no information indicating the situation in Ein al-Hilweh was out of control or had spread to other refugee camps (Al-al-Nashra, August 5, 2023; al-Jazeera, August 5, 2023; al-Mayadeen, August 6, 2023).

### **A Hezbollah truck overturns near Beirut**

► A Hezbollah truck loaded with weapons en route from the Beqa'a Valley to Beirut overturned in the middle of the Christian town of al-Kahala, southeast of Beirut. The Lebanese media reported it had apparently been overloaded, causing it to overturn. As the truck crew tried to upright it they were surrounded and attacked by local residents. The incident developed into a firefight in the center of the town between Hezbollah operatives who tried to keep the locals

away from the truck, and civilians described by Hezbollah belonging to Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces party and Samy Jamil's Phalangists, both parties hostile to Hezbollah. One of the truck's security guards was killed in the exchange of fire. Fadi al-Bajani, an Ein al-Hilweh resident, who shot the guard, was also killed. Lebanese army forces arrived at the scene, surrounded the truck and ended the firefight (al-Jazeera, August 9, 2023).



**The Hezbollah weapons truck that overturned on its way to Beirut (al-Jazeera, August 9, 2023)**

## The presidential crisis

- ▶ In another attempt to resolve the presidential crisis in Lebanon, on August 8, 2023 **Jabran Bassil, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement**, announced an initial agreement had been concluded with Hezbollah for deliberating the election of the next president. However, he said, the talks were only beginning and would continue. Hezbollah insists on the candidacy of Hezbollah-affiliated pro-Syrian Suleiman Frangieh, while Bassil, son-in-law of former president Michel Aoun who sees himself as a candidate, is opposed by Hezbollah.
- ▶ Interviewed by al-Hadath TV, **Lebanese journalist Muneir al-Rabi'** explained that in light of the impasse, Bassil had been convinced to promote agreements with Hezbollah, and held a series of meetings with **Wafiq Safa, a senior Hezbollah figure**. According to al-Rabi', Bassil demanded political guarantees from Hezbollah regarding ministerial and senior positions in exchange for agreeing to Suleiman Frangieh's candidacy (al-Hadath, August 8, 2023).

## Preparations for the start of gas drilling works near the border with Israel

- ▶ On July 24, 2023, **Ghabi Dabboul, chairman of the board of directors of the Lebanese government's oil industry**, reported that the TotalEnergies drilling rig was expected to arrive off the Lebanese coast on August 14, 2023 and would be able to start drilling between eight and ten days later (al-Nashra, July 24, 2023).



► It was also reported that **American mediator Amos Hochstein** was scheduled to arrive in Beirut with the start of offshore drilling towards the end of August 2023. According to Western sources, Hochstein is also expected to discuss marking the land border between Israel and Lebanon (Lebanon 24 website, August 8, 2023).

## Syria

### Attack in Syria attributed to Israel

► Before dawn on August 7, 2023, an air strike was carried out in the Damascus area, reportedly killing at least four Syrian soldiers and wounding four. A Syrian news website affiliated with the opposition reported that the attack, attributed to Israel, targeted positions of the Syrian army and the Iranian militias operating in the Damascus area. Several reports claimed a scientist who was involved in Hezbollah's missile-precision project was killed in the attack, but his killing was reported as more of a deterrent than as actually having an influence on the project itself (Israeli media, August 8, 2023; Alma Center, August 7, 2023).

### Hezbollah authorizes counterfire at international coalition forces

► On August 7, 2023, the commander of Hezbollah went to areas in the Deir ez-Zor district where pro-Iranian militias are active. He examined positions and posts manned by Hezbollah operatives in Albukamal, al-Mayadeen and Deir ez-Zor and met with the commanders. He reportedly ordered them to raise the militias' level of combat readiness and gave them permission to attack the positions and bases of the American-led international coalition forces on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River if the positions of the pro-Iranian militias were attacked by them. After several hours he left Deir ez-Zor, went to Damascus and from there continued to Lebanon (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 8, 2023).