



Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria August 18-24, 2023

Overview

- ▶ This past week there were relatively few Lebanese provocations along the Israel-Lebanon border. Hezbollah's deputy secretary claimed Hezbollah was not interested in war, but was ready to engage in fighting quickly and effectively.
- ▶ Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah secretary general, met with senior Iranian officials to discuss the latest developments in Lebanon.
- ▶ An ISIS operative involved in carrying out the attack on the shrine of al-Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus, was killed when Hezbollah attempted to apprehend him.
- ▶ Senior Lebanese government officials visited the offshore drilling rig in the Qana field, and the prime minister of Lebanon's interim government called it a historic day for Lebanon. A senior Hezbollah figure claimed the arrival of the rig had been made possible by the organization's "successful strategy."
- ▶ In preparation for extending UNIFIL's mandate, there is apparently no international willingness to make the changes requested by Lebanon regarding the force's operations.
- ▶ The weapons in the truck that overturned in al-Kahala will be returned to Hezbollah by the Lebanese army once it has completed its investigation.
- ▶ The presidential crisis in Lebanon continues as no candidate acceptable to all parties has been found.
- ▶ Hezbollah is attempting to expand its influence within the Sunni community in Lebanon by means of economic support.
- ▶ An attack against Hezbollah and Iran targets on the outskirts of Damascus, in which two people were killed, was attributed to Israel
- ▶ The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps are training fighters, including pro-Iranian militias, in the al-Mayadeen desert in Syria to launch anti-aircraft shoulder-fired missiles.

Hezbollah, Israel and Lebanon

Lebanese/Hezbollah provocations along the Israel-Lebanon border

► On August 20, 2023, about ten Lebanese youths, apparently sent by Hezbollah, clashed with a patrol of UNIFIL soldiers in the al-Hiyam area, north of Metulla. A short time later the Lebanese left the area (al-Nashra, August 20, 2023; Ayman Shihadi's Twitter account, August 20, 2023).



Lebanese youths confront a patrol of UNIFIL soldiers (Ayman Shihadi's Twitter account , August 20, 2023).

► On August 19, 2023, a pro-Iranian source reported that two electrical cables had been cut near Metulla and an IED attached to the border security fence between Israel and Lebanon (Sabrin Plus, August 19, 2023).



Cut electrical cables and an IED attached to the border security fence near Metulla (Sabrin Plus, August 19, 2023).

► **Muhammad Wassim al-Murtada, Lebanese minister of culture**, toured the area of Kfar Shuba near Har Dov. He said he had come to show solidarity with residents facing the "Zionist

occupation," adding that the "struggle for the liberation of Lebanese and Palestinian lands" would continue (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, August 18, 2023).



Right: Al-Murtada (wearing glasses, at the right). Left: Al-Murtada looks at the territory of Israel (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, August 18, 2023).

Na'im Qassem's remarks

► **Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy secretary general**, relating to the tents the organization erected in the Har Dov area (Shebaa Farms) in Israeli territory, said neither side was interested in war. He claimed Israel avoided friction lest it led to war. He said the fact that Israel, which was ready for war, had not attacked for 17 years proved it did not want one, and neither, he claimed, did Hezbollah. However, he said, if Hezbollah was "forced" to fight, it would do so "quickly and effectively." He also claimed that in recent years Hezbollah's "operational level" had improved significantly, but Israeli had not improved at the same rate and today Israel was suffering from a deep social crisis and a decrease in motivation in the ranks of the IDF (khamenei.ir, August 16, 2023).

► On another occasion Na'im Qassem claimed Israel should be wiped off the map because "the Zionist entity is a threat to mankind, the future and the Earth." He also claimed the "resistance" [anti-Israeli terrorism led by Hezbollah, Iran and the Palestinian terrorist organizations] symbolized the honor of the Islamic nation and served as an example and role model for free people around the world (al-Manar, August 22, 2023).

Renewal of the UNIFIL mandate

► **Abdullah Bou Habib, Lebanon's foreign minister**, postponed his planned visit to the United States. On August 22, 2023, he was supposed to go to New York to participate in the UN Security Council deliberations for renewing the UNIFIL mandate (al-Gomhuria, August 21, 2023; al-Markazia, August 22, 2023). The Lebanese media issued various reasons for the postponement. According to one version, it was postponed because the trip had not been paid for (Nadaa' al-

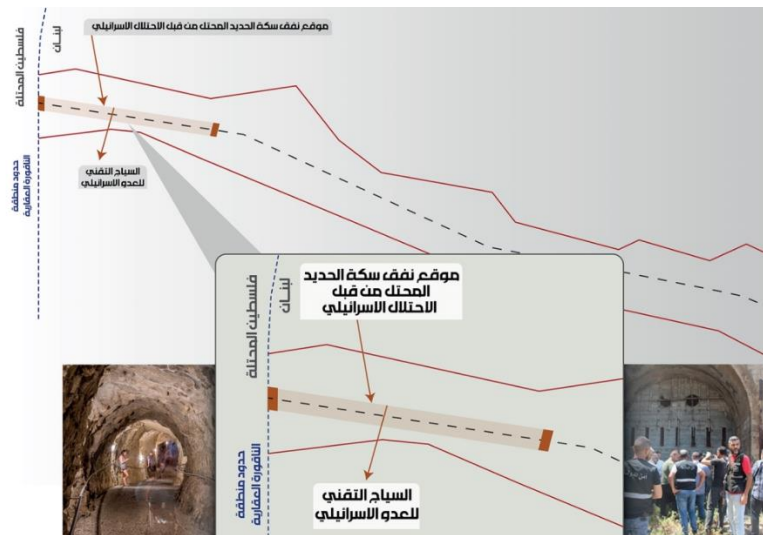
Watan, August 22, 2023). According to the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese daily al-Akhbar, the visit was postponed because the United States State Department refused to provide him with security during his visit. It also reported Lebanon understood it would not be able to cancel the amendment made to UNIFIL's mandate last year regarding UNIFIL's freedom of action in the region, whose limitation was demanded by Lebanon (al-Akhbar, August 23, 2023).

Nasrallah meets with senior Iranian officials

► **Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah secretary general**, met in Lebanon with **Mehdi Shushtari, assistant Iranian foreign minister**; and with **Mojtaba Amani, the Iranian ambassador to Beirut**. According to reports, they discussed the latest developments in Lebanon (Radio al-Nur, August 19, 2023).

Document revealed claiming the al-Naqoura tunnel belongs to Lebanon

► Al-Akhbar reported the receipt of a new document (of unspecified source), which revealed that the blocked train tunnel at Rosh Hanikra which used to connect Israel and Lebanon belonged completely to Lebanon, adding it to the 13 disputed points on the Israel-Lebanon border. A map and photos of the area showing the borders of the Lebanese part of the tunnel were attached to the article. The newspaper claimed the map "proved" that the entire tunnel was located in territory belonging to Lebanon's ministry of public works and transportation and was therefore part of Lebanon. It also claimed the tunnel passed under the border security fence and crossed the Blue Line towards the north, so in effect the fence was Lebanese territory. According to paper, the tunnel therefore also had to be considered "as the occupation of Lebanese lands" which required action to restore them, and Lebanon had already demanded "the fence that Israel built on Lebanese territory" be removed (al-Akhbar, August 23, 2023).



The map showing the tunnel belongs to Lebanon. The upper arrow shows the location of the tunnel and the lower arrow the security fence (al-Akhbar, August 23, 2023).

The Palestinians

A delegation from the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp meets with senior Hezbollah officials

► A delegation of the neighborhood committees in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp met with senior Hezbollah and Amal officials at Hezbollah headquarters in Sidon. **Present were Sheikh Zaid Dhafer, responsible in Hezbollah for the Sidon region, and Bassam Kajak, a member of Amal's political bureau.** The members of the delegation thanked Hezbollah and Amal for their efforts to stop the fighting in the refugee camp and reduce tensions. They also discussed the situation in the camp and the investigation of the events that led to violence almost a month ago.¹ The Hezbollah and Amal representatives said their leadership would continue their efforts to prevent tensions and escalation in the camp (al-'Ahed, August 20, 2023). The meeting was held because of further tensions in the refugee camp in the past week which could lead to another round of violence (al-Jadeed TV, August 20, 2023).

¹ Between July 29, 2023 and August 4, 2023, riots and exchanges of fire took place in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp. They began with the attempted assassination, carried out by Fatah operatives, of a senior operative of Asbat al-Ansar, a Palestinian organization with a Salafi-Jihadist ideology. The attempt led to clashes between armed Asbat al-Ansar and Fatah operatives, resulting in the deaths of 12 people and the injury of over sixty. Many thousands of residents fled the camp to the nearby neighborhoods of Sidon.

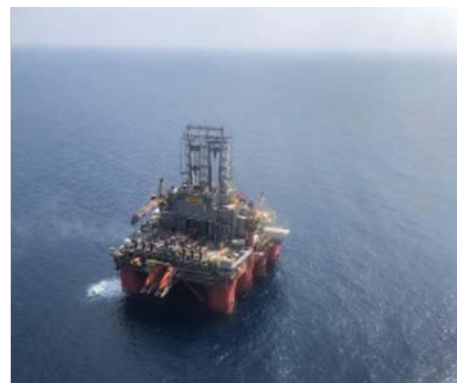


The delegations meet in Sidon (al-'Ahed, August 20, 2023)

Internal Lebanese Affairs

Lebanese officials visit the offshore drilling rig in the Qana field

► On August 22, 2023, **Najib Mikati, prime minister of Lebanon's interim government; Nabih Berri, speaker of the Lebanese Parliament and head of the Amal Movement; Ali Hamia, minister of public works and transportation; and Walid Fiyad, minister of energy and water**, visited the drilling rig that arrived in Lebanese waters this past week (Lebanese government Twitter account, August 22, 2023). Mikati called it a historic day for Lebanon and said he hoped all involved parties would cooperate to stop the decline Lebanon's economy. Nabih Berri called it the first step in overcoming Lebanon's economic crisis (Lebanon prime minister's Twitter account, August 22, 2023).



Right: The drilling rig in Lebanese waters (@aliamie_lb Twitter account, August 17, 2023). Left: Lebanese government officials visit the rig. Najib Mikati stand in the center, Nabih Berri is to his right (Lebanese government Twitter account, August 22, 2023).

► **Sheikh Nabil Kauk, a member of Hezbollah's Central Council**, said the arrival of the rig proved the organization's strategic success. Upon its arrival, Hezbollah initiated a campaign claiming it was the result of the organization's activities. Kauk also expressed hope that the

production of energy from the Qana field would rescue Lebanon from its economic crisis (Multqa al-Alam al-Muqawim, August 20, 2023).

The economic crisis in Lebanon

► Given the economic crisis afflicting Lebanon, **Najib Mikati, the prime minister of the interim government, and Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanon Parliament** met to discuss the issue. After the meeting Mikati said that unlike other elected governments, the Lebanese Parliament was doing nothing to resolve the economic crisis, and it had to formulate a program for recovery. He said many countries had experienced similar economic crises, during which their elected governments held regular meetings and quickly passed the necessary laws and the crises were resolved. In Lebanon, he said, they had been talking about the supervision of capital for four years, but had not managed to hold deliberations to resolve the problem.

► Mikati also said there were many parliamentary bills pending related to the recovery plan, such as restructuring the banks and dealing with the financial gap, and they all needed immediate resolution. He warned that if the government did not convene to approve them as a single plan, the country would have no economic stability. He also said Lebanon had unfortunately turned into a cash economy, which was liable to expose Lebanon to many risks. He called for banking activity to return to its natural course to make it possible for Lebanon to overcome the crisis (Twitter account of Lebanese prime minister's office, August 17, 2023).

► A report published by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) indicated safety problems at the Beirut airport because of a lack of flight inspectors (thenationalnews.com, 17 August 2023).

The presidential crisis in Lebanon

► The Lebanese daily Nadaa' al-Watan reported that in talks Najib Mikati held with Nabia Berri, he said that if Berri did not insist on electing a president before the end of September 2023, he, Mikati, "will be out of the government" (Nadaa' al-Watan, August 23, 2023). Mikati did not elaborate, but it can be assumed he meant he would resign or abandon the discussions regarding the presidency. Mikati recently expressed concern about the internal and international consequences for Lebanon's status without an elected president.

► According to the al-Medan news site, the current security situation works in favor of **Joseph Aoun, the Lebanese army's chief of staff**, increasing his chances of being elected president. According to al-Medan, Aoun has broad support in Lebanon and abroad (al-Medan, August 18,

2023). The Asas Media news site claimed that behind the scenes people were saying that France's last opportunity to influence the presidential elections would be in early September 2023, and after that heavy international pressure would be exerted on Lebanon. In the site's assessment, the appointment of Suleiman Frangieh as president would be considered an achievement for Hezbollah [he is its preferred candidate]. However, even if they compromise on a different candidate who met their demands, Hezbollah would still benefit (Asas Media, August 19, 2023).

The speaker of the Lebanese Parliament calls for an internal dialogue

► **Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Parliament**, called on the opposition parties to promote an internal dialogue with Hezbollah in accordance with the appeal of **Jean Yves Le Drian, advisor to the French president for the Middle East and the French envoy to Lebanon**. The opposition parties refuse to dialogue with Hezbollah, at least until a president has been appointed, and demand limits be placed on the use of illegal weapons and on the possession and use of weapons by the country's law enforcement agencies of the country (Lebanese army and security forces), something Hezbollah opposes (naharnet.com, August 21, 2023).

Investigating the Hezbollah's overturned weapons truck

► The London-based al-Sharq al-Awsat reported the Lebanese army had completed its forensic investigation of the overturning of Hezbollah's weapons truck and the death of a Hezbollah operative and an activist of the Lebanese Forces party. The newspaper claimed Christian political forces refused to allow the residents of al-Kahala, where the truck overturned, to testify, while Hezbollah cooperated and sent the truck's security guards to be questioned (al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 20, 2023). A legal source stated that at the end of the investigation the ammunition on the truck would be handed over to Hezbollah (al-Nahar, August 22, 2023).

Confiscation of Israeli products in Lebanon

► On August 22, 2023, the official Lebanese news agency announced that members of the General Administration for State Security had broken into warehouses and commercial buildings throughout Lebanon that marketed Israeli products. They also broke into the main headquarters of the importer and confiscated products. In addition, those suspected of importing and marketing Israeli-made goods were summoned for questioning (NNA, August 22, 2023).

ISIS operative dies while being apprehended

► According to reports on August 19, 2023, an ISIS operative died after jumping (or was thrown) from the seventh floor of a building in the al-Salam neighborhood of the southern suburb of Beirut (the Dahia, a Hezbollah stronghold) when Hezbollah operatives came to arrest him. The operative, **Wissam Mazen Dalla**, a 23 year-old Syrian citizen, was suspected of involvement in ISIS's attack on the shrine of al-Sayyidah Zaynab, south of Damascus, about a month ago.² He went from Syria to Lebanon illegally after the attack and was suspected of planning another (Lebanese news agency, al-Mayadeen and Reuters, August 19, 2023).

The head of the Lebanese Forces accuses Hezbollah of killing a party member

► On August 20, 2023, **Samir Geagea, chairman of the Lebanese Forces party**, accused Hezbollah of the death of **party member Elias Hasrouni**, who was strangled and shot to death about two weeks ago. According to Geagea, the circumstances point to Hezbollah, as it was unlikely that a car with eight passengers could enter territory controlled by Hezbollah and kidnap someone without the organization's knowledge (al-Nashra, August 20, 2023).

Hezbollah provides aid to Sunni families

► This past week Hezbollah provided financial aid to the families of victims of the explosion of the fuel tank in the Akkar district,³ in the north of the country, most of whose residents are Sunnis. It was not the first time Hezbollah provided financial aid to areas with Sunni populations in an effort to bring them closer to the organization.

► On the second anniversary of the explosion, Hezbollah also unveiled a solar system for pumping water from a well supplying water to a neighborhood of the town of al-Houaich, about 15 kilometers (about 12 miles) south of the Lebanon-Syria border. The ceremony was attended by **Sheikh Muhammad Amro, responsible for the Mount Lebanon region and the north in Hezbollah, Sheikh Radha Ahmed, in charge of the northern sector in Hezbollah, Afif Shuman, chairman of Hezbollah's mutual aid association**, dignitaries and residents of the town. Shuman reported that during the past three months Hezbollah had provided aid and services to the residents of the Akkar district of more than half a million dollars, including

² For further information about the attack, see the ITIC August 2, 2023, report, "Spotlight on the Global Jihad, July 27-August 2, 2023).

³ On August 15, 2021, a fuel tank confiscated by the Lebanese army a part of its fight against black market sales of gas, blew up, killing 28 people and wounding 79.

hospitalization expenses and medicines. He said the Akkar district received special attention from Hassan Nasrallah, adding that additional water and alternative energy projects would soon be implemented (al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 7, 2023).

► According to **Dr. Sami Nader, director of the Beirut-based thinktank, Levant Institute for Strategic Affairs**, Hezbollah wants to increase its influence among the Sunnis, exploiting the absence of prominent Sunni leaders. He added that the current financial crisis in Lebanon gave Hezbollah an opportunity to achieve its goal because local residents were desperate for help. **Ali al-Amin, a Shi'ite opposition figure**, said Hezbollah operated in the Akkar district, Tripoli and other Sunni areas in Lebanon through the Resistance Battalions [Lebanese groups for "resistance to the occupation"]; Hezbollah also has political forces, sheikhs and associations. In his assessment, Hezbollah invests over half a million dollars in the Akkar district every month to attract supporters, but has not been successful because of rivalries and hostility from a large part of the Lebanese population (al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 7, 2023).

Syria

Militia fighters trained in the al-Mayadeen desert to launch shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles

► According to reports on August 19, 2023, fighters in the pro-Iranian militias were on alert and redeployed to al-Mayadeen, about 40 kilometers (about 25 miles) southeast of Deir ez-Zor, in preparation for a series of large-scale joint training exercises involving soldiers of the Syrian army, its auxiliary fighters, fighters in the pro-Iranian militias, Syrian and Iraqi militias and operatives of Hezbollah-Lebanon. Training will focus on the use of anti-aircraft shoulder-fired missiles in anticipation of a possible attack by the American-led international coalition forces against the militias in the region (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 19, 2023).

Attacking Hezbollah and Iran targets in Syria

► Shortly before midnight on August 21, 2023, an attack attributed to Israel on targets in the al-Kiswah and al-Ghazlania area south of Damascus was reported. According to Syrian sources, Hezbollah and Iran targets were attacked. Two people, whose identity is not clear, were killed. Posts in al-Kiswah and near the Damascus International Airport were completely destroyed (Syrian TV, August 21, 2023; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 22, 2023).

Local Hezbollah-affiliated Syrian intelligence figure murdered in Daraa

- ▶ According to reports on August 22, 2023, a senior member of Syria's military intelligence department in the Daraa region and his companion were shot and killed near the town of Da'el on the outskirts of Daraa. The senior figure was reportedly affiliated with Hezbollah (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 22, 2023).