



Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria

August 31- September 7, 2023

Overview

- ▶ This past week no incidents were reported along the Israel-Lebanon border.
- ▶ The UN Security Council renewed UNIFIL's mandate in south Lebanon, according to it which UNIFIL will act independently and not require prior approval to carry out its missions. Reactions in Lebanon were mixed.
- ▶ Amos Hochstein, senior advisor to President Biden, met with Abdullah Bou Habib, the Lebanese foreign minister, to discuss the possibility of further mediation for delineating the Lebanon-Israel land border.
- ▶ The presidential crisis in Lebanon continues. Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, called for a week-long dialogue of all the parties, which would culminate in the election of a president; Hezbollah's opponents rejected the initiative.
- ▶ Wassim Mansouri, governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon, promised investors would be able to withdraw their money from Lebanese banks, which has not been possible since 2019.
- ▶ The Lebanese are concerned about the possible renewal of Syrian refugees' entering Lebanon. A Free Lebanese Forces activist called on Christians to purchase property in the Beqa'a Valley region to stop "Iranian expansion."
- ▶ Hezbollah condemned the developing diplomatic relations between Israel and Bahrain.
- ▶ Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, the Iranian foreign minister, visited Lebanon and met with the secretary general of Hezbollah, the secretary general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the deputy chairman of Hamas' political bureau and the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament.
- ▶ Hezbollah prohibited its operatives from going to Syria to participate in battle.

South Lebanon

- ▶ This past week no unusual incidents were reported on the Israel-Lebanon border.

Renewal of the UNIFIL mandate

► The UN Security Council voted to extend UNIFIL's mandate in Lebanon until August 31, 2024. According to the resolution, UNIFIL does not need prior approval to carry out its missions and is authorized to carry them out independently (UN website, August 31, 2023).

► Lebanese reactions were mixed:

◆ **Andrea Tanti, UNIFIL spokesman**, said the renewal of the mandate would not change UNIFIL activities in south Lebanon and coordination with the Lebanese army and government would continue as it had since 2006. Tanti referred to the tent Hezbollah erected in Lebanon, saying the issue was of great concern to UNIFIL as it related to the implementation of Resolution 1701. He stated that erecting the tent constituted a violation [of the resolution] and UNIFIL operating to remove it (al-what?; al-Nashra, September 4, 2023).

◆ **Najib Mikati, prime minister of the Lebanese interim government**, welcomed the decision, saying it would increase Lebanon's security. He said the resolution took into consideration Lebanon's demand to include a clause stating that UNIFIL would carry out its activities in coordination with the Lebanese government (al-Ghad, September 1, 2023).

◆ On September 6, 2023, Mikati met with **General Aroldo Lazaro, UNIFIL commander in Lebanon**, to discuss bilateral cooperation. Mikati emphasized the Lebanese government's commitment to the Security Council resolution and its willingness to cooperate with UNIFIL by liaising with the Lebanese army (Lebanese prime minister's office Twitter account, September 6, 2023).



Najib Mikati meets with Aroldo Lazaro (Lebanese prime minister's office Twitter account, September 6, 2023)

◆ The **Hezbollah-affiliated** daily al-Akhbar wrote the UNIFIL command adhered to patrolling in coordination with the Lebanese army (al-Akhbar, September 4, 2023).

Internal Lebanese Affairs

Electing a president

► **Nabih Berri, speaker of the Lebanese Parliament and leader of the Amal movement**, called for all parties to hold a week-long dialogue to choose a president (France Channel 24, August 31, 2023). His call went unanswered and even caused disagreements. The main reactions were the following:

- ◆ **Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces Party**, called Hezbollah a "gang of criminals." He blamed Hezbollah for the failure of the presidential elections, noting that Hezbollah's call for dialogue was nothing but another way to enforce its will (YouTube, September 4, 2023).



Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Force party (YouTube, September 4, 2023)

- ◆ **Gebran Bassil, chairman of the Free Patriotic Movement** (a Hezbollah Christian ally), said as far as he knew, Nabih Berri would not oppose decentralized political and economic management.¹ The daily al-Nashra claimed Berri and Hezbollah apparently did not actually oppose it in principle, but their conduct resulted from the fact that the Shiites and Hezbollah were its main beneficiaries (al-Nashra, September 2, 2023).

The economic crisis

► Interviewed by al-Arabiya TV, **Wasim Mansouri, governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon**, announced that returning deposits to investors was not impossible, but did not elaborate on the regulations for withdrawing funds. He added he intended to regulate the trade of foreign currency and maintain it through a Central Bank digital platform. Since 2019 investors in

¹ According to the principle, political force and influence would be divided equally among all Lebanon's sectarian groups.

Lebanon have not been able to withdraw their money from the Lebanese banks on the verge of collapse (al-Arabiya, September 4, 2023).

► Mansouri's announcement caused concern among foreign currency money changers in Lebanon. They claimed the Central Bank's policy had rendered trading in dollars unprofitable, stating that the Bank artificially kept the price of the dollar and Lebanese pound from fluctuating, and as a result they did not profit from trading in dollars (MTV, September 4, 2023).

Fears of a Shi'ite takeover of the Beqa'a Valley

► Ibrahim Saqer, a Lebanese Forces Party activist, issued a video the social network calling on all Lebanese Christians, in Lebanon and abroad, to purchase real estate in Zahle (in the Beqa'a Valley) to prevent Iranian Shi'ites from taking control the region.² He said the Shi'ites were buying land and real estate in Zahle and the Beqa'a Valley and were even willing to pay more than the market price, and in that way were taking over Lebanon (Lebanon Debate, September 4, 2023).



Ibrahim Saqer (Orient YouTube channel, September 4, 2023)

Concerns Syrian refugees will again enter Lebanon

► Recently Syrian refugees have begun entering Lebanon again. According to reports, dozens and even hundreds of Syrians, men, women and children of all ages have broken through the border crossings between Syria and Lebanon. Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Lebanon has been host to many Sunni Syrian refugees. **Issam Sharaf al-Din, the interim government's minister of displaced persons**, said at least 8,000 displaced Syrians had entered the country illegally in August, and more than 20,000 since the beginning of the year (al-Akhbar, September 7, 2023).

² For further information see the ITIC September 6, 2023 report, "Iranian activity to expand its regional religious-cultural influence through soft power."

► **Najib Mikati, prime minister of the interim government**, will hold an ad hoc meeting next week to deal with the "new Syrian immigration." The meeting will be attended by the commanders of the Lebanese army and security forces (al-Manar Telegram channel, September 7, 2023).

► **Parliament Member George Atallah** accused the Lebanese political parties of conspiring against the country regarding the issue of Syrian refugees. He accused the political leadership of intending to settle them in Lebanon. He was particularly angry at Mikati's silence (Lebanon Debate, September 5, 2023).



George Atallah's tweet (George Atallah's Twitter account, September 5, 2023)

Lebanese Foreign Affairs

The American mediator visits Lebanon

► **Amos Hochstein, the American president's coordinator for energy security**, paid a visit to Lebanon and met with Foreign Minister Bou Habib. Hochstein noted America's desire for stability in south Lebanon, and after having successfully delineated Lebanon's naval border, he said he was examining the willingness of all parties involved to assist in mediating the completion of delineating the land borders (NNA, August 31, 2023). Hezbollah accused Hochstein of taking the Israeli position and complained of his insistence on dismantling the tent erected by Hezbollah, which he claimed was a violation (al-Akhbar, August 31, 2023).

The Iranian foreign minister visits Lebanon

► **Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, the Iranian foreign minister**, paid a two-day visit to Lebanon. He met with Lebanese government officials, including Nabih Berri, with whom he discussed regional developments, the "resistance" [anti-Israeli terrorist activity] in Lebanon and "Palestine" and the presidential vacuum in Lebanon. Abdollahian noted that electing a president and forming a new Lebanese government were important and the responsibility

Lebanon' political leadership (Iran Press, September 1, 2023). Meeting with Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah secretary general, he discussed the latest political developments in Lebanon and the region, including the developments in "Palestine" and Syria, the state of the "resistance" front [Iran, Hezbollah and the Palestinian terrorist organizations] and important developments in the Islamic world (Iran Press, September 1, 2023).

► Abdollahian also met with senior Palestinian figures, including Ziyad al-Nakhlah, PIJ secretary general, and Saleh al-'Arouri, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau. He stressed Iran's continuing support of the Palestinians, the "resistance" and "liberating of the lands." He related to the announcement of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei regarding the need to support the West Bank, and promised Iran would not retreat its decisions regarding the Palestinian issue and would continue its forceful support of the "resistance" [Palestinian terrorist organizations] (Tabnak website, September 1, 2023). The Palestinians emphasized their adherence to the "option of resistance" as a strategy, stating they would not stop "resistance" operations in the West Bank, currently their top priority (al-Mayadeen TV website, August 31, 2023).



Right: Abdollahian meets with Hassan Nasrallah. Left: Abdollahian meets with the Hamas and PIJ leaderships (Tasnim, September 1, 2023)

► During the visit Abdollahian toured south Lebanon and visited Maroun al-Ras, near the Lebanon-Israel border (Parsi News website, September 2, 2023). After the Second Lebanon War (2006), the Garden of Iran was established in Maroun al-Ras in appreciation for the important role the town played during the War. The site was constructed by the Iranian Association for Assistance in the Reconstruction of Lebanon, which operated in south Lebanon after the Second Lebanon War. The garden serves as a focal point for visiting Iranian delegations.³

³ For further information see the ITIC November 4, 2019 report "Jihadi tourism: visits to battle legacy sites and shahid tombs as an indoctrination tool for spreading Hezbollah's ideology."

The Lebanese defense minister meets with the American ambassador

► **Lebanese Defense Minister Maurice Salim** met with **Dorothy Shea, the American ambassador to Lebanon**. His office reported they had discussed military matters and the assistance the Lebanese army received from the United States (al-Nashra, September 5, 2023).



The Lebanese defense minister meets with the American ambassador (Al-Nashra, September 5, 2023)

Berri meets with the European Union ambassador

► Nabih Berri met with **Sandra De Waele, the new EU ambassador to Lebanon** (Nabih Berri's website, September 5, 2023)



Nabih Berri meets with EU Ambassador Sandra De Waele (Nabih Berri's website, September 5, 2023)

Israel – Lebanon

Hezbollah condemns Bahrain-Israel relations

► Hezbollah formally condemned the government of Bahrain for the official visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen, calling it a "betrayal and stab in the back of the Palestinian people." Referring to the internal situation in Israel, Hezbollah noted Bahrain had opened an embassy of the "Israeli enemy" at a time when the "Zionist entity" was experiencing the worst period in

its history. Hezbollah also accused Bahrain of oppressing the Bahraini people (a-Nur, September 5, 2023).

Syria

Hezbollah forbids its operatives to go to Syria

► Given the renewed clashes between the Assad regime and its opponents, Hezbollah has reportedly forbidden its operatives to go to fight in Syria, stating that visits to Syria were permitted only for the purpose of visiting the Shi'ite shrines. The ban was allegedly issued because according to Iranian assessments of the situation, there is concern over increasing attacks on Iranians and Hezbollah in Syria (Sawt Beirut International, September 6, 2023)