



Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria September 15-21, 2023

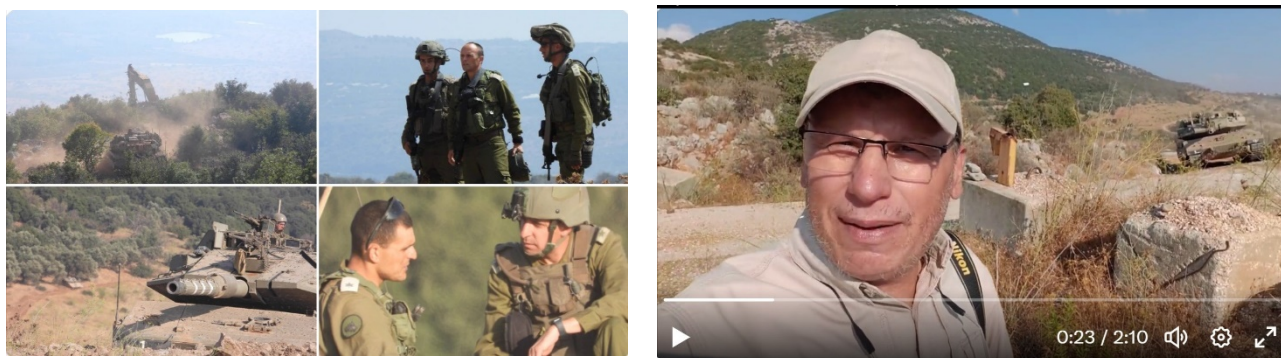
Overview

- ▶ This past week no unusual incidents were reported along the Israel-Lebanon border. Hezbollah-affiliated media outlets reported on works carried out by Israel in the Ghajar region. The exposure of Iran and Hezbollah's secret airport in south Lebanon continued to make headlines. Hezbollah has yet to address the issue directly.
- ▶ Preliminary details have been published about the plan of Amos Hochstein, the American president's coordinator for energy security, to resolve the issue of the land border between Israel and Lebanon.
- ▶ Tensions continue in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp. Several meetings were held in an effort to calm the situation.
- ▶ So far, there has been no solution to the presidential crisis in Lebanon nor is one on the horizon. Hezbollah and Amal continue to promote the candidacy of Suleiman Frangieh.

South Lebanon

- ▶ This week, no unusual incidents were reported on the Israel-Lebanon border.
- ▶ Hezbollah-affiliated media outlets reported on IDF activity near the village of Ghajar. They claimed Israel was carrying out activities in "occupied" Lebanese territory and reported on the presence of UNIFIL and Lebanese army forces in the area.
 - ◆ The daily al-Jarida reported that on September 19, 2023, seven Israeli bulldozers accompanied by five Merkava tanks initiated earthworks. According to the newspaper, the IDF is paving a road for military needs in the Shebaa Farm (Har Dov) area. It was also reported that UNIFIL and Lebanese army forces were deployed in the region (al-Jarida, September 20, 2023; (<https://www.vdlnews.com>, September 19, 2023)
 - ◆ Ali Shoeib, a correspondent for the Hezbollah-affiliated daily al-Akhbar, reported it was the first time Israel carried out work in the "occupied" area. He claimed Israel's objective was to redefine the line of withdrawal and cut off the "occupied" area from the Lebanese Sheba Farms (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 19, 2023). Later, he claimed that

Israel was trying to change the terrain of the Shebaa Farms, an area which "belongs to local Lebanese residents." He noted that the commander of the IDF's 91st Division and the commander of the 769th Brigade supervised "the beginning of the act of aggression" (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 20, 2023).



Right: IDF tanks in the Shebaa Farms. Left: IDF commanders and a Merkava tank (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 19-20, 2023)

► **Qassem Hashem, a member of the Lebanese Parliament**, claimed Israel's activity in the area was a "new aggression" contradicting all international norms which do not allow an "occupying power" to change the features of occupied territories. He added that the international community was responsible for putting an end to the "violations and attacks." He called on Lebanon's foreign minister, who is currently at the UN General Assembly in New York, to raise the issue for discussion (al-Nashra, September 21, 2023).

Exposing the Iranian airport in south Lebanon and criticizing Hezbollah

► The information Israel revealed about the existence of an Iranian airport in south Lebanon continues to occupy the Lebanese media. There was also criticism of Hezbollah, which has so far avoided directly addressing the issue. Some of Hezbollah's opponents took advantage of the situation to attack the organization within the framework of the political struggles of the country's presidential crisis. The main points of the media reports were the following:

- ◆ Local sources said that despite the silence of Hezbollah and Lebanese politicians, the airport in the al-Jabour area of the Jezzine governate did, in fact, exist. According to the sources, it did not matter how much debate the issue caused, Hezbollah would never give up the airport (Lebanon Debate, September 19, 2023).
- ◆ Al-Hadath TV broadcast a report which relied heavily on Israeli media. The channel cited political sources who described Lebanon as "Hezbollah hostage, " adding that Hezbollah used Lebanon as a bargaining chip whenever there was a conflict between

Iran and Israel. The channel quoted a former Hezbollah official who claimed that the existence of the airport was known to local residents. He said Hezbollah restricted freedom of movement near the airport and entrance to the surrounding area was forbidden. He also noted that the residents feared for their homes, should there be a military confrontation with Israel. The findings of the al-Hadath investigation also noted the existence of a Hezbollah training camp near the airport, and stated explosions had been heard and a large number of tunnels had been dug in the region (al-Hadath, September 19, 2023).

◆ **Elie Mahfoud, leader of the Change Movement Party**, after meeting with **Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces Party**, stated that Lebanon was the only country ruled by a cleric [Hassan Nasrallah] who obeyed the orders of a foreign country [Iran], and the cleric ran an armed organization [Hezbollah] working to construct an airport (@lebanosnews Twitter account September 20, 2023).



Elie Mahfoud, leader of the Change Movement Party
(@lebanosnews Twitter account September 20, 2023)

► The @Lord Twitter account shared a video recorded by Sentinel Hub, an engine for processing satellite data, showing the construction stages of the airport between October 11, 2022 and the present, noting that the airport looked real. The length of the airport was reported to be 1.2 kilometers (about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile) and it is located near the village of Kafr Houneh in the Jezzine governorate (@Lord Twitter account, September 15, 2023).



Sentinel Hub picture (@Lord Twitter account, September 15, 2023)

Delineating the Israel-Lebanon land border

► **Philippe Abu Akl**, a correspondent for the **Ici Beyrouth news website**, reported the talks to demark the land border between Israel and Lebanon would continue, mediated by **Amos Hochstein**, the **US President's coordinator for global infrastructure and energy security**, who is scheduled to visit Lebanon in early October 2023. According to Abu Akel, Hochstein will inform Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, that the Biden administration had decided to resolve the issue of the land border and UNIFIL headquarters had been informed. According to several reports, Berri assured Hochstein that an agreement could be reached quickly, similar to the agreement reached regarding the naval border, if the United States exerted pressure on Israel to respond to Lebanon's position regarding point of contention B1 at Rosh Hanikra, which is crucially important for delineating both the naval and land borders. Abu Akel noted that Berri's position was consistent with the US intention to settle the land border dispute by the end of the year according to the draft outline drawn up by the State Department. American sources do not rule out the possibility of a comprehensive agreement based on the borders established in 1923 by the Franco-British commission, as recognized in the 1949 armistice agreement. It was also noted that Hezbollah was drafting its own agreement for delineating the land border using the disputed border points on the Blue Line as its basis for discussion (Ici Beyrouth, September 20, 2023).

► Nabih al-Barji, a political commentator who writes for the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Diyar, published an op-ed piece with anti-Semitic overtones, opposing Hochstein's plan. According to al-Barji, it is impossible to believe Hochstein because he defined Lebanon as a "historical mistake." Hochstein, he claimed, was also anxious about Israel, which is driven by a "biblical obsession" and "hysterical policies." Therefore, he concluded, Hochstein's true goal was to weaken and disarm Hezbollah (al-Diyar, September 19, 2023).

Hezbollah

► **Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy secretary general**, gave a speech at the graduation ceremony of Hezbollah's schools in Beirut in which he claimed the period when Israel could attack the Lebanese with impunity had ended. He said that anyone who criticized Hezbollah's military power was trying to hide his own political weakness in the [Lebanese] presidential elections. He also claimed anyone who demanded Hezbollah disarm was opening Lebanon's door to Israeli aggression (al-Manar, September 16, 2023).



Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy secretary general (al-Manar, September 16, 2023)

The Palestinians in Lebanon

Continuation of clashes in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp

► Tensions continue in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp and apparently so far efforts to achieve calm have not borne fruit. In an attempt to bring calm, **Hassan Habballah, in charge of Hezbollah's Palestine portfolio**, and a Palestinian delegation led by **Azzam al-Ahmed, a member of the PLO's Executive Committee**, in charge of Palestinian affairs in Lebanon, met at the headquarters of Hezbollah's political council y (Lebanon 24, September 19, 2023).

► **Ziyad al-Nakhalah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad secretary general**, met with **Jamil Mazher, deputy secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine**, to discuss strengthening the "resistance" [terrorism] in Judea and Samaria and the events in Ein al-Hilweh, including their implications for the issue of Palestinian refugees (Ziyad al-Nakhalah's Telegram channel, September 15, 2023).



Al-Nakhalah meets with Jamil Mazher
(Ziyad al-Nakhalah's Telegram channel, September 15, 2023)

► **Mahmoud Abbas, chairman of the Palestinian Authority**, met with **Najib Mikati, prime minister of the Lebanese interim government**, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. They discussed Palestinian-Lebanese relations and the situation in Lebanon. Mahmoud Abbas emphasized his desire to achieve peace in the refugee camp in coordination with the Lebanese government (Wafa, September 19, 2023).



Mahmoud Abbas meets with Najib Mikati (Wafa, September 19, 2023)

South Lebanon

Shots fired at the American embassy

► On the evening of September 20, 2023, shots were fired at the United States Embassy in Beirut. Jack Nelson, embassy spokesman, said that small arms had been fired near the embassy building and there were no casualties or damage. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the shooting. Lebanese authorities have launched an investigation (AP, September 21, 2023).

The elections for the president of Lebanon

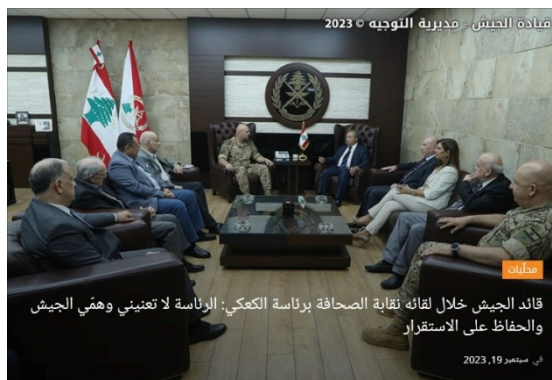
► Despite the efforts of **Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French envoy**, and **Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament**, there is no solution to the presidential crisis on the horizon.

► Hezbollah and Amal are apparently still united in their support of the candidacy of **Suleiman Frangieh**. **Muhammad Raed, a Hezbollah member of Parliament**, paid a visit to Suleiman Frangieh to deliver a letter from the Hezbollah leadership, assuring him he was Hezbollah's only candidate (al-Joumhouria, September 15, 2023). It was also reported that Suleiman Frangieh and Hassan Nasrallah had met several times and Frangieh demanded that Nasrallah consider him during attempts to reach a settlement for the presidential elections so he could "serve the national interest" (al-Jadeed TV, September 14, 2023).



Hassan Nasrallah meets with Suleiman Frangieh (al-Jadeed TV, September 14, 2023)

► **General Joseph Aoun, commander of the Lebanese army**, met with the members of the Lebanese journalists' association and answered questions about the events in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp and the issue of the presidency. He claimed the army had no intention of entering the refugee camp, and that he had no interest in running for president. His only concern, he said, was the army and maintaining stability (al Sharq Online, September 19, 2023). In the past several media outlets reported he was considering presenting himself as a presidential candidate.



General Joseph Aoun meets with members of the Lebanese journalists' association (al-Sharq Online, September 19, 2023)

Lebanese Foreign Relations

► **Najib Mikati, prime minister of the Lebanese interim government**, met in New York with **Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations**. Mikati thanked Guterres for the UN's support of Lebanon. He called for increased financial support and help to stop "Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty" (Twitter account of the office of the Lebanese interim prime minister, September 19, 2023).



Najib Mikati's meeting with the UN Secretary General (Twitter account of the interim prime minister's Office, September 19, 2023)