

Hizballah's Vision of the Lebanon-Israel Border

by [Avi Jorisch \(/experts/avi-jorisch\)](/experts/avi-jorisch)

Mar 4, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Avi Jorisch \(/experts/avi-jorisch\)](/experts/avi-jorisch)

Avi Jorisch is an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute and author of its new monograph and CD-ROM [Beacon of Hatred: Inside Hizballah's al-Manar Television \(templateC04.php?CID=66\)](#) (2004). As the Institute's Soref fellow from 2001 to 2003, he specialized in Arab and Islamic politics. More recently, he served as an



Brief Analysis

On February 28, Hizballah fired 57mm antiaircraft missiles at Israeli planes flying over the Shebaa Farms area. According to Hizballah information officer Hassan Azzedin, "the current line of Israeli withdrawal ('blue line') is not consistent with the international boundary and not recognized by the Lebanese government. That's why we're pursuing the path of resistance." Indeed, Hizballah claims that Israel continues to occupy sovereign Lebanese territory, and the organization makes this claim the basis for what it considers legitimate resistance. What, then, is Hizballah's vision of where the Lebanon-Israel border should lie?

Background

Between 1920 and 1924, French and British negotiators delineated the border between Le Grand Liban and Mandatory Palestine. After the 1948 war, the Lebanese and Israelis established the Armistice Demarcation Line (ADL), which coincided with the 1924 international border. From 1982 to 2000, Israel occupied a section of southern Lebanon, and, upon his election in July 1999, then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak announced his intention to withdraw the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from Lebanon, which he did on May 25, 2000.

Before the Israeli withdrawal, Hizballah maintained that if Israel were to retain even "one inch of Lebanese land," resistance operations would continue. And indeed, post-withdrawal, Hizballah has put forward three outstanding, broadly defined border disputes with Israel: the "seven villages," Shebaa Farms, and land appropriated by the IDF for tactical and topographical purposes.

Seven Villages

The 1924 negotiations between France and Britain included the reassignment of the Galilee "panhandle" from Lebanon to Mandatory Palestine. The panhandle incorporated Jewish settlements, Christian and Sunni villages, as well as six Shi'i villages: Ibl Qamah, Hounine, Malkieh, Nabi Yusha, Kades, and Saliha. Hizballah claims include these six villages, along with a seventh Shi'i village, Teir Bikha, located in the Acre district far east of the Galilee panhandle.

Once Israel was established, residents of the seven villages fled to Lebanon and registered themselves as "Palestinian refugees," which entitled them to United Nations Relief and Works Agency social and economic benefits. Hizballah seeks to make a case that residents of the villages, encompassing "more than 25 farms," are Lebanese because they

held Lebanese identity papers in 1933 and are currently Lebanese citizens. According to the British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, however, the villagers and their descendants received citizenship only in 1994 after thirty years of appeals in the Lebanese courts.

Additionally, the fact that Sunni and Christian villages separated from Lebanon in 1924 are not currently sought after by the Lebanese government leads many to believe that Hizballah's claim on the villages is sectarian in nature.

Hizballah's Shebaa Farms Position

Following Israel's withdrawal, both Lebanon and Hizballah argued that the withdrawal was incomplete because it did not include a twenty-five-square-kilometer collection of farms in the Golan Heights (captured by Israel during the 1967 war). This agricultural area (formerly farmed by Sunni residents of the nearby Lebanese village of Shebaa) is a strip of land located on the Syria-Lebanon border.

Hizballah is inconsistent about exactly what constitutes Shebaa Farms. According to some of their accounts, Shebaa comprises a set of fourteen farms; other Hizballah claims, however, equate Shebaa Farms with the Golan Heights itself. Hizballah's own website (www.moqawama.org) states the following about Shebaa: 1) Israeli tourists travel to the farms daily in order to visit the gravesite of the Prophet Abraham while the Lebanese are forbidden; 2) Ethiopian Jewish immigrants have settled in Shebaa. These two claims are dubious. According to Islamic and Jewish tradition, Abraham is buried in Hebron. The statement most probably refers to the site where, according to tradition, Abraham circumcised himself—a site located a number of kilometers from the farms. Moreover, there are no Israelis living on "Israeli" Shebaa, as it is a restricted military zone. One possible reading of these two statements is that Shebaa is much larger than the stated twenty-five-square-kilometer area. Such statements seem to indicate that if Israel were to return Shebaa Farms to Lebanon, there are still other areas to which Hizballah would lay claim.

Hizballah's insistence that Shebaa Farms is Lebanese has another little-noted aspect: when Hizballah fights for the liberation of a Sunni area, it sends a message to its countrymen that it is concerned for all Lebanese citizens, not just its own sectarian Shi'i interests.

The Blue Line

When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, it pushed the border fence northward and westward by a few hundred meters in several locations for military, tactical, and topographical purposes. This modified border came to be known as the "purple line." When Israel withdrew its forces, the UN set out to determine the location of the internationally recognized 1949 border and established what came to be known as the "blue line."

According to Hizballah, Israel violates the international border at four incursion zones. These include the border ridges between Yarin and Rmeish in the western sector, the hills between Adaisseh and Markaba in the central sector, and the southern end of the al-Marj Valley in the eastern sector. Also contested are military bases atop the Abbad Hill compound in the central sector, distinguished by its twin radio antennae and observation balloon, and civilian homes in Misgav Am. According to Hizballah, these land tracts were taken in order to "dominate views" along the border and, as such, constitute "permanent violations of the 1949 Armistice Agreement."

Hizballah also contests the village of Ghajar, straddling the blue line on the foothills of Mount Hermon. In conflicting statements, Hizballah variably claims 1) the whole village, 2) the half physically located in Lebanon, and 3) none of the village (in the latter case because village residents are Syrian Alawites). At present, a situation has been created that is unacceptable to all parties involved: half of the village residents live in Israel and the other half in Lebanon; Israel continues to experience security problems; and Hizballah claims the village as part of an outstanding border dispute.

The Israeli government's stated position, echoed by the UN, is that Israel has withdrawn fully in accordance with

UNSC Resolution 425. On July 24, 2001, after Israel removed sections of its security fence that were in violation of the blue line, the UN finally confirmed that Israeli authorities had "removed all violations of the line of withdrawal" and were fully compliant with the resolution.

The UN's demarcation of the blue line identified a border "based on the best available cartographic and other documentary evidence available." However, Secretary-General Kofi Annan has repeatedly emphasized that Resolution 425 references only the border that existed when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978, and not the internationally recognized border of 1949. Such constructive ambiguity has led to an intolerable situation whereby Israel claims that it pulled out of Lebanon in full, while Hizballah justifies its continued attacks based on the ongoing international border dispute. This convenient back door has also allowed the Lebanese government to disregard its own constitution, which endorses the substance of Resolution 425.

Policy Implications

A vicious cycle has been created by the UN that will inevitably result in continued attacks and counterattacks on the part of Hizballah and Israel. Although to date Hizballah has waged attacks against Israel only in the Shebaa Farms area, the scope of these attacks could widen in the future to include the other areas that Hizballah contends as occupied. It stands to reason that if the present situation continues, Israel will feel the need to secure its northern border by attacking Lebanese, Syrian, and/or Hizballah targets. Far from securing peace with a demarcated and enforced border, the UN's ambiguous position may bring the region to a heightened level of conflict, and possibly even war.

❖ Avi J. Jorisch is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute. Seth Wikas also contributed to this piece.

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