

Israel-Lebanon Border: Security Situation Improving

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Brief Analysis

Today, following last weekend's deployment into southern Lebanon by United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Lebanese security forces fulfilled their commitments and deployed into Israel's former occupied zone. The lack of major incidents and the relative restraint of Hizballah since the IDF withdrew in May surprises some observers, but the border remains less than fully secured. Hizballah maintains an armed presence in the south, and objects hurled across the border into Israel occasionally lead to Israeli retaliatory fire and injuries. Israeli officials are hopeful that the recent UNIFIL and Lebanese force deployments will reduce tensions. However, these deployments are unlikely to significantly improve the security situation along the border. The key to keeping the peace has more to do with economic incentives for the southern Lebanese, and a strategy of continued deterrence against Syria.

UNIFIL and Lebanese forces deploy to the border. Since the May withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon and the collapse of the Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army, UNIFIL has beefed up its presence from approximately 4,500 peacekeepers to 5,075, and last weekend expanded its area of deployment. It now oversees some 18 positions along the border-in the former Israeli "security zone"-with 30-40 peacekeepers each. The UN plans on further expanding UNIFIL's force to a total of 8,000 troops, raising the number of infantry battalions that patrol southern Lebanon from six to eight and augmenting critical support units, including combat engineers for mine disposal. UNIFIL also plans to use helicopters for aerial observation of the withdrawal line (also called the "blue line"), and is attempting to acquire four Norwegian patrol boats for use along the southern Lebanese coastline.

UNIFIL's deployment has so far been cautious, both because of the large presence of land mines in the area and its strategy of securing support from the regional players before expanding its role. In particular, UNIFIL's apparent insistence on securing Beirut's approval for deployment appears to be the reason for its refusal to establish a presence along the most volatile portion of the border, the former Fatma border crossing just north of Metulla. As a result, the site has become a favorite spot for Lebanese and other Arab travelers to shower the Israeli side of the border with stones, bottles, Molotov cocktails and other crude weapons. Beirut-with the usual dose of heavy Syrian influence-reportedly has not given permission for a UNIFIL presence at the Fatma crossing, so as not to "reward" Israel with total quiet along the border as long as talks with Syria over a Golan deal remain frozen.

Following numerous delays, the Lebanese have begun deploying to the area a mixed force of five hundred Internal Security Force personnel (police-like force) in addition to five hundred Lebanese Army personnel. However, Beirut does not intend to deploy the force to the border, and will limit its duties to internal security and public order. The force commander will be from the Internal Security Force and not from the Lebanese army, to demonstrate that the focus of the mission is on internal security and not on guarding the border. Moreover, Hizballah will likely be permitted to maintain an armed presence in the south, although they may be asked to adopt a lower profile.

Hizballah exercising restraint. Since the withdrawal of the IDF in May, Hizballah guerrillas have been manning observation posts opposite the Israeli border, within eyesight of Israeli sentries. Only in the past week have UNIFIL

troops replaced Hizballah at many of these posts, although Hizballah's armed presence remains a visible feature. Sheikh Mohammad Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hizballah, continues publicly to threaten Israel citing Lebanese detainees in Israeli jails (including former Hizballah chief Sheikh Abdel-Karim Obeid), and territorial claims based on inconsistencies between the blue line and the 1923 international border. Nevertheless, Hizballah continues to exercise relative restraint, largely limiting its provocations to rhetoric and rock throwing across the border.

This restraint is the result of several factors. First, and most importantly, Hizballah wants to translate its military victory into an electoral one. With the first round of Lebanese parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in late August, the party hopes to increase its number of representatives and deputies. Attacking Israel and soliciting retaliatory raids-at a time when southern Lebanese are eager to rebuild and attract international aid and investment-would endanger this goal. Second, provoking such a conflict would turn the area back into a war zone and undermine Hizballah's self-declared victory over Israel. Third, by acting irresponsibly along the border, Hizballah would jeopardize its close ties with Beirut after an unprecedented meeting in June between Sheikh Nasrallah and President Emile Lahoud. The importance of maintaining favorable relations with Beirut, and concern over antagonizing its political support base in the south, suggest that Hizballah may not adopt a more aggressive posture even after the Lebanese parliamentary elections conclude on September 3.

Since Israel withdrew in May, south Lebanese residents care less about the Arab-Israeli dispute than rebuilding the South and improving their livelihood. Poverty has replaced the IDF as the number one enemy. On July 27 and 28, Beirut hosted an international donor conference, hoping to attract more than \$1 billion for aiding the South. Although no firm commitments were made, a follow-up conference is planned for October to deal with specifics. The success of Lebanese efforts to secure aid will depend in large part on the degree of stability in the South. The desire for aid is a powerful incentive for south Lebanese residents and Beirut to keep the border area peaceful.

Likelihood of a flare-up. The deployment of UNIFIL and Lebanese security forces to the South is likely to improve the security situation, but only marginally. UNIFIL will not impose a peace, and the Lebanese mixed force will not act as a border guard for the Israelis. The presence of these forces can however deter militants interested in provoking clashes. How successfully UNIFIL can act as a deterrent remains to be seen. It will depend on two factors: whether it acquires the necessary manpower to field the two extra infantry battalions for more coverage of the border area, and whether it obtains permission from Beirut (and Damascus) to deploy to trouble spots such as the Fatma gate.

For now, Syria and Lebanon are content with the status quo-no guarantees for Israel's security along the border, but enough of a peace to attract investors and aid donors. Syria, for its part, appears to be deterred by Israeli threats to retaliate in the event of major cross-border attacks from Lebanon. Syria's calculation could change by next year if it perceives that more pressure needs to be applied on Israel (and Washington) to restart negotiations for an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. This will depend in part on the internal security situation in Damascus, and whether Bashar feels like gambling on an armed exchange with the IDF.

Yet another variable is the socio-economic situation in the South. If the economic assistance that the residents of southern Lebanon are counting on does not materialize, this could lead to feelings of abandonment and injustice, which in turn could erode their incentive for keeping the peace. The opposite holds true as well-as long as south Lebanese residents have a stake in keeping the area free from conflict, the likelihood of major border incidents is reduced. While U.S. aid accounts for approximately 5 percent of all bilateral donor disbursements to Lebanon, Washington can take a leading role, as it has in the past, in promoting international aid to Lebanon. Effectively administered aid will assist the Lebanese government in strengthening its authority and credibility in the South.

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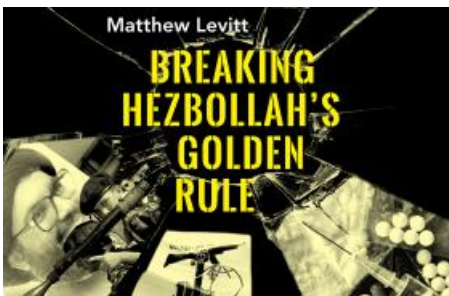
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