

The Israel-Lebanon Border:

A Primer

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Brief Analysis

On April 16, Israel officially notified the United Nations (UN) that southern Lebanon would be evacuated in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 425, adding further weight to the March 5, 2000, announcement by the Israeli cabinet that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) would "redeploy on the border with Lebanon by July 2000." Twenty-two years after the passage of UNSCR 425, Israel has decided to leave Lebanon unconditionally.

The elegant simplicity of unilateral withdrawal has, however, been complicated by controversy over the exact location of the Israel-Lebanon boundary. Ambiguity over the border's actual trace has enabled Hizballah to hold out the prospect of continued, post-withdrawal, cross-border anti-Israeli violence, on the grounds that a few meters of Lebanese territory here or there might still be "occupied" by the IDF.

Background

Much about the Israel-Lebanon boundary is not disputed. The line from Ra's an-Naqura (Rosh HaNikra) on the Mediterranean to Jisr al-Ghajar on the Hasbani was delineated in 1920, surveyed and demarcated in 1921, described officially in 1922, ratified in 1923, and brought fully into effect in 1924 with the incorporation into Palestine of several Shi'i villages, thereby forming the Galilee "panhandle." The line was redemarcated by the British and French in the early 1940s, primarily because the French had fallen down on the job of maintaining the even-numbered boundary markers. The 1949 Israel-Lebanon General Armistice Agreement designated the 1923 Palestine-Lebanon boundary as the "Armistice Demarcation Line" (ADL) between the two states. At Lebanon's request, the ADL was redemarcated in 1949-51 by a subcommittee of the Israel-Lebanon Mixed Armistice Commission (ILMAC).

By early 1951, according to UN reporting, the entire ADL was marked except for the easternmost five kilometers, where the parties had differing interpretations of the original Anglo-French boundary agreement. With the possible exception of these five kilometers between boundary pillar 38 (just southeast of Metulla) and Jisr al-Ghajar, there are no "boundary disputes" per se between Israel and Lebanon. Moreover, both sides have proclaimed their adherence to the 1923/1949 international boundary, or ADL. So why the controversy?

Border 'Improvements'

Many in the IDF would prefer to withdraw not to the international boundary (the "red line") but instead to a slightly modified border (known as the "purple line"), which Israel has for years treated as the line dividing Israel from Lebanon.

The reason for the differences between the two lines is that the 1921 survey drew a border without giving consideration to military defense. The boundary meandered across the fields and ridges of Upper Galilee with no thought whatsoever given to impeding human cross-border traffic or to erecting security barriers (though parts of the boundary were later fenced during the disturbances of 1936-39). When Lebanon lost control of its southern boundary in the early 1970s, the IDF found it expedient to "improve" upon the line initially surveyed half a century earlier. According to Gal Luft, the changes were mostly on the Israeli side: the purple line leaves about 1,000 acres of Israel on the "Lebanese side" of the security fence and about 500 acres of Lebanon on the "Israeli side." The establishment of this purple line was part of the same process that saw a sophisticated security system fully installed along the complete length of the border after 1974, in the wake of three murderous Palestinian raids from Lebanon.

In addition, it appears that since 1982, Israeli private dwellings in Misgav Am, Manara, and Avivim have either encroached on the official boundary or have come perilously close to the line.

Tasked to prepare a unilateral withdrawal, the IDF developed a plan labeled "Morning Twilight" that provided for withdrawal to the purple line rather than the international border. Although that plan would have left more Israeli land on the Lebanese side than Lebanese land on the Israeli side, it would have been criticized severely by Lebanon. Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak therefore ordered withdrawal to the 1978 boundary.

Various ideas are being debated regarding the exact line to which Israel will withdraw. One proposal is for all Israeli forces to retire completely behind the line they crossed during their 1978 withdrawal--a line whose relationship to the 1923/1949 line is not precisely known. The 1978 withdrawal led then-UN secretary-general Kurt Waldheim to judge that the Israeli action constituted complete compliance with UNSCR 425's requirement for a full Israeli withdrawal; he reported to the Security Council that "on 13 June, the Israeli forces withdrew from the remaining occupied area in Southern Lebanon."

Denying the confusion over this issue, Lebanon's official position is that the actual boundary line is precisely known, and that Israel should withdraw to it.

Demarcating the Border

The bottom line is that a boundary last demarcated in 1951 needs to be marked again. At the time of the 1978 Israeli withdrawal, Lebanon's position, as reported by the UN, was "that all border problems shall henceforth be discussed with UNIFIL and in the framework of a reactivated Israel-Lebanon Mixed Armistice Commission, a meeting of which was held on 12 June [1978], the Lebanese government being represented by senior military officers from Beirut."

The UN might again invite the parties to reconstitute, pending eventual peace talks, the ILMAC. Adherence to the 1949 armistice is an important pillar of Lebanon's 1989 National Reconciliation (Taif) Accord. Were Israel to set aside its 1967 unilateral renunciation of the armistice--a move recognized by no one--it might instantly acquire a forum in which security and boundary matters could be discussed with Lebanese military officers. A top priority of ILMAC could be to form a boundary demarcation subcommittee, as it did in 1949, to undertake the task of resurveying and marking the border.

Redemarcation may not be easy, even though the surveying records from 1921, 1941, and 1951 can presumably be assembled. Key reference points in the original survey--paths, villages, and even a tree--are long gone. Yet the parties already agree in principle that it is the 1923/1949 line that officially divides them. With appropriate technical

assistance, Israel and Lebanon could mark their boundary professionally and unambiguously, if there is sufficient cooperation between the two parties and enough encouragement from the international community. Demarcating the border would remove all doubt as to the completeness of Israel's withdrawal and all pretext for post-withdrawal violence.

Frederic C. Hof is the author of *Galilee Divided: The Israel-Lebanon Frontier, 1916-1984* (Westview Press, 1985) and *Line of Battle, Border of Peace? The Line of June 4, 1967* (Middle East Insight, 1999).



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