

PolicyWatch 1415

UN Resolution 1701: A View from the United States

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This PolicyWatch is the third in a three-part series examining the situation in Lebanon two years after the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. This series coincides with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Marine barracks bombing in Lebanon on October 23, 1983, an attack that continues to inform U.S. policymaking in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East.

Read the two companion PolicyWatches, "[UN Resolution 1701: A View from Israel](#)" and "[UN Resolution 1701: A View from Lebanon](#)."

Two years after the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, it is tempting to view another conflict as inevitable: arms continue to flow, Hizballah has rebuilt and enhanced its military strength, Lebanon remains fractured by violent political divisions, and tensions between Iran and Israel have increased. There is, however, cause for hope -- Lebanon's pro-sovereignty leaders have proven courageous and resilient, and the international community has committed significant resources to the country's institutions. If renewed conflict is to be avoided, Lebanon, Israel, and their allies must take advantage of these assets and redouble their efforts to enforce Resolution 1701.

Background

The July 16, 2008, return to Israel of the remains of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev marked an end, of sorts, to a war that began almost exactly two years earlier, when the two Israeli soldiers were captured and eight of their colleagues killed in a brazen cross-border attack by Hizballah. Almost from the start of the ensuing conflict, it was clear that the international effort to end it would have to address not only the fighting on the ground but also the dangerous dynamics that had allowed Hizballah to draw the region to the brink of a wider conflagration. The product of this effort was Resolution 1701, which delineated three principles -- no foreign forces, no weapons for nongovernmental militias, and no independent authority separate from the central government -- as vital to a lasting Lebanese peace. Underlying these principles was the recognition that while the flow of arms to terrorist groups like Hizballah is the most immediate threat to stability in Lebanon, the true key to long-term peace is an empowered and capable central government in Beirut.

Strengthening the Lebanese Government

The UN resolution's most basic objective, a ceasefire, was quickly achieved: the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the expanded UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) deployed throughout southern Lebanon in late 2006, and the Blue Line (the UN's 2000 border demarcation between Israel and Lebanon) has been relatively quiet ever since. The ceasefire, however, proved to be the easy part. More difficult was dealing with the domestic ramifications of the conflict in Lebanon -- Hizballah was emboldened and Lebanon's central government was weakened. Their ensuing struggle for power culminated in May 2008 in a bloody street battle that claimed sixty-five lives, eventually leading to Hizballah's temporary occupation of Beirut.

In the Doha Agreement that followed, Hizballah gained new political power, albeit at the cost of credibility lost in turning its weapons against its own people. The pro-sovereignty forces, on the other hand, made painful concessions to the opposition but in many respects stood their ground and even made gains by electing a president, forming a government, and promulgating a strong cabinet statement. The true test of their strength will be in how President Michel Suleiman and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora handle ongoing discussions of Hizballah's arms, and how the majority fares in the 2009 parliamentary elections.

Built into the UN resolution was the recognition that the Lebanese government would need significant international aid, and indeed it has received an influx of economic and security assistance for the past two years. A massive increase of U.S. assistance, which included \$200 million in military aid this year, led international efforts. Events during this period, however, have underscored that while foreign aid can provide vital leverage to Lebanon's government, real change must be led by the Lebanese themselves. For example, international security assistance gave the LAF an edge in its hard-fought victory over the radical Sunni organization Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in mid-2007. But the operation's success ultimately stemmed from the LAF's determination and public support. Hizballah at first sought to limit the LAF's freedom of action, but was forced to backpedal when it became clear that the tide of public opinion supported the government.

The Challenge of Hizballah

The violence in May 2008 underscored one of the premises of Resolution 1701: that any gains made by the Lebanese government could easily be countered by Hizballah with massive military force. Resolution 1701 sought to constrain Hizballah's military capability by securing Lebanon's eastern border, thus limiting both the flow of arms and the ambitions of Iran and Syria. But the active opposition of those regimes and the lack of robust border security measures left the border porous, allowing Hizballah to rearm. In fact, Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak asserted that Hizballah's arsenal of rockets has nearly tripled since 2006.

Arms smuggling and an emboldened Hizballah pose a threat to the region that is difficult to overstate. As a vanguard for Tehran, Hizballah frustrates progress on regional peace and stability and acts as a proxy through which Iran can operate without risking direct retaliation. This strategy holds true not only in the Levant, but also throughout the Middle East -- such as Hizballah's training of Iraqi Shiite militants -- and as far away as South America, where Hizballah agents engage in terrorist financing and other activities. Compounding the problem, the Iran-Syria arms pipeline supplies al-Qaeda-linked terrorist groups in Palestinian refugee camps, as well as other Syrian proxies in the region.

Next Steps

Two years after the summer 2006 war, the need for full and effective enforcement of Resolution 1701 remains urgent. The possibility of renewed conflict looms large and is compounded by tensions between Iran and Israel, the potential for Hizballah to avenge the death of Imad Mughniyeh (the military commander killed by a February 2008 car bomb in Damascus), and the activities of terrorist groups operating in Palestinian refugee camps, which continue to put the country at risk.

In the short term, it is critical to stop the flow of arms to the militias that hold Lebanon hostage. To this end, any further European moves to revive EU-Syria relations should stipulate that Damascus cooperate in ending the flow of arms into Lebanon. The EU should also emulate the British government's recent designation of Hizballah as a terrorist organization. In addition, the international community and Lebanon's regional partners should take meaningful action to secure the Lebanese-Syrian border, or Siniora should charge UNIFIL with that mission under the authority provided him by Resolution 1701. Finally, measures to stop the arms before they arrive at the border should be examined in earnest.

The long-term challenge for Lebanon's allies will be to strengthen the Lebanese state by increasing military, diplomatic, and economic assistance to Beirut. The Lebanese government, in turn, can demonstrate its authority by continuing to address the country's security challenges and wresting control of the Lebanon-Israel relationship from Hizballah and Iran by taking up Israel's offer of bilateral talks. Hizballah and its allies may criticize such a move, but Suleiman could justify the talks by pointing to the peace deals and ongoing talks between Israel and its other neighbors.

For its part, Israel should recognize that effective implementation of Resolution 1701 requires strong Lebanese civic and security institutions. Israeli leaders should see the Lebanese government as a partner and refrain from actions that indirectly benefit those seeking to undermine it, such as Hizballah. While Hizballah, despite its claims of defending Lebanon, dragged Israel and Lebanon into a war neither wanted, the Lebanese and Israeli governments should pursue the peace that both countries need.

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