

INSS Insight No. 1184, July 2, 2019

Southern Lebanon: The Land of Three Armies

Assaf Orion

July 12, 2019 will mark the thirteenth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War; August 14 will mark the anniversary of its end under Security Council Resolution 1701; and discussions will be held at the United Nations headquarters regarding a renewal of UNIFIL's mandate for another year. Resolution 1701 called for a ceasefire, prevention of renewed hostilities, and establishment of the area south of the Litani River as an area free of non-governmental arms, and called on Lebanon to impose its sovereignty over its territory by deploying the Lebanese Army, supported by the UN force. Looking back over the years, particularly over this past year, the outlines of the resolution's successes, and well as its failures, are well discerned. The bottom line: another war between Israel and Lebanon did not erupt, mainly due to both sides' desire to avoid it and, to some extent, also due to UNIFIL's help in preventing escalation resulting from tactical incidents. On the other hand, southern Lebanon has become an area dominated by dense Hezbollah's military deployment, the Lebanese Army's cooperation and complicity with Hezbollah and its violations of 1701 have been exposed, and UNIFIL has not only failed to prevent the reemerging conditions for another war, but has also actively contributed to the creation of a false picture covering up this reality. This state of affairs reflects the balance of power in the region and in Lebanon, in which Iran and its proxy organization, Hezbollah, have achieved a dominant position in Lebanon's political system. Similarly, it reflects the weakening to the point of irrelevance of their former rivals in Lebanon and the Gulf, and the West's policy shortfalls. Given the wide gap between policy and reality, it would be wise for Israel to consider significant policy and operational changes, both vis-à-vis the United Nations and bilaterally with leading countries, taking into account the clear risks on the one hand and the budding opportunities on the other, mainly the anticipated negotiations over the maritime and land borders.

By the agreed maxims, the main pillar of United Nations and international community policy toward Lebanon is the sovereign Lebanese government's responsibility for what transpires within its territory. This aspiration is complemented by the expectation that Lebanon will fulfill its commitments through its "national defense strategy dialogue" and by its army's deployment and operations. The supporting pillar of this expectation is the

strengthening of the Lebanese Army as the main institution a symbol of Lebanese national unity. However, since these two pillars are grounded in vain hopes, false assumptions, and an imaginary reality, there is no chance of thus advancing toward the declared objectives (a sovereign Lebanese state that controls its territory and weapons) or the ostensible objectives (biding time, buying calm, and reducing risk).

Over the past year several incidents dramatically exposed the gap between the reality on the ground and how it is represented in United Nations reports and policy guidelines. The lead story is the IDF's Operation Northern Shield, launched in December 2018, which exposed attack tunnels that Hezbollah had excavated over several years from Lebanese territory into Israeli territory in preparation for a wide scale surprise ground offensive in wartime. The IDF discovered six tunnels that crossed the Blue Line into Israeli territory, neutralized them, invited UNIFIL forces to visit them, and apparently also gave UNIFIL information about the entry points into the tunnels from the Lebanese side. UNIFIL confirmed the existence of five tunnels (one tunnel was destroyed before its visit), the fact that three of them crossed the Blue Line, and the start of one tunnel inside a cement factory in Kafr Kila, after concrete pumped in from the Israeli side gushed out of it. Since December 2018, the United Nations has not been allowed direct access to any entry point into the tunnels, and its pleas to the Lebanese government and to the Lebanese Army have been flatly denied, on the pretext that the sites at issue are "private properties." The Lebanese government has likewise ignored the United Nations' repeated calls for clarification of incidents of UN patrols attacked by Hezbollah activists – incidents detailed in special appendices to the secretary-general's reports since Security Council Resolution 2373 two years ago. Observation posts of the "environmental group" Green Without Borders are situated, very suspiciously, in close proximity to the routes of the exposed tunnels. As UN executives also admitted privately, it is clear that at issue are Hezbollah operational posts, but the access to them is also limited because they are on "private property." There were also recent reports of drones in Lebanon, some of which crossed into Israeli airspace – another manifestation of Hezbollah's persistent and enhanced intelligence collection efforts.

The events of this past year have brought the reality as it actually is to the surface. On the military level, three armies operate concomitantly in southern Lebanon in two parallel universes: Hezbollah's military ("the yellow army") for years has been building offensive military infrastructure in southern Lebanon with Iran's assistance, while systematically breaching the Lebanese government's commitments within the framework of Resolution 1701; Hezbollah's illicit military activities are camouflaged in civilian guise and embedded in populated areas and in "private properties," both above and below ground. The ten thousand UNIFIL soldiers ("the blue army") indeed increased the number of their patrols over the last two years and the scope of their reporting, but with almost zero

findings, apart from the above-mentioned harassments. The Lebanese Army (“the red army”), which with UNIFIL support is supposed to realize Lebanese sovereignty as the sole legal armed force in the region, is an active partner of Hezbollah, helping to conceal its activities from the United Nations and restrict UNIFIL’s activities, access, and situational awareness. While readily accepting assistance from the West, the Lebanese Army is careful to procrastinate in fulfilling the international expectations that it will deploy additional forces in southern Lebanon.

While the United Nations reports thousands of patrols in the area without any findings, recent events proved that Israel has a credible intelligence picture penetrating even Hezbollah’s clandestine and compartmentalized projects. Israel’s exposure of physical evidence sheds light on the absurdity of the UN’s declamations about the “lack of evidence” of violations in Lebanon. In the political dimension, there is a wide gap between the international community’s appeals to the Lebanese government and the simple fact that this government, whether as a hostage or as a willing accomplice, plays an active role in concealing Hezbollah’s military and in enabling its activities against Israel and against the UN forces. Since Iran and Hezbollah have seized control over politics in Lebanon, the Lebanese government is not the solution, but rather, is part of the problem, with the West’s hopes pinned on it consciously false.

In the final analysis, the gravest military threat to Israel’s security today has gradually emerged in Lebanon: a massive, forward array of Iranian firepower on Israel’s northern border, embedded in populated areas while enjoying a sovereign state’s protection and cloaked in international denial. True – the border has been quiet since the 2006 war, but the likelihood of an outbreak is increasing, against the backdrop of the United States withdrawal from the nuclear deal and Iran’s pushback in the military and nuclear dimensions, the ongoing clashes between Israel and Iran in Syria, and the increasing economic pressures on Iran, Hezbollah, and Lebanon. Many explosive fuses lead, therefore, to this powerful bomb that is liable to explode despite the parties’ desires to avoid war. If it breaks out, Israel and Hezbollah will find themselves in an intense, lethal, and destructive war, while the United Nations will be forced to contend with two key challenges. The lesser of the two will be a severe credibility crisis, as the veil will be ripped off of its complacent reports from southern Lebanon. The graver problem will be the fact that ten thousand UN troops will find themselves in the center of one of the densest rocket launch regions in the world, which will overnight become a bloody battlefield and entail a significant number of casualties among UNIFIL forces.

After thirteen years of experience with Resolution 1701, Israel can understand the limits of the current conditions and update its policy accordingly. Israel’s policy at this time would do well to increase the economic and political pressures on Hezbollah, to

undermine the foundations of state sponsorship and concealment that underpin the organization's strategy, and concurrently, to exploit opportunities to gradually stabilize the long range security reality in Lebanon. As Western diplomats in the United Nations have said: "It is generally easier to operate in Western capitals than in New York"; consequently, it is advisable to work concurrently with UN institutions and with governments in both the United States and Europe.

It is in Israel's interest to recognize the positive role played by UNIFIL and the United Nations as a liaison in reducing the friction along the Blue Line, and at the same time – after the glass, (or rather, concrete) ceiling was exposed, clearly revealing the limits of UNIFIL's potential – it is time to curb UNIFIL's economic and political contribution to Lebanon and to Hezbollah, and reduce the risk to its oversized force if war breaks out. As I have previously argued, it is advisable to take gradual action to downsize UNIFIL's forces – initially, by one quarter to one third, and to begin a corresponding cutback in its annual budget, which is close to half a billion dollars. The number of local southern Lebanese workers that UNIFIL employs should be reduced, as well as the civil projects that it finances, since they constitute direct assistance to a population that supports Hezbollah. At the very least, the international resources should no longer be channeled to these villages, where UNIFIL patrols are harassed; i.e., to villages hosting Hezbollah military activities. Israel should demand that the UN report not only the scope of its patrols in the region (which may be an impressive number) that yield only scant findings, but also about their routes over time. There are reasonable grounds to assume that these patrols consistently avoid Hezbollah's operational areas, and an official UN announcement of this could help peel off another layer of Hezbollah's denial of its activities. Israel should demand that in addition to publication of details about the clashes and harassments of UN forces in the secretary-general's quarterly reports, the United Nations publish the status of the Lebanese government's follow-up and handling of the previous incidents, a change from the current "file and forget" practice. A similar follow-up performed by the IDF in former years revealed a consistent picture of systematic procrastination on the part of the Lebanese government, while clearly breaching its obligations as a country hosting UNIFIL forces. Furthermore, Israel should urge the Security Council to insist that the Lebanese government fulfill its responsibilities and commitments – particularly in relation to the demand to locate the entry points of tunnels that cross into Israel – and reduce the credit the Security Council affords it, which is both based on false hopes and contradicted by the facts. The Lebanese government's pretext of "private properties" must be dismissed outright, after it was proven that it is a ruse used for systematic camouflage to conceal violations and Hezbollah's illicit military assets.

Israel should advance additional policy elements with the United States and Western countries. First, it is necessary to update and adjust the policy vis-à-vis the Lebanese

Army which, like Lebanon as a whole, is presumably not marked by uniformity or political unity. Therefore, the statements voiced in Israel, whereby “the Lebanese army cooperates with Hezbollah,” and in Western countries, whereby “the Lebanese army should be reinforced,” are over-generalizations that require a differentiating and discerning approach. There is no doubt that parts of the Lebanese Army cooperate intensively with Hezbollah, while probably others do not. Some parts will certainly be enemies of Israel in any future war, while others’ survival is desired from a post-war perspective. Since it has become evident that the deployment of the Lebanese Army in the south is not at the expense of Hezbollah’s military forces there, it would be wise to temper international enthusiasm about reinforcing Lebanese forces south of the Litani River. Further assistance to the Lebanese Army should be provided to units that pose no danger to Israel, such as units combating terrorist activities and border security units, and assistance should be made contingent upon performance and the fulfillment of Lebanon’s obligations.

Second, within the scope of the set of economic pressures on Iran and its partners, and after initial measures have already signaled the close associates of Speaker of the Lebanese parliament Nabih Berri, action should be taken to designate Hezbollah’s partners in Lebanon and impose sanctions against them: parts of the Lebanese Army working as Hezbollah cohorts (such as the Lebanese Military Intelligence and relevant unit commanders in the south), local leaders who are members of the Hezbollah organization, and the Green Without Borders straw organization and the sources of its funding.

Third, it would be wise to exhaust the positive – even if tenuous – potential of the talks on demarcation of the maritime border and the division of the gas resources that will soon be developed. Taking a bold approach, and depending upon the extent of the progress achieved during the talks, it would also be worthwhile to challenge Lebanon and Hezbollah with a peace proposal that includes a demand to disarm Hezbollah of its heavy weaponry and to subordinate its forces to the government. Even if it is highly unlikely that such a course of action will bring peace to Israel’s northern border, it offers significant potential for intensifying the political pressures in Lebanon with regard to Hezbollah’s arsenal and exposing the fact that rather than being Lebanon’s protector, as Hezbollah claims, it poses the gravest risk to Lebanon’s security.