



Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center

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Explosion in Hezbollah weapons depot in the village of Khirbet Silim exposes the existence of an active Hezbollah military infrastructure south of the Litani river. UNIFIL and the Lebanese army are shown helpless and unable to prevent Hezbollah's military buildup, a gross and flagrant violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.



The building in the village of Khirbet Silim which was used by Hezbollah as a weapons depot, before (left) and after the explosion.

Overview

1. On the eve of the third anniversary of the second Lebanon war, three events occurred in the central and eastern sectors of south Lebanon: On July 14, 2009, a weapons depot belonging to Hezbollah blew up in the outskirts of the village of Khirbet Silim, south of the Litani river; on July 18 there was a confrontation between local Lebanese residents and UNIFIL forces (the French battalion) who were trying to search for weapons in the village of Bir al-Sanassel; and on July 17 Lebanese demonstrators entered territory controlled by Israel on the slopes of Har Dov (in the region of the village of Shuba in the eastern sector) and waved Lebanese and Hezbollah flags in an act of provocation.

2. The three incidents illustrate the **fragility** of the calm which has prevailed in south Lebanon since the end of the second Lebanon war and the potential for renewed violence. **The explosion of the weapons depot in Khirbet Silim** is particularly significant because it publicly exposed, for the first time since the war, the existence of Hezbollah arms caches in south Lebanon. **It proves Israel's claim that Hezbollah has consistently, grossly and flagrantly violated UN Security Council Resolution 1701**, maintaining **hundreds of weapons depots in south Lebanon**, most of them camouflaged in residential dwellings.¹

3. The incidents exposed **two additional aspects** of the issue:

i. **The limitations of UNIFIL's freedom of action**, which does not prevent Hezbollah from building up its military infrastructure with Iranian and Syrian support. UNIFIL narrowly interprets the mandate it received from Security Council Resolution 1701 and is careful not to confront Hezbollah. In addition, UNIFIL forces avoid taking effective action in the Shi'ite villages where Hezbollah maintains its military networks (although it showed slightly more assertiveness and determination in dealing with the events in Khirbet Silim). Hezbollah has exploited the events in Khirbet Silim to **spread threats** aimed at restricting UNIFIL even further in the future, giving its own baseless interpretation to Resolution 1701.

ii. **The practical collaboration between Hezbollah, the Lebanese army and Lebanese government**: The Lebanese government and army refrain – for internal reasons – from effectively enforcing the government's sovereignty in the south. The **Lebanese army**, which has been an important factor in south Lebanon since the second Lebanon war, helped Hezbollah contain and destroy the traces of the explosion

¹ Rebuilding Hezbollah's military networks, a process aided by Iran and Syria, and the problems of the Lebanese government and UNIFIL, were clear during the first year after the second Lebanon war. For further information see our August 13, 2007 bulletin "One year since the acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the second Lebanon war: An interim report" at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/un1701_0807.pdf. Speaking on July 17, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah again stated that Hezbollah had no intention of ceding its arms ["the weapon of resistance," i.e. terrorism] and that it is not an issue for discussion or negotiation (Radio Nur, July 17, 2009).

in Khirbet Silim. In addition, the **Lebanese government** gave Hezbollah both political and propaganda support in the deliberations held in the Security Council by sending a letter with a fabricated account of the events (The support was ineffectual and this time the responses in the international community and Security Council were much stronger than usual.)

4. Descriptions follow of the three incidents in south Lebanon and the most significant reactions by Hezbollah and other factors:



South Lebanon (Google Earth, July 29, 2009).

First Incident: A weapons depot explodes in Khirbet Silim

A short description of the event

5. On the morning of **July 14, 2009**, there was an explosion in an abandoned building on the outskirts of Khirbet Silim, a village north of Bint Jbeil (15 kilometers, or 9.3 miles, from Israel). The cause was unknown but the noise and size of the explosion and the destruction it caused made it clear that **the building had been used as a weapons depot**. There were no casualties. Apparently it housed, among other things, rockets, machine gun ammunition, mortar shells and artillery shells.

6. Hezbollah tried to contain the event and cover up the fact that that was storing weapons in populated areas. Following the explosion, dozens of Hezbollah operatives arrived, surrounded the building and, with the support of the Lebanese army, prevented UNIFIL from

approaching. It was reported that they then brought in two trucks and started removing the remains of the weapons, especially the rockets and mortar shells (Nowlebanon website, July 25, Elaph website, July 16, 2009). The UNIFIL forces, which succeeded in entering the village with the Lebanese army only the next day, found the building abandoned and containing only the remains of the weapons Hezbollah did not have time to remove.



The building where the Hezbollah weapons store exploded.



Aerial photos of the region of the explosion.

Responses

Hezbollah

7. Although both UNIFIL and the international community blamed Hezbollah, the organization's spokesmen **did not admit** that the weapons depot had belonged to it and raised a series of false explanations for the explosion. Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary general, issued the **complete fabrication** that weapons left by the IDF after the second Lebanon war and stored in Khirbet Silim in collaboration with the Lebanese army had exploded. He claimed that Israel was making an issue over nothing and that no violation of the Security Council resolution had occurred (Alnashra website, July 22, 2009); the lie was quoted by the Lebanese media (Elaph website, July 23; *Nahar Al-Shabab*, July 30, 2009).

8. Despite Hezbollah's embarrassment, it tried to exploit the event to turn its weapons depots in south Lebanon into a factual issue which, it claimed, did not violate Resolution 1701. For example, on July 24 **Hassan Huballah**, a Hezbollah representative in the Lebanese Parliament, told Iranian Al-Alam TV that since Resolution 1701 was passed, and even before, no weapons had been seen in public south of the Litani river. He made the **totally unfounded claim** that the resolution only forbade a public show of arms south of the Litani river and not the presence of arms in general, "since weapons are found

throughout Lebanon and all Lebanese have them.” **Sheikh Naim Qassem**, Hezbollah’s deputy secretary general, repeated the claim about the overt show of weapons, noting that the decision had been taken by the Lebanese government a few days before the publication of the Security Council Resolution² (Nahar Al-Shabab, July 30, 2009).

UNIFIL and the UN

9. UNIFIL spokesmen unambiguously accused Hezbollah of violating Security Council Resolution 1701. UNIFIL said in a statement that the explosion in the weapons depot [in Khirbet Silim] was a **“serious violation”** of the Resolution [1701] (AP, July 15, 2009). UNIFIL spokeswoman Bouziane said that the series of explosions had in all probability been caused by the detonation of a cache of ammunition which was stored in the building (Agence France Presse, July 15, 2009). UNIFIL also said in a statement that it regarded the explosions as a **gross violation** of Resolution 1701 (AP, July 15, 2009). On July 23 the head of the UN peacekeeping force told the Security Council that there were eye-witness reports linking Hezbollah to the weapon depot which exploded in Khirbet Silim, but that it was not clear whether the weapons had been moved there after the second Lebanon war. He also said that Hezbollah was responsible for the violence encountered by the UNIFIL forces during the affair on July 18 (See below).

10. At a Security Council meeting UNIFIL peacekeeping force head Alain Le Roy attacked Hezbollah and said that the organization was responsible for preventing UNIFIL from carrying out its duties in south Lebanon. With the exception of Libya, the members of the Council **condemned Hezbollah’s “serious violation” of Resolution 1701. Diplomatic sources in the UN said that the strong reaction indicated a change in the international community’s response to Israel’s repeated complaints of Resolution 1701 violations** (Shlomo Shamir and Barak Ravid in *Haaretz*, July 24, 2009).

11. The **Lebanese government** issued a false version of the event, providing political and propaganda support for Hezbollah. The Lebanese foreign ministry sent a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon with the **fabrication** that the explosion took place in an abandoned building which contained Israeli ammunition which had not exploded during the second Lebanon war. The letter denied the Israeli claim that Hezbollah was endangering civilians by storing weapons in populated areas and presented the counterclaim that Israel

² Hezbollah tries to give its own false interpretation to the resolutions, which specifically states that there must be “security arrangements to prevent the resumption of hostilities, including the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of *an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons* other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL, [italics ITIC].” The resolution also calls for the “full implementation of the relevant provisions of the Taif Accords, and of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006), that require the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that, pursuant to the Lebanese cabinet decision of 27 July 2006, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State” [ibid.]. Hezbollah’s interpretation of the resolution as referring to the overt carrying of arms has **no factual or legal basis**. See <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8808.doc.htm>.

was trying to justify planned future attacks on Lebanese civilians (*Daily Star*, Lebanon, July 29, 2009).

Condemnation from the residents of the village of Khirbet Silim

12. A group calling itself “the Khirbet Silim residents’ committee” sent a statement to the Lebanese president and senior administration members saying that “the explosion in the weapons depot in our town, Khirbet Silim, is disturbing and very worrying. It exposed what everyone is trying to hide and disguise, that **the illegal weapons and their storage in our area** by an organization have begun to threaten our interests, our tranquility and our lives...” The group also demanded that Hezbollah “remove the weapons and ammunition and anything that endangers our lives from inhabited areas...” (Al-Mustaqbal website, July 16, 2009).

Second Incident: A clash between Lebanese and the French UNIFIL force in the village of Bir al-Sanassel, near Khirbet Silim

A short description of the event

13. On **July 18**, four days after the explosion in Khirbet Silim, UNIFIL soldiers of the French battalion tried to conduct a search in the village of **Bir al-Sanassel** (4 kilometers, or 2.48 miles, southwest of Khirbet Silim). There was a suspicion, which in our assessment was valid, that the weapons from the depot in Khirbet Silim which had not exploded had been moved there.

14. The UNIFIL soldiers who tried to conduct the search met with resistance from scores of local residents (about 100, according to several versions) who may have been **sent there by Hezbollah** (which customarily encourages local residents to confront anyone who tries to tamper with its weapons). The residents tried to prevent the UNIFIL force from searching, blocked the road, set tires on fire, threw stones and confronted the soldiers. The Lebanese army intervened and brought calm but did not help the French forces to carry out their mission to find the weapons in the village of Bir al-Sanassel.

15. UNIFIL said that the confrontations resulted in the **minor wounding of 14 UNIFIL soldiers**. A number of UNIFIL vehicles were damaged, including the ambulance of the team investigating the explosion in Khirbet Silim.

Responses

The Lebanese army

16. The Lebanese army responded with a statement expressing regret that 14 UNIFIL soldiers had been wounded, and that it had already begun an investigation of the incident. According to the statement, the Lebanese army and UNIFIL would continue to collaborate to implement the resolution [1701] (Nowlebanon website, July 19, 2009).

Hezbollah

17. Hezbollah claimed that UNIFIL had **exceeded its limits of its authority**. Hezbollah then gave its own interpretation of Security Council Resolution 1701 suiting its own purposes:

- i. **Sheikh Naim Qassem**, deputy secretary general of Hezbollah, said that UNIFIL had made a mistake by invading the building without first coordinating the move with the Lebanese army. He said that according to the resolution, the Lebanese army had to go in first (Al-Nashra website, July 22, 2009). Elsewhere he said that UNIFIL was forbidden to “invade” buildings without Lebanese army coordination because it violated Resolution 1701. He said that the response of the local residents was “natural” and “if such a thing happens again, there will be a similar [popular] response” (*Nahar Al-Shabab*, July 30, 2009).
- ii. **Hussein al-Hajj Hassan**, Hezbollah representative in the Lebanese Parliament, called the UNIFIL action a “provocation.” He said that it was UNIFIL’s mission to support the Lebanese army only if the army requested it (LBC, July 21, 2009).
- iii. **Nawaf al-Musawi**, Hezbollah representative in the Lebanese Parliament, said that the UNIFIL forces were not empowered to conduct searches or interrogations. He said that it was not anyone’s business to analyze or examine what happened at Bir al-Sanassel, except for the Lebanese army, which was conducting its own examination (NTV; Nowlebanon website, July 25, 2009).

18. Hezbollah used the incident **to send indirect threats to UNIFIL**. For example, “sources close to Hezbollah” said that Hezbollah had no desire for tense relations with UNIFIL. However, said the sources, the incident near Khirbet Silim was clearly a warning to UNIFIL not to try, under any circumstances, to change the “existing ground rules.” According to the same “sources,” UNIFIL tried to engage in “dubious missions, such as raids and observation, which are not required by Resolution 1701” (Nowlebanon website, July 22, 2009).

19. A similar threat was sent to UNIFIL through **Ibrahim al-Amin**, a journalist who is used as a channel by Hezbollah to have its propaganda published. On July 20, he wrote an article in the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese newspaper ***Al-Akhbar*** **expressing understanding** for the opposition of the residents, most of whom it claimed supported Hezbollah, for UNIFIL's attempt to conduct a search. The article warned that the alternative to the reaction could have been "a more violent confrontation" (According to al-Amin, "Fortunately for the French, the residents only reacted by throwing stones."). UNIFIL, it said, had two fundamental options: either to remain neutral and support Lebanon [i.e., Hezbollah] or to cede to the demand of Israel and spy on the "resistance" [Hezbollah] and carry out hostile actions toward it. The meaning of the second option, it said, was that "within an instant" UNIFIL soldiers "would become an enemy force."

The March 14 Coalition

20. **Fares Soueid**, coordinator of the March 14 Coalition's general secretariat, said that Hezbollah had influenced the event in the Khirbet Silim area. He said that it was out of the question that the local inhabitants had acted of their own accord, and "without an order from [Hezbollah] the attack on UNIFIL never could have occurred." He said that the responsibility for implementing Security Council Resolution 1701 was on the shoulders of the Lebanese government and army, and wondered "if Lebanese are actively willing to bear a burden like the one they bore in 2006" (Al-Mustaqbal website, July 20, 2009).

Third Incident: Lebanese entered an area under Israeli control in the region of the village of Shuba in the eastern sector, apparently with Hezbollah and Amal encouragement.

A short description of the event

21. On **July 17** Lebanese civilians, primarily children and adolescents, held a demonstration in the area of the village of Shuba to protest an embankment the IDF had built on the slope of Mt. Dov (the region known as the Shebaa farms). The embankment was situated in an area under Israeli control, south of the Blue Line demarked by the UN in 2000 and the fence constructed by UNIFIL near the village. The demonstrators claimed that the embankment was an "Israeli violation" of Security Council Resolution 1701. **It is possible that what prompted the demonstration was Hezbollah and Amal's desire to deflect attention from what Hezbollah considered the embarrassment of the explosion of the**

weapons depot at Khirbet Silim three days earlier, and to send the ball into the Israeli court.

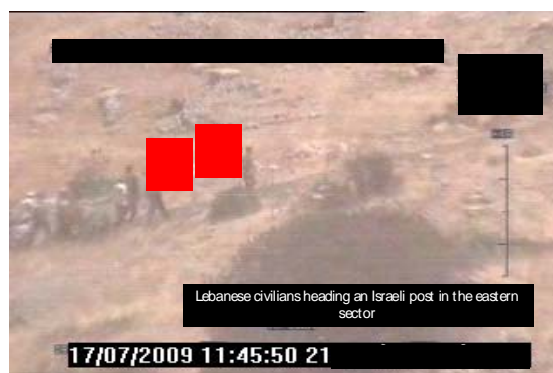
22. In an act of provocation, some of the demonstrators tore down the barbed wire fence, crossed the border into territory under Israeli control and **waved Lebanese and Hezbollah flags** before returning to Lebanon. The demonstration was led by **Qassem Hashem**, a representative of the **Amal** faction in the Lebanese Parliament, who did not, however, personally enter Israeli territory. He claimed that the event had been coordinated in advance with UNIFIL and warned that if the fence were not taken down, the local population would tear it down themselves. He said the demonstration was nothing more than a warning to Israel, and if the Israel outpost were not removed, an "important step" would be taken within a week (Al-Nashra website, July 18, 2009). The IDF took no action against the demonstrators. Nearby UNIFIL forces (apparently the Indian battalion) acted to contain the incident.



Left: Lebanese Parliament member Hashem Qassem (Amal faction) organizations the demonstration.
Right: Lebanese demonstrators (Al-Alam TV, July 18, 2009).



The UNIFIL force at the site of the demonstration in the region of the village of Shuba.



Lebanese civilians waving flags on territory controlled by Israel in the region of Shuba.

Responses

23. **Hezbollah and Amal spokesmen** represented the event as the reaction to an Israeli violation of Security Council Resolution 1701 and **threatened** (directly and via the local population) to take further steps in the near future:

- i. **Sheikh Nabil Qaouq**, Hezbollah operative responsible for the region of south Lebanon, claimed that the “new Israeli violation” in the Shebaa Farms proved that “Resolution 1701 cannot protect Lebanon.” He condemned what he called “Israeli violations” in the region and promised that the “resistance” [i.e., Hezbollah] would meet all its commitments, and that “the day will come when the land is liberated and [Lebanese] flags are flown over the Shebaa farms and the hills of Shuba” (Al-Manar TV website, July 16, 2009).
- ii. **Qassem Hashem**, Amal faction representative in the Lebanese Parliament, said he was surprised when the UNIFIL spokesperson said that UNIFIL forces had no authority in the Shuba region. He said that the event of July 17 was “merely a warning” and added that “we have agreed with UNIFIL to dispose of the Israeli irregularity” (Al-Nashra website quoting an ANB News interview with Qassem Hashem on July 18, 2009).

24. Following the event, on July 20 **the commander of the Lebanese army**, General Jean Kahwagi met with UNIFIL commander Major General Claudio Graziano to discuss the events at Khirbet Silim and Shuba. “Lebanese sources” reported that Kahwagi demanded that UNIFIL “stop the Israeli incursions” and claimed that stopping them would have a positive influence on UNIFIL activities in south Lebanon (Hezbollah-affiliated *Al-Akhbar*, July 22, 2009). A UNIFIL delegation also met with Nabih Berri, chairman of the Lebanese Parliament and leader of Amal to discuss the event at Shuba. Berri accused Israel of trying to annex lands in the region of Shuba and then planning to “occupy” the village of Ghajar (Nowlebanon website, July 18, 2009).