



Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria September 5-19 , 2022

Overview

- ▶ This past week senior Hezbollah figures continued relating to the dispute between Israel and Lebanon over the delineation of the naval border. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared he would not permit the production of oil and natural gas from the Karish gas field before Lebanon's "just demands" were met. Senior Hezbollah figure Nabil Qaouk claimed the "equation of deterrence" created by the organization would ensure the realization of Lebanon's rights.
- ▶ Villages in south Lebanon imposed limitations on the movement of vehicles after hours and on business deals with foreigners, possibly as a way to decrease criminal activity and prevent smuggling.
- ▶ The permission given for Israelis to enter the village of Ghajar is liable to be considered a violation of Lebanese sovereignty and will become another point of friction between Israel, the Lebanese administration and Hezbollah.
- ▶ Hezbollah threatened UNIFIL forces in south Lebanon.
- ▶ The banks in Lebanon closed their doors for a number of days after civilians demanded their money with threats of violence.
- ▶ Iran proposed the construction of two power plants in Lebanon to provide 1,000 megawatts of electricity each.
- ▶ A Fatah officer was killed in the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp and an officer in a Hezbollah-affiliated militia was killed in a battle in the Syrian-Lebanese border.
- ▶ Israel was accused of attacking weapons storehouses and a runway at the Aleppo airport.
- ▶ Hezbollah decided to redeploy in Syria to relieve Israel's pressure on the Syrian forces. The Iranian-supported militias ended their activities in eastern Syria because of Iranian concerns.
- ▶ Syrian civilians, soldiers and officers were detained on suspicion of collaborating with Israel following an exchange of information between Hezbollah and the Syrian army.

Hezbollah and the Naval Border Dispute

► **Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah** gave a speech at the end of the organization's central march in Baalbek for the Shi'ite *al-Arbaeen*.¹ He said Lebanon currently had a golden opportunity to improve its economic situation by producing oil and gas. He claimed the Karish gas field would remain idle until Lebanon's naval border had been delineated, due to the "equation" Hezbollah created: as long as the dispute remained unsettled and Lebanon's "just demands" had not been met, no oil or gas would be produced by the field. He claimed Hezbollah's overt and covert threats had helped create the so-called "equation" and Hezbollah's "eyes and rockets" were pointed at Karish. He also claimed Hezbollah was prepared to give a genuine chance to a negotiated resolution, far from a confrontation, but if it turned into a confrontation, they would be prepared for it as well (al-Manar TV website, September 17, 2022).

► **Senior Hezbollah figure Nabil Qaouk** gave a speech in the village of Ramyeh, near the Israeli-Lebanese border, where he said Lebanon's only chance to extricate itself from its economic hardships was to retake its oil and gas resources, and it was the "equation of the resistance" [Hezbollah] would ensure their restoration, not American mediation (Radio Nur, September 18, 2022).

► **Hashem Safi al-Din, head of Hezbollah's Executive Council**, said the organization had stated its position on the operation of the Karish gas field according to Israel's actions and not what was published in the media. He claimed the fact that Israel "was hiding behind the media was proof of its weakness."² Hezbollah [as opposed to Israel] is convinced Lebanon will receive the rights to the field, relying on Lebanon's use of force in the avenues open to it (Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, September 8, 2022).

► The Hezbollah-affiliated **daily newspaper *al-Akhbar*** published an article by a political commentator named Yahya Dabouq, who wrote, following the progress of the negotiations for delineating the naval border, that Israel wants to sign the agreement quickly but is concerned that if it does, Hezbollah will represent the agreement as one of its success stories. The article described the measures taken by Israel, with support from the United States, to force Lebanon into an agreement where it would lose rather than benefit. However, the firm

¹ "The 40th day," when Shi'ite mourn the death of the Imam Hussain bin Ali, Muhammad's grandson.

² He was apparently referring to the announcements issued to the media the Energean drilling company about operating or not operating the Karish field.

stance of Lebanese President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri tilted the scales in favor of an agreement which preserved Lebanon's rights and natural resources (al-Akhbar, September 14, 2022).

► That narrative may possibly replace Hezbollah's militant discourse. According to the narrative, only Hezbollah's explicit threats, which included brinksmanship, prevented Israel and the United States from chalking up achievements at the expense of Lebanon's natural rights.

South Lebanon

Travel restrictions in the villages in south Lebanon

► On September 5, 2022, the **municipality of the village of Hasbaiyya** in the eastern sector of south Lebanon issued a series of regulations banning the use of motorcycles and ATVs after eight o'clock at night (with the exception of those with municipality permits), as well as dealings with foreigners and people not legally registered (al-Nashra, September 5, 2022). On September 8, 2022, the **municipality of the village of Qlaaya** in the Marjayoun region issued similar regulations (al-Nashra, September 8, 2022). Both towns are widely used by smugglers and other criminal elements. Hasbaiyya is used by smugglers going from Lebanon into Syria and Qlaaya from Lebanon into Israel.

Reactions to allowing non-residents to enter the village of Ghajar

► After more than twenty years during which no one who was not a resident of the south Lebanon Alawite village of Ghajar was forbidden to enter, on September 7, 2022, the commander of the IDF's Northern Command ordered that Israelis could enter the village, through which the Lebanese border passes.³

► Immediately after the order was announced, the Lebanese media reported that the Israeli army had removed its presence from the village. They also reported that the entrance of Israelis into the village was liable to be considered a provocation and a serious example of the "occupation" of Lebanese land (Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, September 8, 2022). The al-'Ahed news website claimed the order was part of new provocations planned by Israel (al-'Ahed, September 8, 2022).

³ Since 2000 no one who is not a resident of the village is permitted to enter without a permit and prior coordination with the IDF.



Ghajar, a view from the Israeli border (al-'Ahed news website, September 8, 2022).

► A number of days later, the Lebanese media reported Israeli activity on Lebanese territory to the west of village, where bulldozers were erecting a barrier of rocks. They also reported that the rocks and rubble had blocked the al-Wazzani-al-Abbassiyeh road (Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, September 16, 2022). It was later reported that when the Israeli activity ended, UNIFIL bulldozers removed the rubble and opened the road (Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, September 17, 2022).



Right: An Israeli bulldozer constructs the barrier in Ghajar (Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, September 16, 2022). Left: a UNIFIL bulldozer rocks boulders from the al-Wazzani-al-Abbassiyeh road (Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, September 17, 2022).

Hezbollah in Lebanon

► The Twitter account #Lebanon_resistance, presumably affiliated with Hezbollah and having 20,000 followers, posted **threats against the UNIFIL force** on September 9, 2022:



Anti-UNIFIL tweet (#Lebanon_resistance Twitter account, September 8, 2022).

► The lack of fuel may stop water-pumping stations in Tyre, and concerns prompted Hezbollah to deliver 3,300 liters (about 870 gallons) to the city's water company (YaTyre! Website, September 10, 2022).

Palestinians in Lebanon

► Fatah Lieutenant Colonel Alaa al-Din was shot to death in the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp, near Sidon, by three unidentified men. He was responsible for Fatah's foreign relations in the refugee camp and because of his role also had ties to Lebanese security. His killing caused tension in the area. Similar events happened in the past when there was tension between the Islamist organizations and the Palestinians in the Sidon region (al-Jazeera website, September 9, 2022).

Civilian Events

► The Lebanese banking association announced that beginning on September 19, 2022, the banks would close their doors for three days because of security concerns, after customers had stormed several banks and demanded their money, using force and the threat of gun violence. On September 16, 2022, eight such events were recorded. They occurred after a bank customer managed to withdraw some of her money from a Beirut branch of the BLOM Bank by threatening a teller with a gun; it later became evident that the gun was made of plastic. Since the fall of 2019, banks in Lebanon have been restricting the withdrawal of money, especially from large accounts, making it almost impossible for depositors to withdraw funds (aljazeera.net, September 15, 2022; France24, September 17, 2022).

► To provide Lebanon with a small amount of help, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamed al-Thani, the emir of Qatar, transferred to the banks part of the funds earmarked for the Lebanese army. The army uses the money to pay salaries and for logistics (al-Lawa, September 14, 2022).

Iranian and Iraqi Aid for Lebanon

► Following Lebanon's severe energy crisis of the past several years, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian formally contacted the Lebanese government and offered to begin the immediate construction of two power plants to provide electricity with the ability to produce 1,000 mega watts. According to the Iranian offer, one will be constructed in Beirut and the other in south Lebanon. In the past Iran offered to provide Lebanon with a steady supply of fuel oil, an offer still being deliberated by Iran and Lebanon, which are waiting for

approval from the United States. Accepting the Iranian offer will mean a substantial increase in Hezbollah's power in Lebanon and in Iran's influence on Lebanon's internal politics.

► In the meantime, a technical delegation representing the Lebanese ministry of energy arrived in Tehran to discuss Lebanon's needs for electricity, holding meetings with representatives of Iranian oil. The delegation brought studies about Lebanon's existing power plants and the oil they use to run them, to examine the level of the plants' compatibility with Iranian oil (al-Manar, September 17, 2022).

► Sources in the Lebanese ministry of energy and water said the fuel Lebanon would receive from Iran would be a gift and there would be no trade involved. They also said that as a gift it would not be liable to sanctions, while trade could expose Lebanon to sanctions (IMLebanon website, September 18, 2022).

► **Nasser Kanaani, spokesman for the Iran foreign ministry**, said Iran was deliberating with the Lebanese ministry of energy, claiming it was a matter of support for friendly governments and helping them solve their problems, which was one of the most important programs of President Raisi's government. According to Kanaani, Iran was prepared to help Lebanon solve its problems in accordance with its capabilities within a framework of common interests, and the negotiations between the two could be the foundation for economic aid for Lebanon, but **the issue of free fuel for Lebanon was not on the Iranian agenda** (al-Nashra website, September 19, 2022). In the meantime, Iraqi oil companies offered to supply fuel to Lebanon (al-Nur, September 6, 2022). The daily *al-Nahar* reported that after the Iraqi government had decided to extend its contract to provide fuel oil for Lebanese power plants. The first delivery of the fuel remaining in the old contract, estimated at 180,000 tons, was supposed to arrive in Lebanon in September 2022, but new developments in the specifications of Iraqi oil were liable to delay the delivery to Lebanon. Walid Fayad, the Lebanese minister of energy and water, said the Iraqis were working with Lebanon and the delivery "would not be delayed more than a few days." He noted the importance of renewing the contract, which would terminate at the end of September (al-Nahar, September 19, 2022).

The Iranian Militias in Syria

► At sixteen past eight on the evening of September 6, 2022, several explosions were heard in the region of the Aleppo airport in northwestern Syria. According to the London-based Syrian Human Rights Observatory, it was an attack allegedly carried out by Israel on arms

warehouses of Iranian-backed militias stationed near the airport. An airport runway was also attacked. According to reports three people were killed, the warehouses caught fire and the airport shut down. In the meantime, explosions were also heard in the port of Latakia, attributed to the same [alleged] Israeli attack (Syrian Human Rights Observatory website, September 7, 2022). The airport had been attacked previously on August 31, 2022.



Satellite photo of the damaged runway in the Aleppo airport (al-Sharq al-Awsat, September 7, 2022).

► Sources in the Damascus leadership reported that Hezbollah would redeploy in Syria to relieve Israeli pressure on the Syrian forces and reinforce the sites where there were critical Hezbollah forces in Syria who would also fight if war broke out with Lebanon. According to the sources, after hundreds of attacks during years of warfare, Israel did not succeed in driving Iran and Hezbollah out of Syria, and therefore adopted the tactic of attacking the weakest link, the Syrian army. The sources added that the Israeli attack had caused a large number of Syrian casualties and damaged facilities and military assets provided by Iran. Another problem, according to the Syrian sources, was that because of the war in Ukraine Russia no longer replenished the Syrian army's arsenal of surface-to-air missiles. That was why, after Assad decided not to enter into a war in the foreseeable future, Hezbollah decided, without Syria's having requested, to distance itself from military facilities whose activities it did not affect or which did not affect the Syrian army. The sources added that such a strategic decision could not have been made without personal communications between Nasrallah and Assad to coordinate a Hezbollah presence on the Aleppo and other roads where forces hostile to Damascus were located. They also noted Assad's decision to maintain strategic cooperation at the highest level (the Kuwaiti daily al-Ra'i, September 18, 2022).

- ▶ After the international coalition's aerial attacks against eastern Syria on August 23 and 24, 2022, Iran suspended the activities of the militias it backs in the region.⁴ In Iranian assessment, the withdrawal of the Russian anti-aircraft batteries from Syria exposed the militias in the east and made them more vulnerable to coalition and Israeli airstrikes. They claimed they had identified intensive intelligence collection activities by the Israeli and coalition forces, which increased concerns of additional attacks on the militia bases. The Iranians also claimed that in addition to gathering intelligence, a number of Syrian fighters had been detained and accused of passing information to foreign agents, facilitating Israeli attempts to locate targets in eastern Syria. Since September 3, 2022, fighters from the various militias have moved and changed bases, fearing attacks. They moved their rocket launchers, taking them from the posts in the town of al-Mayadeen, and threatening the oil-pumping station in the south of the Deir al-Zor province (al-Hadath website, September 6, 2022).
- ▶ Twenty-seven soldiers and officers from the aerial defense and other units stationed around the airports in Aleppo and Damascus and from the military units stationed in Masyaf and the coastal town of Tartus were detained by the Damascus regime and accused of having transmitted sensitive information to Israel. Reportedly, the detentions were carried out after Hezbollah's intelligence service gave information to the Syrians. In addition, Syrian army air force intelligence also detained and interrogated civilians living near the Aleppo airport (al-Hadath, September 10, 2022).
- ▶ An officer in the Bath Brigades Militia, affiliated with Hezbollah, was killed by unknown assailants in the village of Kfeir Yabous near the Syrian-Lebanese border. His name was not given but according to reports the area is rife with drug-smuggling attributed to Hezbollah.



Notice issued by the Bath Brigades Militia showing its ties with Hezbollah (Shaba News, January 18, 2018).

⁴ For further information, see the September 1, 2022, bulletin, "Spotlight on Iran."