



Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria January 22 – February 5, 2023

Overview

- ▶ The Lebanese army claimed it repelled an IDF attempt to cross the border during engineering work in the area.
- ▶ Hezbollah issued clarification regarding a Lebanese civilian who was detained on suspicion of collaborating with the Mossad. He admitted he had been in contact with an Israeli but claimed he reported the incident to Hezbollah and had not collaborated.
- ▶ Hezbollah expressed support for the Palestinians in the wake of the IDF activity in the Jenin refugee camp and praised the terrorist attacks in Jerusalem.
- ▶ The crisis of governance in Lebanon continues, and all efforts to elect a president have failed so far, with differences of opinion evident within the government. Between February 7 and 10, 2023, a meeting will be held in Paris, attended by representatives of the United States, France, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to find a solution for the country's political crisis.
- ▶ The ministers of energy of Lebanon and Qatar signed an agreement for Qatar to join a consortium that will search for gas in the Mediterranean Sea off Lebanon's coast.
- ▶ The controversy over the investigation of the explosion in the port of Beirut continues. Hezbollah claimed the investigating judge was acting on American-European instructions.
- ▶ Lebanon's financial crisis continues and the value of the Lebanese pound plummets while fuel prices skyrocket.
- ▶ Lebanese security forces operating in the northern part of the country detained a squad of ISIS operatives planning a series of terrorist attacks in Lebanon.
- ▶ A convoy of trucks was attacked after crossing the border from Iraq to Syria. Seven people were killed; the trucks were apparently carrying weapons from Iran.

Hezbollah and Lebanon

South Lebanon

- ▶ The Lebanese army claimed it repelled IDF soldiers attempting to cross the border while working in the area. Ali Shoeib, a correspondent for Hezbollah-affiliated al-Manar TV in south

Lebanon, posted a video from January 23, 2023, showing close-ups of the IDF activity and a live broadcast from the border. He claimed the IDF soldiers had erected a barbed-wire fence on the Lebanese side of the border, and that Lebanese army soldiers had subsequently demanded UNIFIL forces to instruct the IDF to move back. According to Ali Shoeib, the Israeli soldiers refused and the "Lebanese army repelled the attempt of the occupation army to cross the blue line," and was currently monitoring the steps taken by Israel (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, January 23, 2023).

► Approximately one week later it was reported that the fence erected by the IDF between Khalat al-Mkhafir and Khalat al-Dabsh east of the border north of Misgav Am had been uprooted despite its being fixed in place with iron posts. All that remained was the original fence near the border (al-Manar, February 1, 2023).



**Lebanese army and UNIFIL forces near the barbed-wire fence on the border
(Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, January 23, 2023).**

► Given the tension between the Lebanese army and IDF forces, UNIFIL commander Aroldo Lázaro Sáenz and Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the UN under-secretary-general for peace operations, held meetings with Lebanese officials, among them former Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Defense Minister Maurice Sleem, Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, and Lebanese army commander Joseph Aoun. The Lebanese noted their commitment to UN Resolution 1701¹ and the importance of the continuing "successful cooperation between the sides." Defense Minister Sleem expressed his condolences for the death of the UNIFIL soldier in al-Aqabiya² (NNA, January 26, 2023).

¹ UN Resolution 1701 determined the ceasefire of the Second Lebanon War and called for the deployment of armed UNIFIL soldiers and Lebanese army forces along the Blue Line to prevent Hezbollah from continuing its activities in Lebanon. It also called for Hezbollah's disarmament.

² On December 14, 2022, an Irish UNIFIL soldier was killed and three wounded by gunfire in al-Aqabiya.

Hezbollah and the Palestinians

- ▶ Hezbollah issued an announcement in support of the Palestinians fighting Israel after the IDF activity in Jenin. It condemned "the Zionist aggression against the Jenin refugee camp," adding that the organization "strongly denounces the terrorist activities carried out by the occupation forces which violate all moral and human laws" (Telegram channel of Hezbollah's combat information [propaganda] wing, January 26, 2023).
- ▶ Hezbollah praised the shooting attack near the synagogue in Jerusalem on January 27, 2023, calling it a "heavy blow for the extremist government." Hezbollah also strongly condemned the governments of the Arab states which offered condolences after the attack (al-Mayadeen, January 28, 2023). Sheikh Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy leader, posted to his Twitter account that they welcomed the "excellent attack" in Jerusalem, which was a response to the "crimes of the occupation," adding that the "brave Palestinian people" were "struggling to liberate Palestine." He assured his followers that the hour of Israel's defeat was approaching (Na'im Qassem's Twitter account, January 28, 2023).

Lebanese national detained on suspicion of collaborating with Israel

- ▶ On January 26, 2023, the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Akhbar printed a clarification from Hezbollah relating to a report on January 21, 2023, about the detention of a Lebanese civilian named Hassan Atiya, who was suspected of collaborating with the Israeli Mossad. According to the new report, Atiya was not a Mossad agent. According to the first report, in July 2022 Lebanese intelligence in the village of Qana in south Lebanon detained Hassan A., born in 1991, who, in return for \$15,000, collaborated with Israeli intelligence over a period of two years. According to the initial report, he provided Israel with names of agents and their phone numbers, and information about Hezbollah's missile warehouses.
- ▶ Initially it was reported that in June 2020 he held a WhatsApp conversation with someone who called from a foreign number and represented himself as a Lebanese named Samer, in charge of recruitment for an international security company specializing in safeguarding businessmen. After Hassan A. said he was an operative in the ranks of Hezbollah, he was asked about where he served and what military and religious courses he had taken (al-Akhbar, January 23, 2023). In its clarification Hezbollah said an Israeli had contacted Atiya, who was using the Internet to find work, and promised him a job, but as soon as Atiya understood Israel was behind the call he rushed to inform Hezbollah and gave them all the information. Hezbollah continues to monitor the issue (al-Akhbar, January 26, 2023).

Lebanon Overview

The government and presidential elections

► On January 26, 2023, Maurice Sleem, the Lebanese defense minister, from the National Freedom Party, accused Joseph Aoun, commander of the Lebanese army, of exceeding his authority and threatened to dismiss him, although it is unclear if he has the power to do so. In recent months Michel Aoun has been mentioned as a possible candidate for the position of president since the people in power are unable to reach a compromise. Sleem and Aoun are engaged in a power struggle for the authority to appoint Lebanese army officers (al-Akhbar, January 26, 2023). The day after the article appeared in al-Akhbar Sleem issued a denial of everything attributed to him (al-Nashra, January 27, 2023).

► On January 23, 2023, Hussein al-Khalil, political advisor to Hassan Nasrallah, and Wafiq Safa, in charge of Hezbollah's communication and coordination [propaganda] unit, met with Jibril Bassil, chairman of the National Freedom Party. The meeting was held after a month and a half without communication between the sides, after the Mikati government held a meeting at which Hezbollah was present, contradicting the National Freedom Party's position. According to reports, Hezbollah initiated the meeting. Both sides want to lower the tension, but the rift between the parties is too great to overcome without both sides becoming more flexible (al-Akhbar, January 23, 2023). After the meeting al-Khalil said they had discussed appointing a president and had decided on a date for the next government meeting (Lubnan24, January 23, 2023).



Al-Khalil, Wafiq and Bassil meet (National Freedom Party Twitter account, January 23, 2023).

► According to reports, because of the ongoing presidential crisis in Lebanon, between February 7 and 10, 2023, a meeting will be held in Paris to deal with the issue. Participants will include Barbara Leaf, American assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs; Patrick

Dorel, advisor to the French president; Nizar al-Alula, advisor to the Saudi Arabian royal office; and Muhammad bin Abd al-Aziz al-Khalifi, Qatar's deputy foreign minister for regional affairs. Their objective will be to formulate a clear path for resolving the political crisis in Lebanon by choosing a president and forming a government. The meeting will not deal with the names of candidates. According to the reports, the process could take between three and six months, and if after that time no headway has been made, the countries involved may impose sanctions on Lebanon.

Drilling for oil in Lebanon's territorial waters

► On January 29, 2023, the Lebanese and Qatari ministers of energy signed an agreement for Qatar to join a consortium searching for oil. Lebanon and Qatar will drill in Blocks 4 and 9. Other members of the consortium are the French company Total and the Italian ENI. The Qatari company will have a 30% share in the consortium, 20% from Lebanon which received the share from the Russian Novatek company, 5% from Total and 5% from Eni. Lebanon received nothing in return from transferring the 20% it received from Russia to Qatar (al-Jazeera, January 29, 2023). The agreement was signed in the Lebanese prime minister's office in the presence of former Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Lebanese minister of energy Walid Fayid, and Qatari minister of energy Sa'ad bin Sherida al-Ka'abi. Fayid said the measure demonstrated Lebanon's loyalty, despite its financial distress. Al-Ka'abi said "Qatar is always there for Lebanon" (al-Nashra, January 29, 2023).

► The al-Akhbar News Agency website reported that Block 9, where the Qana and other fields are located, contains 4.4 billion cubic meters of natural gas in three wells, and the amount is larger than the gas reserves in the Karish field located in "the occupied Palestinian territorial waters ." It also reported that Lebanon and Qatar were working to shorten the time table and begin drilling earlier than the projected date of the end of 2023. Lebanon is expected to receive between 54% and 62.7% of the profits (al-Akhbar, January 28, 2023).

Investigation of the explosion in the port of Beirut

► Tareq al-Bitar, the judge investigating the explosion in the port of Beirut,³ decided to renew the investigation, which had been frozen for more than a year. He said it was focused on eight suspects who held senior positions in the Lebanese government (LBCI Twitter account,

³ On August 4, 2020, there was an explosion in the port of Beirut in which 218 people were killed and more than 7,000 were wounded. Immense damage was done to the entire port area. An investigation was launched immediately.

January 24, 2023). Attorney General Ghassan Awidat announced the investigation had been suspended and was not officially allowed to continue (Reuters, January 24, 2023), and the following day he ordered the release of the eight detainees. Al-Bitar called on the Lebanese security forces not to obey Awidat's orders because they were illegal (al-Jazeera, January 25, 2023).

► In the wake of the above, Simia, Hezbollah's Telegram channel, launched a campaign against al-Bitar, with pictures of him as a puppet controlled by America and Europe (Simia Telegram channel, January 24, 2023).



Hezbollah cartoon of al-Bitar as an American-European puppet (Simia Telegram channel, January 24, 2023).

Media outlet attacked

► A shock grenade was thrown at the Lebanese broadcasting company LBCI after it broadcast a comedy offensive to Shi'ites. The building was slightly damaged. The attack was widely condemned, especially by interim Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who told Sheikh Biyar al-Saher, chairman of the LBCI board of directors, that the freedom of responsible media would remain protected and not to be deterred by attacks (al-Nashra, January 22, 2023).

The Lebanese economy

► The value of the Lebanese pound continues to plummet, and on February 1, 2023, it was worth \$0.00066. The price of fuel continues to climb, and 20 liters of gasoline cost more than a million Lebanese pounds (over \$660). Lebanese held a demonstration in front of the Central Bank in Beirut to protest the country's economic crisis and political corruption (al-Nashra, January 25, 2023).

► About 1.3 million Lebanese, almost one quarter of the country's population, need social assistance in order to survive. Lebanese receives international aid which is used mainly to

fund food programs, aid for needy families and support education. However, according to reports, the social programs will be reduced in the coming year. The aid programs provide eligible families with \$25 per family and \$20 per family member per month (al-Sharq al-Awsat, January 22, 2023). Lebanon recently lost its right to vote in the UN General Assembly for not paying its operational costs of about \$2 million (al-Nashra, January 20, 2023).

► The United States Treasury Department announced it had imposed new sanctions on Hassan Mukalled, a Lebanese "money-exchanger and so-called financial expert, who plays a key role in enabling Hizballah to continue to exploit and exacerbate Lebanon's economic crisis." Sanctions were also imposed on his businesses and two sons. According to the announcement he was a financial advisor to Hezbollah and on behalf of the organization carried out deals from which he reaped hundreds of thousands of dollars in profits (United States Treasury Department website, January 24, 2023). The Central Bank of Lebanon then froze the accounts of CTEX, the money-changing firm belonging to Hassan Mukalled and his sons. Mukalled denied he was connected to Hezbollah and said he would initiate legal measures in Lebanon and the United States (Reuters, January 26, 2023).

ISIS squad exposed

► Between December 7 and 9, 2022, the Lebanese general security services detained a squad of five ISIS operatives from Tripoli who were planning a series of terrorist attacks in Lebanon. The operatives were detained in the northern part of Lebanon on suspicion of planning to detonate a UAV carrying explosives at the al-Rasoul Hospital in Beirut. They also planned to shoot Christian worshippers in a Tripoli church on Christmas Eve. According to reports, they come from families with histories of activity in terrorist organizations, some from Syria, and lived in an area known as a site for recruiting young Lebanese for activity in Iraq (al-Akhbar, January 30, 2023).

Syria

► On the night of January 29, 2023, six trucks in an Iranian militia convoy of 25 were attacked near the border city of Albukamal, southeast of the Deir al-Zor district in Syria (al-Suria, January 30, 2023). The convoy was coming from Iraq and was attacked after it crossed the border at a site controlled by Hezbollah's militia in Iraq, used by the Iranians to smuggle weapons and drugs (Euphrates Post, January 30, 2023). According to the Syrian Human Rights Observatory, seven people were killed. According to reports before the attack,

warnings were sent. Local sources claimed Israeli and American planes were responsible (Dr. Fadhel Alyunis Twitter account, January 30, 2023). The Iranian media issued pictures of the alleged contents of the truck, claiming they were "medical equipment and food" (al-Mayadeen, January 20, 2023).

► On January 29, 2023, two armed men attempted to cross the Syrian border into Israel in the Hispin region of the southern Golan Heights. IDF soldiers shot at them, mortally wounding one, who later died. The other returned to Syrian territory. They were apparently not planning a terrorist attack (IDF spokesman, January 30, 2023). The event was not widely covered, and most reports were based on the IDF spokesman's announcement and the Israeli media, noting that one man was killed and the other fled back to Syria (al-Jadeed, January 29, 2023).