



## Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria September 8 – 14 , 2023

### Overview

- ▶ This past week no unusual incidents were reported along the Israel-Lebanon border. In south Lebanon there were reports of explosions and Israeli planes circling over the area.
- ▶ Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Galant revealed the existence of an Iranian airport in south Lebanon. In Lebanon the reactions to the revelation were mixed.
- ▶ The United States Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Hezbollah operatives and economic institutions in south Lebanon and South America.
- ▶ An arms-smuggling network from Iran to Lebanon for Hamas was exposed, with the involvement of officers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) Qods Force.
- ▶ Violent clashes were renewed in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp near Sidon. All efforts to achieve a ceasefire have failed. According to reports, so far at least 15 people have been killed and over 150 injured.
- ▶ The presidential crisis in Lebanon continues despite the efforts of Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French envoy, who visited Lebanon, to help resolve it.
- ▶ The Lebanese government approved the 2024 budget and agreed to carry out the reforms demanded by the governor of the Central Bank.
- ▶ In Syria, two attacks attributed to Israel were carried out in the area of Tartus and Hama. According to reports, the targets were Hezbollah weapons warehouses and a "scientific research center."

### South Lebanon

- ▶ This past week, no unusual incidents were reported on the Israel-Lebanon border.
- ▶ Lebanese media reported Israeli planes seen flying over the skies of Lebanon. Echoes of explosions were also reported, apparently sonic booms. One report referred to the incident as "enemy maneuvers on the southern border". (al-Akhbar and I Am Lebanon, September 11, 2023).



**Israeli planes circle Bint Jbeil (Muhammad Younes' Twitter account, September 11, 2023)**

## Exposure of an Iranian airport in south Lebanon

► At a conference at the Reichman University in Herzliya, **Israel Defense Minister Yoav Galant** gave a speech accompanied by photographs of an airport under construction by Iran in south Lebanon. He stated that "the land is Lebanese, the control is Iranian, the target is Israel." Galant emphasized that Israel would not hesitate to use "lethal force" against Hezbollah (Israeli news TV channel Kan 11, 11, 2023). The airfield is located near Qalat Jabour, a Hezbollah training center, twenty kilometers (about 12.5 miles) from the Israeli border north of Metulla. The complex was built after the Second Lebanon War (2006) under the supervision of Imad Mughnieh (head of Hezbollah's military-terrorist wing who died in a targeted killing on February 12, 2008). Residential buildings, firing ranges and training areas were identified on the airport grounds, including a training complex for urban warfare (al-Janoubia, September 12, 2023).



**Right: Aerial photograph of the airport. Left: A compound near the airport where flags of Hezbollah and Iran are visible (Israeli Ministry of Defense, September 11, 2023)**

► The Lebanese government did not formally relate to the exposure of the airport. During an interview, **Ghada Ayoub, representative of the Christian Lebanese Forces Party in the Lebanese Parliament**, stated that information about the presence of an Iranian military

airport in Lebanon was a matter of concern for Lebanese sovereignty, and the Lebanese government and its security forces had to respond to the claims officially. Ayoub also claimed the airport was situated in "lands occupied [by Iran]" (al-Sharq al-Awsat, September 12, 2023).

► Reporters in Lebanon ridiculed Israel for exposing the airport. Ali Shoeib, a Hamas-affiliated correspondent reporter for al-Manar, claimed Israel, which was unable to remove the Hezbollah tent [erected in the Shabaa Farm area on the Israeli border], would also not be able to attack the airport. He also posted pictures of military airports inside Israel, claiming they were close to the border and endangered Lebanon (photojournalist Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 11, 2023). Khalil Nasrallah, correspondent for Hezbollah's al-'Ahed "news" website, claimed Galant had not dared to say the airport belonged to Hezbollah but instead threatened Iran. He noted the [alleged Hezbollah] "equation" according to which an attack on an airport [on the Lebanese side of the border] would lead to an attack on an airport [on the Israeli side of the border] (Khalil Nasrallah's Twitter account, September 11, 2023).

► Al-Modon claimed Hezbollah had neither confirmed nor denied the existence of the airport because the organization avoided revealing its military capabilities and was not interested in provoking the international community (al-Modon, September 12, 2023).

### **The controversy surrounding the delineation of the Israel-Lebanon border**

► The Hezbollah-affiliated daily al-Akhbar reported that the Israeli delegation to talks with Lebanon at al-Naqoura<sup>1</sup> had agreed to withdraw from the northern part of the village of Ghajar in return for the removal of the tents erected by Hezbollah in the Shebaa Farms. According to the newspaper, **Najib Mikati, the prime minister of the interim government**, and **Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament**, were conducting a thorough examination of Israel's position, especially because some people believed Israel was willing to withdraw only from uninhabited agricultural areas. A source close to the UNIFIL command was quoted as saying that Israel had expressed a willingness to withdraw from all 13 disputed border line points of dispute on the border line, including Rosh Hanikra (B1), and another meeting to discuss the issue would be held in the near future (al-Akhbar, September 12, 13, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently a reference to the meeting held at al-Naqoura on August 16, 2023.

► Despite the publication of the news item, the Lebanese army stated that no agreement had been reached at the meeting and contacts would continue (Lebanese army Twitter account, September 13, 2023).

## Hezbollah

### Hezbollah denies reports of involvement in smuggling arms from Iran

► Hezbollah responded to al-Hadath's investigation of its control of the Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut with an official condemnation of the report.<sup>2</sup> It claimed the results of the investigation had been distorted, there was no evidence and it had damaged image of the Lebanese security services operating at the airport. It further claimed that the purpose of the "lies" was to place responsibility on Hezbollah for any damage to the airport which might occur in the future. According to Hezbollah, the investigation served the "Israeli enemy" by discussing Hezbollah's military use of Beirut's international airport (al-Nur, September 12, 2023).

### Imposing sanctions on Hezbollah operatives and Hezbollah-affiliated companies

► On September 12, 2023, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) in the United States Treasury Department, in coordination with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), imposed economic sanctions on seven Hezbollah operatives and key bodies in a network generating revenue for Hezbollah's activities and enables it to maintain a presence in South America (US Treasury Department, September 12 2023). Among those who were sanctioned were:

- ◆ **Amer Mohamed Akil Rada**, a senior Hezbollah operative who lives in Lebanon. He and his partners run a charcoal export business from Colombia to Lebanon for Hezbollah. About 80% of its income benefits the organization. Rada was one of the operatives who participated in the 1994 bombing attack on the Jewish Community Building (AMIA)<sup>3</sup> in Buenos Aires, which killed 85 people and injured hundreds.
- ◆ **Samer Akil Rada**, Amer's brother, who is the CEO and chairman of the board of directors at BCI Technologies C.A., which operates from Venezuela. The company was

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<sup>2</sup> For further information see the ITIC update, "Spotlight on Terrorism: Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria (August 31- September 7, 2023)."

<sup>3</sup> Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina

also sanctioned because Samer owned and operated it; Samer was involved in an attempt to smuggle half a ton of cocaine, worth about \$15 million, which was hidden in a fruit shipment seized in El Salvador.

◆ **Mahdy Akil Helbawi**, Amer's son, manages a business in Colombia on behalf of his father. He founded and serves as CEO of the Zanga S.A.S. coal company. The company was also sanctioned because it is owned and managed by Mehdi.<sup>4</sup>

## Palestinians in Lebanon

### Exposure of an arms smuggling network from Iran to Hamas

► The Washington, DC-based Persian language Iran International news channel broadcast a report about the exposure of a network which smuggled arms from Iran to Lebanon for Hamas. According to the report, it was exposed after Lebanese security forces arrested **Michal Elias Francis** and **Fadi Elias**, who lived in Lebanon, and **Muhammad Zaki Shaheen**, a Palestinian Hamas operative. The investigation revealed they had formed a network managed by Saeed Izadi, Majid Zibai and Ali Marshad Shirazi, **officers in the IRGC's Qods Force**. The network smuggled weapons from Iran to Lebanon for Hamas. According to the report, the existence of the smuggling network indicated strengthening ties between Iran and Hamas, especially in light of Tehran's desire to increase coordination between Hamas and Hezbollah (Iran International, September 13, 2023).



Right: Michel Elias Francis. Left: IRGC Quds Force officers (Iran International, September 12, 2023)

### Renewal of violent clashes in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp

► After a hiatus of about a month, on September 9, 2023, violent clashes were renewed in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp, on the outskirts of Sidon in south Lebanon, between Fatah and

<sup>4</sup> For further information see <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1726>

Islamist organization operatives. The cause was Fatah's demand to hand over those responsible for killing its senior figure, which ignited the previous round of fighting (al-Nashra, September 10, 2023).<sup>5</sup>

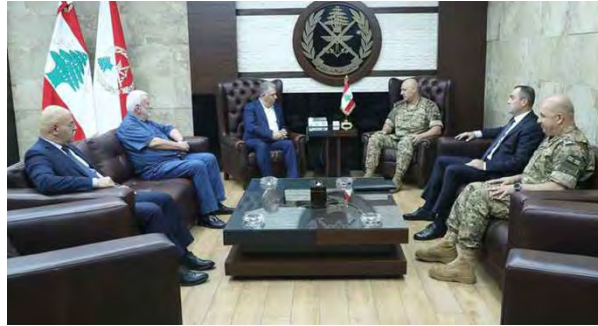
► According to reports, at least 15 people were killed and more than 150 were injured in the clashes (uae71, September 14, 2023). Among the dead were Lebanese army soldiers, killed when rockets hit two army positions near the refugee camp (Lebanese army Twitter account, September 10, 2023). Following the violence, many residents fled the camp and moved to Sidon. UNRWA and other officials in Lebanon were asked to provide the refugees with a response.

► Hamas rejected accusations that it, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hezbollah supported the events in the refugee camp, claiming the events contradicted their ideology and the accusations were an attempt to distort the image of the "Palestinian resistance [i.e., terrorist activities]." According to Hamas, the accusations only served "the occupation and the enemies of the resistance," claiming that since the violence began they had worked together with all the organizations, the Lebanese and Palestinian security forces and the Palestinian ambassador to Lebanon to protect the refugee camp and its residents (Palestine Online, September 11, 2023). Hezbollah also expressed regret over the events in the refugee camp, stating they strongly opposed fighting from which only the "Zionist enemy" benefitted and the biggest loser was the Palestinian people. They called for an immediate ceasefire and a commitment to all measures previously agreed on (al-'Ahed, September 11, 2023).

► In an effort to bring calm, **Mahmoud Abbas** spoke **with Najib Mikati, the prime minister of the interim government**, and emphasized his efforts to achieve a ceasefire (L'Orient and al-Nashra, September 10, 2023). On September 11, 2023, **Joseph Aoun, commander the Lebanese Army**, met in his office with **Ashraf Dabour, Palestinian Authority (PA) representative in Lebanon**. No details were provided about the meeting (al-Nashra, September 11, 2023).

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<sup>5</sup> For further information about the previous round of clashes in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp, see the August 3, 2023 ITIC report "Spotlight on Terrorism: Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria."



**The commander of the Lebanese Army meets with the representative of the PA in Lebanon (al-Nashra, September 11, 2023)**

► On the evening of September 12, 2023 a meeting was held at the Palestinian embassy in Beirut, attended by Fatah and Hamas representatives, including **Musa Abu Marzouq, a senior Hamas figure** who arrived in Lebanon. After the meeting they issued a joint statement emphasizing the decision to stabilize calm. According to the report, the following points were agreed upon at the meeting: (saidaonline.com, September 13, 2023).

- ◆ Establishing a ceasefire and implementing understandings the reached under the sponsorship of Najib Mikati in the presence of the security force commanders.
- ◆ The extradition of wanted persons accused of assassinating a senior Fatah official in the camp, Major General Abu Ashraf al-Armoushi and his men, and of Abd al-Rahman Farhoud, and turning them over to the Lebanese justice system.
- ◆ Facilitating the return of camp residents to their homes and repairing the destruction as soon as possible.
- ◆ Continued cooperation with Lebanon and all its institutions.



**Dabour meets with Hamas and Fatah delegations (al-Risalah, September 13, 2023)**

## Internal Lebanese Affairs

### Electing a president

► The Lebanese presidential crisis continues. As part of the efforts to resolve the crisis, **Muhammad Raed, a Hezbollah member of the Lebanese Parliament**, met with **Joseph Aoun, commander of the Lebanese army**. Details of the meeting were not made public, except for a news item in al-Diyar stating Aoun had told Raed he did not intend to run in the presidential election (contrary to what was published by several media outlets) (al-Diyar, September 8, 2023). The media noted it was the first time a Hezbollah-affiliated politician had met with the army commander, a significant development because Hezbollah supports the candidacy of Suleiman Frangieh (Nidaa al-Watan, September 7, 2023). It was also noted that the timing of the meeting was apparently not coincidental, since it took place between the visit of Amos Hochstein, American presidential coordinator for global infrastructure and energy security, and the visit of Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French envoy (al-Diyar, September 8, 2023).



**Lebanese army commander Joseph Aoun (Nidaa al-Watan, September 7, 2023)**

- ◆ Hassan al-Hasan, a Hezbollah-affiliated journalist, said Hezbollah leaders had announced that Hezbollah had a new presidential candidate (Lebanon Debate, September 10, 2023).
- ◆ Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French envoy, arrived in Lebanon and met with Najib Mikati. Le Drian expressed hope that the initiative for a dialogue proposed by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri would be the beginning of a solution (Twitter account of the office of the interim prime minister, September 12, 2023). Rolla Beydoun) reporter for the Ici Beirut news web site, was pessimistic about Le Drian's ability to help resolve the crisis because of varying and conflicting Lebanese expectations regarding what he had the ability to do (Ici Beirut, September 11, 2023).





**Najib Mikati meets with Le Drian (Twitter account of the interim prime minister's office, September 12, 2023)**

## The arrival of Syrian refugees in Lebanon

- ▶ The issue of Syrian refugees arriving in Lebanon continues to provoke public debate and preoccupy the Lebanese government. **Najib Mikati**, who addressed the issue at the cabinet meeting, stated that most of the refugees were young people who arrived in Lebanon through illegal border crossings (al-Arab, September 7, 2023). **Anwar al-Sahli, the Hezbollah Parliament member responsible for the issue of Syrian refugees**, demanded it be placed at the top of the Lebanese government's priority list. He claimed the Lebanese security forces were at fault for not being able to close the border with Syria (al-Ayam TV, September 12, 2023).
- ▶ The al-Liwaa newspaper claimed the divisions and disputes in the Lebanese government paralyzed it and kept it from resolving the refugee issue (al-Liwaa, September 13, 2023). Rakeel Ateeq, a reporter for the Nidaa al-Watan newspaper, claimed the Lebanese army was unable to solve the problem and was not the "correct address" for a solution. She also claimed Syrian refugees contributed to increasing social tensions in Lebanon and an increase in serious crime. Although there is [allegedly] no organized Syrian crime in Lebanon, Lebanese hire the services of Syrian refugees to commit serious crimes, such as murder (Nidaa al-Watan, September 13, 2023).

## The economy

- ▶ On September 12, 2023, the Lebanese government approved the 2024 budget in record speed during the visit of the International Monetary Fund delegation to Lebanon (al-Nashra, September 12, 2023). The government agreed to carry out the reforms demanded by **Wassim Mansouri, the governor of the Central Bank**, and expressed a willingness to withdraw from the plan to collect taxes in dollars due to the opposition of the International Monetary Fund. All the measures taken by the government and the governor of the Central Bank would seem

to be intended to convey to the International Monetary Fund delegation that their intentions were serious (al-Nahar, September 13).

► **Salem Shaheen, the Central Bank's third deputy governor**, said the Bank intended to tighten the supervision of the trade in foreign currency by means of a new digital platform which would be operated in cooperation with the Bloomberg company. The new rules and management of foreign exchange trade are supposed to reduce the illegal trade in dollars.

► Despite the attempts by the Central Bank and the Lebanese government to combat money laundering, an investigation carried out on behalf of the Central Bank revealed that Lebanon remained a prime destination for laundering a foreign resident's total capital and served as a tax shelter. One of the main reasons is the weakness of regulation and the banking supervision (grandlb.com, September 11, 2023).

## Syria

### Aerial attacks on Tartus and Hama

► On September 13, 2023, two airstrikes were carried out on targets in Syria, for which Israel was accused of responsibility. The attacks were the following:

- ◆ At 5:22 p.m. an attack was carried out on Syrian army air defense positions in the rural area of Tartus. Syria reported two soldiers were killed and six wounded and property had been damaged (SANA, September 13, 2023). Reportedly, the attack damaged warehouses used by Hezbollah located at a Syrian army air defense base southeast of Tartus, about eight kilometers (about five miles) north of the Syria-Lebanon border. The warehouses were used by Hezbollah to store weapons in preparation for shipping them to Lebanon. On the evening of the previous day, several Hezbollah trucks arrived at the warehouses from Lebanon through illegal border crossings and unloaded their contents. According to reports, in addition to two Syrian army soldiers, another person, whose identity is unknown (possibly a Hezbollah operative), was killed in the attack. Another attack was carried out against a Syrian army air defense base in the village of Kartu, about ten kilometers (six miles) southeast of the first target. Three soldiers and five officers of the air defense system were injured (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 13, 2023).

- ◆ At 10:40 p.m. several positions in the Hama area (central Syria) were attacked. Damage to property was caused (SANA, September 13, 2023). The Lebanese commentator Nidal

al-Saba, who recorded the event, claimed that four Israeli fighter jets circled the skies of northern Lebanon and carried out an attack towards Syria (Nidal al-Saba's Twitter account, September 13, 2023). The target of the attack was reportedly a "scientific research center" near Taqsis, about ten kilometers southeast of Hama (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 13, 2023).