



## Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria September 21-27, 2023

### Overview

- ▶ **Tensions on the Israeli-Lebanese border:** On September 23, 2023, a Lebanese tractor crossed the border into Israeli territory, in the Har Dov area, and took down a mound erected by the IDF. An IDF force drove it away by throwing stun grenades. According to the Lebanese army, the tractor operated in Lebanese territory. At the same time, the Lebanese army was paving a road nearby. IDF forces also continued their work in the area.
- ▶ In an interview to an Iranian news channel, Wafiq Safa, head of Hezbollah's liaison and coordination unit, said that it was still too early to predict whether the decisive campaign against Israel was imminent, but what was certain, he said, was that Israel was suffering from internal and external crises and its deterrent power was eroding. Hezbollah continues to try to gain support among the Sunni population in northern Lebanon by providing material support. For the time being, residents tend to reject it.
- ▶ In the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp, a temporary calm is apparent. A joint security force of Fatah, Hamas, and other Palestinian organizations was deployed along the confrontation lines in the camp.
- ▶ Najib Mikati, Lebanon's interim prime minister, said in an interview that a peace agreement with Israel could only be possible through negotiations carried out by the Arab League. This is an unprecedented declaration that does not rule out in principle the possibility of a peace agreement with Israel.
- ▶ Lebanon's presidential crisis is still far from resolved. Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French envoy, declared that the crisis posed a danger to Lebanon's survival and conveyed a message that the five supporting countries were losing tolerance and trust in the Lebanese leadership. Jassem bin Fahd Al Thani, the Qatari envoy, also failed in his efforts to mediate between the sides.
- ▶ Lebanese security forces arrested a Lebanese citizen believed to be behind the shooting on September 21, 2023, at the US Embassy building in Beirut.
- ▶ A drone targeted, apparently in Syria, two Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives. The two were killed. In one of the reports, the attack was attributed to Israel.

- ▶ Hezbollah reportedly moved a system of surface-to-air missiles from Lebanon to one of its bases in the Dimas area on the outskirts of Damascus.

## South Lebanon

### **Lebanese tractor crosses the Blue Line**

- ▶ On September 23, 2023, a Lebanese tractor used to remove an earth mound erected by the IDF crossed the border line (the Blue Line) in the Har Dov area (Shebaa Farms) by several meters. An IDF force threw two stun grenades at the tractor to drive it away. On the Lebanese side, Lebanese army and UNIFIL soldiers were present at the time, and no Lebanese civilian crossed the border. The incident ended within a few minutes with no casualties (Ynet, September 23, 2023).

- ▶ The Lebanese army reported an “Israeli violation.” According to its statement, on September 23, 2023, between 11:00 and 12:00, several IDF soldiers (“operatives of the Israeli enemy”) crossed the Blue Line and threw smoke grenades at a Lebanese army patrol escorting a bulldozer that was working to remove an earth mound erected by Israel north of the withdrawal line in the Bastra Farm area (Har Dov). The patrol team responded by firing tear gas canisters and as a result, IDF soldiers withdrew (Lebanese Army website, September 23, 2023). The Lebanese army posted photos documenting the incident, showing Lebanon army soldiers standing next to an Israeli tank and a UNIFIL soldier watching at the side. In addition, a Lebanese army inside a jeep in Lebanon is seen directing a missile at Israel (Twitter account of the Lebanese army @LebarmyOfficial, September 23, 2023)



**Photos released by the Lebanese army documenting the incident on the Israeli-Lebanese border (Lebanese army Twitter account, @LebarmyOfficial, September 23, 2023)**

► Ali Shoeib, a correspondent for the Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Manar network, shared photos documenting the incident on his Twitter account. According to him, Israel violated Lebanese sovereignty by the bulldozer operation and the Lebanese army responded by firing tear gas canisters. He reported that both sides were on high alert (Al-Manar TV and Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 23, 2023).



**Lebanese army tractor clears IDF mound (Al-Manar TV and Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 23, 2023)**

► UNIFIL issued an announcement stating that its personnel were present on the ground and in contact with the sides to reduce tension, restore calm to the region, and prevent misunderstandings (UNIFIL website, September 23, 2023).

## Lebanese army paves road parallel to Blue Line

► On September 25, 2023, Ali Shoeib reported that IDF forces were on high alert due to a new military road paved by the Lebanese army parallel to the road built by Israel on its territory in the Shebaa Farms. On September 26, 2023, Shoeib posted a photo showing him standing about five meters from an Israeli tank, with UNIFIL soldiers watching what was happening (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 25, 26, 2023).



**Lebanese army soldiers escort the bulldozer paving a new military road along the border with Israel (Lebanese Army Twitter account, @LebarmyOfficial, September 25, 2023)**



**Ali Shoeib reports next to an IDF tank (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 26, 2023)**

► On September 27, Ali Shoeib reported that at the end of a week of alert on both sides, the Lebanese army "forced" the IDF to remove "two signs of violation (trespass) in the liberated land of the Shebaa Farms" and caused the IDF's Merkava tanks to be removed to within ten meters of the site (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, September 27, 2023)



**Lebanese army soldiers in the Har Dov works area**  
(Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, @alishoeib1970, September 27, 2023)

## Hezbollah and IDF activity near the border

► The Akhbar al-Yawm news website referred to a news report by Sky News (September 23, 2023) about the tension on the Israeli-Lebanese border.<sup>1</sup> The website highlighted the presence of Hezbollah fighters dressed in black, taking up positions a few meters from IDF tanks (Akhbar al-Yawm, September 26, 2023).

## Hezbollah

### Interview given by the head of Hezbollah’s coordination and liaison unit

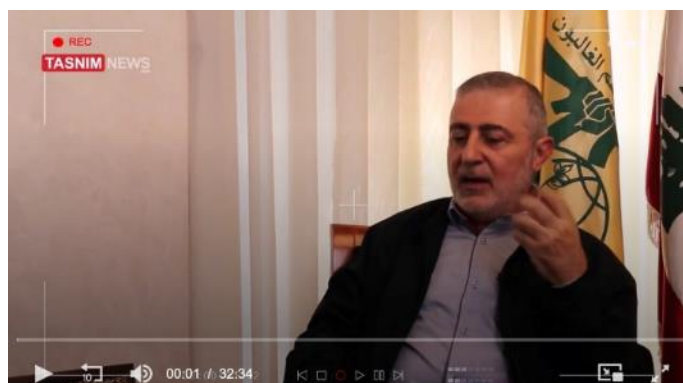
► **Wafiq Safa, head of Hezbollah’s liaison and coordination unit**, a senior member of Hezbollah, gave an interview to Iran’s Tasnim News Agency (affiliated with the IRGC). Following are the main points of his remarks:

- ◆ It is too early to predict whether a decisive campaign with Israel is imminent, but what is certain is that Israel is suffering from internal and external crises, which attest to the erosion of Israeli deterrence. Proof of this, he said, was Israel’s response to the presence of a tent set up by Hezbollah, which it claimed was located on Lebanese soil. Israel threatened several times to remove the tent but eventually changed its mind. Israeli residents along the border live in ongoing instability and do not sleep.
- ◆ Regarding the land borders, Safa claimed that there are currently 13 disputed points along the Blue Line that “mark the border, but under no circumstances is this a defined border delineation.”

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<sup>1</sup> Sky News report in English: <https://news.sky.com/story/lebanon-israel-tensions-worsen-but-there-are-signs-of-hope-despite-talk-of-conflict-12967709>

- ◆ Safa stressed that Hezbollah would stand behind the Lebanese government in every decision regarding the maritime as well as land border. Hezbollah will intervene when it sees that Israel is trying to reach an agreement while ignoring Lebanon's demands (Tasnim, September 26, 2023).



Wafiq Safa during the interview (Tasnim, September 26, 2023)

### Hezbollah's civilian aid to Sunni residents in northern Lebanon

► As part of Hezbollah's attempt to gain support among the Sunni community in Lebanon, Hezbollah operatives came to comfort families in the village of Al-Talil, in the Akkar Province in northern Lebanon, and to provide them with assistance following the explosion of a fuel tank on August 15, 2021, in which 36 local residents were killed and 80 others were injured. According to local sources, Hezbollah operatives came with Hezbollah flags and pictures of the organization's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, but most of the villagers refused to welcome them and the assistance they provided (raseef22.net, September 25, 2023).

## Palestinians in Lebanon

### Ceasefire in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp

► Tension continues in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp, but it seems that a temporary calm has been achieved. In this context, on September 25, 2023, a joint security force of the Palestinian organizations, numbering 45 fighters, was deployed along the confrontation lines and in several neighborhoods of the camp. The joint force is headed by Fatah, commanded by Liwa (Maj. Gen.) Mahmoud al-Ajouri. Also in the force are Hamas operatives, Usbat al-Ansar (a Palestinian organization with a radical Islamic ideology),<sup>2</sup> and Islamist organizations that were not involved in the clashes. It was noted that pressure exerted by Lebanese Parliament

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<sup>2</sup> Usbat al-Ansar (the supporters' community) is a Palestinian organization with a radical Islamic ideology operating in Lebanon, mainly in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp. The organization is affiliated with global jihad elements and its operatives were involved in firing rockets into Israeli territory on December 27-28, 2005.

Speaker Nabih Berri, to which Hezbollah was a partner, created the appropriate atmosphere for resuming joint activity. It was also reported that the understandings between the sides are based on several clauses, including a ceasefire, the surrender of those wanted for the murder of Fatah's national security force commander Abu Ashraf al-Armoushi and four of his escorts, and not taking steps intended to bring about military achievements under the pretext of the current crisis (Al-Quds News Agency; Al-Jazeera, September 26, 2023).



Some of the operatives of the joint security force in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp  
(Al-Jazeera YouTube channel, September 26, 2023)

## Internal Lebanese Affairs

### Lebanon's presidential crisis

► **Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French envoy for the presidency in Lebanon**, gave an interview to the Lebanese newspaper L'Orient-Le Jour and the AFP News Agency. The interview echoed growing impatience and mistrust on the part of the quintet (the five countries supporting Lebanon with funding - France, the United States, Qatar, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia) towards the Lebanese leadership. Following are the points raised in the interview:

- ◆ The current situation in Lebanon calls into question its survival as a state.
- ◆ Lebanese politicians must find a way to solve the intolerable crisis (the presidential crisis).
- ◆ Hezbollah and its opponents will not be able to force their presidential candidate.
- ◆ The quintet consulted during the UN General Assembly deliberations; they are losing patience with the Lebanese denial of reality and are therefore considering their continued assistance (L'Orient-Le Jour, September 26, 2023).

► **Jassem bin Fahd Al Thani, the Qatari envoy**, arrived in Beirut on September 21, 2023, in an attempt to reach an agreement around one candidate. Hezbollah and Amal still adhere to the candidacy of Suleiman Frangieh, who is close to Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, while MP Gebran Bassil and Lebanese Forces Party head Samir Geagea oppose his candidacy and

propose three other candidates in the following order of priority: General Joseph Aoun, Chief of Staff of the Lebanese Army; Major General Elias Al-Baysari; and MP and businessman Neemat Frem. The Qatari envoy is trying to promote Joseph Aoun's candidacy as a compromise candidate (Al-Nashra, September 26, 2023). According to the newspaper Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, a solution to the crisis is not in sight (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, September 26, 2023).

### Shooting at the US Embassy

- ▶ Following the shooting at the US Embassy in Beirut on September 21, 2023, interim Prime Minister Najib Mikati met with US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea and condemned the incident, saying that the aggression against the embassy was aggression against Lebanon (Al-Modon, September 22, 2023).
- ▶ Lebanon's Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi called Dorothy Shea and informed her that the ministry's intelligence department had arrested the perpetrator and that an investigation was underway (MTV, September 25, 2023). The Al-Hurra network reported that the detainee is known by his initials M.H. and was born in 1997 (Al-Hurra, September 25, 2023).



**Lebanon's interim prime minister at a meeting with the US ambassador (Al-Modon, September 22, 2023)**

### Syrian refugees in Lebanon

- ▶ Following the Lebanese army and Hezbollah's attempts to expel from the country Syrian refugees, whose number has recently risen, it was reported that the Lebanese government was accelerating the deportation process and that during August 2023, a total of 6,000 refugees were expelled from the country (@Charles\_Lister Twitter account, September 21, 2023).



## Lebanese Foreign Affairs

### Mikati does not rule out the possibility of a peace agreement with Israel

- ▶ **Najib Mikati, the interim prime minister of Lebanon**, gave an interview to the French newspaper Le Figaro during a visit to New York as part of his participation in the UN General Assembly deliberations. Among other things, he answered a question about the possibility of a peace agreement with Israel.
- ▶ According to Mikati, Lebanon would be open to the possibility of joining negotiations conducted by the Arab League based on the Arab Peace Initiative proposed by the Arab League in 2002. He noted that in principle, Lebanon already has an armistice agreement with Israel, but added that he was willing to consider any peace initiative that would enable Lebanon's development and safeguard its interests (Le Figaro, September 18, 2023).

### Lebanese army commander meets with UN envoy to Lebanon

- ▶ Joseph Aoun met in his office with Joanna Wronecka, the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, to discuss general issues related to Lebanon (Twitter account of the Lebanese army @LebarmyOfficial, September 26, 2023).



**Joseph Aoun alongside the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon  
(Twitter account of the Lebanese army @LebarmyOfficial, September 26, 2023)**

## Syria

### Air defense system moved from Lebanon to a Hezbollah base in the Damascus area

- ▶ Zaman al-Wasl, a news website affiliated with the Syrian opposition, reported that Hezbollah had moved an air defense system (surface-to-air missiles) from Lebanon to one of its bases in Syria, located near the town of Al-Dimas, about 10 km northwest of Damascus (and about 4 km east of the Syrian-Lebanese border). According to the website, the system was moved through

one of the border crossings in Lebanon used for smuggling in the area of the Syrian town of Kfeir Yabous, about 25 km northwest of Damascus (and about 1.5 km east of the Syrian-Lebanese border). The system was deployed inside one of the Hezbollah bases surrounding the town of Al-Dimas by Lebanese experts, who brought with them accompanying equipment.

► Hajj Hamid, one of Hezbollah's commanders in the region, supervised the delivery of the system. It was noted that it was an Iranian-made S-75 Dvina surface-to-air missile system, including an AA (heat-guided) guidance system improved by the Iranians.

► The article notes that Hezbollah has recently move several air defense systems to Syria. These systems are deployed at Hezbollah bases around Damascus. It was also noted that during September 2023, Hezbollah moved several air defense systems and advanced radar systems to its bases in the Rihla border area and near Damascus International Airport (Zaman al-Wasl, September 23, 2023).

► It is difficult to determine based on this report which missile it is since the S-75 Dvina missile is an old Soviet-made surface-to-air missile (from 1957) that was never supplied to Iran. According to a report by a Russian military website, the Dvina missile has been used by the Syrian army and has proven itself to be an effective system (topwar.ru, May 31, 2023).



**Soviet-made S-75 Dvina missile in the Syrian army (topwar.ru, May 31, 2023)**

### **Two people attacked by a drone**

► According to Syrian media reports, a drone targeted two motorcyclists near the village of Beit Jan on the outskirts of Damascus. The attack was attributed to Israel. The two motorcyclists were killed (Ynet, September 21, 2023). According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the two fatalities were Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) operatives (Al-Arabi, September 21, 2023).

## Two Hezbollah drones shot down in Jordan

► The Jordanian army announced that it had shot down two drones loaded with shipments of crystal meth on the Jordanian-Syrian border. It should be noted that the smuggling of weapons and drugs from Syria to Jordan is carried out with the backing of the Syrian government, Hezbollah, and Iran (Jordanian Army website, September 26, 2023). On September 21, 2023, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights published an investigative report on smuggling activity from southern Syria to Jordan. The article notes that Hezbollah plays a central role in smuggling activity, operating in coordination with Syrian security forces. In addition, the article indicates that Hezbollah supplies the raw materials to produce drugs and that drones are extensively used for smuggling in southern Syria, although smuggling also takes place by crossing the border on foot. The article notes that the village of Al-Shi'aab, in the As-Suwayda Province, is one of the most prominent centers from which smuggling to Jordan originates (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 21, 2023). It should be noted that Jordan is not the only destination country for the drugs and that they are smuggled from there to the Gulf states and apparently also to Judea and Samaria, Israeli territory, and other areas around the world.



**The drones shot down by the Jordanian army (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 21, 2023)**