

Yellow Tents Across the Blue Line: Hezbollah's New Brinkmanship

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Brief Analysis

The group has been erecting structures and sending armed personnel into Israeli territory, decreasing the margin of error for diplomatic solutions and further eroding the credibility of the post-2006 border security regime.

Seventeen years after Hezbollah forces crossed into Israel, killed three soldiers, and sparked a devastating war, the group no longer bothers to hide its sprawling military presence in south Lebanon, on the border, and even across it. In fact, it seems to view Israel's recent domestic turmoil and perceived weakness as a window of opportunity. As the Security Council prepares to extend the mandate of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Hezbollah has erected tents and deployed armed men across the Blue Line in the Mount Dov/Shebaa area—the latest in a string of actions that violate the security regime established by [UN Security Council Resolution 1701](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL-LB_060814_SCR1701.pdf) (https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL-LB_060814_SCR1701.pdf), which ended the war. These illicit activities are blatantly visible to all, as are UNIFIL's shrinking relevance and the Lebanese military's collaboration with Hezbollah. Israel has sought to restrain the group's provocations without deteriorating into all-out war, but its measured approach—coupled with Iran's growing clout in the region—has only emboldened Hezbollah's aggression and invited grandstanding from Beirut. Even if the current crisis is resolved quietly, the international community must take immediate action to prevent war and change course to avert deterioration.

Tents on the Blue Line

On June 21, armed Hezbollah personnel [reportedly \(https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/defense/407115/\)](https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/defense/407115/) erected two tents on Israeli territory. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) initially refrained from publicizing the violation in order to give Hezbollah a quiet “climb down.” Israeli [officials \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/well-fight-you-to-remove-outpost-israel-reportedly-warns-hezbollah/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/well-fight-you-to-remove-outpost-israel-reportedly-warns-hezbollah/) also used political channels with the United States, France, and the UN to clarify that the tents will be

forcibly removed if they are not evacuated, while emphasizing that Israel does not want war and will let diplomacy work. In Lebanon, the Hezbollah-affiliated newspaper *al-Akhbar* **has warned** (<https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/365086/%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%88-%D8%A5%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D9%83-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B3%D9%83%D9%88%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%B6%D8%A8>) that “any Israeli action to remove the tents will lead to war.”

Lebanese officials have repeatedly declared their respect for the Blue Line—the boundary defined by the UN in June 2000 after Israel withdrew from south Lebanon. Yet Beirut also claims sovereignty over the Shebaa Farms, an area south of the line that Israel seized from Syria in 1967. Moreover, the line runs through the village of Ghajar—whose residents are Israeli Alawites—leaving the community’s northern section on Lebanon’s side of the boundary. Hezbollah has exploited both of these disputes to further its ethos of “resisting the occupation” and create a pretext for continued attacks there.

In the wake of the 2006 war, Resolution 1701 sought to prevent future hostilities by removing the main condition that led to the conflict: the presence of Hezbollah forces in south Lebanon. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) were reinforced and tasked with helping UNIFIL create “an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government.” Since then, however, Hezbollah has increased its military more than tenfold, including in the south. And over the past year alone, its elite Radwan assault units have **established** (<https://www.jns.org/hezbollah-builds-27-new-bases-in-lebanon-under-cover-of-fake-ngo/>) dozens of positions along the Blue Line.

Although Israel assesses that Hezbollah is not interested in initiating a war at present, senior IDF officials **recently warned** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-05-22/ty-article/.premium/idf-intelligence-chief-warns-of-escalation-and-clashes-from-israels-northern-border/00000188-4498-de00-a588-ff9a60ca0000>) of the group’s growing appetite for challenges that risk unintended escalation (e.g., the **March bombing** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-infiltrates-israel-part-1-another-step-toward-changing-rules-game>) near Megiddo; the **April rocket salvo** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanese-social-media-reactions-rocket-strikes-israel>) by Hamas cells in south Lebanon). In the Mount Dov/Shebaa area, Hezbollah military operatives were **reported** (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/128/89/pdf/N2312889.pdf?OpenElement>) near a local UN observation position (OGL-SO3) dozens of times between January and March, occasionally crossing the Blue Line. In response to the group’s growing presence along this frontier, the IDF began constructing a robust ground barrier that has since reached Mount Dov, spurring Hezbollah-encouraged **protests** (<https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-on-terrorism-hezbollah-lebanon-and-syria-june-2-15-2023/>) from residents of nearby villages. Last month, *al-Akhbar* **reported** (<https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/363617>) that the “resistance” had erected a structure to stop the IDF’s work.

Meanwhile, a senior Israeli official **noted** (<https://www.axios.com/2023/06/30/hezbollah-outpost-lebanon-israel-us-state>) that Hezbollah operatives had built a tent about thirty meters inside Israeli territory on April 8, near UN post SO3. The IDF later dropped **leaflets** (<https://www.alquds.com/en/posts/72979>) in the area warning individuals not to cross the border. On May 30, however, another tent was **erected** (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/levant-turkey/1687502236-israel-s-envoy-demands-uncs-to-condemn-hezbollah-tents>) fifty-five meters inside Israel. IDF officials **reportedly** (<https://twitter.com/orheller/status/1678076232125087746?s=48&t=uxvamAJC1hFhCbSc142GCA>) believe both tents were erected by field operatives without the knowledge of their leaders. Whatever the case, senior Hezbollah figures and media outlets subsequently declared that the tents were located in occupied Lebanese territory. Later,

one of the tents was reportedly evacuated, but Hezbollah spokesmen **have claimed** (<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1342335/hezbollah-denies-the-removal-of-tent-on-blue-line.html>) that both tents are still in place and will be joined by further structures as necessary.

The issue grew more complicated earlier this month when Hezbollah media **accused** (<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1342474/after-the-annexation-of-ghajar-are-lebanon-and-israel-heading-toward-a-new-escalation.html>) Israel of annexing Ghajar village, which was re-fenced in 2022 at the request of its residents for security reasons. On July 6, a Konkurs antitank missile **fired** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-rocket-fired-from-lebanon-explodes-near-border-artillery-returning-fire/>) from Lebanon hit Israeli territory near the village. On July 10, Prime Minister Najib Mikati **met with** (<https://www.lebanon24.com/news/lebanon/1085972/%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%89-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8>) UNIFIL commander Aroldo Lazaro Saenz, who conveyed Israel's demand to "remove the tent"; Mikati responded by demanding that Israel withdraw from the northern part of Ghajar, which is considered Lebanese territory. The same day, parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri **declared** (<https://t.me/almayadeen/172929>) that the two tents are on Lebanese land and likewise **demanded** (<https://t.me/almayadeen/172930>) that Israel withdraw from northern Ghajar, Shebaa Farms, the hills outside the Lebanese village of Kfar Shouba, and Point B1, the westernmost location on the Israel-Lebanon coastline.

On July 12, the anniversary of the 2006 war, Hezbollah operatives tried to sabotage the fence and set fire near Israeli border communities, spurring the IDF to disperse them. The group's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, **emphasized** (<https://english.almanar.com.lb/1870068?s=tg>) that any attack on the Shebaa tents would not go unanswered and directed fighters to respond to any Israeli aggression. He also reiterated the demand for Israel to withdraw from occupied Lebanese points along the border. Meanwhile, Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant warned against dangerous provocations, emphasizing Israel's readiness to act as needed.

It is difficult to ignore the similarity between the emerging developments in Mount Dov/Shebaa, Hezbollah's wider trend toward more open aggression and overconfidence, and the group's threats last year in support of **Lebanon's maritime demands** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/securing-or-insecuring-israel-assessing-israel-lebanon-maritime-agreement>). Then as now, a tactical situation (launching drones in 2022; deploying tents and gunmen along the Blue Line in 2023) gradually devolved into a Lebanese political attempt to extort border concessions from Israel under threat of escalation. The current situation's most dangerous risk is a miscalculated escalation that leads to war—a scenario that might erupt due to additional Hezbollah attacks or a forceful Israeli removal of tents.

Internationally, the situation illustrates the depth of the current challenge to the UN-established Blue Line, the brazenness of Hezbollah's armed violations of Resolution 1701, and UNIFIL's utter failure in all aspects of its mandate besides its role as a liaison channel and an interposing force. On the eve of their next report to the Security Council, UN staff will face another credibility test: will they honestly recount the hard reality of an oversized peacekeeping force that is losing ground to Hezbollah every day, or will they once again water down the situation's severe downward trend and obfuscate the truth? So far, the UN has refrained from publicly declaring that tents and militants are present south of the Blue Line despite being aware of this dangerous situation for several months, and the existing text of the next report indeed fails to mention them.

For its part, Hezbollah has deemed the steady progress of IDF barrier construction on the Israeli side of the Blue Line

and in Mount Dov/Shebaa as a suitable pretext for “defending Lebanon’s sovereignty”—and, no doubt, distracting the Lebanese public from the group’s responsibility for the country’s meltdown. As noted above, it is unclear whether Hezbollah originally intended to erect the tents south of the line, but once called on to evacuate them, the group doubled down. Hence its emerging dilemma: quiet withdrawal could dent its image of strength, but leaving the tent in place could spark unintended escalation that wreaks havoc on Lebanon and stokes domestic anger against the group. One potential way out of this dilemma may be to link tent removal to a wider border negotiation.

Israel faces a strategic dilemma as well. The remaining tent presents no military threat, and attempting to answer the challenge with quiet diplomacy is a prudent first step. Yet in seeking to restrain such provocations without deteriorating into all-out war, Israel’s measured use of force (e.g., intercepting last year’s drones without an offensive response; responding to the Megiddo attack in Syria rather than Lebanon; striking harmless targets in response to the April rocket strikes) has emboldened Hezbollah’s aggression and invited political grandstanding in Beirut. Accepting Lebanon’s demands could project weakness and invite additional provocations.

Policy Options

Given that one tent has been evacuated, Israel can allow a short additional period to exhaust the diplomatic path. The option of land border talks seems to be on the table now as well. Yet Israel should not negotiate under threat of Hezbollah aggression.

If the group’s presence in Israeli territory persists, as is now increasingly probable, Israel should prepare to remove it at a time of its choosing—and prepare for possible escalation if Hezbollah forcefully opposes this removal or engages in any other aggression. To reduce potential Hezbollah brinkmanship, Israel should seek to shake the group’s confidence in predicting what shape IDF operations will take. Meanwhile, barrier construction near Mount Dov should be completed, and the Blue Line should be clearly marked in obstacle-free sections.

To establish legitimacy for its actions should war prove unavoidable, Israel should also adopt a higher media profile starting now, including high-resolution documentation of Hezbollah military violations of the Blue Line and UN resolutions. These efforts should be aimed at international audiences beyond just policymakers. The Lebanese public in particular should know who is responsible for dragging them closer to catastrophic war.

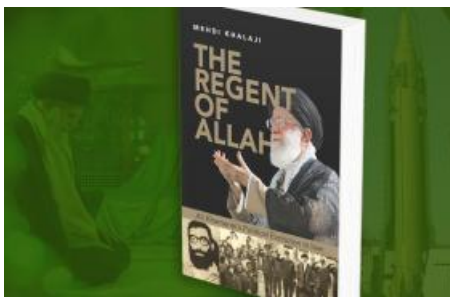
Finally, as prescribed in previous PolicyWatches [last month \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/last-call-unifil-israel-and-hezbollah-2006-deja-vu\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/last-call-unifil-israel-and-hezbollah-2006-deja-vu) and [last year \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-avoid-another-lost-year-unifil\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-avoid-another-lost-year-unifil), authorities need to urgently adapt the Resolution 1701 and UNIFIL mechanisms to the transformed environment, including through the following measures:

- Extend UNIFIL’s mandate by six months rather than a year, since the fast pace of events in Lebanon requires more frequent attention from the Security Council.
- Cut UNIFIL’s size by 20 percent this summer and consider further cuts every six months. With the exception of liaison roles and border interposition or buffering, there is no justification to leave 10,000 peacekeepers at grave risk of becoming Hezbollah’s human shields if war breaks out.
- Withhold UNIFIL civil projects from villages where patrols are repeatedly assaulted, condition assistance to the Lebanese army on fulfillment of its obligations under Resolution 1701, and decrease UNIFIL’s overall annual budget accordingly.
- Condition assistance to the Lebanese government on fulfilling its legal obligations to protect UNIFIL. This includes meaningful, expedited legal proceedings against persons suspected of attacking peacekeepers (e.g., the [murdered Irish soldier Sean Rooney \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unifil-follies-turn-deadly-israel-lebanon-border\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unifil-follies-turn-deadly-israel-lebanon-border)).

- Upgrade UN reports to include precise location data on where UNIFIL has actually patrolled, where it has been denied access, and where it has come under attack. Instead of simply providing general descriptions of incidents (which often obfuscate more than they reveal), the UN should report trends using graphs rather than just numbers.
- Consider a U.S. veto of this summer's UNIFIL renewal mandate unless changes are made. Although some might argue that this would increase Lebanon's instability, it would in fact constitute a first step toward stability, signaling to Lebanon that UNIFIL represents not a cash cow to be taken for granted, but a serious commitment to a security regime that must regain some traction against Hezbollah.

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