



Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria June 2-15 , 2023

Overview

- ▶ **Increasing tension along the Israel-Lebanon border:** Near Kafr Shuba, in the eastern sector of south Lebanon, civilians have made attempts to disrupt IDF engineering activities and cause provocations. At least some of the activities have been encouraged and directed by Hezbollah.
- ▶ Hezbollah practiced using UAVs as part of its preparations for a possible confrontation with Israel.
- ▶ Hashem Safi al-Din, chairman of Hezbollah's Operational Council, reiterates threats to fire missiles at the center of Israel and send operatives of its elite al-Radwan unit to invade the Galilee.
- ▶ Israel lodged a complaint with the UN against Hezbollah because of Hezbollah's stated intention to abduct Israeli civilians, a scenario of the most recent al-Radwan unit exercise.
- ▶ Five Hezbollah operatives were accused of killing a UNIFIL soldier.
- ▶ Hezbollah is planning to expand its network of pharmacies.
- ▶ The Lebanese Parliament has not found a presidential candidate acceptable to all factions.
- ▶ The Lebanese army is deploying to protect the oil and natural gas installations offshore and near the Israeli border.
- ▶ Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian militias use the tunnels along the Syria-Iraq border to smuggle arms and drugs; the tunnels were formerly used by ISIS.

Hezbollah and Lebanon

Tension along the Israel-Lebanon border

- ▶ During the past two weeks tension has increased in the eastern sector of the Israel-Lebanon border, following IDF engineering activity for the construction of a barrier in the Har Dov area. The Hezbollah-affiliated media outlets in Lebanon claimed Israel's activity over the Blue Line¹

¹ The Blue Line marks the border between Israel and Lebanon, determined in coordination with the UN after the IDF left Lebanon in 2000. It is marked with barrels painted light blue, the color of the UN flag,

is a violation of Lebanese sovereignty (lebanon24.com, June 1, 2023). On June 1, 2023, Hezbollah erected a tent near Kafr Shuba. Tensions worsened following demonstrations held by residents from the village, apparently supported and directed by Hezbollah. Lebanese army and UNIFIL forces were deployed to the site but did not take action against the demonstrators. On the same day, Hezbollah distributed flyers to residents in the Kafr Bastara, not far from Kafr Shuba, and in the Shaba Farms region, which Lebanon also claims. The flyers warned Israel it was operating in Lebanese territory, claiming "You should be worried. We don't need advice from an occupier like you. You need to stop the occupation and the infiltration of Lebanon. The Shaba Farms have always been and will remain Lebanese." The flyers were distributed in response to IDF flyers distributed on the Lebanese side of the border on May 23, 2023, warning local residents not to approach the border.



The Hezbollah flyer (@alishoeib1970 Twitter account, June 1, 2023).

► On June 7, 2023, Isma'il Nasser, a Lebanese farmer from Kafr Shuba, stood in the path of an IDF bulldozer operating near the border and threw rocks at it (@alishoeib1970 Twitter account, June 7, 2023). UNIFIL soldiers watched from the side with no apparent intention to intervene. He was widely praised, especially by people affiliated with Hezbollah and Amal (@alishoeib1970 Twitter account, June 7, 2023).

hence the name. Lebanon claims sovereignty over several areas to the south of the Line, including a Har Dov area belonging Kafr Shuba and the area of the village of Agha, known as the Shaba Farms.



Isma'il Nasser tries to prevent IDF activity (@alishoeib1970 Twitter account, June 7, 2023).



Villagers from Kafr Shuba on the Israeli side of the border (@alishoeib1970 Twitter account, June 8, 2023).



Right: Local residents protest IDF activity near the border. Left: Teargas used to disperse demonstrators (@alishoeib1970, June 13, 2023).

► Following an increase in protests, on June 9, 2023, the IDF used teargas to disperse protestors who waved Hezbollah and Palestinian flags. The IDF also erected a barbed-wire fence along the DMZ to prevent direct friction with demonstrators. During the clashes a Lebanese army soldier aimed an RPG launcher at an Israeli tank parked on the border (Telegram and al-Mayadeen, June 9, 2023).

► In response to the events, **interim Lebanese prime minister Najib Mikati met with UNIFIL commander General Arnoldo Lazaro**, and demanded the UN exert pressure on Israel to stop

its [alleged] "violations" of Lebanese sovereignty near the Blue Line. He warned that Israel's continued activities would lead to "a dangerous level of tension." Mikati confirmed Lebanon's commitment to UN Security Council Resolution 1701² and coordination between the Lebanese army and UNIFIL to preserve stability along the Lebanese border (Lebanese prime minister's website, June 12, 2023).

► On the morning of June 10, 2023, **Ali Fiyad, a Hezbollah member of the Lebanese Parliament**, paid a visit to Kafr Shuba and was briefed on "Israel's recent violations in the area." He said they were proud of the Kafr Shuba villagers, who demonstrated adherence to their land and proved their will was stronger than "the Israeli aggressor." He stated that the "resistance" [Hezbollah] was in place and prepared to preserve Lebanon's security and sovereignty (al-'Ahed, June 10, 2023).

Reactions to Hezbollah's military exercises³

► **Hashem Safi al-Din, chairman of Hezbollah's Operational Council**, emphasized **Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah** had often said that in the event of any Israeli "mistake" made on the basis of "incorrect calculations" Hezbollah's missiles would attack Tel Aviv and its elite al-Radwan unit operatives would invade the Galilee. He said the objective of the military exercises was to make it clear that everything Hezbollah said, including the invasion by an al-Radwan force, a powerful confrontation and the forces' constant preparedness, was serious and not a joke (Iran's Tasnim news agency, June 13, 2023).

► **Interim Lebanese prime minister Najib Mikati** condemned the exercise, stating that Hezbollah's possessing arms demanded a broad Lebanese consensus. He said nothing was more important than Lebanon's sovereignty and the existence of "a state within a state" was unacceptable. He added they recognized Hezbollah as an "arm of the resistance" [Hezbollah, Iran and the Palestinian terrorist organizations] whose role was limited to the "liberation of occupied Lebanese land" and that both he and the Lebanese government confirmed that role. However, he said he opposed the use of Hezbollah's military force for internal Lebanese political purposes and he would never allow Hezbollah to use its weapons inside the country,

² UN Security Council Resolution 1701 was passed on August 12, 2006, at the end of the Second Lebanon War. It included authorization for an increased UNIFIL force in Lebanon to prevent hostilities and a UNIFIL commitment to protect the region from violence. It also stated that no weapons would be brought into areas where there was a UNIFIL presence without authorization from the Lebanese government, and imposed an embargo on the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah.

³ For further information see the May 22, 2023 report, "Hezbollah holds a military display in south Lebanon and threatens Israel."

only against Israel. He called on Israel to leave Lebanese territory and not give Hezbollah the excuse to use its weapons. Regarding a future confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel, he said he relied on Hezbollah's prudence not to drag Lebanon into a war at the present time (euronews.com, June 5, 2023).

Israel complains to the UN about Hezbollah's intention to abduct Israeli civilians

► Following the military exercise Hezbollah conducted in south Lebanon on June 21, 2023, Israel lodged a complaint against Hezbollah with the UN for its violation of agreements, since the exercise included a scenario of the invasion of Israeli communities and the abduction of civilians. **Gilad Ardan, Israel's ambassador to the UN**, appealed to the Security Council and the UN secretary general with Israel's demand that the UN Security Council strongly condemn Iran and Hezbollah for sabotaging regional stability, and demand the Lebanese government meet its commitments to Security Council Resolutions 1159 and 1701. He added that Israel would take all steps necessary to defend its citizens and sovereignty (Ma'ariv, June 2, 2023).

Al-Radwan commander identified

► A video documenting Hezbollah's military exercise and display in Aramta in south Lebanon on May 21, 2023, showed a high-ranking officer in a red beret receiving a Kalashnikov assault rifle from Safi al-Din. The rifle previously belonged to Imad Mughnieh (or probably to his son, Jihad Mughnieh, who died in a targeted killing attack attributed to Israel in 2015). The officer, who was not named, had an al-Radwan badge on his sleeve. In the assessment of the Alma-Israel Research Center, it is highly possible the officer was **Haytham Ali Tabataba'i**, aka Abu Ali Haytham Ali Tabataba'i and Abi Ali Rada, the al-Radwan commander. As he gave him the rifle, Safi al-Din said it had been donated to the al-Radwan unit by the family of Hajj Imad [Mughnieh] and would be held by a man who one day would enter "Palestine and Jerusalem." Given the statement and the central presence of an al-Radwan force in exercise, it can be assumed Ali Tabataba'i is the acting commander of Hezbollah's planned invasion of the Galilee (Alma-Israel Research Center Twitter account, June 2 and 5, 2023).



The chairman of Hezbollah's Operations Council gives the rifle to a high-ranking commander, apparently Haytham Ali Tabataba'i (Akhbar Jihad, June 5, 2023).



The badge of Hezbollah's elite al-Radwan unit on the officer's right sleeve (Akhbar Jihad and the Alma-Israel Research Center Twitter account, June 5, 2023).

► Tabataba'i was born in Beirut in 1968 to a mother from south Lebanon and an Iranian father, giving him an Iranian last name. He grew up in south Lebanon and joined Hezbollah as a youth. After Imad Mughnieh, commander of Hezbollah's military-terrorist wing, was killed in 2008, he entered the elite al-Radwan unit (Alma-Israel Research Center Twitter account, June 2, 2023; Alma-Israel Research Center and Akhbar Jihad, January 5, 2023). On October 26, 2016, the United States designated him a terrorist operative (United States State Department, October 26, 2016). According to the State Department in 2016, he is a key Hezbollah military figure and there is a \$5 million reward for information about him (United States Department of State, May 30, 2023).

REWARD UP TO \$5 MILLION FOR INFORMATION ON HAYTHAM 'ALI TABATABA'I

Haytham 'Ali Tabataba'i is a key military figure in the Hizballah terrorist organization. As a special forces commander in both Syria and Yemen, he has helped Hizballah conduct operations that destabilized the region.

If you have information about Tabataba'i, text it to Rewards for Justice over Signal, Telegram, or WhatsApp at the number below, or send it via our Tor-based tip line. you could be eligible for a reward.

U.S. Department of State
Diplomatic Security Service
Rewards for Justice

+1-202-702-7843
@RFJ_USA

United States Department of State, May 30, 2023.

Reactions to IDF exercise

► On May 29, 2023, IDF forces began a two-week exercise simulating a multi-arena war (IDF spokesman, May 29, 2023). Hezbollah sources attempted to minimize its importance and timing. The Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese al-Akhbar described it as "unextraordinary." According to the newspaper, it was the first large exercise simulating a war fought simultaneously on several fronts, a scenario which the Israeli military command considered one of two challenges facing Israel. The other was that Hezbollah might to carry out "daring and dangerous" activities against Israel. The exercise, claimed the newspaper, had been planned in recent months and was not linked to developments on the ground but was an Israeli campaign to "frighten and deter Israel's enemies," especially Iran and Hezbollah, and to carry out what Israel thought they were planning to carry out. The newspaper also reported that there was little threat the activity was preparation for an act of aggression, especially because it would not be wise to warn an enemy before an attack, thereby obviating the advantage of surprise (al-Akhbar, June 1, 2023).

► The Hezbollah-affiliated al-Mayadeen TV claimed Israel regarded multiple arenas as a complex and dangerous situation, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu watched his image as the preserver of Israel's security evaporate. According to al-Mayadeen, even though the exercise was part of Israel's annual training program, it was particularly significant that it was being held at the present time, because its timing was close to two Hezbollah exercises simulating the takeover of "Palestine" and after Israel accused Hezbollah of being behind the terrorist attack at the Megiddo Junction and unprecedented mutual threats. Al-Mayadeen claimed Israel's deterrence had deteriorated due to the increase of arenas and challenges Israel's had failed to meet and overcome, especially the Palestinian issue and Iran (al-Mayadeen, June 2, 2023).

Hezbollah's use of UAVs in a military exercise

► Sources in Lebanon reported that Hezbollah had held a 24-hour exercise in the Beqa'a Valley using various types of UAVs to carry out missions including aerial photography and intelligence gathering, deterrence and attack (lebanonfiles.com, June 10, 2023).

► **Abd al-Bari Atwan, a Palestinian political commentator**, quoted "a Lebanese source close to the resistance" who revealed that Hezbollah had held unreported maneuvers near the border in south Lebanon using "more than a thousand UAVs." He claimed the maneuvers were a message for Israel and a practical manifestation of Safi al-Din's declarations that an al-Radwan force might invade the Galilee. According to Atwan, Hezbollah's recent threats, including those from Safi al-din, reflected "the region's prevailing belligerent atmosphere." According to a different Lebanese source, Hezbollah and its rocket and land forces are on constant high alert in preparation for dealing with "any possible Israeli aggression" (al-Ra'i al-Youm, June 13, 2023).

Five Hezbollah operatives accused of killing a UNIFIL soldier

► On May 1, 2023, five Hezbollah terrorist operatives were accused by a Lebanese military tribunal of killing a UNIFIL soldier. Hezbollah denied any involvement in the affair, claiming the five did not belong to the organization. Sean Rooney, 23 years old, an Irish citizen and a soldier in UNIFIL's Irish Battalion, was killed en route to Beirut on December 15, 2022, when the vehicle he was riding in was shot at in Kafr Aqbiyah. According to the indictment, the vehicle was halted by five men who identified themselves as Hezbollah operatives. They shot at the passengers; Rooney was killed. According to reports, only one of the suspects is still in custody (irishnews.com, June 1, 2023).

Hezbollah plans to expand its pharmacy network

► According to reports, Hezbollah is planning to expand its al-Murtada pharmacy network beyond the three currently operating in al-Beqa'a, the Dahia (the Beirut's southern suburb, a Hezbollah stronghold) and Nabatieh in south Lebanon. An additional pharmacy will be opened in each of six towns. More than 80% of the Lebanese population hold al-Sajed and Nur cards, which entitle them to discounts at network stores (MTV Lebanon News, June 3, 2023).

► In recent years, following Lebanon's economic crisis, many pharmacies have had financial difficulties. In response, Hezbollah began buying failing or bankrupt pharmacies, especially in south Lebanon (Janubiyya website, October 21 and November 19, 2020). In the meantime,

Hezbollah began smuggling Iranian-made drugs and other medical products to Lebanon (Lebanese social security website, January 10, 2023). Hezbollah apparently smuggles them overland from Syria through official and unofficial border crossings. Upwards of 150 types of drugs are smuggled from Iran overland, by air and by sea. They are not authorized by the Lebanese ministry of health and therefore endanger public health (MTV Lebanon News, June 3, 2023). Hezbollah's pharmacy network is one way the organization establishes its hold over Lebanon and raises money.



Entrance to an al-Murtada pharmacy (MTV Lebanon News, June 3, 2023).

Other Events in Lebanon

The presidential campaign

► The Lebanese presidential campaign crisis continues. On May 29, 2023, the anti-Hezbollah opposition parties, including the Lebanese Forces, the Falangists, the Progressive Socialist party, the Free Patriotic Movement and several individual members of the Lebanese Parliament agreed to jointly support the **Jihad Azour** as their candidate. The Hezbollah- and Amal-affiliated members went on the offensive. Nabih Berri called him a "challenger" and suggested he drop out of the race. Azour, a former minister of finance who was close to former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, belongs to the National Liberal party, and Hezbollah considers him a problem (ici Beyrouth, May 28, 2023; SBI and al-Jadeed, May 29, 2023). According to some of the political commentators, in the absence of broad support for Frangieh or Azour, it is possible **Josef Aoun, the commander of the Lebanese army**, may be elected president (al-Sharq al-Awsat, June 1, 2023).



Right: Jihad Azour. Left: Suleiman Frangieh (al-Manar, June 6, 2023).

- ▶ After an agreement, the National Liberal party apparently settled on Azour's candidacy, especially after Michel Moawad dropped out on June 4, 2023. Hezbollah and Amal continue support for **Suleiman Frangieh**, who is close to the organizations and the Syrian regime, while expressing reservations about Azour (Reuters, June 4-6, 2023; al-Hadath, June 5, 2023).
- ▶ On June 4, 2023, **Bechara al-Rahi, the Patriarch of the Lebanese Maronite Church**, sent a representative to **Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah**, in an attempt to reach an understanding between the two camps. Nasrallah expressed unreserved support for Frangieh (al-Manar, June 4, 2023). **Na'im Qassem, deputy Hezbollah secretary general**, said no one could force a "challenger" on anyone without Hezbollah's agreement (al-Manar, June 6, 2023).
- ▶ On June 14, 2023, the Lebanese Parliament met in an attempt to reach an agreement regarding a presidential candidate. The attempt failed because no candidate received the support of two-thirds of the members, as decreed by Lebanese law. Azour received 59 votes, six less than the minimum number (naharnet.com, June 14, 2023).

The Lebanese army deploys to protect the oil and natural gas facilities offshore and near the Israeli border

- ▶ The Lebanese army began deploying to protect the drilling in Block 9 off the coast of Lebanon and near the Israeli border, which is supposed to begin at the end of the year. The army, which will be responsible for protecting the facilities, is working to fashion defenses, and will apparently receive boats adapted to that specific purpose from the United States (Lebanese army website, June 23, 2023).
- ▶ On May 11, 2023, **Walid Fayad, Lebanese minister of water and energy**, announced that the TotalEnergies and ENI companies will drill for oil and natural gas and will divide Block 9 in September 2023. He added both companies were optimistic about finding oil and gas reservoirs at the site (al-Arabiya, May 11, 2023).

Joint Lebanese-French army exercise

► The Lebanese and French armies held a joint exercise in which 300 soldiers participated. It lasted a week and was devoted to naval locating missions, rescue at sea and the takeover of hostile vessels (Lebanese army website, June 2, 2023).

British foreign aid for the Lebanese army

► Britain gave the Lebanese army Land Rover Defender 4X4 vehicles worth \$1.2 million to help Lebanon defend its borders (thedefensepost, June 6, 2023).

Syria

New Iranian unit in Aleppo attacked from the air

► On June 5, 2023, al-Araby TV reported that at the beginning of May 2023 Israel attacked sites belonging to a new Iranian unit operating in Syria. According to the report, the Israeli Air Force hit facilities near Aleppo belonging to Unit 18340, used to manufacture advanced weapons under the command of **Jawad Suleimani**. One Syrian soldier was killed in the attack and seven were wounded. The military airport at Aleppo functioning was disrupted and it had to be closed.

► The Iranian unit is composed of Iran commanders and Syrian soldiers. Jawad Suleiman, the commander, heads secret projects for the development and manufacture of weapons (al-Arabiya, June 5, 2023).

Pro-Iranian militias use tunnels on the Syria-Iraq border

► On June 4, 2023, the Iran International website reported that the pro-Iranian militias, including Hezbollah-Lebanon, Asa'id, Ahl al-Haq, Ktaib Sayyid al-Shuhadaa and al-Nujaba, use tunnels dug by ISIS operatives along the Iraq-Syria border near Albukamal and Deir ez-Zor to smuggle weapons and drugs.

► ISIS operatives dug and used the tunnels when they controlled the area between 2014 and 2019, and they are currently used by Iran and its proxies. **Mahmoud al-Najar, the founder of the al-Ra'i Research Center in Iraq**, said the militia operatives move weapons, oil and drugs through the tunnels to avoid the official overland border crossings, and use drones to secure the activity. The Iraqi authorities are aware of the existence of some of the tunnels, but they are not in possession of all the information, such as the number of tunnels or who controls them (Iran International website, June 3, 2023).