Hezbollah’s violations justify Israeli buffer zone

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 23.12.2024

Close to a month into the ceasefire agreement with Lebanon, the daily rocket fire on northern Israeli communities has stopped, but since the very first day, the IDF has had to act to counter Hezbollah’s attempts to transfer weaponry into southern Lebanon. Given this situation, we must ask: has the government’s stated goal of safely returning northern residents to their homes been achieved? And what are the long-term implications if, within 60 days, the IDF withdraws from southern Lebanon as stipulated in the agreement?

On one hand, significant achievements have been made against Hezbollah. Most of their missile arsenal and production capabilities have been destroyed, and their senior leadership and operational command have been eliminated. Hezbollah is now weaker than it has been in 20 years. Many of the border villages in which Hezbollah was entrenched have been heavily damaged, and there is currently no immediate threat of an invasion by Radwan forces. One could argue that since there is no immediate threat to northern communities, life can begin to return to normal. This time, Israel would be determined to enforce the agreement through the international supervision mechanism and unilaterally from its own territory when necessary.

The problem is that to truly restore life and rehabilitate Israel’s north, which has been abandoned for over a year, achieving short-term quiet is not enough. The real question is whether, under these conditions, Israel can prevent Hezbollah’s rearmament and the resurgence of a direct threat to its border communities. And the answer is that, in this sense, we are far from achieving the war’s objectives for the Lebanese front.

The critical point of failure here is the reported requirement for Israel to withdraw the IDF back within the Blue Line within 60 days. For anyone who has been there to see it with their own eyes, it becomes undeniably clear that the way the Blue Line cuts through the terrain makes this border indefensible for Israel. The topography along most of the line places Lebanese villages in elevated

positions overlooking and dominating Israeli communities. If we learned one thing from October 7, it is that we must not accept a situation where hostile villages, serving as bases for a terror army operating under civilian cover, exist in close proximity and topographic dominance of Israeli towns.

Have we learned nothing from the failed attempts to rely on international supervision for our security? And has the Lebanese army done anything to prove it could effectively fulfill the role of enforcer of Hezbollah's perpetual disarmament south of the Litani River? Anyone who thinks the IDF can prevent Hezbollah's rearmament through visual intelligence and standoff airstrikes alone is sorely mistaken.

The only way to secure Israel's north, bring residents back, and rehabilitate the region in the long term is to maintain a buffer zone along the first mountain ridge in southern Lebanon. This area should be defined as a no-man's-land, prohibiting any movement, with the IDF maintaining control over the high ground overlooking Israel. Only from this forward defensive position can the IDF effectively act against Hezbollah's rearmament and prevent the threat of invasion or anti-tank fire into northern communities. Such a buffer zone would not even require holding the entire area up to the Litani River and could even be smaller than the previous Security Zone.

From the first day of the agreement, Hezbollah has been violating it with repeated attempts to infiltrate forces and weapons into southern Lebanon and has even fired into Israeli territory on Mount Dov. Israel cannot be expected to fully withdraw its forces under such conditions.

The incoming Trump administration is indeed interested in achieving ceasefires on all fronts, but it will not impose terms of defeat on Israel. Trump primarily seeks to halt the intense fighting that could spread to other arenas. However, maintaining the buffer zone, which in practice already exists, is simply enforcing the ceasefire conditions from a forward position and should remain in place for the foreseeable future.

Hezbollah has been dealt a great blow, but it is by no means defeated. A full Israeli withdrawal at this time means that many residents will not return, placing Israel's north in an economic tailspin, and will ensure that within a few years, those who do remain in the north will live under severe security threats. Only

maintaining a forward Israeli presence to proactively prevent Hezbollah's rearmament in the area can prevent this and justify the price we have paid thus far.

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