Beware the Brewing Lebanon Deal

written by Dr. David Wurmser | 15.12.2023

A US plan, spearheaded by the diplomatic efforts of the US, and led by Amos Hochstein (who negotiated the Lebanon Maritime Agreement) and the French government, is emerging to diffuse tension along Israel's northern border. The US and France appear to propose a plan with three elements. Hizballah withdraws its forces northward. Israel concedes all the disputed areas along the border. And finally, the area between Israel and Hizballah will be filled by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

Hizballah has been in violation of UNSCR 1701 — the resolution that terminated the 2006 Second Lebanon War — since its signing. Resolution 1701 called for the "full implementation of the relevant provisions of the Taif Accords, and of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006), that require the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that, pursuant to the Lebanese cabinet decision of July 27, 2006, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state." Moreover, the resolution said all foreign forces are prohibited, such as IRGC, Hamas or other Palestinian factions, or Iraqi militias. Israel left in 2006, so it has been in compliance ever since. Also, the area south of the Litani River will be policed by the LAF and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). In many ways, the US proposal only asks of Hizballah to implement one part of UNSCRs 1701 and completely ignores 1559 and 1680. This itself constitutes a major victory for Hizballah since it validates the annulment of the critical obligations of all three resolutions that render Hizballah an illegal militia altogether — all in order to ask of Hizballah to abide by one part of 1701 which it violated as Israel withdrew from the area under 1701.

Second, the three UNSCRs — to ensure that Israel had indeed withdrawn from all Lebanese territory and thus deny Hizballah's anticipated claim of being a Lebanese nationalist resistance to continued Israeli occupation — established a mechanism to demarcate the border and validate the "blue line" which had been set in 2000. Such a demarcation was completed shortly thereafter and the border runs along that line. Moreover, careful examination of UN demarcation maps since World War I established that the village of Ghajar had been part of Syrian Golan, and thus, part now of the Israeli Golan Heights, not Lebanon. In short, there actually is no real disputed territory because of either un-demarcated or

unclear borders. They are disputed only because Hizballah raised spurious claims.

And yet, under the plan proposed by the US and France, Hizballah is rewarded — and its resistance validated and continued existence as an armed militia legitimized — by a full Israeli withdrawal in all of the areas (Kfar Shouba, Sheba Farms and Ghajar) in addition to other disputed parcels. Essentially by conceding these lands as Lebanese retroactively sanctioned Hizballah's existence because ostensibly the US and France (and Israel, if it agrees) will now have admitted that Israel continued to occupy Lebanese territory. In other words, Israel becomes the party responsible for Hizballah's failure to disarm as required by UNSCRs 1559, 1680 and 1701, because Hizballah was a Lebanese faction conducting resistance against occupation of Lebanese land.

The US and France have also proposed under this agreement that the LAF secures the border and the buffer zone south of the Litani River. Indeed, UNSCR 1701 had called for that, but it has long been proven to be an entirely dysfunctional fiction as a sovereign force. It cannot in any way cross Hizballah, and to believe it can going forward is simply delusional. The historical record only shows it has functioned until now as cover and human shield for Hizballah presence despite the vast sums of money, equipment and training that have been given to LAF by the US (an aid activity which is coming under increased scrutiny in the US Congress). The LAF has simply for decades been controlled fully by or cowered into subservience to Hizballah.

So why is the US doing this?

The US is in fact determined not only to avoid escalation on the Lebanese border, but also to avoid any Israel escalation against Iranian proxies anywhere. For example, the US has warned Israel to stop attacking Yemen since "it could provoke Iran," wherein a very odd situation now exists whereby American warships and international sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are attacked, and only Israel appears to be responding to the attacks on the US warship and SLOCs.

This is part of a broader attempt by the US to burrow more deeply into the paradigm it nurtured prior to October 7 regarding Iran. At its core, it is an attempt to appease Iran by handing it major strategic victories. The paradigm itself allows the US to still seek through some combination of pressure and

incentives to harness Iran, validate its "moderates," and reach a regional understanding that can stabilize the Middle East. Essentially, it highlights that the US continues to operate toward Tehran under the Robert Malley doctrine, under which the United States still believes that there are moderates in structures of power in Iran who, with proper modulation of US policy — specifically that showing understanding and restraint rather than backing Iran against the wall, which is what "hardliners" would want — will have their fortunes so vastly improved that their common interest with the United States can be cultivated and a common understanding reached to stabilize not only Iran's nuclear program, but its policies to such an extent that Iran becomes a partner for regional stability.

Israeli indulgence of these diplomatic discussions might be an attempt to set the stage for a war rather than reflect a genuine belief that this would lead to anything — especially were Israel to stand firm in rejecting the strategically devastating concessions demanded of it to secure Hizballah partial compliance with UNSCRs to which it already is obliged to comply.

Moreover, Hizballah likely will not accept it either. While it would be an Israeli humiliation for it to be accepted, that Hizballah withdraws voluntarily under Israeli threat would be yet another point of humiliation for Hizballah too. Neither Iran nor Hizballah care about these little pieces of land nor do they build too much on the idea that Israel's humiliation by yielding them outweighs their humiliation of the last seven weeks of restrained intervention, two meager speeches of Nasrallah, and withdrawal operationally from territories south of the Litani without a fight. They are already ridiculed regionally.

Iran right now needs the area south of the Litani more than ever to shift the remains of Hamas over there to continue the war. In short, they can in no way accept a buffer zone that will take a year or two to infiltrate and establish a Hamas presence and Hizballah reasserted presence. And they need to end this war right up against Israeli lines to get in the last shots to signal that they continue fighting the resistance.

The US and France are pushing for an agreement to avoid escalation on Israel's northern border which must be understood in effect as part of a larger effort to appease Iran on substance and strategy while giving Israel hollow tactical scraps. It is a deal Israel must refuse.

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