

UN Resolution 1701: A View from Israel

By Oded Eran

PolicyWatch, num. 1413, October 20, 2008

In a September 29 interview, outgoing Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert defended UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 -- an agreement that ended the 2006 summer war between Israel and Hizballah -- by asserting that it had quieted Israel's northern border. Although the resolution ended the fighting, it did not end the conflict, and its failure to incorporate specific stipulations and mechanisms to disarm Hizballah makes future violence between the two sides inevitable.

Missed Opportunities

UNSCR 1701 was adopted twenty-eight years after Resolutions 425 and 426 established the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and delineated the territorial boundaries of its mandate, limiting it to the south of the country. As such, UNSCR 1701 does not allow UNIFIL to fulfill the resolution's mission to assist the Lebanese government in disarming all armed Lebanese groups -- a mission that had already been specified by UNSCR 1559 in 2004 -- and in preventing the "sales or supply of arms and related material to Lebanon except as authorized by its government."

When the Security Council adopted Resolution 1701, the international community missed an opportunity to provide UNIFIL the legal sanction to extend its territorial responsibility and functional mandate. As a result, Hizballah has more than doubled its prewar arsenal of long- and short-range missiles and rockets by way of the porous Syrian-Lebanese border. In less than two years, Hizballah has recovered from its losses and depletion of weapons stocks, primarily as a result of the Security Council's inability to adopt a more meaningful resolution.

Skeptics of UN peacekeeping forces argue that even if UNSCR 1701 had mandated the deployment of an international force on the Syrian-Lebanese border, its ability to prevent massive arms smuggling would have been limited. Although this assessment may be accurate, it should not have prevented the UN from adopting tougher language in order to implement UNSCR 1559 in robust fashion, specifically by disbanding Lebanon's militias.

Furthermore, since Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, Hizballah has built a massive military infrastructure, both above and below ground. Among Israel's 2006 war objectives was the destruction of that infrastructure, yet whatever was destroyed during the war has been reconstructed and fortified in the past two years, regardless of UNSCR 1701 and the presence of UNIFIL and the Lebanese Army.

The absence of any Hizballah military offensive against Israel since 2006 has been attributed erroneously to UNSCR 1701. In reality, this restraint comes from the policy decision of Hizballah's leaders to focus on the domestic agenda and solidify its political

position in Lebanon. Hizballah has also been deterred militarily by the calculation that Israel would respond overwhelmingly to any provocation, striking the Shiite organization and/or its two major patrons, Syria and Iran. Hizballah's desire to avoid a perceived violation of UNSCR 1701 has had only a marginal impact on its restraint.

Hizballah has benefited tremendously from the loopholes in the resolution, fully recovering from the 2006 war and improving its political and military position in Lebanon. Under the lull provided by the ceasefire, the organization has managed to avoid paying a price for triggering the 2006 war and has reasserted itself even more forcefully in Lebanese politics.

Hizballah Undeterred

UNSCR 1701 provided Israel with a reasonable exit from a military dead end, and was a way for the United States and France to reassert influence in Lebanon, at least ostensibly. Yet the increased involvement of Washington and Paris has been of little value, especially as far as Israel is concerned. Even at the time of its adoption, many in the Israeli government viewed UNSCR 1701 with skepticism.

Moreover, Israel now faces a more formidable organization, one that is better supplied and entrenched than it was two years ago. Although Israel's reaction to the kidnapping of two soldiers in 2006 took Hizballah's leadership by surprise and may have increased Israel's regional deterrence, the mixed performance of the IDF during the campaign undercut the shock value, making its impact of limited value and efficacy. Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's leader and secretary general, continues to issue threatening statements and displays confidence in his organization's ability to weather another Israeli military campaign.

In contrast, many Israelis have a strong sense that an opportunity was missed following the 2006 debacle. Hizballah's buildup over the last two years accentuates Israel's desire to undermine the organization's position in Lebanon. Logic suggests this can only be achieved by a successful military operation followed by a clear diplomatic solution. Such an outcome would close the loopholes of UNSCR 1701 and force the Lebanese government and the international community to take concrete measures to implement UNSCR 1559, which calls for the disbanding and disarmament of all militias inside Lebanon.

Conclusion

Another war with Hizballah appears inevitable, and the Israeli military currently is making preparations to ensure that the next round is decisive. More importantly, however, is the diplomacy that would follow the conflagration. Not only is it important to secure a meaningful UN resolution, it is also critical that the international community implement that resolution.