**Waiving the rules on the Syrian-Lebanese border**

The West should use resolution 1701 to roll back Hizbullah's effective take-over of the Lebanese gov't.

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The summoning by the United States of Syrian Deputy Chief of Mission Zouheir Jabbour for a review of Syrian arms transfers to Hizbullah is the latest evidence of the serious basis to the recent tensions in the north.

Syria has continued to deny recent reports suggesting that it permitted the transfer of Scud-D ballistic missiles to Hizbullah.

But the issue of the Scuds is only a significant detail within a larger picture, which has been emerging into clear view since August 2006. This is the reality in which UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the war between Israel and Hizbullah in 2006, has been turned into a dead letter by the “resistance bloc” of Iran, Syria and Hizbullah.

It is worth recalling that Resolution 1701 was hailed as a significant achievement for diplomacy at the time. The resolution was supposed to strengthen the basis for the renewed Lebanese sovereignty that seemed possible after Syrian withdrawal in 2005.

Its provisions are quite clear. The resolution calls for the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that... there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state.” It also explicitly prohibits “sales or supply of arms and related materiel to Lebanon except as authorized by its government.”

Hizbullah and its backers calculated, correctly, that neither the government of Lebanon, nor the United Nations, nor the “international community” would be able or willing to enforce these clauses.

The UN has itself admitted the severe inadequacy of arrangements along the Syrian-Lebanese border. Two UN border assessments have been carried out since 2006 – in June 2007 and August 2008.

The second report found, in the dry language employed by such documents, that “even taking into account the difficult political situation in Lebanon during the past year,” progress toward achieving the goals laid out in Resolution 1701 had been “insufficient.”

The “difficult political situation” of 2008 is a reference to the fact that the elected Lebanese government’s single attempt at enforcing its sovereignty over the allies of Syria and Iran in the country ended in May 2008 with the violent rout of the government.

Hizbullah and its allies simply made clear that any attempt to interfere with their military arrangements would be met with blunt force, and no further attempt was made.

The result has been that over the past three-and-a-half years, under the indifferent eyes of the world, the roads between Syria and Lebanon have hummed to the sound of arms trucks and suppliers bringing Syrian and Iranian weaponry to Lebanon.

The response of Israel has been to observe the situation, and to make clear that the crossing of certain red lines in terms of the type and caliber of the weaponry being made available to Hizbullah would constitute a casus belli.

The recent heightening of tensions has come because of emerging evidence that these red lines are being flouted with impunity.

This did not begin with the reports of the Scuds. Evidence has emerged into the public sphere over the last months of weaponry suggesting a Syrian and Iranian desire to transform Hizbullah into a bona fide strategic threat to Israel.

The weaponry supplied to Hizbullah include M-600 surface-to-surface missiles, the man-portable Igla-S surface-to-air missile system, which would threaten Israeli fighter aircraft monitoring the skies of Lebanon, and now the Scud-D ballistic missile system.

If the reports regarding such weaponry are correct, they would make Hizbullah by far the best-armed non-state paramilitary group in the world.

These reports do not mean that war is necessarily imminent.

Israel appears in no hurry to punish Hizbullah and Syria for the flouting of red lines. Unlike its enemies, the Israeli government is publicly accountable, and would find it difficult to justify a preemptive strike – which might well result in renewed war – to the Israeli public.

Hizbullah and Syria also seem in no rush to initiate hostilities. They have merely internalized the fact that nothing serious appears to stand in the way of their activities across the eastern border of Lebanon, and are hence proceeding apace.

The clearest lesson of the latest events is the fictional status of international guarantees and resolutions if these are not backed by a real willingness to enforce them.

The Western failure to underwrite the elected government of Lebanon has led to the effective Hizbullah takeover of that country. The failure to insist on the implementation of Resolution 1701 has allowed the apparent strategic transformation of Hizbullah over the last three and a half years.

While the “resistance bloc” does not necessarily seek imminent conflict, there is also no sign whatsoever that its appetite has been satiated by its recent gains. Laws, elections and agreements do not stand in its way. It operates, rather, according to the dictum of a certain 20th-century German leader, who said, “You stand there with your law, and I’ll stand here with my bayonets, and we’ll see which one prevails.”

The real question, of course, being how long the intended victim of such an approach is prepared to allow it to continue.

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