

# **The United States, the UN, and the Lebanon Ceasefire**

**By Stephen Zunes | August 22, 2006**

The UN Security Council resolution for a ceasefire to the fighting in Lebanon is certainly good news in terms of ending the carnage. Passed on August 11, Resolution 1701 is also a marked improvement over the original U.S. draft and contains some positive language. Both sides, for instance, are called upon to honor “a full cessation of hostilities.” And Israel must provide the UN with maps of landmines planted in southern Lebanon during Israel’s 22-year occupation that ended in 2000.

But the ceasefire resolution took longer than necessary to achieve. The fighting could have ended weeks ago, but the United States threatened to veto earlier draft resolutions. Instead, the Bush administration insisted on a version that would have allowed Israel to remain in Lebanon and continue at least some military operations, provisions rejected by other Security Council members. These delays cost the lives of hundreds of civilians and billions of dollars worth of damage to Lebanon’s civilian infrastructure. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, however, was clearly unperturbed by the additional weeks of killings. “This has been time that’s been well spent over the last couple of weeks,” she said at an August 7 press conference with President Bush.

Perhaps more troubling for the future, Resolution 1701 contains some disturbing ambiguities that may make a permanent peace between Lebanon and Israel elusive.

## **Close Reading of the Text**

The initial UN resolution proposed by the United States would have required Hezbollah to “cease all attacks” but Israel only to cease “all offensive military operations.” Given that Israel and the United States had justified Israel’s attacks on Lebanon’s

civilian infrastructure as legitimate acts of “self-defense,” such language could have given Israel license to continue fighting. No peacekeeping force would have been able to enter the area under such conditions.

The new resolution calls for “a full cessation of hostilities.” The United States insisted, however, on the inclusion of the wording “based upon, in particular, the immediate cessation of attacks by Hezbollah and the immediate cessation by Israel of all offensive military operations.” Despite this ambiguity, the call for a full cessation of hostilities appears to have been enough to end most of the fighting, despite the Israeli commando attack in eastern Lebanon less than a week after the ceasefire.

The new resolution has some other particularly troubling ambiguities. It calls on Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon “in parallel” with Lebanese army forces as they moved into positions throughout that part of the country. The lack of a timetable, however, has raised concerns that a full Israeli withdrawal might take many months.

Though the Secretary General and other top UN officials have documented extensive violations of international law by the Israeli armed forces, the resolution simply refers to the “conflict between



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Hezbollah and Israel.” While preliminary estimates indicate that Israel was responsible for far more death and destruction than Hezbollah, the resolution refers to the suffering of “both sides,” implying symmetry in the two countries’ experiences.

In addition, the resolution speaks of “the need to address urgently the causes that have given rise to the current crisis, including ... the unconditional release of the abducted Israeli soldiers.” The original U.S. draft referred to the seizure of the Israeli soldiers as the single “root cause” of the crisis. The compromise language of the resolution, while more ambiguous about the conflict’s origins, makes no reference to the widespread evidence that Israel—with strong encouragement from the Bush administration—had actually been planning this assault on Lebanon for many months or that Israel had repeatedly violated Lebanese air space and engaged in other border violations in the months and years leading up to the July 12 attack by Hezbollah on the Israeli border post.

And though Israel—both in the recent round of fighting and historically—has launched far more attacks against Lebanon than any Lebanese party has against Israel, the United States successfully demanded that the peacekeeping force only be deployed on the Lebanese side of the border. Similarly, and also at the insistence of the United States, the resolution calls for the “unconditional release of the abducted Israeli soldiers” seized by Hezbollah commandoes inside Israel, but only for “encouraging” efforts to settle “the issue of Lebanese prisoners detained in Israel” who were abducted by Israeli commandoes inside Lebanon.

That the resolution would essentially blame Hezbollah for initiating the conflict while not criticizing Israel’s widespread violations of international humanitarian law indicates that, despite

compromising on a number of key points, the United States had a heavy hand in shaping the final version of the resolution.

## Other Resolutions, Other Violations

The United States has placed great emphasis on the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1559, passed in 2004, which calls for the respect of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and unity of Lebanon “under the sole and exclusive authority of the Government of Lebanon throughout Lebanon,” the withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon, the extension of Lebanese government control over all Lebanese territory, and the disbanding and disarmament of all militias.

However, statements from the Bush administration and a series of congressional resolutions have only mentioned the disbanding and disarmament of Hezbollah’s militia, even though Israel’s reoccupation of parts of southern Lebanon was also in violation of 1559. Typical was President Bush’s August 7 statement to the press: “Had the parties involved fully implemented 1559, which called for the disarmament of Hezbollah, we would not be in the situation we’re in today.”

It is striking how much the administration and an overwhelmingly bipartisan majority in Congress have pressed Hezbollah—over which the United States has little leverage—to abide by UN Security Council resolution 1559 while not calling on the implementation of a series of UN Security Council resolutions currently being violated by Israel, over which the United States has enormous leverage. These include UN Security Council resolutions 446, 452, 465, and 471, which call on Israel to withdraw from its settlements in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem; UN Security Council resolution 497, which calls on Israel to

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rescind its annexation of the Golan Heights; UN Security Council resolutions 252, 267, 298, 476, and 478, which call on Israel to rescind its annexation of greater East Jerusalem; and UN Security Council resolution 487, which calls on Israel to place its nuclear facilities under the trusteeship of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The United States either voted in favor of or abstained on every one of these resolutions. Not included in this list are the 42 Security Council resolutions on Israeli violations of international legal norms that were vetoed by the United States and therefore do not have the force of law.

Furthermore, given that Israel's Arab neighbors have offered full security guarantees in return for a full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, one could make a case that Israel is also violating resolutions 242 and 338, the "land for peace" formulation long held up as the basis for a permanent settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The U.S. government clearly believes that enforcement of UN resolutions depends not on any objective legal standard but on the relations that a given government or party has with the United States.

## Ceasefire Implications

Israel has been sufficiently bloodied by its ill-fated ground assault against entrenched Hezbollah guerrillas in southern Lebanon that it would not likely try something like that again, even if pressed by Washington. The presence of the Lebanese army and international forces in the south would also likely serve as a deterrent to future Israeli aggression. Further commando raids as well as future air strikes and other forms of collective punishment against the Lebanese people are still quite possible, however, thanks to the successful effort by the Bush administration, with bipartisan support from

Capitol Hill, to block the UN from sanctioning or even censuring Israeli war crimes.

Given the political advantages gained by Hezbollah from the recent conflict, the extremist group may again seek to provoke a conflict with Israel. The resolution does not explicitly call for the total disarmament of Hezbollah's militia nor does it give the multinational force the authority to force such a move. However, it does clearly bar Hezbollah forces from operating south of the Litani River, which would keep the militia at least twenty miles from the Israeli border. It also refers to a previous Security Council resolution (UNSC 1559) and a treaty signed by various Lebanese parties (the Taif Accords) that call for all such militias within Lebanon to disarm and disband. The resolution also bans the "sales or supply of arms and related material to Lebanon except as authorized by the government," presumably as a means of stopping Iran from providing additional missiles to Hezbollah. It is unclear whether the Lebanese government, even backed by a multinational force, will be able to enforce these edicts.

The inability of the UN to stop the fighting earlier and the weakness of the resulting compromise demonstrate that the power of the United States in the Security Council severely restricts the UN from fulfilling its principal mandate to prevent aggression by one state against another. If a UN member state can get away with launching a full-scale attack on the civilian infrastructure of a neighboring member state following a minor border incident (even when instigated by the militia of a minority party outside the control of the central government of that country), this constitutes a serious breakdown in the international legal order. As with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the U.S.-Israeli war on Lebanon has shown that the United States and its allies can get away with breaking the most

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fundamental international laws that have provided at least some semblance of global order since World War II.

And if the United States—the most dominant military and economic power the world has ever known—believes that it and its allies do not have to play by the rules, why should Hezbollah or anyone else?

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