Firefighting on Multiple Fronts:
Preventive Diplomacy in Lebanon through the
Syria Crisis (2011-17)

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Introduction

This case study on preventive diplomacy in Lebanon contributes to the “Capturing UN Prevention Success Stories” project by the Centre for Policy Research. The purpose of the study is to describe the moments in Lebanon over the past six years where the risks of an outbreak of serious violence appeared highest, identify the factors that contributed to a reduction of that risk, and analyse the UN’s political role in helping to de-escalate the situation. The following analysis is based on a desk review of existing literature, internal UN documents related to Lebanon and the region, and interviews with senior UN and Lebanese officials during an eight-day field visit to Lebanon.

The first section will examine the evolving risk landscape in Lebanon between 2011 and late 2017, focusing on the factors that increased the risk to the country’s stability and/or violent conflict. It will look at how the war in Syria drove regional dynamics affecting Lebanon, security developments within and along the borders, political and sectarian fault lines, and the growing impact of the refugee crisis on the socio-economic fabric of the country.

The second section will build on this context and identify three specific moments where the potential for conflict grew rapidly, but where key actors took decisions that de-escalated the immediate situation. It will examine the motivations of those actors who held the ability to drive the situation towards or away from violence, what factors influenced their decisions at the time, and why the immediate risk of conflict receded. How did they play a role in influencing the actors away from conflict? The key question in each case.

The third section briefly considers the risk of escalation surrounding the Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon, in particular the potential for the xenophobic rhetoric to spill over into violent conflict. The UN’s approach to supporting Lebanon, and the ways in which the humanitarian aid was used politically to curb the risks of conflict, are considered in terms of how they played a role in supporting the preventive diplomatic efforts.

The fourth section touches upon a key question facing many preventive diplomatic activities, but one especially important in the Lebanese context: How did the short-term interventions interact with the longer-term risks facing the country, particularly those involving the political/military group Hizbullah?

The concluding section looks more broadly at the UN’s political role in addressing the conflict risks in Lebanon, with a view to identifying common factors that contributed to success. Analysing the UN’s strategies, objectives and tactics in the immediate crisis management phase in particular, the study will identify the key characteristics that allowed the UN to contribute to conflict prevention. Lessons from this case study will contribute to a policy paper that will draw from the five other case studies in this project.

A caveat: Unlike the majority of country case studies carried out as part of this project—which tend to examine a single incident or crisis—the Lebanon case examines a series of moments where the risk of an outbreak of violence rose and then fell. Rather than evaluate a single UN intervention, therefore, this study examines whether, and if so how, the UN worked to put out several fires over time, all flaring up in one way or another from the impact of the Syrian war. Many of these fires continue to burn, and several interlocutors in Lebanon suggested the country was again entering a period of heightened risk. While it may be therefore difficult to assess the sustainability of some of the conflict prevention engagements in this context, they nonetheless offer important lessons for the UN’s approach to preventive diplomacy globally, and for the Secretary-General’s organizational reform agenda.

I. The Risk Landscape of Lebanon During the Syria Crisis

Among Syria’s neighbours, Lebanon has been uniquely susceptible to spill-over effects from the Syrian war that has raged for the past seven years. This is in part because of the deep historical ties between Lebanon and Syria—the former was considered part of “Greater Syria” during the Ottoman Empire—and the profound social and economic relationships between the two countries. For nearly 30 years, Syria maintained troops on Lebanese soil, and until the war in Syria broke out in March 2011, Lebanon’s labour market hosted roughly 300,000 Syrian nationals every year, with free movement between the two countries. At the outset of the war, Lebanon’s trajectory was largely thought of as contingent on Syria’s, with many international commentators suggesting that the small country would rapidly become swallowed up by the violence as it spread across Syria and beyond.

Lebanon’s susceptibility to the Syrian war also derives from the country’s internal divisions and weak state structures. Composed of 18 official religious sects, carefully balanced across the legislative and executive branches, the Lebanese political system is acutely sensitive to even the smallest shifts in power. In fact, the Ta’ef Accords that ended the Lebanese civil war not only enshrined strict religious balance, but rendered the entire political system extraordinarily prone to paralysis, as the most important political decisions over government formation and the presidency need to be reached by consensus. Weak by design, the Lebanese political arrangement thus operates more as a modality for ensuring accommodation amongst religious groups than an effective system for delivering basic governance and services to the people of Lebanon.

The Lebanese state was placed under staggering pressure by the Syrian war, as more than 1.5 million Syrian—overwhelmingly Sunni—refugees poured into the country from 2011 to 2015. By the end of 2015, one in four people in Lebanon was a Syrian national, posing not only one of the worst humanitarian crises the region has ever seen, but also incredible strains on Lebanese institutions. The Syria crisis also triggered a massive economic downturn in Lebanon as export and tourism were...
effectively halted, contributing to more than $13 billion in losses to the Lebanese GDP and soaring unemployment amongst both the Lebanese and the Syrian populations. With resentment running high in many Lebanese communities, and no real end in sight to the Syrian conflict, the refugee crisis in Lebanon has prompted a rapid growth in xenophobia and fears of confessional imbalance, creating fertile conditions for escalation into violence and radicalisation that continue to this day.

Risks along Lebanon’s borders rose rapidly from 2011 too, as battles in western Syria frequently resulted in cross-border shelling, incursions and even the temporary takeover of a Lebanese border town by extremist groups from Syria in 2014. The rise of jihadi groups in Syria, including Jabhat Al Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), added to the risk profile for Lebanon, particularly as some groups established a presence within Lebanese territory, often in close proximity to areas controlled by the Shia political/military organization Hizbullah. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), already strained as it dealt with sporadic rounds of violence and spates of terrorist attacks across the country, was forced to spread itself even more thinly in the face of this threat, with risks that Hizbullah might fill the vacuum, take over key aspects of the battle against extremist groups from Syria and more deeply embed itself in the Lebanese state.

Over the course of the war in Syria, Hizbullah’s military involvement in support of the Assad regime became deeper, more visible, and more of a polarizing element of the Lebanese political landscape. While the Lebanese government—of which Hizbullah is a member—formally adopted a “policy of disassociation” from the Syrian conflict, Hizbullah’s involvement in Syria nonetheless grew over time. From fairly limited operations in towns along the Lebanon-Syria border in 2012, to a 2013 announcement by the group’s leader Hassan Nasrallah that it was engaged across Syria in support of Assad, the group rapidly became one of the key players in the Syria war. This played directly into the already inflamed sectarian tensions within Lebanon, and certainly contributed to a spike in terrorist attacks in Shia neighbourhoods in 2012-2014. And today, with Hizbullah firmly entrenched in Syria and no apparent desire to leave, the group has become more of a regional player than ever, making Lebanon’s stability even more tied to events beyond its borders.

Hizbullah’s presence in Syria also altered the risk profile of the stand-off across the Blue Line, the temporary UN-administered boundary separating Lebanon and Israel. Since the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon, the Blue Line has remained a potential flashpoint for violence. Occasional flare ups, usually driven by local incidents along Blue Line, carry with them the potential for massive escalation, as both Hizbullah and the Israeli Defence Forces engage in dangerous exchanges. But with Hizbullah increasingly committed to military presence in Syria, and Israel actively seeking to disrupt any transfers of weaponry to Hizbullah there, the risk of miscalculation has at times reached the brink of open war.

The conflict in Syria has also driven a deepening of regional tensions, with implications for Lebanon. Over time, key regional actors—most importantly Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also Turkey, Qatar and others—became more deeply invested in their proxies within Syria, funneling arms and other support to the groups on the ground. Fuelled by this support, the violence swelled, displacing millions of Syrians from their homes and drawing the battle lines increasingly on sectarian grounds. Lebanese internal dynamics mirrored these regional divides, as alliances between the Lebanese political leadership and their respective regional patrons led to governmental paralysis, heightened rhetoric along sectarian lines, and a growing risk that the delicate confessional balance could give way to violent conflict. Regional discord also threatened to undermine the fragile unity within the international community—and the Security Council in particular—over the need to protect Lebanon from the worst effects of the war in Syria. Protecting that unity and ensuring that the regional consensus to support Lebanon was maintained despite other divisions became an overriding priority for the UN and Lebanon.

In the context of these proliferating risks to Lebanon’s stability, the Lebanese political leadership remained paralyzed for much of the war in Syria. In fact, the two major political blocs have been defined by their opposing positions on Syria. The 14 March bloc (composed of the Sunni-dominated Future Movement, the Christian-led Lebanese Forces and Kataeb, and several other groups) was born of the anti-Syrian regime sentiment following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Similarly, the 8 March bloc is principally founded upon the alliance between the Maronite Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbullah, and their agreement to adopt a pro-Syrian regime stance. For nearly two-and-a-half years, the Syrian war kept these two blocs at a stalemate, preventing any agreement on a president. This in turn meant that the government remained largely stuck, unable to take critical decisions on security, the economy, and responses to the refugee crisis. When incidents did occur, such as terrorist attacks in Beirut during 2013-2014 or incursions across the Lebanon-Syria border in Arsal in 2014, the beleaguered government often struggled to respond quickly, leaving open the possibility that relatively localized issues could spread quickly. And as the needs of both the vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian populations of the country soared, the government’s paralysis and inability to deliver became itself a potential source of conflict.

However, the Lebanese system has proven remarkably resilient to these threats, “defying gravity” despite the many predictions that the country would fall apart. In fact, the paralysis of the political sphere in some sense may have helped keep major escalations at bay: with few moving pieces and all parties awaiting an outcome in Syria, the Lebanese system managed to avoid the kinds of rapid transformations that could have triggered conflict. This aversion to large-scale violence derives in part from the relatively recent civil war in Lebanon and the living memories of the costs to all communities. As
one political leader stated, “it is preventive history more than anything that constrains violence here,” the sense across Lebanese society that the country’s history is too recent to allow for another war now. Even at its most divisive, the Lebanese political system comprises leaders who wish to avoid internal strife, and are unwilling to mobilize their followers towards violence. As the following sections look more closely at specific instances where risks spiked, this deeply embedded reluctance to escalate should be kept in mind, and preventive diplomacy can often be seen as an effort to consolidate and bolster the underlying desire of the Lebanese to avoid violent conflict.

Hizbullah’s role too can be seen as a form of containment of internal violence. On the one hand, Hizbullah’s growing role in Syria heightened tensions within Lebanon, adding to the already simmering sectarian divisions within the country. And their alleged role in political assassinations is a longstanding dividing line within the country. On the other, Hizbullah’s predominance within Lebanon has at times acted as a hedge against escalation by keeping all other groups in check (though of course it is Hizbullah’s willingness to use violence that constitutes this check). “Hizbullah’s clear domination of Lebanon, its open willingness to use force to maintain power, this had a restraining effect on other communities, and it kept the street clear,” one politician stated. After demonstrating its ability to hold the street in the 2008 crisis, and displaying enormous relative military advantage in Lebanon, Hizbullah could largely dictate the course of the crises described below. Underlying the success of many of the efforts to de-escalate volatile situations over the past six years is the fact that Hizbollah, stretched in Syria, has wished to avoid disruptions at home.

The UN’s engagement in Lebanon took place in this highly uncertain context, as the Syrian conflict spilled more and more dangerously into the country. With the UN peacekeeping operation (UNIFIL) densely populating southern Lebanon, a Special Political Mission (UNSCOL) based in Beirut, and 25 UN agencies operating in the small country, Lebanon already had a strong UN presence in country before the Syria crisis. This increased dramatically over the initial years of the war, with UN agencies quickly ramping up their presence to respond to the growing needs of refugees and the huge impact of the crisis on Lebanon’s infrastructure and economy. Politically too, the UN deepened its engagement, forming the International Support Group for Lebanon in 2013, increasing its contact with regional players, and trying to build a strong international consensus to protect the country from the Syrian storm. As the following analysis shows, the risks to Lebanon are far from over. But there have been moments where the UN’s political engagement has helped to tip the balance in favour of de-escalation and influenced the key actors away from the many brinks of violence.

II. Three Key Crisis Moments

While the current situation in Lebanon is relatively calm, there have been moments over the past six years when many experts predicted the country might well descend into violent conflict or state collapse. These moments took place against the backdrop of a two-year period in which the Lebanese leadership could not agree a president of the country, a vacancy which kept the government dangerously paralyzed, limited the state’s capacity to respond at critical moments, and played into the already deep divisions within the country. No single event stands out as the moment when the country was most at risk, given that most of the threats were in some way connected to each other; however, these cases underline some of the most important kinds of risks confronted by Lebanon, and how the UN played a political role in preventing escalation.

“The First Test for Lebanon”: The Assassination of Wissam al Hassan (October 2012)

Background

Lebanon has a long history of political assassinations, the most high-profile being the 2005 killing of then Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which triggered a massive crisis in the country and resulted in the eventual withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. On 19 October 2012, during the months when the Syria crisis was just beginning to spill over into Lebanon in earnest, Beirut was shaken by a massive explosion that killed Brigadier-General Wissam al Hassan and eight others.

General Hassan was Head of the Information Branch of the Internal Security Forces (ISF), responsible for investigating domestic and external terrorism, and he was one of the highest profile Sunni leaders associated with the anti-Assad “14 March” political bloc. His branch had been directly involved in uncovering ties between Hizbullah and the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005, and was actively pursuing a case against the former Information Minister for alleged conspiracy with Damascus to carry out terrorist bombings in Lebanon. The implication was thus very clear to members of his political bloc: Bashar Assad and his allies in Lebanon had killed General Hassan, just as they had killed Hariri and dozens of other political opponents in the past.

The killing triggered widespread demonstrations in Beirut and elsewhere, prompting sporadic outbursts of violence and confrontations between protestors and the security services. Seven people were killed in the northern city of Tripoli, while protestors tried to storm the Government’s building in Beirut during the 21 October funeral for General Hassan. Highly inflamed rhetoric from the 14 March leadership—which accused Damascus of openly fomenting instability in Lebanon—spread into broader calls for Prime Minister Mikati’s resignation because he was perceived to be sympathetic to Assad, and the withdrawal of the 14 March bloc from engagement with the Government. “This government is responsible for the assassination of Hassan,” former PM Fouad Siniora announced, in a call to his supporters to use the street to pressure the government.

In the immediate aftermath of the killing, the Office of the
UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) warned UN Headquarters that the risk of further serious incidents remained high, while the Secretary-General called the attack part of a “deliberate attempt to destabilize Lebanon.” Derek Plumbly, the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon at the time, called this the “first test” for Lebanon “in the context of the war in Syria, and considered it one of the riskiest moments for the country during his time there.

De-Escalation

Nonetheless, within days, the street violence had subsided, the 14 March leadership had called an end to the protests, while President Michel Sleiman had launched consultations across the Lebanese political spectrum for a way forward. And though the opposition continued to call for Prime Minister Mikati’s resignation before they would dialogue with the Government, the risk of open violence quickly receded.

It is important to note that this assassination took place near the beginning of the war in Syria, when there was a sense among the anti-Assad parties in Lebanon that regional dynamics were shifting in their favour. This was particularly the case for the Sunnis of Lebanon, who saw the tide of the Syria war flowing against Assad at that time. As one expert wrote, the pressure on Assad was “emboldening Sunnis in neighbouring Lebanon to escalate their opposition to Hizbullah,” with some Sunni leadership in Lebanon predicting the imminent demise of Hizbullah and its allies. The street violence that followed the assassination of General Hassan can be seen in this light, as anti-Assad factions in Lebanon looked to press their advantage in the street. In fact, some analysts suggested that the assassination could have provoked a much harder push to topple the Mikati government, bringing the possibility of direct confrontation with Hizbullah and much more serious violence into play. And as a whole, the incident certainly demonstrates the willingness of Assad’s allies within Lebanon to take a highly destabilizing act to protect their own positions in the country. As such, domestic political constraints on conflict may not have been sufficient to prevent escalation.

In fact, many analysts—including Lebanese politicians and UN officials directly involved—attribute the rapid reduction in tensions in large part to the united position of the international community in favour of the Mikati government. In a joint statement issued three days after the assassination, the P-5 ambassadors and the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) expressed unified support for the Government, and called on all parties to preserve national unity. Even according to some of the 14 March leadership, UN and P-5 support for Mikati was a “tipping point” that kept Mikati from resigning, and saved his Government. UNSCOL at the time told UN Headquarters that Mikati had been “visibly buoyed by the international reaction,” which contributed to little appetite on the part of the public to mobilize on the streets. Others noted that international support to the Mikati government “killed any leverage to push harder against Hizbullah.”

It is unclear whether the fall of the Mikati government would have in itself provoked more widespread violence at the time, but many interlocutors believe it would have dramatically increased the risk of open confrontation involving Hizbullah and their opponents in the streets, as had happened when the group was pressured in 2008. “We didn’t know whether things would hold or not, and we didn’t know how people would react,” said the Special Coordinator for Lebanon (SCL), Derek Plumbly. Shoring up the Government was thus seen as the quickest path to reduce the risk.

The UN’s Role: Unify International Support to the State

UNSCOL’s decision to bring the international community together in support of the Mikati government in the aftermath of the assassination was not an easy one. The calls for Mikati to resign were loud, and the 14 March bloc was pressing its advantage in the street. Expressing support for the Government risked being seen as partial, and meddling in the country’s internal political affairs. Immediately after the assassination SCL Plumbly convened a meeting of the P5 ambassadors during which all agreed that it was critical to shore up the Lebanese state, in line with the UN’s mandate in the country. This decision was strongly and immediately supported by the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) in New York, the Under-Secretary General of which had long experience in the Middle East in his national capacity with the US Government. In UNSCOL’s view “the intent was to steady the ship … it would have been a more dangerous moment if the government had fallen then.” The ambassadors agreed with the UN’s point that addressing the immediate risks associated with government collapse, including further street violence, or even a broader destabilizing moment as happened in 2008, was the priority. Following the agreement amongst the P-5 ambassadors and the UN, UNSCOL issued a joint statement on the group’s behalf which built on a prior Council condemnation of the killing, but, importantly, also explicitly supported the Government. Achieving agreement amongst the P-5 was particularly tricky, given that Najib Mikati was a member of the 8 March political alliance, which was not generally supported by the P-5 members of the Security Council (given Hizbullah’s presence in the bloc).

And it appeared to work: interlocutors across the political spectrum and within the international community agree that the united position of the UN and the P-5 in support of the government staved off almost certain collapse of the Mikati government. “Without the UN’s action to show the P-5 support for Mikati, his government was doomed.” While some have pointed to this as a negative in the longer run—noting that this may have emboldened Hizbullah, and that Mikati’s eventual resignation in March 2013 happened at a time when it was still harder to form a government—several senior interlocutors stated that the action prevented a possible descent into more violence at that specific moment. The UN, as the convener of this group, consolidated and publicised the Security Council’s consensus.
The Wissam al Hassan crisis was a precursor to the 2013 establishment of the International Support Group for Lebanon, a standing group of P-5 plus other key actors designed to maintain international unity on Lebanon and advocate for support to the country as it faced increasing risks from the Syria conflict. The October 2012 intervention may have been controversial, but showed that the UN could rally the international community, and that this could have a direct impact on the decisions of the country’s leaders. Importantly, it showed the receptivity of the Lebanese system to international messaging in favour of state institutions, a theme that runs throughout this study.

“They Are Stretching the Rules of the Game”: Risk of Israeli-Lebanon Confrontation Spreads Beyond the Blue Line

Background

Lebanon and Israel are formally at a state of war, with no official contact, and only a UN-administered Blue Line separating the two countries. With Hizbullah allegedly maintaining a large weapons arsenal pointed at Israel, almost daily overflights by Israeli aircraft above Lebanese territory, frequent incursions and Blue Line violations, and a lack of agreement on several key Blue Line areas, the risk of escalation between the countries along the Blue Line is essentially a constant. Resolution 1701 was established in the wake of the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon to manage these risks, address contested border issues, gradually reduce the threat posed by Hizbullah’s weapons in South Lebanon, and work towards eventual normalization of relations between the countries.

Over time, both Hizbullah and the Israeli Defense Forces have evolved implicit “rules of the game” for the Blue Line area that have allowed for relative calm and the ability to walk down from potential escalatory moments. Small violations, such as the crossing of the Blue Line by unarmed Lebanese citizens, have generally been met with only complaints by the Israeli side, or occasional temporary detentions. More serious incidents, including rockets fired across the Blue Line from alleged Hizbullah locations in southern Lebanon, tend to result in retaliatory fire from the Israeli side and a period of heightened rhetoric, but even these are typically contained and dealt with through UNIFIL’s “tripartite mechanism” involving military officials from Israel, Lebanon and the UN.

There have been exceptions to this constraint, most notably Hizbullah’s abduction of two Israeli soldiers in 2006, which rapidly escalated into a brutal war that cost more than 1,200 lives and resulted in the destruction of much of southern Lebanon. But even that moment was subsequently characterized by Hizbullah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah as a regrettable miscalculation by Hizbullah rather than an intention to start a war. In fact, ever since the 2006 war, there has been a clear, and relatively well-publicised, position by both Israel and Hizbullah: neither wishes to provoke an all-out confrontation across the Blue Line, though both sides reserved the right to retaliate when provoked themselves. The risk, therefore, has remained one of potential miscalculation by either side, and the goal of the UN has thus largely focused on preventing such miscalculation. In fact, Security Council resolution 1701 was established in the wake of the war and mandated UNIFIL with the task of helping the parties avoid another return to violent conflict.

Hizbullah’s growing presence in Syria, however, muddied the rules of the game, and created a heightened risk of each side misreading the other. From 2012 Hizbullah steadily increased its involvement in the fighting in Syria, building a visible ground presence on the Syrian side of the Syria-Lebanon border, openly participating in fighting near the contested Golan Heights area between Syria and Israel, and eventually deploying fighters across all of the major battle zones in Syria. Behind this was a clear motivation for both Hizbullah and Iran: maintaining control of the key corridors of Syria that would allow for continued weapons transfers from Iran to Hizbullah into Lebanon.

Israel had been keenly aware of Hizbullah’s growing reach within Syria, and frequently reported to the UN that arms transfers to Hizbullah within Syria constituted a “red line.” In June 2014, Israel warned UNSCOL and others in the international community that Hizbullah had been emboldened by their victories in Syria and more willing to take risks vis-à-vis Israel. And Israeli officials were concerned that Hizbullah was “stretching the rules of the game in South Lebanon and the Golan.” Regardless of the truth of these claims, the Israeli perception was very real, and was driving Israel to increase its presence and take a more active posture along the Blue Line area. Particularly near disputed areas along the Line, increased Israeli presence is often seen by Lebanese actors as a provocation, driving up the risk of confrontation.

In fact, Israel too appeared willing to stretch the established rules in order to enforce its own position on weapons transfers to Hizbullah in Syria. On several occasions in late 2014 and early 2015, air strikes near Damascus—allegedly by Israeli aircraft—destroyed apparent weapons convoys headed towards Lebanon. For several months, this bombing campaign appeared to fall within a new rule of the game—“what happens in Syria stays in Syria”—as Hizbullah did not react to strikes in Syria with any action across the Blue Line. But on 18 January 2015, an Israeli airstrike on a convoy near the Golan Heights killed six Hizbullah members, including the well-known Hizbullah official Jihad Moughniyeh, and a high-ranking Iranian officer.

At this point “the [Hizbullah] support base was screaming for revenge and Hizbullah had to do something.” The established rules governing the Blue Line did not clearly apply, what happened in Syria was no longer necessarily going to stay there, and risk of miscalculation immediately rose. Only days later, Hizbullah launched several anti-tank guided missiles from the Shab’a Farms area into an Israeli military convoy south of the Blue Line, killing two Israeli soldiers and injuring several others. The IDF returned fire into Lebanon,
which in turn triggered the firing of several rockets from the Lebanese side into Israel.65

Hizbullah’s attack from Shab’a Farms caught most actors by surprise—in fact, “UNFIL’s view was that Hizbullah was more likely to retaliate from Golan.”66 By reacting to an event in Syria from within Lebanon,67 Hizbullah had placed the rules of the game into question, and potentially brought Lebanon into play. According to the UNFIL leadership, this was “the highest risk moment where all of us thought this could lead us straight back into a war like 2006.”68

The Threat Spikes and then Recedes

However, within days of the exchange of fire across the Blue Line, the situation had de-escalated, with both sides privately acknowledging that the risk of violent conflict had receded. For its part, Hizbullah was clear in its communications with the UN that its attack was a direct response to the killing in the Golan, and they stressed that their action from Shab’a Farms was a signal that they did not wish to open another front with Israel on the Syrian side of the border. In calls with UNSCOL, Hizbullah officials made clear that they considered the cycle of violence closed.69 In calls with Tehran too, the UN received assurances that Iran did not wish the incident to escalate and would pass messages to their allies in Lebanon accordingly.

For its part, Israel also stressed that they did not wish escalation beyond the commonly understood tit-for-tat between the two sides. An Israeli security official told UNSCOL that it was in Israel’s interest to keep Lebanon isolated from the Syria situation, and stressed that Israeli concerns about Hizbullah’s presence on the Golan should be taken care of on the Golan.70 But following the round of violence, Israel gave a clear message to UNSCOL: Lebanon and Israel had come very close to war on 28 January; if more soldiers had been killed the Israeli system very likely would have been forced to escalate.71

The decision by both sides not to escalate thus seems to have resulted in part from a rapid clarification of positions by both sides, a difficult task given that Israeli and Lebanon are formally at a state of war and have no official contact outside of UNFIL’s tripartite meetings. In the hours that followed Hizbullah’s 28 January attack, it was not clear whether Israel might escalate, and it was not immediately apparent what signal was being sent by either side. The risk thus arose from the possibility of misreading the other side. And the action to contain that risk, therefore, was one of bridging the communications gap between the two sides.

The UN’s Shuttle Diplomacy Role

One advantage the UN had from the outset of this incident was the established procedures and structures for dealing with tensions across the Blue Line, from the existing good relationships with key military and political officials in Israel and Lebanon to the longstanding tripartite structure administered by UNFIL on the ground. The strategy in this instance, as in previous moments of escalation along the Blue Line, was to contain the rhetoric, provide time for UNFIL to do its verification and tripartite work on the ground, and ensure that all sides knew the intentions of the others. As the UNFIL leadership noted, “the UN achieves leverage through impartial clarification of the facts and positions, which gives space for the leadership to walk back from conflict.”72

At a political level, UNSCOL’s role was first and foremost one of ensuring that all sides understood the positions of the others, and did not make false assumptions about the readiness of the other side to escalate. Immediately after Hizbullah’s strike on 28 January, SCL Sigrid Kaag placed calls to the Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran in Tehran, senior officials within Hizbullah, senior military officials in the Israeli Defense Forces and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Lebanese Prime Minister and key international ambassadors in Beirut. The central purpose of these calls was to limit the risk of miscalculation by directly hearing all parties’ positions, and then ensuring that both Hizbullah and Israel understood that neither side wished to escalate the conflict.

One of UNSCOL’s goals was to help create sufficient political space for UNFIL to do its work on the ground and across the Blue Line. In all of the calls, the Special Coordinator stressed the need to avoid further action and public rhetoric until UNFIL had verified the events on the ground, and her contact with UNFIL during this period was hourly. At this time, UNFIL convened an emergency tripartite meeting—the only venue where the Israeli and Lebanese army officials communicate directly—in which both Lebanon and Israel affirmed their desire to avoid escalation. Though of course Hizbullah was not present at these meetings, the messaging from both sides was clear, and established a common understanding of each country’s official position. UNFIL too was able to pass messages directly to both Hizbullah and the IDF, echoing the positions by all parties that none wanted war.73 Within hours of the tripartite meeting, and following the calls by UNSCOL, the message from all sides was clear: no one wished to provoke violent conflict.

There is agreement amongst all of the key actors on both sides of the Blue Line that this model worked to help prevent violent conflict in January 2015, and has succeeded more generally to head off other escalatory moments in recent years.74 Israeli officials subsequently thanked the Special Coordinator for having relayed messages to Hizbullah and Tehran, and were clear that UNFIL’s role via the tripartite mechanism was critical in helping to de-escalate. Similarly, Hizbullah pointed to the importance of being able to relay messages directly to Israel on their desire to avoid conflict, as did Tehran.

In fact, all sides pointed to the existence of resolution 1701 itself as a hedge against conflict. Resolution 1701 has universal buy-in on both sides of the Blue Line, though different interpretations and emphases. Hizbullah—and many
political leaders in Lebanon—agreed to the resolution in 2006 as a reaffirmation of Lebanon’s right to be free of Israeli occupation and interference. Other Lebanese leadership see resolution 1701 more in terms of its mandate to remove non-state arms from South Lebanon. Israel is of course focused on the mandate to keep South Lebanon free of Hizbullah’s weapons, and has couched its actions across the Blue Line as responses to military threats from Hizbullah. “Resolution 1701 has something for everyone,” one commentator pointed out. And rightly or wrongly, in the case of the incidents of January 2015, both Hizbullah and Israel felt able to couch their own actions as compliant with 1701, thus giving both sides a narrative that led away from escalation.

The role of UNIFIL was decisive in this case, and in many others over the past six years. “UNIFIL’s presence along the Blue Line provides both sides a reason to de-escalate: both sides can point to the mission as the reason not to react, and the reason to wait until the facts are known.” UNIFIL acts as the “credible, impartial reference point that allows the facts to work against conflict escalation.” And crucially, UNIFIL engages with the military leadership of Lebanon and Israel, with those actors most directly concerned with the immediacy of the decision to escalate (and potentially less swayed by the domestic political pressures in their respective capitals). With more than 100 tripartite meetings held since 2006, the mission’s constant interaction with the Israeli and Lebanese sides plays a “sacred role of conflict prevention along the Blue Line.” And as some analysts pointed out, the presence of large numbers of international troops also acts as a bulwark against violent conflict where the troops might be caught in the middle, raising the stakes of any decision to escalate. While there are longer-term issues related to Blue Line risks identified in the fourth section of this report, this crisis offers evidence that the UN structure and approach with the political and military actors helped to prevent escalation.

The Arsal Flashpoint: Sealing Off Lebanon from Syria

Background

Lebanon and Syria share a 360-kilometre, largely undemarcated border, with a long tradition of free movement between the two countries. Damascus has historically lashed out at Lebanon across this border when it felt under pressure, and many of the Sunni communities of northeastern Lebanon hold a deep sense of solidarity with the Sunni opposition in Syria as they confront the Assad regime. As the fighting in Syria swelled towards the Lebanese border in 2012-2013, these border communities were increasingly at risk of being drawn into the conflict and/or targeted by the Syrian army. At the same time, an increase in terrorist attacks within Lebanon fuelled fears in many Lebanese communities that extremist elements were infiltrating the country, including within the refugee population that had quickly surged to more than one million people. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), already stretched in many other parts of the country, struggled to secure the key border areas, and when it did respond risked being drawn in on sectarian grounds.

The border town of Arsal has been emblematic of the risks along the Lebanon-Syria border, a flashpoint for serious violence over the past six years, and continues to be a dangerous area today. A Sunni-dominated town within a Shiite governorate in the Bekaa valley, Arsal has historically lived at the mercy of heavy-handed approaches by the Syrian security services, and remains closely linked to the Sunni communities just across the border in Syria. Arsal also bore more refugees per capita than any other town in Lebanon during the height of the refugee flows, quadrupling its population in the first three years of the war. From the outset of the Syrian war, Arsal thus formed a natural focal point for border conflict, a potential rear-base for Syrian opposition groups, and a clear target for those wishing to blame the Sunni community for aiding extremism in Lebanon.

In June 2013, Arsal was drawn further into the Syrian storm, as military victories by Hizbullah and the Syrian army in the Qusayr area of Syria pushed elements of the armed opposition into the border region with Lebanon. Arsal and its mountainous environs quickly became an important safe haven for Syrian armed groups retreating from battles across the border, bringing militants directly alongside densely populated refugee camps. Hizbullah’s open participation in the fighting in Syria also drove animosity towards the Shiite communities of Lebanon to new highs, and terrorist attacks in Shiite neighbourhoods spiked at this time. Many commentators pointed towards Arsal as a key flow-through point for those wishing to bring explosive devices into Lebanon, and as the Syrian army and Hizbullah gradually took control of the Qalamoun Mountains along the border, the pressures on Arsal mounted.

In August 2014, after a series of incidents in the town, the crisis in Arsal reached a climax as roughly 700 militants associated with Al Nusra and ISIL attacked and temporarily held the town, taking hostages and repelling the LAF for several days. Widespread reports that Syrian refugees in Arsal had joined Nusra and ISIL’s ranks during the attack fuelled deepened suspicions towards the refugee population across the country, and increasingly xenophobic statements by members of the Lebanese leadership. Arsal and its dangerous mountainous environs had become Lebanon’s “most significant security challenge.” Within the UN, it was clear that the threat posed by extremists to Lebanese civilians, the LAF and the sovereignty of Lebanon was very real.

The Decision to Deploy the LAF to Arsal

The decision to deploy the LAF to Arsal in the wake of the extremist takeover was not an easy one for the beleaguered Prime Minister Tamam Salam and his Government. At the time, the impasse over the presidency was complete, and the Government’s ability to take major decisions required
consensus amongst factions that included Hizbullah and its allies, as well as Sunni-led parties that did not necessarily want the LAF to become embroiled in a fight on the side of Hizbullah against ISIL and Nusra. The absence of a president was especially important in this case, as the president was the designated commander in chief of the army. Prime Minister Salam, without the full powers of the presidency, therefore needed to reach a common position amongst his cabinet on the deployment of up to 2,000 soldiers to Arsal.

Complicating this decision still further was Arsal itself, a Sunni town within a Shia enclave only kilometres from the Syrian border, thus a potentially dangerous place to dramatically increase the presence of armed forces that would by necessity be targeting Sunnis. With the extremists holding LAF hostages, reports that refugees from the nearby camps had joined the ranks of ISIL, and Hizbullah active in the area, a decision to deploy the LAF was a risky and complex one. “Tamam Salam was in a particularly weak position to make decisions that would run the army up against Sunni groups—he was a Sunni himself, and overseeing a Government that had very divided views on how to approach Syria. He often felt he didn’t have enough leverage on his own to take these kinds of decisions.”

But following an emergency meeting of his Government, and with its full support, PM Salam announced in August 2014 that the LAF would deploy robustly into Arsal, and stay to ensure the extremist actors were forced to withdraw. Speaking from outside Lebanon, the Sunni leader Saad Hariri voiced support for this decision, indicating that the LAF had to “liberate Arsal from the militants.” These statements were made in the face of Lebanon’s Muslim Clerics Association, which had called on Sunnis to protest the army’s deployment to Arsal.

For its part, Hizbullah also faced a difficult decision. On one hand, Hizbullah could support the decision of the LAF to deploy, thus expressing solidarity with the state in the face of an extremist threat, but also potentially removing a key argument of the group that Hizbullah was needed to prevent the extremist threat from Syria. On the other, Hizbullah could ramp up its own deployment, undermine the army, and try to push ISIL and Nusra out on its own. At that moment in August 2014, Hizbullah chose to support the LAF, expressly calling for the army’s deployment to Arsal. In fact, a senior Hizbullah cleric issued a caution, “to those who would threaten to divide the army and leave it, we say: Lebanon and the Bekaa are not Mosul.”

This unified support for LAF from key Sunni and Shia sides was the cover needed for the Prime Minister to instruct the army to deploy heavily to Arsal and begin to drive the extremist elements out of Lebanon. The operation largely succeeded, and the ISIL and Nusra elements fled from Arsal, allowing the army and security services to re-establish control in the town. The deployment did not eradicate the longer-term threat, nor did it resolve the potentially explosive issue of Hizbullah’s involvement in the fighting along the border areas. However, at that critical moment in August 2014, the common message of support for the LAF from the Government, Hizbullah and the Sunni leadership, headed off one of the most dangerous moments where the war in Syria could have spilled far more directly into Lebanon.

Unifying Around the Lebanese Army: The Role of UN Political Messaging

The UN played a small, but arguably important role in facilitating a common position in favour of the LAF’s central role in Lebanon generally, and in Arsal in particular. This began in September 2013, when UNSCOL and UNHQ decided to dedicate a separate “LAF support” track to the International Support Group for Lebanon (ISG), with the express purpose of coalescing international positions in favour of the Lebanese state against the risks that violence in Arsal and elsewhere posed to the country. Throughout 2013 and early 2014, in the lead up to the Arsal moment, the UN-led ISG supported meetings specifically to increase donor contributions to the LAF and consistently advocated for greater political support to the army as the key state institution in Lebanon.

In this regard, the ISG was set up in large part to bolster the Government, allowing Prime Minister Tamam Salam to take difficult decisions, such as deploying the LAF. “The ISG messaging was about empowering Tamam Salam,” said SCL Plumbly, referring to giving the Prime Minister a sense that he had enough international support to make difficult national decisions despite his fractured Government. Privately with UNSCOL, and in group settings with international diplomats, Prime Minister Salam acknowledged the positive impact of the ISG on his ability to corral the various factions in his Government, and he referred to the positive role of the ISG in garnering broad support for the LAF. Certainly the ISG had established a consistent and very public position that the LAF was the sole state institution authorized to address the national security issues of Lebanon, and the participation of Lebanon in the ISG gave Prime Minister Salam a positive reference point for the decision to deploy the army to Arsal.

It is difficult to measure the direct impact of the political messaging on the decision to deploy the LAF to Arsal in August 2014, and still more difficult to assess whether the strong international position on the Lebanese state affected Hizbullah’s decision-making at the time. Indeed, Hizbullah’s later decisions to engage more directly in the Arsal area may run against any argument that the UN directly affected the group’s calculation. But at a time when Prime Minister Salam faced near total paralysis in the ability of his Government to take state-level decisions, the unified position of the ISG does seem to have strengthened his hand to bring the political leadership together and take a decision to de-escalate the very dangerous situation along the border. As the SCL Plumbly describes, the ISG in this case was an example of “political theatre, where the public symbol of
III. Fear and Loathing in Lebanon: The UN’s Role in Addressing Real and Perceived Risks from the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Background

“The Syrians are a cancer that has spread across Lebanon; they will kill us if we don’t send them back.” Such negative perceptions about the Syrian refugees are increasingly widespread amongst the Lebanese political leadership, and there have been repeated calls from many quarters to push out the “existential threat” posed by the enormous refugee population in country. In fact, there is a widespread view within and outside the UN that “at any moment, the animosity towards the refugees could spill over into violent conflict.” Addressing this threat is not strictly the purview of preventive diplomacy, but a brief examination of how the UN built a strategy around assisting Lebanese and Syrian communities, and how that approach was used to gain political leverage, does provide an important element to the preventive diplomacy story for Lebanon.

Indeed, the sheer numbers facing Lebanon are staggering. After six years of the war in Syria, Lebanon has hosted up to 1.5 million Syrians who fled the conflict, along with more than 30,000 Palestine refugees from Syria and a pre-existing population of more than 275,000 Palestine refugees. In a country of only 3.5 million nationals, the influx of Syrians to Lebanon was the equivalent of Europe receiving roughly 170 million refugees in a three-year period.

The impact of the war in Syria on the Lebanese socio-economic sphere has been dramatic, as unemployment has doubled since 2011 to more than 34 per cent, while one-third of young Lebanese are unable to find work. It is estimated that 170,000 Lebanese were pushed into poverty in 2013 alone, pressing the numbers of Lebanese in poverty well above one million today. Massive losses in trade and tourism—driven largely by the blockage of export routes and the decision by the Gulf Cooperation Council to restrict travel to Lebanon—left key sectors of the Lebanese economy in tatters. Overall, the growth of the economy fell off heavily, with debt augmenting to 141 per cent of GDP, and losses to the economy estimated at more than $13 billion between 2012 and 2017.

There has been a strong tendency among the political leadership of Lebanon to lay the blame for Lebanon’s economic downturn on the Syrian refugee population, part of a broader effort to stigmatize the refugees and lay the groundwork for their return to Syria. The dominant narrative has been that the Syrian refugees are competing for Lebanese jobs, leeching off the highly subsidized basic services in country, and undermining the fragile confessional balance in Lebanon. The perception that the Syrians have benefited disproportionately from international assistance heightened the sense of threat within Lebanese communities, while reports of isolated incidents involving Syrian refugees tend to drive much more expansive fears. A statement by a senior military official captures this inflammatory rhetoric: “Refugee camps are hotbeds for terrorists . . . they constitute a genuine risk to Lebanon’s stability.”

This xenophobic narrative intentionally distorts the real impact of the refugee crisis, most of which is not due to the refugee presence at all. In fact, the economic losses suffered by Lebanon are overwhelmingly driven by the breakdown of international trade and the lack of tourism from the Gulf, not the presence of the refugees. The negative economic impact of the refugees themselves comes largely from the fact that the Lebanese state subsidizes electricity and some other basic services: a growth in population has added to the costs of these subsidies, and has strained already overstretched infrastructure and waste removal services. But Lebanese politicians tend to (intentionally) conflate these costs with the broader economic downturn, rather than consider them separately.

Similarly, despite the political rhetoric linking Syrian refugees to insecurity, there is strong evidence that the Syrian refugee population has not significantly increased security risks or crime; instead, the overwhelming majority of the refugees have endured appalling conditions without resort to crime or violence. While there is no reliable source that indicates a meaningful increase in violent crime or attacks by Syrian nationals in Lebanon, there is a clear increase in the perceptions amongst Lebanese citizens as to the threat posed by Syrians, with more than 60 per cent feeling “not safe at all” in Lebanon, and roughly 75 per cent attributing their feeling of insecurity to the Syrian refugee presence. Lebanese politicians, benefiting from a xenophobic platform to garner support from an increasingly fearful population, have fed this distorted narrative. “This has contributed to an incredibly tense situation with refugees in every community in Lebanon, where any small incident, could flare up…getting very quickly into physical violence between the communities.”

Why Hasn’t the Refugee Issue Exploded?

The public rhetoric about the risks of conflict associated with the Syrian refugee presence is highly inflamed, and Lebanese and Syrian communities rub up against each other in every village in Lebanon. The risks of serious violence appear to many experts overwhelmingly high. Yet, for six years there has been no serious or widespread violence. Why?

An important reason is the historical proximity and recent experience many Lebanese have with their Syrian neighbours. Indeed, during the 2006 Israel/Lebanon war, tens of thousands of Lebanese citizens fled to Syria where they were welcomed and housed. This sense of reciprocal hospitality should not
be underestimated. Nor should the previously mentioned “war fatigue” of the Lebanese population: while a growing proportion of Lebanese do fear for their safety, there is also an overriding reluctance to go back to violent conflict.\textsuperscript{127} Again, there is a built-in resistance to violent conflict within Lebanese society, despite its deep divisions.

However, there has been another important factor in limiting potential violence between the Syrian and Lebanese communities in Lebanon: the fact that UN support has been intentionally and visibly channelled to both Lebanese and Syrian communities, and this has helped to curb the willingness of the Lebanese leadership and the population to take the kinds of actions that might provoke violent conflict. Under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), aid is not directed at Syrian refugees per se, but is rather allocated based on “vulnerability,” a term which does not distinguish on the basis of nationality. Money is thus provided directly to vulnerable Lebanese citizens alongside Syrian refugees. In addition, the LCRP prioritizes support to local and national institutional capacity, diverting large sums of money into the Lebanese institutions and infrastructure most negatively affected by the refugee presence.\textsuperscript{128} This was a strategic decision by the UN leadership in Lebanon near the outset of the Lebanese crisis, one which took into account the enormous burdens already facing the country, the history of refugees in Lebanon, and the fact that support would need to be delivered outside of a camp setting, across a wide range of communities.\textsuperscript{129}

In fact the LCRP has operated in large part as an economic boon for Lebanon: in the past six years it has generated a 1.3 per cent GDP boost for the country, providing more than $2 billion in humanitarian aid since the start of the crisis.\textsuperscript{130} Roughly 45 per cent of the aid delivered is in the form of cash, spent by Syrian refugees in Lebanese markets, while nearly 15 per cent is spent on rents to Lebanese landlords.\textsuperscript{131} Even the claim that the Syrian refugees are part of a “fierce competition” for jobs is a distortion: overwhelmingly the refugee population has only participated in the agricultural and infrastructure labour markets (as up to 300,000 Syrians did in Lebanon prior to the war) and harsh government restrictions on their right to work have limited any real ability to compete for the range of jobs being sought by the Lebanese.\textsuperscript{132} In fact, the UN’s support to Lebanon as a result of the Syria crisis created and sustained more than 22,000 jobs in 2016 alone, while 10,000 new teaching positions for Lebanese nationals have been created via the UN’s support to second-shifts in public schools.\textsuperscript{133}

**Leveraging the Money into Messages**

While much of the above UN activities can be considered more in terms of structural prevention than preventive diplomacy, there were instances where the UN was able to leverage the LCRP’s dual Lebanese/Syrian approach into political engagement aimed at reducing some of the most immediate risks of violent conflict. Looking briefly at some of these moments and their impact on the decisions of the Lebanese leadership, there is a case for considering such approaches broadly within the preventive diplomacy range of engagement.\textsuperscript{134}

Importantly, UNSCOL took an early decision to include Lebanon in the core participants of the ISG, meaning that the Government would be invested in the international messages produced by the high-level meetings. When the UN held a ministerial conference, therefore, it was an opportunity to show united support for Lebanon and meet the Government’s demands for increased donor support via the LCRP, but also a forum to pressure the leadership politically to take a less dangerous line on refugees. For example, in the lead up to a 2016 donor conference in London, the UN quietly placed implicit conditionalities on the support package to Lebanon, pushing for the Government to end discriminatory policies on the Syrians’ right to employment in Lebanon. According to UNHCR, this pressure “clearly resulted in better policies by the government” and reduced some of the most dangerous pressures at the time.\textsuperscript{135} The fact that the UN was providing a tangible benefit to the Lebanese economy and socio-economic sphere does appear to have given the UN political leverage push for these policy shifts with the Government.\textsuperscript{136}

There has also been a concerted push to change public opinions in Lebanon about refugees, with some measurable success. UNHCR recorded a “significant downturn in inflammatory rhetoric” about Syrian refugees following a UN information campaign in 2015 that highlighted the benefits of the UN support to Lebanese communities.\textsuperscript{137} Importantly, this campaign was combined with direct engagement with the key political leadership of Lebanon, many of whom had openly expressed xenophobic, anti-Syrian rhetoric.\textsuperscript{138} While it is difficult to attribute a shift in rhetoric directly to the information campaign, it does suggest that politically-driven public information supported by the kind of tangible benefits provided by the LCRP can help to defuse public fears, or at least correct the distortions put out by some of the Lebanese leadership.

The UN’s contribution to preventing violent conflict between Syrian and Lebanese communities in Lebanon may be difficult to measure, but the decision to channel aid to both communities did provide the UN with a key point of leverage to push Lebanon’s leaders away from some of the more divisive and dangerous decisions. And the simple fact that the Lebanese communities have benefited in clear ways has surely prevented the risk of much broader violence. As the current head of UNHCR in Lebanon noted, “The support we gave to Lebanese communities, and the way the UN let them know they were benefitting, this helped keep tensions tamped down, so when an incident did happen, it didn’t escalate so quickly.”\textsuperscript{139}
IV. An Umbrella for a Yellow Elephant: Managing Short- and Long-Term Risks in Lebanon

Lebanon has survived an extraordinary set of crises over the past six years, “defying gravity” according to many who follow the Middle East. The extent to which UN diplomatic engagement may have helped Lebanon stay afloat is difficult to measure, and views of interlocutors interviewed ranged from “no impact whatsoever” to “without UNSCOL Lebanon would be underwater.” This case study has made an argument that at key watershed moments the UN has played a limited but important role in providing the parties with a path away from the brink, acknowledging that most of the time they were looking for a reason to avoid conflict anyway.

Faced with high risks of imminent violence, the UN has often been confronted with a dilemma: How to address the immediate danger of violence without contributing to longer-term hazards for the country? In heading off a crisis, the UN may help prevent the immediate risk, but that may be at cost to the country in terms of addressing the deeper tectonic rifts. The UN could even play a role in deepening them. As SCL Kaag points out, “there is an important role in keeping the leadership aware of the risks that are creeping up on them, holding them to account for the longer-term issues in the country.”140

No issue is more important in this context than the role of Hizbullah in Lebanon. This case study has thus far considered Hizbullah partially in terms of its positive role, its reluctance to precipitate conflict across the Blue Line, and its double-edged role in shoring up the security threats to the country. But there is another story running in parallel, one where Hizbullah has been able to gradually entrench itself into the Lebanese system, allegedly assassinate opposition politicians with impunity, set up parallel security systems in defiance of the Lebanese state, and erode the international standing of Lebanon.141 “Hizbullah’s overwhelming military dominance and readiness to use terrorism domestically, along with the total failure of any state response against the group, keeps a dangerous lid on the situation while gradually leaving the state less and less viable.”142

Crucially, Hizbullah reportedly has been able to bring tens of thousands of new weapons into Lebanon since 2006, including strategic ground-to-ground missiles that can allegedly fly from northern Lebanon to any location in Israel.143 According to a wide range of Israeli officials, this constitutes an existential threat to Israel, making war between Israel and Lebanon an inevitability. Israeli officials often blame the UN for this, sometimes calling 1701 “a total failure...an eight year umbrella under which Hizbullah could build up its arsenal.”144

In this view, Hizbullah is “the yellow elephant in the room,” the source of risk so overwhelmingly large, it tends to be ignored in favour of smaller, more manageable issues.145 Heading off an incident along the Blue Line may feel like a victory, but according to many in Israel, that victory masks a looming defeat for prevention.

SCL Plumbly acknowledged this dilemma, and suggested that part of the answer lay in politically implicating Hizbullah. “The goal with Hizbullah is to engage them in a way to make them constructive players in Lebanon, acknowledge their political strength, but use them to gradually inhibit their ability to escalate conflict. By having more and more to lose, Hizbullah will gradually become tied down by their own political investment, like the silk threads of the Lilliputians.”146 On one hand, these threads may already be accumulating, as Hizbullah has become increasingly invested in the workings of Government, and has been a constructive player in some of Lebanon’s political developments over recent years.147 But with an increasingly regional role in Syria, the potential to dominate in Lebanon, and few checks on its power from the Lebanese state, it is unclear whether the silk threads will hold, and even less clear what might contain the risk of war across the Blue Line if Israel decides that the threats have grown too great.148 Indeed, recent developments—where PM Hariri resigned and left Lebanon after alleging a plot to assassinate him—are an indication of the serious disruptive potential for Hizbullah and its allies.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to take on questions of Lebanon’s longer-term stability. But as the SCL Kaag said, “part of the conflict prevention role of the UN in Lebanon is to flag the future threats, to understand how what we’re doing now might contribute to the creeping risk facing this country.”149 Over the past six years, UNSCOL has done more than just flag the threats: the Mission has worked with UNIFIL to try to broker progress on Blue Line demarcation and contested areas as an attempt to build confidence between Israel and Lebanon; there has been a quiet effort too to see if the parties are ready to resolve the longstanding dispute over the maritime boundary separating Israel and Lebanon’s exclusive economic zone; and both UNIFIL and UNSCOL have constantly crossed between Israel and Lebanon, looking for opportunities to build a more constructive relationship between the two countries. Domestically too, recent initiatives by UNSCOL have been calibrated at the longer-term threats to Lebanon, such as the recently approved nationally-led Preventing Violent Extremism Strategy, and the Integrated Strategic Framework. Finding a balance between the crisis management and the longer-term threats is a challenge that will continue to confront Lebanon well beyond the end of the war in Syria.

V. Conclusions: Key Factors for Successful Preventive Diplomacy in Lebanon

The above analysis makes the case for a UN political role that has managed to nudge key actors away from conflict at critical watershed moments, sometimes by making innovative use of the leverage available at the time, sometimes by helping to unify those actors who wish to de-escalate. Importantly, the approach of this case study has been to situate the UN's
actions within the context of the key stakeholders, an attempt to show the UN’s influence as compared to the other drivers towards and away from conflict. The UN is far from the most important player in Lebanon, and sometimes its contribution to conflict prevention has been a quite limited one. From these experiences, some broader observations about the UN’s preventive role in Lebanon can be drawn.

1. Unity as an Enabling Tool for Prevention

Even at the most dangerous moments in the past six years in Lebanon, there has been general consensus that no Lebanese party wished to push the country back into violent conflict. The most serious risks of escalation therefore have tended to arise when events moved quickly, potentially outrunning the ability of the key domestic actors to contain them.150 This was the case in the assassination of General Hassan, where the street protests and broader feeling that the war in Syria might play to one side’s advantage could have resulted in more widespread violence. Other crises too—such as in Arsal in 2014 or the Blue Line in 2015—have risked growing into violent conflict despite the interests of the Lebanese leadership, the regional powers and the international community in protecting the country. The risk profile of Lebanon is often more about miscalculation than spoilers.

Where the UN has played a most visible role in helping to prevent escalation in Lebanon, it has been in fostering a unified position, most importantly within the Security Council, but also within the Lebanese political leadership.151 “The main value of the ISG,” according to SCL Plumbly, “has been to maximize Security Council cohesion, helping to create the sense that there is a united position on keeping Lebanon out of the regional dynamics and preventing escalation.”152 This unity can have an immediate impact in a country like Lebanon—such as when it served to prevent the fall of the Mikati Government following the assassination of General Hassan—and it also serves as a reference point when key actors in Lebanon risk division along political or sectarian lines. “Maintaining a unified international position amongst the Council members helped the Lebanese leaders hold the line and take decisions at crisis points.”153

The establishment of the ISG was essentially geared at maintaining such unity, and is an example of what experts have called “framework diplomacy.”154 The ISG served an important purpose, providing political support to a beleaguered government in Lebanon at critical moments, while also keeping donor attention focused on the country through a sustained period. It also helped to ward against the possibility that members of the Security Council might be partial or biased in their approach to Lebanon, thus building a more legitimate basis for international messaging.

At the same time, while SCL Kaag recognises the value of the ISG, she has also cautioned against overreliance on it: “The ISG was good for its purpose and directly helped international consensus, but we also need the Lebanese to take ownership of their own decisions, to realise there is no protective umbrella over this country.”155 According to this view, there is a risk that an unqualified supportive approach could give the Lebanese leadership too many reassurances, allowing them to avoid key decisions (such as agreeing a president) in the hopes that the international and regional actors will eventually come to their aid. Looking at how a structure like the ISG can balance support and also continue to encourage constructive decision-making is a lesson from the Lebanese experience. As of the finalization of this report in late 2017, that was the news that PM Hariri had resigned and left Lebanon—alleging a plot to assassinate him—the relevance of the ISG appears to have reasserted itself. While it is beyond the scope of this report to evaluate this ongoing UN-led effort, it is worth pointing to the moments described above where the ISG played a positive role at moments of crisis as evidence that it may well do so again now.

2. Nudge Them Down a Ladder: Elusive Leverage and the Importance of the Personal

There are widely differing views about the extent to which the UN has been able to influence the key powerbrokers within Lebanon and across the Blue Line. Several experts pointed to moments when the UN appeared able to “nudge” Hizbullah away from a more dangerous position, particularly when the group was keen to pass a message to the Israeli side.156 Members of the Israeli government also appeared to use the UN’s messaging to try to influence their own leadership away from bellicose positions, though it was less clear how much this impacted Israeli foreign policy.157 This quiet influence appears to have borne fruit in the January 2015 incident described above, where the Special Coordinator’s and UNIFIL’s message-passing helped clarify Israeli and Hizbullah’s positions, connect the dots between regional capitals, and allow both parties to walk back from a dangerous brink. That said, the messages were just one piece of the broader calculation by both sides about whether to escalate, and several interlocutors noted that the number of casualties was what ultimately drove decision-making in Tel Aviv.

Personal relationships matter when it comes to this kind of soft leverage. SCL Plumbly highlighted the constant engagement with all of the political actors of Lebanon, “placing them under the international microscope, making sure they felt important personally, but also knew we were all watching.”158 And both SCLs Kaag and Plumbly underscored the importance of building personal trust and confidence of key leaders, “so when the crisis happens they turn to the UN and trust what we say.”159 This personal trust and reliance is evidenced by the frequent requests by former Prime Minister Tamam Salam to discuss messaging and approaches vis-à-vis the Arsal and the refugee crises with both SCLs.160

At the same time, many Lebanese and UN officials cautioned against too broad a reading of the UN’s political role in the
country. “The UN did not directly affect our political process,” said one official from the Prime Minister's office, speaking of the multi-year negotiation to agree on the presidency. Others within and outside the UN generally agree: the scope for the UN to influence key actors to address the kinds of conflict risks above is a quite limited one, and should be described more in terms of “coaxing,” “nudging,” “trying to persuade,” rather than the exercise of hard leverage. Where the UN appears to play its most constructive role is thus to offer the actors a ladder down away from conflict, one which most of them wish to use, but which is not always available in the moment of the crisis. Rather than think in terms of hard leverage, the Lebanon case offers more examples of the UN offering small opportunities and spaces for key actors to move away from the escalatory moment.

And in terms of influence, it was far from clear from the Lebanon example that the UN was able to nudge the regional players. While there were limited instances where passing messages was deemed important—such as to and from Tehran during the January 2015—there was no consensus that the UN was able to actively participate in or help influence regional actors. The ISG may have helped provide a positive reference point for the region, but evidence of influence was difficult to determine. SCL Kaag has suggested that the Lebanon experience could be used to revisit a more regional approach to preventive diplomacy, potentially by mandating an envoy to address a broader set of transnational issues around the Syria/Iraq conflicts.

3. Politics, Peacekeeping and Prevention: the UNIFIL/UNSCOL Model

There are few places in the world where a Special Political Mission and a Peacekeeping Operation are deployed together. There are some persuasive arguments for consolidating the two UN presences into one, and several interlocutors spoke of a lack of coherent direction bringing the two missions together. At a time when the UN is undergoing a reform effort focused on coherent approaches to conflict prevention, there may be scope to reassess how these missions work together.

However, the January 2015 crisis along the Blue Line does demonstrate how a peacekeeping operation and a political mission can operate together effectively to prevent escalation. In fact, there are some clear benefits to the current model. UNIFIL, with the densest deployment of peacekeepers in the world and decades-long presence on the ground, “has a high degree of credibility with the parties, the ability to provide an impartial version of events, and a proven record of working directly at the operational level to de-escalate.” This work finds a useful complement in the political and regional level engagement of UNSCOL, as messages from Tehran, Tel Aviv, Beirut and Washington can all bolster the ground-level efforts to walk the parties away from conflict. As the January 2015 incident demonstrated, there was real value in combining the high-level political messages with the groundwork to clarify and reduce tensions on the ground.

In Lebanon the UN plays a crucial bridging role amongst actors who would otherwise have no official contact. There is no formal channel connecting Hizbullah and Israel, though arguably this is the most important point at which miscalculation could lead to more widespread conflict. “The UN’s open channel with Hizbullah, the ability to keep the group engaged at crisis moments, this in itself has value.” And though the UN has far less clout with Israel than the US or other key bilateral actors, restrictions on Western countries’ ability to contact Hizbullah means the UN is placed at the centre. In this context, being a credible, impartial player is more important than ever. The UNIFIL leadership spoke of maintaining credibility with the parties on both sides of the Blue Line as an overriding priority, while SCL Kaag frequently spoke of the critical need in a prevention context to be seen as telling “the real story of what is happening, what risks are present for all sides.” The use of UNIFIL and UNSCOL together may contribute to the impact of that narrative.

4. Money Helps Diplomacy Walk the Talk

One of the most crucial decisions of the UN was to channel the enormous funds of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan towards vulnerable communities, rather than just Syrian refugees. This created a tangible benefit to Lebanon, bolstering the overall economy and injecting cash into the Lebanese communities most likely to feel the impact of the Syria crisis. And the above case provides some evidence that political messaging plus money can play a role in de-escalating tensions and pushing Lebanese leaders to take less dangerous decisions than they would have done otherwise.

However, there are limits to the ability of funds to offset the deepening resentment and fears in many Lebanese communities. SCL Plumbly in fact suggested that the money “wasn’t enough or fast enough to curb the rhetoric” of the harder line Lebanese politicians. And even in late 2017, very local incidents have given rise to collective expulsion of refugees from Lebanese towns, and calls by some Lebanese leaders for the forcible removal of refugees from Lebanon entirely.

In fact, the sense of desperation among both the Lebanese and Syrian communities may be worsening, as the war in Syria appears to have no viable political process, and thus no realistic prospect that the refugees will be able to return home soon. “The lack of a peace process in Syria is what is driving the risks of conflict against the refugee population in Lebanon, they all need a sense that at some point the Syrians will be able to go home.” In this respect, massive funding to Lebanon cuts both ways: it alleviates some of the immediate pressures on the Lebanese communities, but it may also contribute to a feeling that the Syrian refugee presence may become permanent. Managing the messaging around the
relief effort is thus one of the most important challenges for the political leadership of the UN in a country like Lebanon.

5. Flexible Interpretations of Political Mandates: The Importance of Space to Innovate

“We succeeded in turning 1701 into everything related to Lebanon’s stability.” The ability to flexibly interpret the UN’s mandate in Lebanon has been a key to achieving leverage and relevance at some of the riskiest moments over the past six years. Whereas resolution 1701 was largely set up in the aftermath of the Israel/Lebanon war to manage risks across the Blue Line, the overflow of the Syria conflict meant that the UN increasingly interpreted the mandate to address a much broader set of issues related to Lebanon’s stability and security, and tried to position itself to have impact on some of the deeper issues of governance and state authority underlying the risks to the country. From the establishment of the International Support Group for Lebanon, to convening ministerial meetings in support of the Lebanese Army, to more recent efforts to build a broader Integrated Strategic Framework with the Government, “it is about using the mandate to gain entry and leverage with the key actors, being active and creating positive reference points.” In all of the above crisis moments, the willingness of the UN leadership in country to look beyond the strict letter of the Security Council mandate and try to support its underlying intention seemed central.

To foster this flexibility, SCL Kaag has referred to positive, empowering role played by UNHQ, which she described as “being supportive and available, but giving us scope to do our work without micromanagement.” Both former SCLs interviewed stressed the positive impact of having a USG of DPA who was intimately familiar with the Middle East, capable of providing insight and guidance when needed, but also comfortable in allowing the political mission to innovate and act entrepreneurially with the mandate on the ground. In fact, the common element to all of the above successful moments for the UN in Lebanon has been creativity, the ability to see when a small opportunity presents itself to help push the conflict actors away from the brink.
The author of this case study was serving with the UN Special Coordinator's Office for Lebanon (UNSCOL) from March 2012 through December 2015, and has also drawn on notes from this period.

While not strictly a case of preventive diplomacy, the story of the Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon is perhaps the most critical in terms of Lebanon's risk profile during the past six years. Every interlocutor during the field visit to Lebanon stressed the importance of the Syrian refugee question when discussing the risk profile of the country. The extent to which the UN was able to address the immediate needs of the Syrian refugees, while also allaying widespread fears amongst the Lebanese communities, is integral to the UN's politically-led efforts to prevent conflict in Lebanon.


Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, 2015, available at: data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=10181. Even before the Syria crisis, Lebanon was still recovering from the 2006 war, and suffered high unemployment, poor infrastructure, and an economy largely dependent upon tourism from the Gulf countries.


Hizbullah is an Iranian-sponsored Shia group founded during the Lebanese civil war in the 1980s. Its original purpose was to expel Israeli forces from South Lebanon, and to defend Lebanon from Israel. Particularly following the 2000 Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, Hizbullah has built a powerful arsenal, both in South Lebanon but also in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon. As early as 1992, Hizbullah has also developed a political platform, running in local and national elections, and forming alliances with Shia and Christian parties. During the period covered by this case study, Hizbullah was a member of government (both Mikati's and Salam's).

NB: there are widespread reports of other Lebanese actors’ involvement in the conflict in Syria as well. See, e.g. http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/02/lebanese-sunnis-fighting-holy-war-syria-201421394828913798.html


The Blue Line between Lebanon and Israel is a temporary marker put in place in 2000 by the UN to measure the withdrawal of Israel Defense Forces from southern Lebanon. The unresolved areas of the Blue Line—most notably the Israeli-occupied town of Ghajar and the disputed Sheba’a Farms, which extends into the un-demarcated border area between Lebanon, Syria and Israel—have served as a constant reference point for Hizbullah’s claim of Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory. The land just north of the Blue Line in Lebanon, a Shia-dominated area considered the heartland of Hizbullah, has also served as the staging ground for Hizbullah’s actions into Israel. Israel asserts that the area is home to large numbers of Hizbullah’s weapons. The Blue Line is thus the most likely area for potential escalation between Hizbullah and Israel.

This report was drafted immediately before PM Hariri’s surprise resignation and exit from Lebanon. Where possible, updates reflecting this dynamic have been inserted, but this new phase of Lebanon’s political landscape is not thoroughly considered here.


Some interlocutors, including with UNSCOL, suggested that there was an unspoken agreement amongst key regional players to keep Lebanon “frozen” during the Syria crisis. As evidence of this, they point to the current upheavals—the resignation of PM Hariri—as indicative of a “thawing,” which could pose immediate risks to the country’s stability.
17 Interview with Office of Prime Minister Hariri, 4 October 2017.
18 Interview with Office of Prime Minister Hariri, 4 October 2017; interview with Professor Karim Makdisi, American University of Beirut, 3 October 2017, Beirut. Many Lebanese interlocutors, even those deeply opposed to Hizbullah, acknowledge that the group’s preponderant presence in Lebanon and proven willingness to use force to achieve objectives has at times prevented an escalation of conflict in the country. In the case of the assassination of Wissam al Hassan, for example, one 14 March official said the street protests were contained “because we were all scared of Hizbullah.” This, while also pointing to Hizbullah as the culprit in the assassination. And in the case of the crisis in Arsal, there is a widespread view that Hizbullah played a key role in preventing the extremist groups from spreading further into Lebanon. Even in the crisis moments along the Blue Line, the UN and others have frequently cited Hizbullah’s desire to avoid open conflict with Israel as a key factor in avoiding escalation. Interviews in Beirut, 3-8 October, 2017.
19 Resolution 1706 (2006) enlarged UNIFIL’s mandate and troop levels beyond those of earlier resolutions (425 and 426).
20 In a letter to the Lebanese Prime Minister on 08 February 2007, the United Nations Secretary General announced his intention to appoint a Special Coordinator for Lebanon. The position was originally established in the year 2000, based on the Secretary-General’s report to the Security Council, dated 20 July 2000 (S/2000/718) which expressed the intention to appoint a senior official to be based in Beirut to help coordinate United Nations activities with regard to Southern Lebanon. Subsequently, the title of the post was changed to Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for Lebanon and then to Special Coordinator for Lebanon. In his letter, the Secretary General mandates his Special Coordinator to represent him on all political and coordination aspects of the work of the United Nations in Lebanon.
24 Though some commentators have also pointed to the possibility that he had mixed allegiances, including possible ties to the Hariri assassination itself. See, see e.g., https://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/22/the-many-faces-of-wissam-al-hassan/?mcubz=1; see also, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/19/lebanon-divide-assassination-security-chief.
26 Interviews with 14 March officials 3-5 October, 2017.
28 Ibid, para 11.
30 Prime Minister Mikati was not strictly aligned with Damascus he was a member of the 8 March political bloc, and he was seen by 14 March as sympathetic to Assad. Interview with PM Hariri’s office, 5 October 2017; http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/21/world/meast/lebanon-beirut-violence/index.html.
31 S/2012/837, para 60.
32 S/2012/837, para 11.
33 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017.
34 S/2012/837, para 11.
36 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017; interview with 14 March official, Beirut, 3 October 2017.
37 UNSCOL highlighted the importance of a balanced analysis of the risks of escalation here, noting that the 14 March protests were one factor, but that the assassination itself demonstrated a willingness of pro-Assad elements to take a destabilizing course of action.
39 In fact, 14 March considers this a deeply negative outcome for Lebanon in the long term. One 14 March senior official who was involved in the process said, “the worst thing that happened was the UN saving the Mikati government; it led to Hariri leaving and the lack of a government’s approach to refugees.” Interview in Beirut, 3 October 2017.
40 Author’s notes, November 2012.
41 Interview with 14 March official, Beirut, 3 October 2017; this point also supported by interview with UNSCOL, 4 October, 2017.
Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017. It is worth noting here for background that in 2008, following a 17-month political crisis and widespread sit-ins across the country, the government moved to shut down Hizballah’s control of the telecommunications network, and remove its presence at the airport and environs. This sparked violent conflict in the streets of Beirut, as pro-Hizbullah groups occupied parts of West Beirut, during which at least 11 people were killed. Violence spread well beyond Beirut as well, and was only contained by the army after several days of open fighting. The Doha Agreement that followed was considered a victory for Hizbullah and its allies, as it provided for a veto-power for opposition in government, and an electoral law seen by many to favor 8 March.

Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017. Indeed UNSCOL faced harsh criticism from the 14 March leadership on this count. Author’s notes from October to November 2012, in which repeated meetings with 14 March officials included reference to the UN/P-5 statement in support of the Mikati government.

In all interviews with UNSCOL and DPA staff, USG Feltman’s deep experience in the region was cited as an extremely valuable and important resource for UNSCOL’s work in Lebanon.

Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017.


Interview with 14 March official, Beirut, 3 October, 2017; interview with UNSCOL staff, Beirut, 5 October 2017.

Interview with 14 March official, 3 October, 2017; also supported in interview with office of Prime Minister Hariri, 4 October, 2017.

Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017; author’s notes from November 2012 (recording meeting with P-5 ambassadors in which there was general agreement that a serious situation had been averted by the Mikati government staying on).

NB: The author travelled to Israel throughout 2012-2015 as an UNSCOL official and was present for dozens of meetings with Israeli officials during which many of the country’s concerns and positions were privately described in detail. For the purposes of this report, only those positions that were also made public by the Israeli government are provided.

UNIFIL’s tripartite mechanism is a structure whereby UNIFIL convenes Israeli and Lebanese military officials in UNIFIL’s premises along the Blue Line. UNIFIL convenes these meetings on a regular basis to try to move forward on Blue Line demarcation, resolve the occupation of the town of Ghajar, address Blue Line violations and other related issues. UNIFIL also convenes the tripartite in an ad hoc fashion to address particular incidents along the Blue Line.

Another example was the August 2010 killing of an Israeli officer during a dispute over a tree cutting process being undertaken by the IDF, which resulted in severe retaliatory fire by the IDF and the death of three Lebanese soldiers. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/04/lebanon-israel-tree-border-clash.

“Tell me, if I had known on July 11... that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not.” https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/aug/28/syria.israel.


Hizbullah’s public statements matched these deployments, from the early 2012 announcement that the group was merely defending Lebanese interests along the border areas, to the 2013 pronouncement by Hassan Nasrallah that Hizbullah was fully and actively engaged in supporting Assad’s broader fight in Syria. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/world/middleeast/syrian-army-and-hezbollah-step-up-raids-on-rebels.html?mcubz=3; http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/hassan-nasrallah-speech-hezbollah-syria.html.


Nick Blanford interview 4 October 2017.


Interview with Nick Blanford, Christian Science Monitor, 4 October 2017.

In fact, the Israeli airstrike itself may have been a miscalculation, as there were immediately rumours that Israel had been unaware of the presence of the Iranian official in the convoy. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/20/israel-
unaware-killed-iranian-general-hezbollah-convoy-syria.

64 S/2015/147, para 2.
65 Ibid.
66 Interview, UNIFIL, 3 October 2017, Beirut; interview Nicholas Blanford, 4 October 2014 (“we all thought that what happens in Syria stays in Syria, and that Hezbollah would only retaliate from the Golan since the Israeli strikes were there”).
67 Though it is worth flagging that the attack took place in the disputed Sheb’a Farms area, which Hezbollah has consistently argued is part of Lebanon. UNSCOL noted that the decision to attack from Sheb’a could also be viewed as reasserting the rules of the game, to avoid opening a new Syrian front with Israel.
68 Interview, UNIFIL, 3 October 2017, Beirut.
69 Author’s notes, 27 January 2015.
70 Author’s notes, June 2015.
71 Ibid.
72 Interview, UNIFIL, 3 October 2017, Beirut.
73 Ibid.
74 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017; also Interview, UNIFIL, 3 October 2017, Beirut.
75 It is worth emphasizing that Hezbollah is not a “party” to 1701 per se, but in the lead up to resolution 1701 the Lebanese political leadership consulted Hezbollah given the critical importance of their buy-in to the mandate.
76 Though UNSCOL also pointed out that this universal acceptance of 1701 has allowed for selective interpretation of what is important within the resolution, and when it is violated, potentially undermining its ability to deliver on the mandate.
77 Hezbollah (and to a lesser extent the Lebanese government) has in the past indicated that attacks in the Shab’a Farms area do not constitute Blue Line violations, as Shab’a is not demarcated. While the UN disputes this openly, and it clearly is a violation of 1701 to attack across Shab’a area, the ambiguity about the Shab’a Farms may offer a sort of safety valve for Hezbollah to justify its actions across the Blue Line without facing too much domestic backlash.
78 Interview, UNIFIL, 3 October 2017, Beirut.
79 Interview, UNIFIL, 3 October 2017, Beirut. Interview with Professor Karim Makdisi, American University of Beirut, 3 October 2017, Beirut.
80 Interview with Prime Minister Hariri’s office, 4 October 2017. This quote echoed elsewhere. See, e.g. Interview with Professor Karim Makdisi, American University of Beirut, 3 October 2017, Beirut (UNIFIL has played an important justification for not escalating”).
81 Interview with former Chief Political UNSCOL, 28 September 2017 (UNIFIL is the “largest, best armed human shield in the world”); interview with Professor Karim Makdisi, American University of Beirut, 3 October 2017, Beirut (UNIFIL plays an “important human shield function”).
84 S/2014/130 (26 February 2014) para 3.
86 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017 (“The really bad period was when they were fighting in Qusayr, Hezbollah, this could spread within Lebanon. The spectacle of Hz breaking with disassociation, going across the border, with communities linked across the border.”).
90 There is a common understanding amongst the Lebanese political leadership that, absent a president, the Prime Minister government will only take major decisions by consensus.
91 Interview, Beirut, 4 October, 2017. Author’s notes from September 2014.
In fact the LAF, according to many reports, has subsequently coordinated with Hizbullah to push the extremist groups out of the mountains surrounding Arsal, and in the summer of 2017 Hizbullah launched its own attacks unilaterally in the Arsal area. Blanford, Nicholas, “The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah’s Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants,” Combating Terrorism Center, available at, https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunny-militants.

In the past the LAF, according to many reports, has subsequently coordinated with Hizbullah to push the extremist groups out of the mountains surrounding Arsal, and in the summer of 2017 Hizbullah launched its own attacks unilaterally in the Arsal area. Blanford, Nicholas, “The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah’s Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants,” Combating Terrorism Center, available at, https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunny-militants.

UNSCOL pointed to the LAF operations in 2017, which were done in coordination with Hizbullah in an increasingly open fashion, as additional evidence of the complexity of the issue, and in making definitive statements about the impact of UN messaging.

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Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017. Though not covered in this report, the ability of the LAF to deploy to Tripoli, where successive rounds of violence have caused hundreds of deaths in the past six years, was also very important in this context.

The presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is a threat that is real and actual toward to society and [the country in general];... it is an existential threat”). Even this year, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri has warned that Lebanon was close to a “breaking point” from the impact of the Syrian refugees in the country available at http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-lebanon-idINKBN1722JK. See also, Shashank Joshi, “Lebanon risks being torn apart by Syrian conflict,” NBC News, 24 October 2012, available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world/middle-east-20054560; see also, http://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/spillovers-syrian-crisis-stretching-lebanon-breaking-point.

For example, during the field visit a rape of a Lebanese woman, allegedly by a Syrian national, was characterized by political actors interviewed as “proof that they are all dangerous,” and “exactly the reason why they all need to be sent home as soon as possible, regardless of whether it’s voluntary.” Interviews, Beirut, 3-4 October 2017. See also, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/all-lebanon-is-against-them-a-rape-murder-sours-a-country-on-its-syrian-refugees/2017/10/10/afa13010-a792-11e7-9a98-07140d2eed02_story.html?utm_term=.4b0a2afa59c5.

Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017. This view was repeated by several Lebanese politicians and is described here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/all-lebanon-is-against-them-a-rape-murder-sours-a-country-on-its-syrian-refugees/2017/10/10/afa13010-a792-11e7-9a98-07140d2eed02_story.html?utm_term=.4b0a2afa59c5.

Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020, available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2017_2020 LCRP ENG-1.pdf. Note that number has receded in recent year because of border controls etc.


In interviews with Lebanese politicians in Beirut, there was a consistent talking point that the refugees were the cause of the 1.3 billion dollar economic downturn, and that the refugee population had created both the GDP losses and the high unemployment rates.


For example by misusing increased crime rates due to the rise in arrests of Syrians who do not possess the correct papers, or using intra-Syrian crime rates to show increased risk to Lebanese citizens. International Alert, Security Threat Perceptions in Lebanon, 2014, available at…; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/30/i-interviewed-300-syrian-refugees-they-are-far-from-a-security-threat/?utm_term=.37481c1299ed. See also, ARK Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon Wave II: Interim Results [draft, on file with author].

Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017.

ARK Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon Wave II: Interim Results.


Impact of Humanitarian Aid on the Lebanese Economy, UNHCR, 2015.

Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017.

Interview with UNDP, 5 October 2017.

Interview with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 6 September 2017.

Interview with former Chief Political UNSCOL, 28 September 2017.

Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017.

Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017. Following the initial drafting of this report, UNHCR reportedly initiated another public information campaign, including by outreach to key international stakeholders. The impact of this campaign is yet to be measured.

Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017.

Interview with UK embassy, 4 October 2017 (“the massive funding by the LCRP did help to curb the political rhetoric against the refugees”); Interview with UNDP, 5 October 2017 (“the tangible benefits through the LCRP allowed for more constructive political messaging by the leadership in Lebanon”); Interview with DSCL/RC/HC, 3 October 2017 (“The LCRP has succeeded in being seen as support not just for refugees, but for all Lebanon; this has helped the overall atmosphere”);

Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017.


Author’s meetings with Israeli officials in 2015.

Author’s meetings with Israeli officials in 2015. It should be noted that the Israeli private perspectives matches the public statements of Israel. See, e.g. http://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-missiles-can-now-hit-anywhere-in-israel/?fb_
146 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017.
147 For example, Hizbullah's public support for the LAF's deployment to Arsal in the above example.
148 Indeed, during the field visit to Lebanon, a recurrent fear expressed by experts was that the US administration had
emboldened Israel to take a proactive stance in Hizbullah as part of a more general effort to curb Iran's influence in the
region. This is well beyond the scope of this paper, but is flagged as an indication of the continuing risks.
149 Interview with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 6 September 2017.
150 See the Policy Paper section referring to the “escalatory dynamics of conflict.”
152 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017.
153 Ibid.
University Center on International Cooperation, July 2010.
155 Interview with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 6 September 2017.
156 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017. Interview with UN Special Coordinator
for Lebanon, 6 September 2017.
160 However, there may be diminishing returns on this personal leverage: both Special Coordinators who served during the
Syria crisis noted that, after roughly three years, “the trust and knowledge we build over time can erode, and we need to
think of refreshing the relationships with a transition to keep the leverage going.” Interview with UN Special Coordinator
for Lebanon, 6 September 2017. Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017.
161 These terms were the most commonly used in interviews in Beirut, and also with the former Special Coordinator for
Lebanon.
162 In fact, the attempts to encourage Saudi Arabia and Iran into the periphery of the ISG were unsuccessful.
163 Interview with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 6 September 2017.
164 UNDOF provides one such example, though the political work of UNSCO alongside it appears far less connected to the
day to day issues as the UNIFIL/UNSCOL relationship.
165 Interview with former Chief Political UNSCOL, 28 September 2017 (“I think there was opportunity for the UN to play
a substantially larger role. But for that opportunity to have been more effective, the political department of UNIFIL
should have been under UNSCOL. UNSCOL should have been in charge of everything UNIFIL did, would have given us
much greater leverage”). Other interviews with UN staff in Beirut pointed to a “cognitive dissonance” between the two
missions, and an incompatibility between the immediate goals of UNIFIL along the Blue Line and the need for the UN as
a whole to address the deeper issues of stability in the country, including those related to Hizbullah's arms.
166 Interview, UNIFIL, 3 October 2017, Beirut.
167 There are unconfirmed reports that informal and indirect channels are open, though these are not necessarily conducive
to the kind of de-escalation described in this paper.
168 Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017.
169 Interview with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 6 September 2017.
170 It should also be noted that there has been an envoy tasked with resolution 1559, more directly tasked with reporting on
Hizbullah, and with a tendency to speak more openly about Hizbullah's arms. While this is part of the political messaging
of the UN, it did not appear to play a major role in the UN's preventive diplomatic efforts in the cases described in this
report, and has thus not been included in any detail.
171 Interview with UNHCR, 3 October 2017.
172 Interview with former UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 28 September 2017.
173 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/all-lebanon-is-against-them-a-rape-murder-sours-a-country-onits-syrian-refugees/2017/10/10/afa13010-a792-11e7-9a98-07140d2eed02_story.html?utm_term=.4b0a2afa59c5
174 Interview with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 6 September 2017.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.