

MEETING TRANSCRIPT

BRINGING PEACE TO ISRAEL-LEBANON BORDER

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Güven Sak: We have Joost here one more time. Bringing peace to the Israel-Lebanon border is our topic today. Hiltermann is the Middle East Project Director of the International Crisis Group. The new ICG Report on this subject will be published next week. Today, we are going to listen to his impressions after his recent return from the region.

Joost Hiltermann: I spent some time recently in both Israel and Palestine and spoke with the officials as well as independent experts. I had useful impressions. I will summarize what we will see in the upcoming ICG report on bringing peace to the Israel-Lebanon border. In Lebanon, most people ask: Who won? Who lost? It is a difficult question to answer. It is very much a subjective issue. In Israel, there is a soul searching debate on why Israel lost, even as Israeli officials were declaring that Israel had won. Nasrallah also gave a victory speech. But also, there is a widespread sense that Lebanon as a country lost given the damage that was done. Most of this damage is in the South in particular. There are different ways of looking to it. Militarily, the battle was a draw and neither side won. Politically, Israel may actually have gained something while Hezbollah had lost something. But then, you can look at the Arab and Muslim worlds and there, Hezbollah has a very high standing right now and Nasrallah is seen as an Arab leader rather than a Shiite militia leader in Lebanon. Hezbollah can build on that. But it is also true that in Lebanon, Hezbollah had fought a fight, he prevented an Israeli military victory. He is recognized for that. But at the same time, he brought on that fight and therefore is also accused very openly for bringing this to the Lebanese people and Lebanese economy in particular. There is now a major damage that needs to be repaired in terms of infrastructure, housing etc. One of the principal casualties in Lebanon in addition to more than 1000 civilians who were killed and many others injured, was the damage to the confidence of the Lebanese. Here is a country that recovered 16 years after the civil war, which lasted around 15 years. As any visitor to Lebanon can tell, there was real hope, a lot of reconstruction, lot of business interest. There were lots of Lebanese businessmen in exile who would not come back fearing that all of this was still very fragile. And now this war proved them right and this war was very fragile and it has collapsed again. Now who is going to come back to Lebanon again thinking that in five years time or within the foreseeable future, there will be another round of fighting? Lebanon is now only facing physical damage, but also is being faced the fear of not being rebuilt economically in the same way that it has been rebuilt in the past 15 years. This is very dramatic impact for the Lebanese.

On the Israeli side, there is a keen sense that Israelis have lost their deterrent power. In the past, they were able to defeat the Arab regimes or resistance movements like the PLO. They have had very effectively and militarily defeated them. This time, they could not defeat Hezbollah. They could not even facilitate the release of the two abducted soldiers. They failed in every single goal that they publicly announced for the war in Lebanon. They are not sure now what to do next. I would say that in both sides, we have a realization (on the Israeli side about Israeli power, on the other side about the Hezbollah power) about the limitations of that power. This is going to create an opportunity in the near future to stabilize the situation in Lebanon on the border. We have one point of common ground that both sides are aware that they cannot achieve their objectives by military means. We also have two important areas of consensus. The first area of consensus is that all parties agree that UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces should be deployed fully in the South. Hezbollah, Israel, international committee agrees, Lebanese government agrees and it is happening. Already we have more than 5000 UN forces on the ground of major European countries. We have European ships in the Mediterranean patrolling the coast. We have already 10,000 Lebanese armed forces deployed in the South. These numbers will go up to 10,000 in the case of UNIFIL. It can go up to 15,000 but nobody accepts that to happen. Most probably, it would be some number around 10,000- 12,000 at most. It will most probably be 15,000 in terms of Lebanese armed forces. This is a huge deployment given the small area that we are talking about. It is going to be a very big ratio between the military and civilian in the area. Everybody has agreed to that and that's why it has happened very smoothly without any problem. Nobody has resisted the arrival of these military forces in Southern Lebanon.

The second area of consensus is that all sides agree that one of the core problems of the conflict is the weakness of the Lebanese state and the way to solve that is to build up the capacity of the Lebanese state. In the first instance, that means to strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces. Again, Hezbollah supports this. Israel made this a precondition. International committee has also said yes to it but now has to show that it would really do something by providing the necessary equipment and training. The Lebanese Army is very poorly equipped. As an example, both vehicles that we used during my visit to Lebanon broke down during one short afternoon tour. They need to be helped as Timur Goksel, head of UNIFIL there, told that the Lebanese army is the only national institution that Lebanon has. People in the South would like to respect it. But how can they respect an army that does not even have tents or sleeping bags; that has to be transported in small busses because it does not have transport carriers and that does not have weapons to defend itself? This is the situation of the Lebanese army today. It has been kept weak by Syria. There is a long history to this. But now, this is changing. It is changing to the point that people are talking about using the Lebanese army for what it was originally intended: To protect the borders, the territory and sovereignty of Lebanon. In the past, until today, Lebanese army was instead used for internal policing, to keep public order. This is not really what an army is meant to do. Now, we may be able to see a transformation of the Lebanese army towards a real army and the emergence of internal security forces that are properly trained to do that job, but they also would need the help of the international community,

In any case, because of these points of consensus, the international community now has a real opportunity to bring change. They would have to do more than to send troops. The reason is because the issue that is a part of all of this, we can go root causes of Palestinian-Israeli, Arab-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli conflict, these need to be resolved to bring long-term peace also to the Lebanese. But there are intermediate causes that will continue to create problems as long as these basic causes are not addressed. The International Crisis Group launched an initiative to kick-start the international effort of the Peace Process. We are working on that front. This will be a very tough battle and will take a while. For this reason, we should look for also solutions to intermediate problems.

In the case of the Israel-Lebanon border, we know what is needed. We also have consensus and commitment to bring it about. But there are booby traps in bringing this about. The main problem for the Israelis and the Lebanese is that Hezbollah is so heavily armed. It is much more powerful than the Lebanese army or the Lebanese state. If you go to Lebanon, it is not just the military wing of Hezbollah that is impressive, but they are also the first ones out there to provide services. During the war, they had water trucks, delivering water to displaced people, almost on the first day. Immediately after the War, they moved to the South making surveys of the damage and started providing money to the people displaced. We could only dream of the Lebanese army doing this. Hezbollah was there in day one doing this in a very efficient way and in a completely non-corrupt way.

If you want to strengthen the Lebanese state, you have to keep in mind that the people have some respect for Hezbollah for various reasons: It is an accountable movement, a grassroots political movement that actually brings benefits to people. But at the same time, it is a problem because it is not the government. It is a non-state actor, a resistance movement in its own words. It has been a resistance movement in its own words because it has had to defend Lebanese territory especially in the South where Shiites predominate against Israeli attacks. As long as there is the threat of Israeli attacks, or as long as there is an Israeli occupation of the Lebanese land, Hezbollah would say it would need to keep its weapons. Once the situation has changed, Hezbollah has said it does not need its weapons. We have to hold Hezbollah to its word, but we can only do it if the situation is actually changed on the ground, which means building up the viable Lebanese armed forces that can replace Hezbollah and to solve the outstanding issues.

Hezbollah has two aims in its words: One is liberation of occupied Lebanese land, other is protection. Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon (Israel would say all of Lebanon, Hezbollah would say most of Lebanon) in 2000. But it did not leave an uninhabited small area called the Sheba Farms that is on the slopes of the Golan Heights. Israel says that this territory belongs to Syria and is part of the Golan Heights. The whole issue of Golan Heights will be resolved as part of any peace negotiations between Israel and Syria. On the other hand, Lebanon and also Syria had said that Sheba Farms do not belong to Syria, belongs to Lebanon and therefore should have been vacated when Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. This is a dispute and it needs to be settled. As long as Israeli forces are in Sheba farms, Hezbollah will have the chance to say that it is still working towards the liberation of the Lebanese territory. The other side of Hezbollah's

work in its own words is the protection of Lebanon. Here it means to protect the Shiite population in the South from Israeli attack. We have already seen that Hezbollah could not protect that same Shiite population of Southern Lebanon from Israeli attack. Israel did attack and caused a huge amount of damage in the South. Hezbollah would not admit this and would instead say: They could not defeat us, therefore our weapons were useful. We fought them to a standstill and therefore, we need to keep the weapons in order to be able to do that again. In fact, we were so successful at stopping Israel that they know that they cannot try this again. Politically they would again not accomplish their goals and politically, they cannot afford this. They say then that their weapons worked.

The booby traps come when we look at the Resolution that brought the cessation of the hostilities. It was not a ceasefire. It was a cessation of hostilities. It came into effect August 14th. It was accepted by all parties mainly, Israel, Lebanon, Hezbollah, and of course the international community. The Resolution first of all orders a cessation of hostilities and this happened. Secondly, it ordered the deployment the UNIFIL and Lebanese Armed Forces in Southern Lebanon , that also is in the process of taking place but we have seen significant action to that regard. Then, it did two things. It called for the disarmament of Hezbollah and any other armed movements other than the government of Lebanon or UNIFIL in Lebanon. Secondly, it imposed an arms embargo on Lebanon except for the arms aimed for the government or UNIFIL.

Now, the Israelis are frustrated because their main aim was to disarm Hezbollah. They want to disarm Hezbollah through Resolution 1701. But there are conflict interpretations of what Resolution 1701 says. It talks about the need to disarm movements in non-state actors in Lebanon in the context of a permanent solution to the conflict in Lebanon. It talks about establishing a zone free of weapons and armed forces south of the Litani river in Southern Lebanon. It talks about this in the context of a permanent solution to the conflict in Lebanon. So now, I discovered talking to various parties that there are widely different interpretations of what this means. I found for example that the Lebanese government and armed forces interpret Res. 1701 to say that if we see any armed fighters walking around in Southern Lebanon, we should disarm them. And in fact, the Lebanese government has made a deal with Hezbollah that explicitly agrees to this. In the past month, this has happened in five to six instances, when Lebanese armed forces found weapons and they confiscated them and put them in storage. Hezbollah finds this as acceptable and this is also the limit of what they would accept.

The Israeli government by contrast says that the Res. 1701 orders the disarmament of Hezbollah. The Lebanese army and UNIFIL should go after any arms found or present in Southern Lebanon in order to create this zone free of armed fighters. This means that they should be aggressive in their efforts to disarm the region. The UN has a different interpretation and this is not very helpful. I have heard two interpretations. One that if UNIFIL receives intelligence on someone that there are arms in a certain location or some arms are being transported, they would then give that intelligence to the Liaison Office in the Lebanese Armed Forces. In turn, they would accept the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to do something about it, namely to locate it, to confiscate it and solve the problem. If the LAF want the help of the UN, they can ask for help and then UNIFIL

would give assistance. Res. 1701 says UNIFIL is there to assist the LAF in the task of disarmament of Hezbollah. But the question is what if the LAF do not act on this intelligence. We already know that LAF say they do not go after the things they do not see. This is a problem. In the version heard from the UN, they say if the LAF do not ask for assistance and if they do not act on the intelligence, then they would act. The other interpretation is that the UN is not mandated under Resolution 1701 to do that. It talks about disarmament but it talks about it in the context of an overall solution and it is a process. The only way to bring about a successful conclusion to the process is to have it be a part of the eternal political dialogue in Lebanon which started after 2000 and is continuing, which sees the emergence of the Hezbollah as a political actor, more than a military actor.

The booby traps come when Israelis see weapons somewhere in the South or being shipped across the border between Syria and Lebanon or coming from the Mediterranean but that would be difficult with all these foreign patrol ships coming. They could have intelligence of certain movements of arms in some parts of Lebanon. They can pass that initially to UNIFIL. Israelis told that we pass that info, but if UNIFIL does not act, then we will have to act unilaterally meaning they can bomb, go into the country or take any kind of military action. If that happens, then we are back at where we were before because it is a possible escalation of the conflict over the issue of Hezbollah's power in the South. Ehud Barak withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. He is now being blamed for having left Lebanon and allowing Hezbollah building up to be such a powerful actor that it could fight Israel to a standstill in the recent conflict. Israelis had intelligence on what Hezbollah had but not on everything what they had. The Israelis discovered bunkers that they did not know existed. They were quite extensive, even going underneath UNIFIL positions and very well equipped. Hezbollah was able to build this up over time.

Res. 1701 talks about disarmament south of the Litani river, but what about the North of the Litani River? If you go to the east in the north of the Litani River, you are sometimes even closer to the Israeli border compared to the South of the river. The Hezbollah could put rockets there. Who would stop them? The real threat is that Israelis are so frustrated for not establishing their goals that they would put pressure on the international committee and UNIFIL to act against Hezbollah each time they have intelligence that arms are being removed either internally or from Syria. The moment that happens, Hezbollah will fight back. They can. Not because that they have appetite at this point to provoke conflict. But they will act in reaction to any military pressure. Then we could have a resignation of the conflict. The way Hezbollah and the Lebanese government and to some extent UN see the solution is to gradually build up the Lebanese armed forces and make the possession by Hezbollah of the weapons irrelevant. The solution is seen as to obviate the need for Hezbollah in having these weapons. This process will take a while. The solution to the overall conflict is to be able to show progress in the disarmament of Hezbollah. That would have to happen by certain benchmarks. One would be the full deployment of the Lebanese army in the South and the equipment and training of the Lebanese armed forces in the South. Another one would be no evidence what so ever of arms shipments entering the country or going to the South. Only if you can show that kind of progress, Israelis would feel reassured that they will not face the

same problems that they had faced in the past. That said, for the first time since 2000, there are no longer Hezbollah fighters right on the border. To the Israelis psychologically, this is a very big step forward.

There is the potential for intermediate solutions to the conflict. We need to create the conditions for this to move forward. We need to work on the overall context on the reinvigoration of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.