

Testing Received Wisdom

PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY IN SOUTHERN LEBANON

The people of Southern Lebanon have survived protracted sectarian conflict, Israeli occupation, and, in mid-2006, a devastating war. The 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel killed approximately 1,000 people in Southern Lebanon, decimated its infrastructure, and led to the displacement of an estimated one million people in both countries. It also illustrated the region's continuing volatility.

Although many have written about the situation in Southern Lebanon, a number of questions remain unanswered. Namely, in the wake of the 2006 war, how do the people of Southern Lebanon feel about their security? Whom do they look to for protection against local and external threats? Which political parties do they support? How many households own weapons, and what are their views on arms control, including the regulation of non-state armed groups?

This chapter presents the results of a household survey conducted in Southern Lebanon in March–May 2008 to explore these and other questions. It begins by outlining key elements of the history that led to the 2006 war, describing the central players and principal dynamics of that conflict. It then presents the findings of the Southern Lebanon Armed Violence Assessment, devoting particular attention to those relating to insecurity during and after the 2006 war, attitudes towards security provision, party affiliation, and gun ownership and control. Its key findings include the following:

- Some 1,000 people were killed and 5,800 injured in Southern Lebanon as a direct result of the 2006 war, while combat activity resulted in the damaging or destruction of approximately 69,000 homes in this area.
- The people of the south, whatever their political affiliations, express strong support for state security institutions, with the Lebanese army and police consistently cited as preferred security providers.
- Less than a quarter of the population believes that expanding the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) on the border with Israel would enhance community safety.
- Although it is often assumed that Hizbollah is broadly popular among southerners, it appears that support for non-state armed groups in general—and Hizbollah in particular—is at least partially overestimated.
- The extent of civilian firearm ownership in Southern Lebanon is unknown but is probably much higher than that captured in survey responses. There is also evidence that arms flows to non-state groups such as Hizbollah continue despite a 2006 UN Security Council arms embargo.
- There is significant support among the people of Southern Lebanon for government control of civilian weapons ownership, as well as the outlawing of armed militias; those who back opposition parties, such as Hizbollah, are much less likely to favour such initiatives.

The Southern Lebanon Assessment reveals that the opinions and experiences of the people of the region are somewhat more diverse than previously assumed. Notwithstanding widely held beliefs about the popularity of non-state armed groups among the people of the south, the study concludes that the support enjoyed by these actors, most importantly Hizbollah, is probably overestimated. The extent of the party's influence over the social, economic, and political life of Southern Lebanon should not be underestimated, but it cannot be assumed that its actions reflect the will of most southerners.

The people of Southern Lebanon express strong support for state security institutions.

While survey respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with their quality of life and sense of personal safety in May 2008, as a group they were cautious on the question of government gun control, including the prohibition of non-state militias. Many pro-government and non-aligned respondents said they supported such measures; among adherents of opposition parties, including Hizbollah, this was more exceptional. These contrasting views on weapons regulation underline a critical fact of Lebanese life, namely that the country remains prey to political instability. Until the root causes of political violence are addressed, many in Southern Lebanon appear reluctant to submit their weapons to governmental control.

Table 10.1 Security and gun control: responses

Question	Response	Party supporters	Non-party supporters	Total*
First person you address/call if an important asset of yours is robbed.	Police	82.4%	68.2%	73.6%
	Other	17.0%	31.8%	26.1%
First person you address/call if someone threatened to hurt or kill you.	Police	85.4%	92.7%	89.9%
	Other	14.0%	7.2%	9.8%
First person you address/call if someone threatened to hurt or kill you.	Community elders	13.0%	1.8%	6.1%
	Other	86.4%	98.1%	93.6%
Ideally, who do you think should be responsible for security?	Army	89.9%	92.4%	91.5%
	Other	6.3%	4.3%	5.0%
Are you for or against stricter government control on civilian weapons?*	For	16.1%	41.7%	33.2%
	Against	34.7%	29.4%	31.2%
Improving the capacity of police/security services would make my community safer.	Agree	88.3%	90.6%	89.7%
	Disagree	0.6%	0.4%	0.5%
Increased UN presence monitoring the border with Israel would make my community safer.	Agree	8.3%	32.7%	23.6%
	Disagree	63.5%	38.4%	47.7%
If Palestinian refugees left Lebanon, it would make my community safer.	Agree	37.5%	67.3%	56.5%
	Disagree	17.9%	12.6%	14.5%
Permanent peace agreements between Israel and Lebanon would make my community safer.	Agree	4.6%	4.2%	4.4%
	Disagree	91.9%	81.3%	85.4%

Notes:

* Percentages may not total 100 because responses such as 'I don't know' and 'I refuse to answer' were excluded.

** Note that 49.2 per cent of party supporters either 'did not know' or 'did not care' about this issue. Of the non-party supporters, 28.8 per cent expressed such sentiments.

At the same time, whatever their political inclinations, survey respondents indicated they looked primarily to government security institutions, specifically the Lebanese army and police, to provide security. This support came at the expense of non-government militias, including Hizbollah's military wing, and the international peacekeeping force UNIFIL. Although Southern Lebanon has long been characterized as a Hizbollah stronghold, its people appear to have more confidence in state security institutions than previously believed.

Contrasting views on weapons regulation reflect the fact that Lebanon remains prey to political instability.

The people of Southern Lebanon stand at a critical juncture. Despite recent upheavals, many in the region support the regulation of civilian gun ownership and the banning of non-state armed groups. There is even greater—almost unanimous—support for state security institutions, including the Lebanese army and police. Aspirations, perhaps, for a better future, one in which the Lebanese state can provide security for all its citizens. As of early 2009, Lebanon was calm, yet pro-government and opposition forces within the country remained at odds. Tensions with Israel also persisted, fuelled by reports that Hizbollah has armed since the 2006 war. In Lebanon, as in so many 'post-conflict' countries, insecurity clouds the horizon. ■