What Happens When UN Security Council Resolutions are Ignored?

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What happens when UN Security Council resolutions are ignored? That depends, really—on whether you are any of 192 other members of the United Nations, or are Israel.

Defenders of Israel often claim that it is treated differently by the United Nations from any other nation. That claim is accurate, and a brief look at Lebanon offers some proof. It continues to violate Security Council resolutions, year after year—but no one complains, and no one ever argues that Lebanon must be punished with boycotts or prosecutions for doing so. In fact they are often congratulated for their defiance.

The United Nations Security Council has been saying for decades that the Government of Lebanon must exercise control of its territory. [Resolution 1559](http://www.un.org/press/en/2004/sc8181.doc.htm) of 2004 “Calls for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias” and “Supports the extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory.” By “Lebanese militias” the UN was referring to Hezbollah, but dared not speak its name. In any event, the Government of Lebanon did not comply.

[Resolution 1583](http://www.un.org/press/en/2005/sc8299.doc.htm) was adopted unanimously in 2005 and in it the Security Council

Reiterates its strong support for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon within its internationally recognized boundaries and under the sole and exclusive authority of the Government of Lebanon;

Calls upon the Government of Lebanon to fully extend and exercise its sole and effective authority throughout the south, including through the deployment of sufficient numbers of Lebanese armed and security forces, to ensure a calm environment throughout the area, including along the Blue Line, and to exert control over the use of force on its territory and from it….

As the French ambassador said about that resolution when it was adopted, “in keeping with the present demands of the United Nations, Lebanon must extend its authority throughout the south, in particular, by expanding and deploying its forces and by disarming the militias.” But the Government of Lebanon did not comply.

[Resolution 1701](https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8808.doc.htm) of 2006, adopted to end the war between Israel and Hezbollah,

Welcomes the efforts of the Lebanese Prime Minister and the commitment of the Government of Lebanon…to extend its authority over its territory, through its own legitimate armed forces, such that there will be no weapons without the consent of the Government of Lebanon and no authority other than that of the Government of Lebanon….

Emphasizes the importance of the extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory…for it to exercise its full sovereignty, so that there will be no weapons without the consent of the Government of Lebanon and no authority other than that of the Government of Lebanon….

Calls upon the Government of Lebanon to secure its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry in Lebanon without its consent of arms or related materiel….

But the Government of Lebanon paid no attention, or more accurately was unwilling to comply because it was afraid.

In the last week of December, 2016, Lebanon got a new government under Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and as is customary the new Cabinet issued a “Ministerial Statement” outlining its plans. Those plans openly defied the Security Council’s many resolutions on Lebanon and bowed to Hezbollah pressure.

Here are the relevant lines:

In our conflict with the Israeli enemy, we will spare no effort or resistance in order to liberate the remaining occupied Lebanese territory, and to protect our homeland from an enemy who still covets our land, our water and our resources….The Government affirms the right of Lebanese citizens to resist the Israeli occupation, repel the Israeli aggressions and recapture the occupied territories.

Note that it does not say the government of Lebanon has the right to resistance, or the state, or the Army, which would at least have endorsed the authority of the state in principle. The actual language legitimizes Hezbollah as a state within a state and legitimizes its military operations outside the control of the state. It was approved because Hezbollah demanded this, and the opposing forces (who got no visible Western support) were too weak to prevent it.

So Lebanon is in violation of Security Council resolutions, and deliberately so. There was plenty of discussion about this issue–what exactly would the Ministerial Statement say about Hezbollah and its “right” to arms–and some key figures resisted the language Hezbollah wanted. But Hezbollah got its way (on this and several other key issues).

What was the U.S. reaction? Here it is, from the [White House](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/29/statement-nsc-spokesperson-ned-price-lebanons-cabinet-formation):

The United States congratulates Prime Minister Hariri on the Lebanese parliament’s approval of his cabinet on December 28….The United States stands steadfast in its support for a strong, stable, prosperous, and sovereign Lebanon as the new government works to strengthen state institutions, prepare for timely national elections, and uphold and implement Lebanon’s international commitments.

But of course the Lebanese government had just announced, very clearly, that it was NOT going to “uphold and implement Lebanon’s international commitments.”

Now, some critics will say this is not comparable to the situation in Israel and the new Resolution 2334 on Israeli settlements, because the Netanyahu government has the power to act to freeze settlements. Why does it not do so? Ah, well, it’s a coalition government and some members of the coalition would oppose a freeze; indeed they would leave the coalition over this and the government might well collapse. But that’s pretty much the situation in Lebanon. “Hariri cabinet capitulates to Hezbollah demand” was the headline in [Gulf News](http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/lebanon/hariri-cabinet-capitulates-to-hezbollah-demand-1.1950973). Had Hariri not agreed, he’d never have become prime minister or his new government would have collapsed.

Of course the two situations are not comparable– not when you consider that Hezbollah is a murderous terrorist group that kills people every day, and was likely involved in killing Saad Hariri’s father Rafik in 2005. As the [New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/the-hezbollah-connection.html) reported in 2015 about Rafik Hariri’s murder by car bomb and the UN tribunal investigating that event, “the tribunal is producing overwhelming, albeit circumstantial, evidence that Hezbollah murdered the most important politician Lebanon had ever produced, and indiscriminately slaughtered many others in the process.” So one can sympathize with Saad Hariri and other Lebanese politicians when they bow to Hezbollah. The people who might leave Netanyahu’s cabinet will go home, not pick up machine guns and plant car bombs.

But the fact remains that Lebanon is defying the Security Council very clearly and very deliberately, and no one says a word about it (except to applaud). No one is threatening a boycott of Lebanese goods until it complies. No one is suggesting that Lebanese politicians are violating international law by their complicity with and now official defense of Hezbollah. And actually, some pressure from the West might be useful in empowering and emboldening Lebanese politicians who are trying to resist Hezbollah, and risking their lives by doing so.

But that’s not the point here. The point is that plenty of countries defy the UN but in very, very few cases is this even noticed, and in fewer still is anyone punished. Israel remains a special case, whose maltreatment in the UN is a disgrace—and one that, until the Obama administration decided to allow Resolution 2334 to pass, the United States fought and prevented in the Security Council. It may be a vain hope that the UN will depart from past practices and stop persecuting Israel, but it seems very likely that under the Trump administration the United States will return to past practices and defend Israel again. That would be a good start for 2017.