UNIFIL confirms third 'illegal' Hezbollah cross-border tunnel into Israel territory

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The United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) confirmed on Thursday that a third Hezbollah tunnel crossed the Blue Line border into Israeli territory, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that established a ceasefire agreement and buffer zone between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

The announcement from UNIFIL comes following an investigation conducted in coordination with Israel Defense Forces (IDF) last week.

Back at the end of 2018 leading into 2019, Israel had announced Operation Northern Shield, which revealed six border tunnels dug by Hezbollah, and destroyed their entry into Israeli territory.

UNIFIL said on Thursday that it reached its conclusions after performing a "technical inspection of the last tunnel discovered by the IDF in northern Israel close to the Blue Line and across from the Lebanese village of Ramyah."

While UNIFIL had already recognized the existence of five of the six tunnels disclosed by Israel, the UN force has now confirmed that at least three of those cross the Blue Line in violation of the UN resolution adopted to end the 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel.

“Overall, of the six tunnels reported by the IDF until now, UNIFIL has independently confirmed the existence of five tunnels close to the Blue Line in northern Israel. Of these, three tunnels have been found to be crossing the Blue Line,” UNIFIL’s press release read.

The international agency said it informed the Lebanese authorities of the findings and that it “requested urgent follow-up actions in accordance with the responsibilities of the Government of Lebanon pursuant to resolution 1701.”

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Back in January, the IDF announced the end of the operation to locate and destroy cross-border attack tunnels dug by Hezbollah into Israeli territory, after it revealed the sixth and final tunnel.

UNIFIL said it continues to remain engaged with Lebanon and Israel on the pertinent issues in order to ensure coordinated activity between the two states.

While the peacekeeping force said that the “situation in UNIFIL’s area of operations remains calm,” the tunnels have ramped up tensions on the border and threatened the prospect of a new conflict between the sides should there be any missteps in the dismantling of the tunnel network.

Lebanese troops and intelligence officials have reportedly been "observing" Israel’s activities along the border while forces have been deployed to carry out operations with UNIFIL to prevent escalation.

Critics, including members of Israel's opposition (and at least one Hezbollah affiliate), charged that the launch of the Israeli operation had been conspicuously timed so as to distract from a myriad of political and legal woes that have plagued Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is now preparing to form a coalition in his fifth consecutive term in office.