LEBANESE INFORMATION CENTER

Renewing UNIFIL: Time for a Change?

August 2020

On August 31st, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) will face the annual renewal of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon's (UNIFIL) mandate. Amid growing debate about its efficacy, there have been calls for a change in UNIFIL's size, structure and role. The Lebanese Information Center has compiled a review of UNIFIL's mission, the challenges it faces in its areas of operations, the positions of key actors on a renewal or expansion of its mandate, and potential amendments to UNIFIL's modus operandi that could make it a more effective force.

UNIFIL Mission

Following a deadly terrorist attack in March 1978, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) entered southern Lebanon, establishing a buffer zone to prevent further attacks on Israel. In response, the UNSC passed Resolution 425, which called on Israel to withdraw from Lebanon and created UNIFIL. The force was tasked with confirming Israel's withdrawal, restoring peace and security, and assisting Lebanon's government as it reasserted authority over the area. Nonetheless, Israel invaded again in 1982. When it finally withdrew in 2000, UNIFIL helped confirm the pull-out and subsequently reported on ceasefire violations from both sides.

After the July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1701. The decision increased UNIFIL's size to a maximum of 15,000 troops to cover land, air and sea. The peacekeeping troops would deploy alongside the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) between the Blue Line[1] and the Litani River to secure an area free of weapons and armed personnel, other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL. UNIFIL's mandate was also expanded to include assisting Lebanon's government with border control to prevent the entry of weapons.

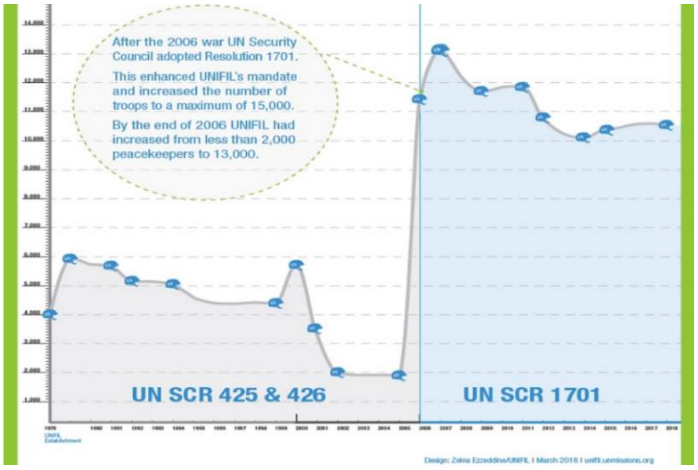


Figure 1:Change over time in UNIFIL deployment

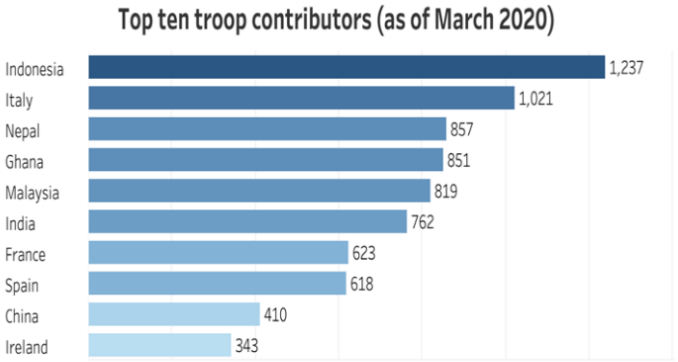


Figure 2: Top countries that supply UNIFIL

[1] The Blue Line is a demarcation line established in June 2000 to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, following the invasion of June 1982.

UNIFIL Activities

UNIFIL currently comprises about 10,000 troops (*Figure 1*) from 45 contributing countries (*Figure 2*), with a budget of $500 million per year.

In the last 14 years, UNIFIL has conducted a number of activities in its area of operations in South Lebanon (*Figure 3*), including:

- Monitoring the zone between the Litani river and the Blue Line, via land, sea and air patrols as well as fixed and mobile checkpoints[2];
- Reporting on all violations of UNSCR 1701;
- Mediating between Lebanon and Israel to avoid escalations;
- Holding tripartite meetings with the LAF and IDF to address pending issues;
- Demarcating the Blue Line and helping resolve specific land border disputes between Lebanon and Israel;
- Clearing areas riddled with deadly mines and unexploded explosive ordnance;
- Providing services to the civilian population including assisting needy families, rehabilitating water facilities, educating youth, and donating medical supplies;
- Collaborating with the LAF through operational activities, such as joint patrols and checkpoints, recovering and destroying ammunition;
- Building the LAF's capacity through the Strategic Dialogue, which aims to develop the LAF's capabilities to implement the tasks mandated by UNSCR 1701 so it can gradually assume full responsibility for the provision of security in UNIFIL's area of operations.



Figure 3. UNIFIL deployment

[2] UNIFIL has 55 positions in its area of operations and conducts over 450 daily activities. UNIFIL vehicles and foot patrols cover most accessible areas, while air surveillance is able to reach inaccessible grounds, providing needed intelligence. The Maritime Task Force monitors the Lebanese waters and hails ships to be inspected by the Lebanese Navy.

Violations of Resolution 1701

Despite the full endorsement of UNSCR 1701 by all parties involved in the Lebanese-Israeli conflict, its implementation has been deeply flawed.

- Hezbollah continues to operate outside the authority of the Lebanese state as an armed militia.
- Iran's unfettered transfer of weapons to Hezbollah via Syria has boosted Hezbollah's missile capability from a few thousand to over 100,000, made even more dangerous by Hezbollah's recent acquisition of high-precision technology.
- Hezbollah has flouted UNIFIL's monitoring and built tunnels from Lebanon into Israeli territory, six of which Israel discovered in December 2018.
- Israel maintains its occupation of northern Ghajar as well as daily overflights in Lebanese air space, averaging 100 per month.
- Minor land-based violations occur on a daily basis, mostly civilians crossing the Blue Line from Lebanon into Israeli-claimed territory. They are overwhelmingly unarmed shepherds and farmers who have inadvertently crossed the line but include some armed hunters as well.
- Major cross-border incidents have been rare, but deadly. At least three incidents since the 2006 war have led to the deaths of four IDF soldiers, 3 LAF troops and one UNIFIL peacekeeper. In September 2019, anti-tank missiles were launched by Hezbollah, prompting the IDF to fire artillery rounds into Lebanon. On July 27, Israel briefly shelled Lebanon after accusing Hezbollah of trying to sneak south across the border, which the armed group denied.

Challenges to UNIFIL operations

UNIFIL faces constant challenges to carrying out its mandate, including limits to its freedom of movement, obstruction of its investigations, serious aggressions against its forces and a lack of essential support from the Lebanese government.

- UN troops are routinely denied access to certain locations under various pretenses, and patrols are stopped by local men. Specifically, the organization Green Without Borders, which claims to be an environmental NGO working in southern Lebanon, has obstructed UNIFIL access to parts of the south.[3]
- UNIFIL's investigations into security incidents and other breaches have been met with delays and obstacles, including in the case of the tunnels running across the Blue Line and into Israel.
- UN troops have also been directly attacked, with cases increasing in the last three years. Soldiers have been aggressed, their vehicles burned and their equipment and weapons stolen.
- UN officials have complained that Lebanese authorities have fallen short in their duty to UNIFIL by failing to protect UN troops and even hindering the force's investigations. Despite the Lebanese government's commitment to match all UNIFIL troops with an equal number of LAF soldiers, the LAF presence in the south remains too low, currently numbering only 3,000. UN officials have also stated that only a third of the vessels hailed by UNIFIL's Maritime Task Force were searched by the Lebanese Navy.

Positions on UNIFIL Mandate Renewal

[3] The Washington Institute for Near East Policy carried out a wide-ranging investigation into Green Without Borders, including the group's links to Hezbollah. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/green-without-borders-the-operational-benefits-of-hezbollahs-environmental

1. ***Lebanon:*** Lebanon's government insists on renewing UNIFIL's mandate without any modifications. On June 3, 2020 President Michel Aoun told the UNSC P5's ambassadors in Beirut that "Lebanon requests the renewal of UNIFIL without any change to the mandate in order for UNIFIL to continue and succeed in fulfilling the vital roles it plays."

2. ***Israel:*** Israel is insisting on a broader authority to the UN force to conduct its operations without interference, particularly from the Lebanese side. Israeli Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon stated that, "Israel will insist that peacekeepers have access to all sites, that they have freedom of movement and that any time they are being blocked, that the UN Security Council be immediately informed." Additionally, an official from the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented that "effective fulfillment of the UNIFIL mandate is necessary in order to ensure regional stability and to prevent Hezbollah from gaining power in Southern Lebanon. We expect the UNSC members to adopt a decision that will grant UNIFIL the power to fulfill its duty without restrictions."

3. ***Hezbollah:*** Hezbollah has framed any attempt to alter UNIFIL's mandate as a plot to target its "resistance" to Israel. In a May 2020 interview, its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said Lebanon was against a change to UNIFIL's mandate, accusing Israel of lobbying UN troops to search private properties in Lebanon and the US of pressuring Lebanon to accept a broader mandate. "We are not against UNIFIL staying, but it will be under our conditions, not Israel's," said Nasrallah. It is important to note that Hezbollah prefers a UNIFIL presence as the force does create an internationally-recognized check on Israeli violations across the border. Additionally, residents of southern Lebanon, much of which is a stronghold for Hezbollah, benefit from UNIFIL's development projects, including renovating schools and providing medical care. The large foreign presence also boosts the local economy.

4. ***United Nations****:* The UN is, naturally, supportive of UNIFIL's current work. In a report on June 1, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres concluded that the "UNIFIL presence is vital in order to avoid a vacuum in south Lebanon that can be taken advantage of by various factions outside of the government." Instead of a change to the mission, the report advocates certain tactical moves such as the reliance on higher-tech monitoring, the use of lighter vehicles and smaller patrols, the consolidation of military bases and the addition of observation points. The UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Jan Kubis also recently highlighted the crucial role UNIFIL plays in south Lebanon, stressing the importance of a strong UNIFIL able to properly carry out its mandate.

5. ***United States:*** The US seeks the full implementation of UNSCR 1701 and is currently unsatisfied with the degree to which UNIFIL can complete its mission. Top US officials regularly comment on obstacles to UNIFIL's work and the presence of illegitimate armed actors in the south. In strongly-worded remarks to the UNSC on May 4, US Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft lamented that UNIFIL was prevented from fulfilling its mission, accusing Hezbollah and the Lebanese government of blocking access to the force within its area of operations. "The time has come to either pursue serious change to empower UNIFIL, or to realign UNIFIL's staffing and resources with tasks it can actually accomplish," she said. [4]

6. ***France:*** As the penholder for Lebanon issues at the UNSC,[5] France has become a reference for all Lebanon-related policies, including on UNIFIL. It currently contributes 638 peacekeepers. The French

[4] https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-situation-in-lebanon-via-vtc/

[5] Penholder system is a relatively new Security Council practice whereby a specific member performs ongoing leadership roles on most country-specific and some thematic issues on the Council agenda. The penholder chairs negotiations over a draft and speaks first whenever the Council discusses the issue. France is now the penholder for Lebanese issues in the Security Council.

prefer a continuation of the current UNIFIL mandate, fearing that any amendment would endanger the mission itself and provoke a negative reaction by members of the UNSC or actors on the ground. Since he took up the post in 2018, French Ambassador to Lebanon Bernard Foucher has hailed UNIFIL's role in preserving peace in southern Lebanon and discussed the force with Lebanon's Foreign Minister as recently as late July.

7. ***Russia:*** Russia, which does not contribute troops to UNIFIL, opposes changes to the mandate. In an interview with Hezbollah's TV station "Al-Manar" on May 31, Russian Ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Zasypkin said any attempt to change the mission would fail as "Russia would cast a veto in the Security Council in that case."

8. ***China:*** China contributes more than 400 soldiers to UNIFIL. The Chinese ambassador to Lebanon Wang Kejian indicated during a meeting with President Aoun that China will be negotiating with the other members of the UNSC in support of renewing the UNIFIL mandate, as well as increasing the effectiveness of the UN force.

Conclusion

Given the current political, military, and economic realities in Lebanon, UNIFIL is unable to adequately execute all the requirements of its mission. Full implementation of UNSCR 1701 relies on genuine political will from the Lebanese government, whose top representatives -- the current President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of Parliament -- are close allies of Hezbollah. That political will cannot exist with one party to the conflict, Hezbollah, enforcing its strategic calculations on one of the guarantors of the resolution, the Lebanese government.

Nevertheless, and in order to address some of the shortfalls in UNIFIL's work, the UNSC can explore several changes. The proposals below are based on recent conversations with officials in Lebanon and at the United Nations in New York, complemented by an extensive review of reports, analyses, and public statements by concerned individuals.

- Reduce the size of UNIFIL's land contingent, and limit land patrolling and checkpoints.
- Concentrate forces on the border with Israel to improve control over the immediate buffer zone.
- Rely on air surveillance and other advanced technology to monitor the area of responsibility.
- Preserve the Maritime Task Force, as the Lebanese Navy is incapable of taking over the full mission and would not have the political cover to stop Hezbollah's sea operations.
- Insist on the Lebanese authorities to secure the safety, freedom of movement and access for UNIFIL troops that is essential to UNSCR 1701. The fact that the Lebanese government, and behind it Hezbollah, is still attached to the UN presence in the South is a point of leverage that the international community should use in its deliberations and negotiations with Lebanese officials.
- Maintain the liaison and communication mechanisms between Lebanon and Israel, specifically the tripartite forum that allows a trusted channel between the LAF and the IDF.
- Pursue demarcation of the Blue Line and resume negotiations over the 13 points along Israel's border that are disputed by Lebanon .
- Support coordination between UNIFIL and the LAF, as well as their Strategic Dialogue aimed to strengthen LAF capabilities in order to assume security along the southern border.
- Raise the issue of Iran's arms transfers to Hezbollah through Syria, which violate Lebanese sovereignty, the Iran arms embargo, and UNSCR 1701.

For more than 40 years, UNIFIL has worked in challenging circumstances in the south, with varied success. Indeed, it would be a mistake to attribute the absence of a fresh conflict along the Lebanese-Israeli border to the UN's deterring presence. Rather, simultaneous conclusions by Hezbollah and Israel that currently, war does not serve their individual interests have introduced a prolonged, but temporary, calm. The most recent skirmishes on July 27 prove that flare-ups can still occur.

But they also demonstrate the advantages of having an international force along the border, one with experience mediating between longtime adversaries and de-escalating some of the most complex and sensitive incidents. The political and military obstacles impeding UNIFIL's work will not be cleared overnight, but the amendments suggested above could improve the force's performance– and this is a worthwhile endeavor.

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