



Hiding in Plain Sight

Hezbollah's Campaign Against UNIFIL • Assaf Orion

REUTERS/HADAR HAWILA

The Second Lebanon War, between Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah, ended August 14, 2006. Since that summer, populations on both sides of the Israel-Lebanon border have enjoyed the longest calm in their troubled history, thirteen years and counting. Mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), an entity first established in the late 1970s, was expanded, and its 10,500 peacekeepers are busy and visible. UN reports over the past thirteen years emphasize the general calm. But calm does not mean safe and secure. During the war, Hezbollah launched approximately four thousand rockets out of its arsenal of twelve thousand toward Israel. Since the war, Iran has invested billions of dollars in building its Lebanese proxy military force throughout Lebanon, including in the south.



Hezbollah's current arsenal is estimated to include 130,000 rockets and missiles of various ranges and warhead sizes, in addition to attack drones, coast-to-sea missiles, and surface-to-air missiles. This large firepower, exceeding that of most nation-states, is defended by a land garrison and augmented by offensive infantry units. The group's impressive military growth took place despite two obstacles: Hezbollah's deep involvement in regional fighting, especially in the Syrian war, and the UNIFIL mandate to help the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) become the only military force south of the Litani River. But the seemingly calm blanket covering southern Lebanon is regularly pierced by the sharp edges of reality, making Hezbollah's efforts more difficult to obscure. This study seeks to explain a dramatic gap between the UN's reporting of southern Lebanon and the actual reality pregnant with disastrous potential.

On August 29, 2019, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2485 (2019), extending the mandate of UNIFIL for another year and "reaffirming its determination to ensure that no such acts of intimidation prevent UNIFIL from implementing its mandate...that UNIFIL personnel are secure and their freedom of movement is fully respected...condemning in the strongest terms the attack against UNIFIL forces on 4 August 2018 near the town of Majdal Zun, Southern Lebanon, and recalling the importance of the Lebanese authorities swiftly providing UNIFIL with further updates on this matter."¹

Over a year has passed since that blatant attack by Hezbollah on a UNIFIL patrol, of which Fox News aired new 2018 footage conveniently close to the council's 2019 discussions.² The incident was indeed extraordinary in its flagrant violence and the blunt conduct of Hezbollah's militants, but in fact it was just a careless, sloppy operation in an otherwise well-executed continuous gray-zone campaign, which has effectively reduced UNIFIL to its current cowed, incapacitated form. This analysis puts the incident and many others like it in context, outlines Hezbollah's campaign and other Lebanese government actors' role in it, and recommends possible policy steps.

In November 2018, UN secretary-general António Guterres reported the following:

One of the most serious incidents involving UNIFIL personnel in recent years occurred on 4 August, when some 20 individuals in civilian clothes stopped a four-vehicle UNIFIL patrol in the village

of Majdal Zun, allegedly because the peacekeepers were taking photographs. During the course of the incident, several individuals broke windows of the patrol vehicles with hammers, shot at two of the vehicles as they sought to disengage and poured gasoline on a vehicle, setting it ablaze. A peacekeeper inside suffered minor burns. Some individuals assaulted the peacekeepers, punching and beating the patrol commander with sticks as he attempted to mediate the situation and kicking and dragging another peacekeeper while he was on the ground. Individuals also pointed weapons at the UNIFIL personnel, including at close range, snatching their weapons or demanding that they be handed over. The patrol requested Lebanese Armed Forces support immediately. Weapons, ammunition and equipment were stolen from the patrol, most of which were later returned by the Lebanese Armed Forces.³

But the greater picture extends far beyond even what lengthier footage of the incident shows.⁴ This was not just an isolated local event; it is part of a much larger campaign that seeks to achieve well-defined military and policy objectives.

Since August 2006, the UN secretary-general has submitted forty reports on Resolution 1701 to the Security Council.⁵ These reports describe numerous incidents in which UNIFIL suffered restrictions of its movement or violence against its troops. A thorough analysis of these reports reveals the anatomy of UNIFIL's encounters in southern Lebanon and exposes several clear and unmistakable patterns that point to the logic guiding Hezbollah's campaign against the UN force in southern Lebanon.

A preliminary note about relying on the UN reports as a source of data: one needs to assume that they only partially reflect the full scope of events on the ground, for both bureaucratic and political reasons. Years of experience show that many occurrences never appear in the final reports, after being thinned out in one of the many echelons between the field patrol and the secretary-general's office. Officers from several of UNIFIL's contributing countries confided that much more is going on than what is reported. With this in mind, the data in the reports are minimal numbers. The partial UN reports include more than 150 incidents that have broken through the reporting threshold. Even if these do not represent all incidents, they offer sufficient pixels to form the picture.

THE GRAND DESIGN

Southern Lebanon is Hezbollah's military's main area of deployment against Israel, including massive rocketfire arrays, defensive garrisons, fortifications, and assault infantry units. Hezbollah's military is dug in to local villages as its main strongholds, and most of its assets and arsenal are embedded in the populated areas. Since 2006, Hezbollah has generally avoided an explicit military form, including open display of arms and uniforms. Instead, it carries on its military operations in a civilian cloak, an illicit nongovernmental military deployment in UNIFIL's area of operations and a clear violation of 1701. Concurrently, Hezbollah conducts a systematic campaign seeking to avoid detection while expanding its military activity, as well as to maintain a low political cost for its violations. To achieve these goals, it must constrain UNIFIL's situational awareness and reporting on the actual reality on the ground. The following sections explain the main elements of Hezbollah's campaign.

"STAY AWAY"

The main feature in Hezbollah's campaign in southern Lebanon is the restriction of UNIFIL's mandated freedom of movement.⁶ The UN, as noted, reports at least 150 incidents of restricted movement, of which Majdel Zoun is just a sample. In ninety-five cases, UN troops were stopped, forty-five others involved vehicles blocking their path, and several more involved a stationary physical barrier.

As for the reasons given for preventing UNIFIL access, four incidents were explained as being for religious sensitivity, and six mentioned narrow or secondary roads as inadequate for UN patrolling. As the July 2019 report describes, "the Mukhtar cautioned that the villagers might have reacted aggressively if the patrol had entered the village, owing to their dislike of vehicles patrolling through its narrow streets...LAF personnel...argued that UNIFIL was in charge of patrolling the Blue Line, while the LAF was responsible for securing the village."⁷ Evidently, there are multiple ways to keep UNIFIL on main roads only, or altogether out of the populated areas where Hezbollah's military is embedded.

But the most salient means to encroach on UNIFIL's freedom of access is by using "private property" claims, trumping Lebanon's international commitments and

presenting the issue as one of sovereignty. There were at least fifteen incidents of UNIFIL's restriction under this pretext, fully endorsed by the LAF, as reported in 2013: "UNIFIL patrols, including some conducted along with the LAF, were prevented from proceeding by individuals... stating that the road was private property. These incidents occurred...near Bmaryamir, Rshaf, Majdal Zun and Tayr Harfa. UNIFIL protested all the incidents to the Lebanese Armed Forces, which subsequently informed UNIFIL that the concerned areas were indeed private property."⁸ "Private property" occurs thirty-four times in the UN reports: only once between 2006 and 2012 (in 2009), once per report since 2012, and three to four times in every report since July 2018, a steep rise in occurrence and use. Obviously, with so much to hide, the use of this pretext has increased, and the UN has gradually found it both more noteworthy and acceptable.

SEE NO EVIL: BLINDFOLDED OBSERVERS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON

Another salient pattern in UNIFIL's experience involves activities seeking to curtail UN situational awareness and evidence gathering. Late in 2006, France had shipped unmanned aerial vehicles to UNIFIL in Lebanon to improve situational awareness, only to withdraw them under Hezbollah's threats and accusations of espionage.⁹ Since then, fifty-five reported incidents included locals seizing UN equipment, mainly cameras but also navigation and communications gear, maps and documentation, and even weapons from UN personnel or from their vehicles. Eight more cases involved unsuccessful attempts to grab such gear. All the cases involved some kind of forceful behavior toward the UN troops. The verbal explanations given for these actions, in fourteen cases, as in Majdel Zoun, stated "taking photographs" as the reason for blocking UN troops' way or demanding that they hand over their gear.

According to a 2008 report, a "serious incident occurred" when "a UNIFIL patrol had photographed [suspicious] cables...In response, civilians...threw stones... and impeded its freedom of movement." Apparently, UNIFIL was nearing Hezbollah's internal military telecommunications and experiencing pushback. Then "the situation improved when all the parties agreed to discard all photographs...[UNIFIL's] use of photographic and recording devices in the area of operations remains an

extremely sensitive issue, even though...audio/video recording and photography are carried out in full compliance with United Nations policy, which authorizes the use of photographic and other electronic devices in the accomplishment of mandated tasks."¹⁰

An incident report from 2019 reflects the current state of play: locals stopped "the patrol because they had seen some [of its] members taking photographs...an allegation UNIFIL disputes."¹¹ As the language shows, UNIFIL gradually internalized that its area of operations is a "no photography zone," despite earlier interpretations of its mandate to the contrary and photography's vital importance for its mission. By 2019, UNIFIL has already allowed itself to accept the prohibitions on photography. The documentation high ground was ceded to Hezbollah, and the duty to generate evidence on violations has apparently been abandoned.

TERROR, COERCION, DETERRENCE

Violence is blatant not only in the Majdel Zoun video clip; it is, in general, a central feature of Hezbollah's campaign against UNIFIL in southern Lebanon. At least 114 cases of violent conduct against the UN forces have been reported since 2006 by the secretary-general to the Security Council, on the spectrum between verbal violence and lethal attack: twenty cases of verbal threats or insults, thirty-four physical attacks, thirty-six stone throwing, eight weapon pointing, two car ramming, five cold-weapon attacks, four shooting incidents, two improvised explosive device (IED) attack attempts, and six explosive devices attacks.

The UN casualty reports include six dead peacekeepers and at least forty-one injured, most of them before 2012. The UN reporting withholds full data on its injured personnel. Its report on the Majdel Zoun 2018 attack states only: "None of the peacekeepers sustained injuries that required medical treatment."¹² Untreated injuries are off the record.

Yet it is not attrition by mass casualty that Hezbollah seeks but rather affecting UNIFIL behaviors. The Spanish battalion was a highly motivated contingent, and its assertive conduct was markedly high in the early postwar days. In June 2007, a lethal explosive-vehicle attack killed six Spanish battalion peacekeepers near al-Khiam, a well-known Hezbollah stronghold. Following the carnage, the Spanish dramatically restrained their activity,

and the message was not lost on other contingents either. Following four 2011 explosives attacks injuring eleven French, six Italian, and two Irish troops, Western governments significantly downsized their contingents in 2012, pulling hundreds of troops from Lebanon.¹³ In 2011, France already chose to relinquish its relatively high-friction territorial sector responsibility and confined its troops to the Force Commander's Reserve. Four of the IED attacks occurred north of the Litani River outside UNIFIL's area; most attacks remained unattributed, and one was suspected as the radical Sunni group Fatah al-Islam's attack. In any case, their effect served Hezbollah's purpose, as the al-Khiam bombing is always on the peacekeepers' minds.

The underlying message is clear: UNIFIL's presence is tolerated as long as it adheres to the "southern Lebanon rules" dictated by Hezbollah. Under threat of violence, everyone, from patrol soldier through UN bureaucrat up to UN official or head of state, is expected to play along or face the consequences. Each aggressive incident establishes the power relations between UNIFIL and the locals as well as the dictated rules of the game: Keep to the trail, keep your eyes shut, keep your reports mild and reassuring—or else. Following an incident, a European officer privately confided, "Don't you think I know a Mafia when I see it?!"

TECHNIQUES, TACTICS, PROCEDURES

In the Majdel Zoun attack, the assailants were all in civilian clothes, and no uniforms were to be seen, in accordance with Hezbollah's modus operandi in the south. This Hezbollah tactic sheds light on the absurdity of the UN's frequent use of the terms "civilians" or "individuals in civilian clothes" in reports about prohibited and military activities, as if to dull the activities' severity and downplay their military nature.

Indeed, UNIFIL reports of its encounters with "civilians," but the tactical features of these encounters reveal organized teamwork and operational drills. Only five cases involve a single individual impeding UNIFIL's movement, whereas sixty-four involve "groups"—twenty-nine with fewer than ten persons and thirty-five more than ten. In sixteen cases, the reports describe encounters with "crowds," meaning that the local population has been mobilized into action. Nine cases involve armed individuals, three of which occurred

across the Litani and out of UNIFIL's area, where the blocking teams openly carried assault rifles. These in fact emphasize Hezbollah's policy in UNIFIL's area of responsibility (AOR), when arms are not openly displayed, and still, the drill is the same on both banks of the Litani: stop UNIFIL, search, harass, seize electronic gear, intimidate, release. As mentioned, forty-five incidents involved a vehicle block against UNIFIL, using cars, vans, or motorcycles, as seen in Majdel Zoun. Nineteen cases involved vehicles or individuals tailing UNIFIL forces or photographing them, a clear operational activity. The recurring tactical patterns and teamwork all point to a common approach employing the same tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and guidance, creating a network of operational responses across the various villages.

WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

The UN reports include at least nine incidents in which activities are clearly naming Hezbollah as perpetrator: three involved public relations events; one IED and one antitank guided missile (ATGM) attack against Israel; a LAF helicopter downed by Hezbollah's fire; two cases of exploded arms depots in Tayr Filsay and Tayr Harfa; and one unique case in April 2019 in which four persons openly introduced themselves as Hezbollah members before threatening the UN troops and demanding them to leave.

But Hezbollah does not stand alone in the crippling campaign against UNIFIL. In five cases, local and municipal authorities provided cover to such efforts, and three more cases involved local police. Seven cases of obstructed movement involved Hezbollah's façade NGO, "Green Without Borders," whose towers are recognized as operational observation posts even by UN senior officials. In this "whole of government" approach, the LAF deserves special attention. In nineteen cases of restricted movement or direct assault on the UN, the LAF betrayed its duties as UNIFIL's host. In two cases, the LAF stood by and did not intervene. In four cases, the LAF provided cover to the obstruction, and in eight cases it was the LAF itself that blocked UN access. Since the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) exposed six Hezbollah attack tunnels dug into Israel in late 2018,

the LAF continuously denies access to the six tunnel sites to both the UN envoy, Nickolay Mladenov, and the UNIFIL force commander.

Extremely illuminating are nineteen cases in which the LAF reportedly returned UNIFIL's gear that had been seized by its assailants. Clearly, any piece of seized UNIFIL equipment reaching the LAF's hands indicates a clear lead to the perpetrator's identity, but there is no sign that the Lebanese government or its uniformed members have any interest in stopping these assaults or bringing its violators to justice. That permissive policy enables Hezbollah's violence against the UN and encourages its continuation.

SPEAK NO EVIL: INTERNALIZING THE AGGRESSOR'S RULES

In light of Hezbollah's orchestrated campaign to cripple and blind UNIFIL, the UN's first line of defense is denial and self-reassurance, watering down the hard reality. Many aggressive and threatening actions are described as merely "unfriendly" or downplayed as isolated and negligible in scale against the general picture. In a June 2014 report, the secretary-general remained

concerned at incidents impeding freedom of movement of UNIFIL and instances of aggressive behaviour towards UNIFIL personnel. While their number remains marginal in comparison to the overall level of UNIFIL activities, some of these incidents have the potential to compromise UNIFIL effectiveness in executing its tasks under resolution 1701 (2006). It is the primary responsibility of the Lebanese authorities to ensure that UNIFIL can operate unhindered in its area of operations.¹⁴

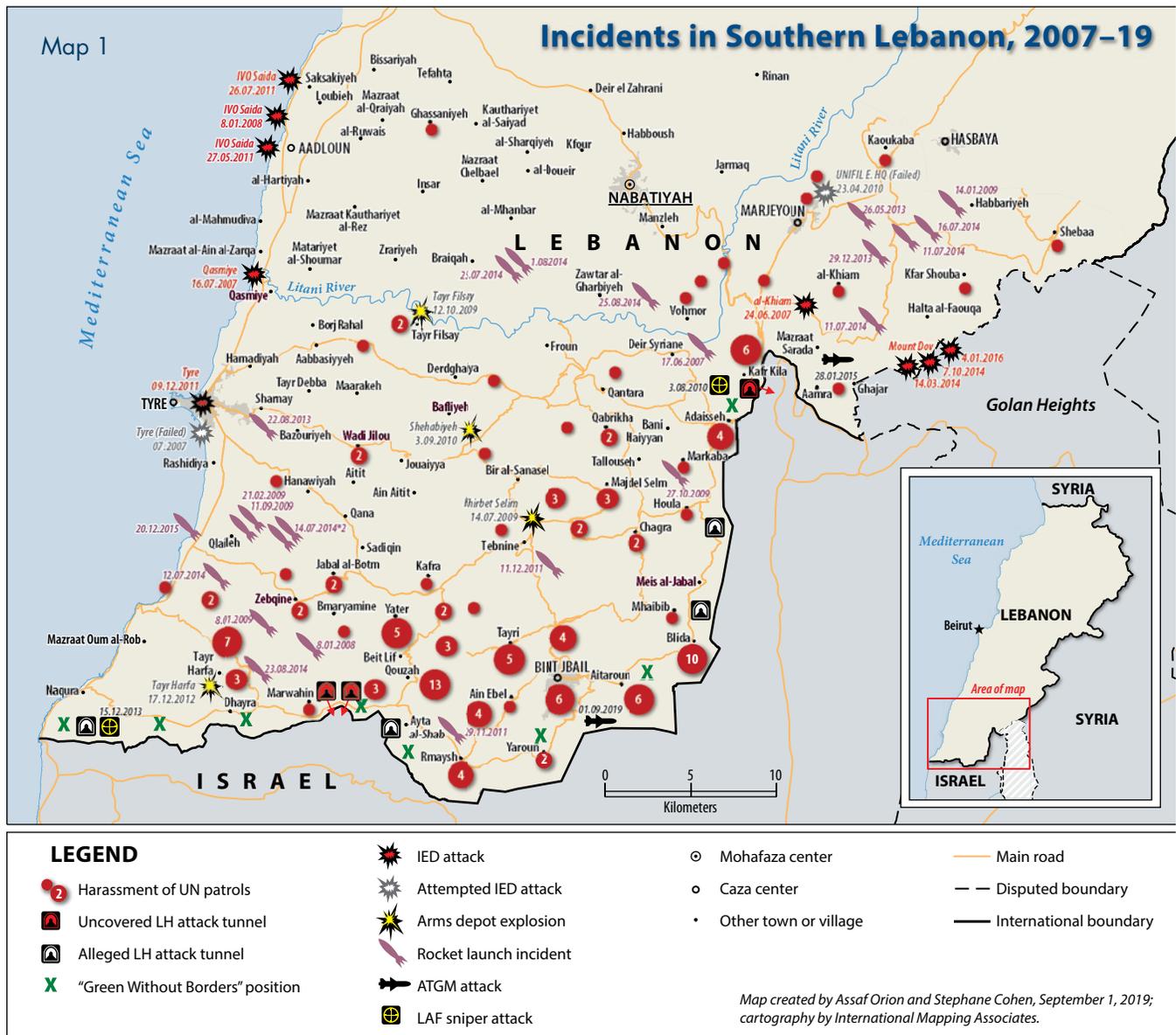
Typical of the UN language, the sharp concern is immediately toned down and dulled by contrasting the few reported incidents to the oversize force and its numerous, though blindfolded, operations. Over time, UNIFIL has internalized Lebanon's dictates of photography prohibition and "private property" supremacy over UNIFIL's freedom of movement and access. The UN reporting continues to prevent a credible portrayal of the reality on the ground, which could cause alarm, expose the policy gaps, and prompt policy review.

UNIFIL'S TACTICAL RESPONSE

In UN document hierarchy, UNIFIL's mandate had stemmed from UNSCR 1701 and was translated into rules of engagement (ROE). For most contingents, their own national guidance and caveats often take precedence over the UN mission's commands and ROE. This hierarchy explains how bold words on UN papers unravel into submissive conduct in the field.

Its mandate, renewed in August 2019, reaffirmed "UNIFIL's authority to take all necessary action in areas of operations...and as it deems within its capabilities, to ensure that its area of operations is not utilized for hostile activities of any kind and to resist attempts by forceful means to prevent it from discharging its mandate."¹⁵

At face value, the reported incidents should have met a strong, resolved, even forceful UNIFIL response safeguarding its mission and its members' safety and gear, as well as its mandated freedom of movement. But the original text already included the route of retreat that disarmed UNIFIL from its self-defense measures. UNIFIL's leading authorities deem it beyond the force's capabilities to stand up to local aggression, and its tactical behavior is accordingly sheepish, seeking to preserve its community relations at all costs. UN reports describe only four cases of warning shots by UNIFIL against its aggressors and six cases in which its patrols broke away from their blockers, including by ramming their vehicles. Most other cases included submission, laying arms down as seen in Majdel Zoun, handing over electronics,



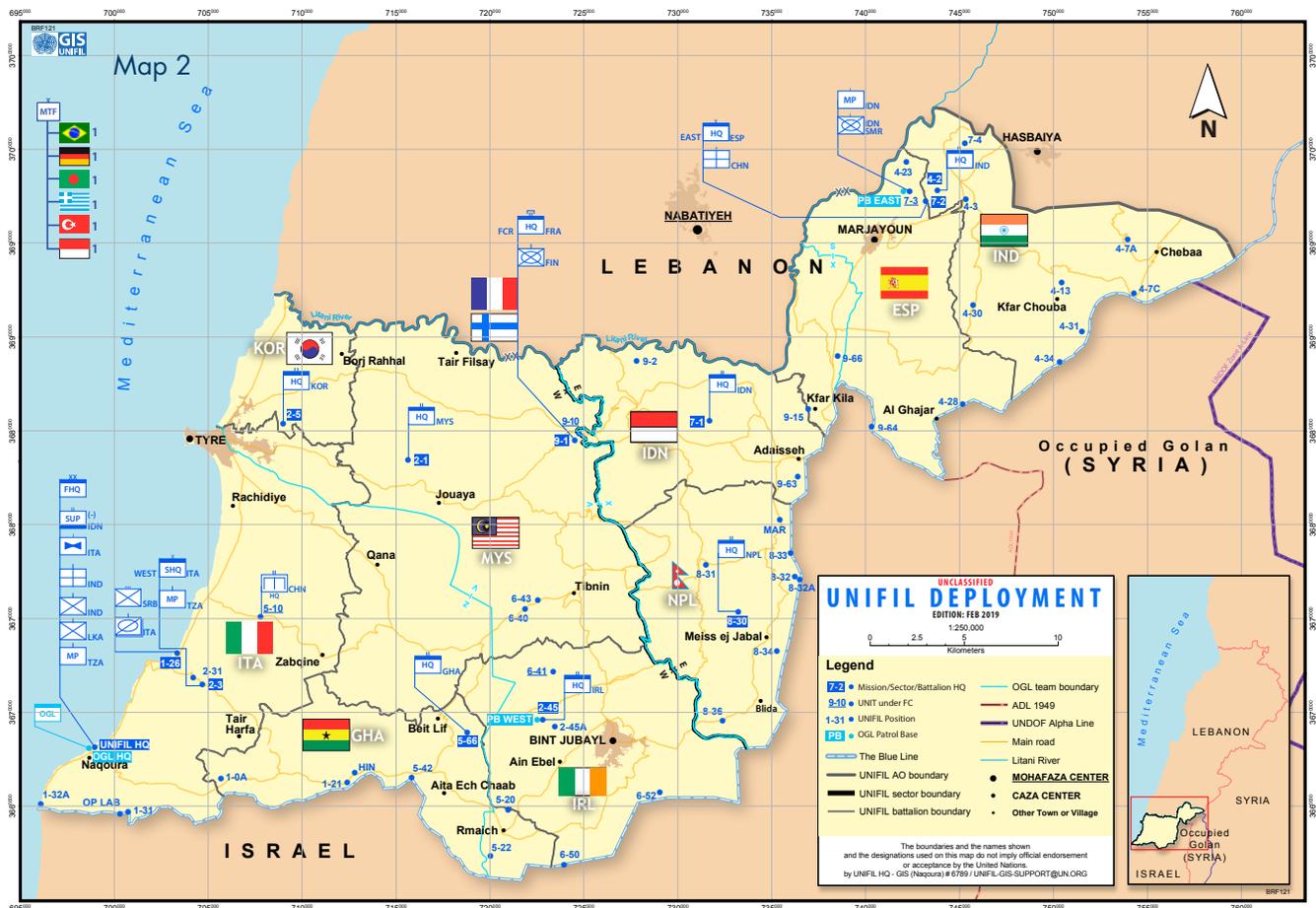
erasing camera memories, or appeasing attackers by quietly leaving the premises, sometimes returning later. UNIFIL's armed troops are effectively disarmed by their intimidated UN and national authorities, who abandon them to the humiliating, offensive treatment of Lebanese Hezbollah and its collaborators.

GEOGRAPHY: HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

Projecting the reported data on a map (see map 1) is eye-opening. Red dots indicating restriction or harassment incidents against UNIFIL are widespread across much of southern Lebanon. There are 128 incidents reported since 2006, with locations spread across more than fifty villages. Fifty-five percent of the incidents occurred in eleven villages, each having at least four incidents. Aytarun, Bint Jbail, and Kfar Kila accounted for six incidents each. The top three UNIFIL-bashing villages are Aita al-Shab with thirteen incidents, Blida with ten, and Majdel Zoun with seven. Interestingly, an

almost identical incident to the August 2018 attack in Majdel Zoun had reportedly happened on February 3, 2017, in the same place.¹⁶ Both cases involved a violent attack starting in Majdel Zoun that developed into a hot pursuit to neighboring Mansouri, with the 2018 incident ending at the gates of the UN position on the coastal road. As no serious UN response followed the first case in 2017, the aggressors of Majdel Zoun simply did it again, and once more the response was far from raising the assailants' concern or government intervention. The UN speaks softly, and the locals carry big sticks.

From a wider viewpoint, it is important to see that 30% of the incidents take place about one kilometer from the blue line, 94% are within seven kilometers of the line, and only 6% are farther away. Even more significant is the spatial division of the anti-UNIFIL campaign operations: 71% of the incidents occurred in the central sector, between Majdel Zoun in the west and Blida in the east, and in the villages to their north. This area is home to the three top-incident villages, four tunnels, and four "Green Without Borders" positions. The eastern sector, between Kfar Kila and Houla, accounts for only 16% of



the incidents and includes two tunnels and one GWB position. Farther east lies the Mount Dov/Shebaa area with 7%. The area around Tyre accounts for 6%, with almost half of its incidents related to arms depots explosions. Evident “quiet areas” with few reported incidents lie around Tyre in the northwest and around Naqoura in the southwest.

The geographical layout of incidents can be explained by several causes, combining density of Hezbollah military presence and activity level, intensity of UNIFIL patrols, the national battalions’ specific conduct and assertiveness, the troops’ experience and skill, and their assailants’ posture and aggressiveness. Beyond operational reasons, different national reporting standards may also account for the reported incident footprint.

Dividing the reported incidents by the UN contributing countries’ deployment, it is interesting to see that the Republic of Korea had an impressive zero reported incidents; the Indian battalion’s sector accounts for 2% of the reported incidents; the Indonesians account for 6%, half of which are in the border town Adaisseh; the Spanish account for 9%, half of which are in Kafr Kila; Nepal and Italy each account for 13%, with over a half of the former’s incidents in Blida and a third of the latter’s in Majdel Zoun; Ghana and Malaysia reported 15% and 16%, respectively (see maps 2 and 3, the latter an overlay of maps 1 and 2). But the most active sector, accounting for 25% of the reported incidents, is in the Bint Jbail area, currently under the Irish battalion’s responsibility. This area, from which the September 1,

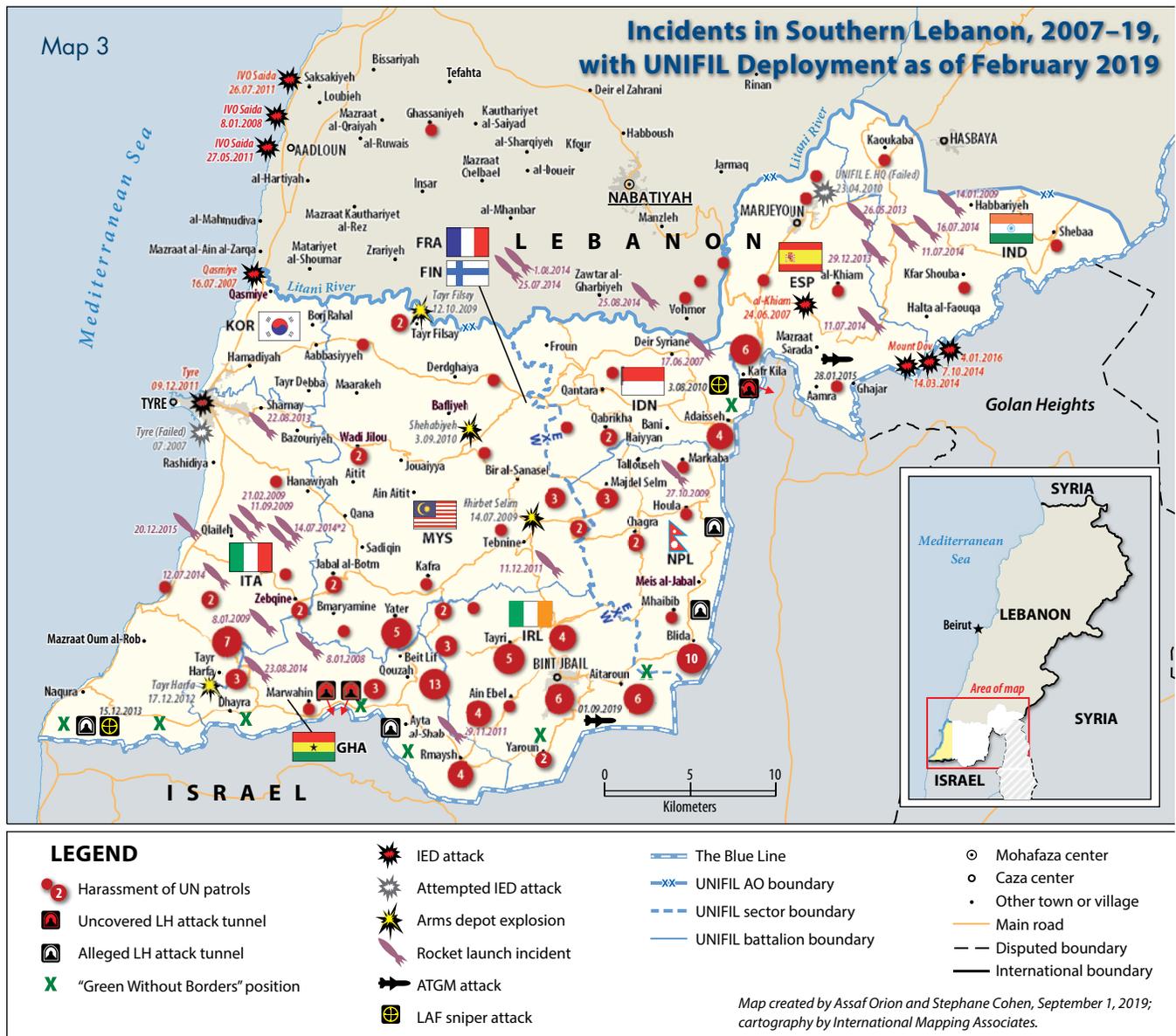
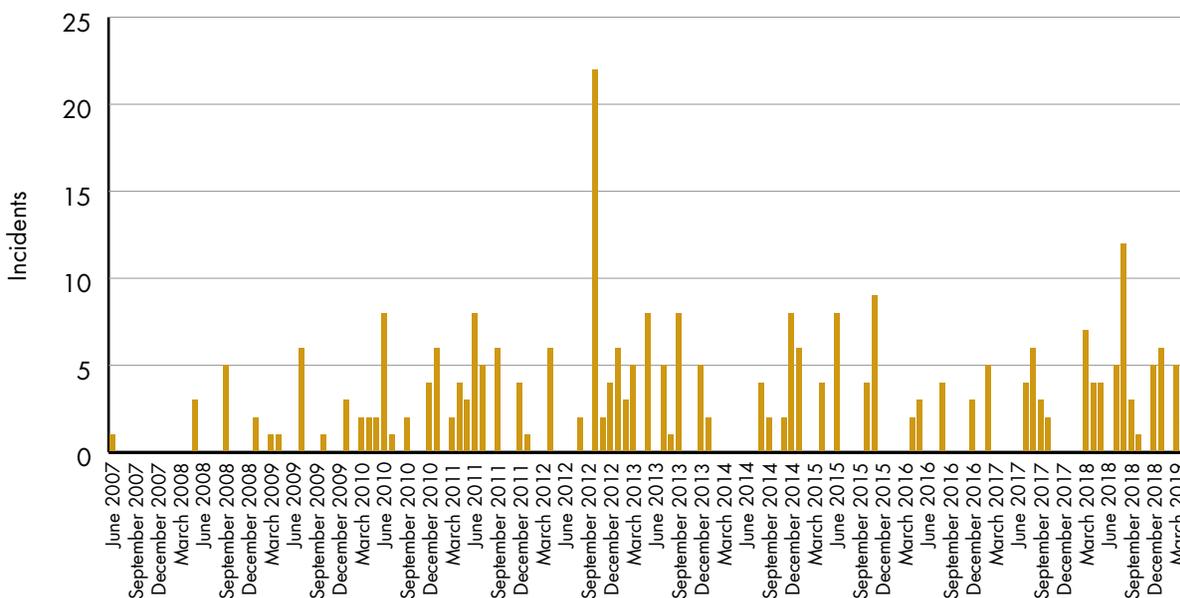


Figure 1. Obstruction or Violent Incidents over Time



2019, antitank missile attack on Israel was launched, was previously under the responsibility of France and later Finland. Gradually, both nations relinquished their territorial responsibility and moved northward to serve as the Force Commander's Reserve. With all other battalions steady in their sectors, it is quite reasonable to assume that the high friction and harassment in the Bint Jbail area have taken their toll and incentivized the French and Fins to disengage and leave, a clear indication of the cumulative effect of Hezbollah's campaign on UNIFIL forces and behaviors.

CHRONOLOGY AND TRENDS

Laying out the harassment and obstruction experiences over time, as drawn from the UN reports, shows Hezbollah's campaign tempo. In absolute numbers, the average incident rate is about two per month over the last twelve years, a seemingly marginal phenomenon (see figure 1). But looking at the yearly trend of monthly averages reveals the contours of Hezbollah's campaign. A quiet year passed after the June 2007 lethal IED attack on the Spanish peacekeepers in al-Khiam. The following year saw initial reports of three incidents in June 2008. By 2009, the low monthly incident average doubled to one per month, doubling again in 2010. The years 2011–13 peaked with another 50% rise in the monthly incident average, owing to a record twenty-two

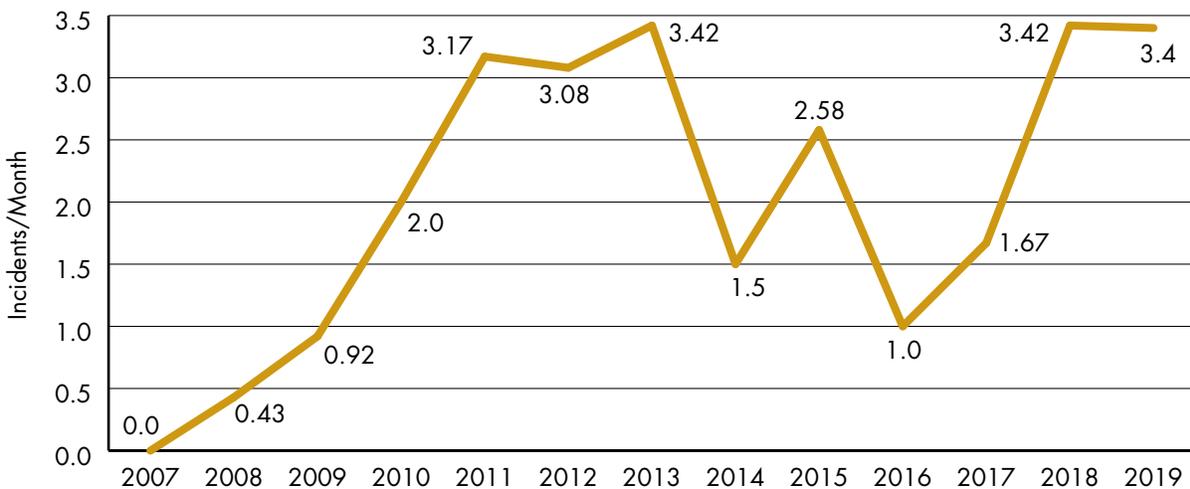
incidents in October 2012 alone and numerous multiple-incident months between June 2011 and August 2013. In 2014, the average halved, in 2015 it rose by over 70%, and in 2016 it dropped back to 2009 levels. By 2016, however, it rose again by nearly 70%, more than doubled by 2018, and until May 2019 the average once more hovered at its 2013 peak.

It is noteworthy that about half of the months covered in UN reports are seemingly eventless. Another 20% have an average of up to three incidents, and 27% of the months saw four incidents or more, or at least one incident per week. As a typical peacekeeper's tour is four to six months long, it is highly likely that all UNIFIL troops are exposed to either Hezbollah's physical harassment or to its threatening presence as a force in UNIFIL's AOR. The long-term effect is cumulative habituation of the UN troops to the local rules of the game. Occasional reassuring remarks by UN officials about periods of relative calm evidently ignore the long-term vectors of southern Lebanon dynamics. For almost ten years there has been no respite for the blue berets in the yellow-flags land (see figure 2).

IMPLICATIONS

The analysis presented so far allows one to better read between the lines of routine UN statements such as the following from the July 2017 report: "UNIFIL did not find

Figure 2. Average Incidents per Month, 2007–19



evidence of armed personnel, weapons or infrastructure either being present in or being transferred into its area of operations. The IDF continued to allege that Hezbollah maintains military infrastructure and equipment in southern Lebanon.¹⁷ The general impression conveyed is that there is no problem because there is no evidence, despite the IDF's recognized intelligence excellence and occasional incidents proving the contrary.

The 2017 report also states that "UNIFIL monitors the area of operations...and reports all violations of resolution 1701 (2006) that it observes...In accordance with its mandate, UNIFIL does not proactively search private property for weapons in the south unless there is credible evidence of a violation...including an imminent threat of hostile activity from that location."¹⁸ Assuming that UNIFIL indeed reports all observed violations, its actual observation efficacy becomes central. Assuming that much if not all of Hezbollah's military assets are inside private properties, in accordance with its *modus operandi*, these assets are by definition out of UNIFIL's sights. The claim about UNIFIL's mandate as the obstacle to search private property is misleading, given that this impediment was a later addition by Lebanon, as already discussed. Either way, the specific conditions described here justifying a UNIFIL search at a private property were specially designed never to materialize. One can here assume that accurate intelligence arrives from a credible source about a missile launcher in a southern Lebanon home, naturally a private property. By the stated policy, no search could be initiated by UNIFIL until credible intelligence arrives that imminent launching is about to occur from the exact house. UNIFIL's own capabilities

will never generate such information. Even when Israel prewarned UNIFIL about the imminent ATGM attacks in 2015 and, more recently, in September, UNIFIL was unable to prevent them. Understandably, when Israel has such intelligence, it prefers to keep it for targeting strikes in wartime instead of effectively giving it over to Hezbollah through a UNIFIL and then LAF liaison. Between the UN reluctance and Hezbollah's crippling campaign, the real value of UNIFIL monitoring and evidence generating as a basis for judging realities on the ground is illusory at best.

"Where specific information is received regarding the illegal presence of armed personnel, weapons or infrastructure inside its area of operations, UNIFIL, in cooperation with the LAF, remains determined to act with all means available within its mandate and capabilities. The LAF command continued to confirm that it would act immediately to put an end to any illegal activity in contravention of resolution 1701 (2006) and relevant Government decisions."¹⁹

As seen in more than thirty rocket and IED attacks since 2006, and recently in the September 2019 ATGM attack, weapons are present in UNIFIL's AOR, revealed at their user's decision. Four cases in which Hezbollah's arms depots blew up were just as surprising to their owners as to UNIFIL, but even then UNIFIL was prevented from accessing and inspecting them afterward, brutalized when it insisted. Both UNIFIL's declared determination and the LAF command's outspoken commitment to immediately address any contravention of 1701 fell flat when the IDF exposed Hezbollah's attack tunnels in December 2018, and again after the September 2019 missile attack. Almost a year of no action, except denied

UNIFIL access, procrastination, and empty promises from Lebanon, accurately represents the general state of play. Two months after a blatant missile launch into Israel, UNIFIL is still denied access to the launching positions, conveniently located on “private property.” Recurring UNIFIL requests to the Lebanese government, from the president on down, are to no avail.

After thirteen years under Hezbollah’s yoke, UNIFIL is a far cry from what was envisioned by the authors of 1701 and also quite distant from what its UN masters portray in their reports. Its ways and means, clipped by Hezbollah’s campaign and constrained by risk aversion, are ill fit to contend with Hezbollah’s gray-zone operations. UNIFIL’s presumed omnipresence is clearly obstructed and partial, its monitoring limited, and its documentation incapacitated.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis and the evident gaps in UNIFIL’s mission and conduct, and recognizing the political landscape and constraints that have shaped the UNIFIL environment so far, recommendations follow, in descending order, from the desirable to the probably achievable.

Ideally, UNIFIL should enjoy full access and movement in its AOR, with the full support of the LAF. This would allow UNIFIL to discover the full scope of Hezbollah’s military deployment in the south, credibly witnessed by the UN, enabling the international community to take political, diplomatic, and economic steps to rectify the gross violation and to remove the serious threat to international security. Hezbollah’s resistance to this discovery is self-evident, as is its willingness to prevent it by force. The Lebanese government will continue to support Hezbollah, with sovereignty and privacy as pretexts, preventing exposure and remedy.

Optimistically, it would be useful to demand full and immediate UNIFIL access to any credibly indicated illicit military location, even without an imminent threat and despite its location in an alleged private property. International actors should demand that Lebanon allow the LAF immediate access to private property without judicial recourse, and UNIFIL must likewise demand immediate escorted access when justified. A positive first step would be to enact this policy change along a strip two kilometers deep in Lebanese territory along the blue line, where much of Hezbollah’s frontline operations are taking place. It would be right to demand from UNIFIL’s

troops that they assert their mandate, and definitely fair to allow them real self-defense against their attackers, including by using force. But these recommendations are sure to fall flat against resistance from all the guardians of the status quo, from the Security Council members, through UNIFIL troop contributors’ capitals, and down to the Hezbollah teams in the field.

More realistically, it would be desirable to insist on full mission documentation; forbidding UNIFIL from handing over gear and erasing photography should be a minimal step. Troops, equipped with compact action cameras and online tracking systems, could log timed image, sound, and geolocation records, and reclaim the evidence high ground. Big data can be quite useful in creating situational awareness, while facial recognition can help in denying the perpetrators the shelter of anonymity; it can provide a solid alternative for mission analysis to the scant shreds used in the current reporting. This change does not necessitate a change of mandate, only a change of tools, while making clear to the Lebanese government and its Hezbollah masters that the time of blindfolded peacekeeping is over.

Moreover, UNIFIL reporting should be more frequent and more detailed, with an immediate reporting of any incident of obstruction, harassment, or assault. UNIFIL should report all its patrol routes, as well as its civilian projects and local hiring. UNIFIL and the national forces should suspend services, hiring, and funded projects to any village in which its forces are harassed or stopped, until full proceedings are taken and justice is served on the perpetrators. Casualty numbers and cost of damages to UN equipment should be reported, and compensation should be demanded from Lebanon and the local municipalities. In general, to bridge the distance between the operational ground and the political theater at UN headquarters, a UNIFIL force commander should be asked to provide an in-person briefing at the periodic Security Council discussions covering reports on Resolution 1701.

Given that most of the previous recommendations are expected to be blocked—even the more modest ones just set forth—the time has come to admit that UNIFIL’s force structure far exceeds its actual permissions and real efficacy. Any attempt to match size and missions by downsizing the force, however, will meet fierce resistance from large troop contributors, for which the UNIFIL budget generates a good return for units in Lebanon. Others will object to the negative message

conveyed by downsizing and warn against UNIFIL collapse, conveniently overlooking that between 2008 and 2012, the force was quietly cut by three thousand troops without serious consequences.²⁰

To achieve its most vital missions, UNIFIL should focus on its primary functions: it should strengthen its liaison capabilities, which are key to de-escalating communications between the parties, bringing it to several dozen officers; and it should maintain strong interposition capability, a useful tool, requiring about three thousand troops, for tactical deconfliction along the blue line.

A first step that would send a good signal of “business not as usual” would be, on paper, to cut the force’s cap from 15,000 down to 10,500, its current size. A next and more important step would be to cut 10% of

the troops and budget and conduct a strategic review toward the next mandate renewal in August 2020. If no progress is then made to improve the grim situation of the force in rolling back Hezbollah’s campaign against it in southern Lebanon, further cuts should follow.

Finally, because the UN is the line of most resistance, Israel and the United States should focus their efforts on like-minded governments, addressing both their contingents in Lebanon and their policy toward its government and the LAF. At the end of the day, should a war in Lebanon erupt, it is those governments that will see their troops caught in a blazing battlefield. Planning for their safety and possible evacuation is a final recommendation certain to draw interest, given that it is achievable for every troop contributor, regardless of UN politics.

NOTES

1. UN Security Council, "UN Security Council Resolution 2485 (2019)," August 29, 2019, [https://undocs.org/s/res/2485\(2019\)](https://undocs.org/s/res/2485(2019)).
2. Ben Evansky, "UN Peacekeeping Patrol Filmed Coming Under Attack by Hezbollah in Lebanon," Fox News, August 28, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/un-peacekeeping-patrol-filmed-coming-under-attack-by-hezbollah-in-lebanon>.
3. UN Security Council, "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) During the Period from 21 June to 26 October 2018," November 15, 2018, <https://undocs.org/S/2018/1029>.
4. "04/08/18 Hezbollah Attacks UNIFIL soldiers in Lebanon—Majdel Zoun base," YouTube video, 2:47, posted by Luka Novak, August 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTSGle5QM20&feature=youtu.be>.
5. See Office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, "Secretary-General Reports on 1701," <https://unscil.unmissions.org/secretary-general-reports-1701>; UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted August 11, 2006, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1701>.
6. UN Interim Force in Lebanon, "UNIFIL Mandate," updated September 6, 2019, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-mandate>.
7. UN Security Council, "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) During the Period from 18 February to 24 June 2019," July 17, 2019, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/574>.
8. UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006): Reporting from the Period 1 March to 28 June 2013," June 26, 2013, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/N1337562.pdf>.
9. "UNIFIL Shops for Drones to Monitor Border Zone," *Daily Star*, January 3, 2007, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2007/Jan-03/44815-unifil-shops-for-drones-to-monitor-border-zone.ashx>; "Des Drones Français en Renfort au Liban-Sud?" *Le Figaro*, December 7, 2006, https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2006/12/07/01003-20061207ART-WWW90345-des_drones_francais_en_renfort_au_liban_sud_.php; Jeannine Jalkh, "Éclairage L'Affaire des Drones Français Relance le Débat sur la Mission de la Finul II," *L'Orient le Jour*, January 9, 2007, https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/549203/ECLAIRAGE%2527affaire_des_drones_francais_relance_le_debat_sur_la_mission_de_la_Finul_IIJeanine_JALKH.html.
10. UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006)," June 27, 2008, <https://undocs.org/S/2008/425>.
11. UN Security Council, "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) During the Period from 18 February to 24 June 2019," July 17, 2019, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/574>.
12. UN Security Council, "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) During the Period from 21 June to 26 October 2018," November 15, 2018, <https://undocs.org/S/2018/1029>.
13. David Schenker, "Preserving UN Peacekeeping in the Levant," PolicyWatch 1948, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 6, 2012, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/preserving-un-peacekeeping-in-the-levant>.
14. UN Security Council, "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006): Reporting Period from 28 February to 26 June 2014," June 26, 2014, <https://undocs.org/S/2014/438>.
15. UNIFIL, "UNIFIL Mandate," last updated September 6, 2019, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-mandate>; UN Security Council, "UN Security Council Resolution 2485 (2019)," August 29, 2019, [https://undocs.org/s/res/2485\(2019\)](https://undocs.org/s/res/2485(2019)).
16. UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006): Reporting Period from 5 November 2016 to 28 February 2017," March 8, 2017, <https://undocs.org/S/2017/201>.
17. UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006): Reporting Period from 9 March to 21 June 2017," July 11, 2017, <https://undocs.org/S/2017/591>.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. UNIFIL, Infographics, "UNIFIL by Numbers," <https://unifil.unmissions.org/infographics>.

THE AUTHOR



BRIG. GEN. ASSAF ORION (RES.) is the Liz and Mony Rueven International Fellow with The Washington Institute, focusing on Israel's regional political-military strategy. Before retiring from the military in 2016, Orion headed the Strategic Division in the Planning Directorate of the IDF General Staff, a role that included coordinating communication with UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces. He is also currently a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, where he heads the counter-BDS program and the Israel-China program.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
1111 19TH STREET NW • WASHINGTON, DC 20036
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG