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UNIFIL's Yearly Mandate Renewal: Maintain Ends, Change Ways and Means

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Brief Analysis

Most parties would be happy maintaining the status quo, but staying course on the current security trends is unsustainable and may lead to escalation unless the Security Council revises its peacekeeping mission and procedures.

Next month marks the fourteenth anniversary of the 2006 Lebanon war and [UN Security Council Resolution 1701](#), and hence the annual debate over renewing the mandate of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which expires August 31. Hezbollah and the Lebanese government and army have continued to erode 1701 and UNIFIL's effectiveness, but a unique combination of national crises may provide a rare opportunity to reverse some of the negative security trends. As [U.S. permanent representative Kelly Craft told](#) the Security Council on May 4, "Hezbollah openly flaunts its weaponry, flagrantly disregards Resolution 1701, [and] dictates to UNIFIL where and when it can patrol...The government of Lebanon is preventing the mission from fulfilling its mandate by denying it access...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."

LATEST REPORTS, THREATS, AND INCIDENTS

When UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres issued his [latest assessment](#) of UNIFIL on June 1, he recommended transforming it into "a more agile and mobile force with improved monitoring capacity," equipped with high-mobility light tactical and reconnaissance vehicles in order to foster "better situational

awareness” and “a lighter footprint.” The report also proposed decreasing troops near the Litani River, reconfiguring second-echelon units, focusing force density near the Blue Line and other strategic locations, and removing a ship from UNIFIL’s six-vessel Maritime Task Force.

The winds of change were not lost on Hezbollah, which continued its [anti-access campaign against UNIFIL](#). Since early May, at least three more incidents have been reported between UN patrols and locals in the southern village of Blida, an infamous hotspot for harassment. When President Michel Aoun met with the UNIFIL chief on May 21, he prescribed coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as a remedy to such incidents. Then, on May 25, media outlets and tweets began pounding UNIFIL for its supposed “aggressive patrolling” and harassment of villagers. The municipalities of Blida, Meis al-Jabal, and Mhaibib declared that they would be suspending all meetings with UNIFIL and barring its patrols from entering their villages unless they coordinate in advance with local authorities and the LAF. For his part, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah mentioned the 1701 renewal issue in a May 27 speech, claiming that Israel was pressing the United States to change UNIFIL’s mission so that the force could operate without LAF coordination. He also declared that he could not care less if UNIFIL stays, leaves, or is altered in size, since the force is more in Israel’s interest than Lebanon’s.

Commentators in the Hezbollah-affiliated *al-Akhbar* repeatedly echoed such sentiments. On May 27, they accused UNIFIL of “working in service of the enemy”; on June 12, they argued that the UN secretary-general was trying to define the force’s role as “spying on the Resistance,” noting that Hezbollah will not accept such changes and will respond “unexpectedly.”

Meanwhile, Lebanon’s government decided to extend UNIFIL’s mandate by another year without amendment on May 29, soon after Prime Minister Hassan Diab insisted on maintaining its current size. The next day, Hezbollah’s al-Manar television quoted Russia’s ambassador as saying that any attempts to change UNIFIL’s mission would fail. And in a June 3 meeting with the UN special coordinator for Lebanon and the British, Chinese, French, Russian, and U.S. ambassadors, President Aoun both commended and conditioned UNIFIL’s mission. According to Lebanon’s constitution, he argued, “Private properties must be respected, accessing them requires prior authorization and escort from the concerned Lebanese authorities.” In other words, he effectively endorsed those who deny UNIFIL access to illicit military sites—for example, the “private property” label has been applied to such locations as a missile launch site and a cross-border attack tunnel entry.

UNSUSTAINABLE “STATUS QUO”

Currently, all stakeholders see common value in continuing UNIFIL’s liaison and de-escalation roles. They also derive various benefits from the force’s current status: European contributors enjoy the political-military influence it confers; Beirut enjoys the revenues and veneer of legitimacy associated with hosting a sizable UN force; Hezbollah leaders enjoy UNIFIL paying for projects in their southern heartland and hiring hundreds of local staff, so long as the force stays out of their business; and so forth. Another year of no change would please many of these actors, Hezbollah most of all.

Yet this status quo is an illusion. To prevent another war—UNIFIL’s original goal—the force needs to effectively discharge its mandate of limiting illicit military operations in the south or at least honestly report on them, but neither of these minimal requirements has been fulfilled. Instead, the Lebanese government has stepped up its efforts to prevent UNIFIL from encountering or exposing Hezbollah activities; the security margins established by Resolution 1701 [have further eroded](#); and Hezbollah has increased its strength and activities in UNIFIL’s area of operations. This state of affairs is more than just a mission core failure—it represents a dangerous slope toward unwarranted escalation, as the UN’s June report correctly notes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When the Security Council takes up UNIFIL's renewal next month, it would do well to implement the secretary-general's latest recommendations and unfulfilled parts of previous resolutions. Improvements should focus on four areas:

Enhance the Security Council's oversight. Rather than addressing UNIFIL's status just once a year under frozen parameters, the council should conduct a thorough review of the force's mandate, size, operations, and access two to three times annually. This can be achieved by holding deeper discussions when the secretary-general issues his periodical reports on UNIFIL or, preferably, by shortening the force's mandate to just six months, as done with other missions (e.g., UNDOF). In addition, authorities should regularly present concrete indicators of alleged progress toward an illicit-weapons-free zone south of the Litani River, discuss right-sizing the force each renewal period, and thoroughly review its effectiveness at least once a year.

Decrease UNIFIL's size and budget. The force should be immediately reduced by 10-20 percent, its maritime component decreased by one vessel, and its maximum authorized number cut from 15,000 to 8,000-10,000. UNIFIL should be reshaped according to the secretary-general's call for a light, mobile, well-protected mission with advanced monitoring and situational awareness capabilities. These reductions would show Beirut that military support is neither infinite nor unconditional, while prodding it to fulfill its commitments to Resolution 1701, reducing the risk to peacekeepers in case of escalation, and curbing the amount of UN funding to Hezbollah's support base.

Fine-tune UNIFIL operations. Several changes recommended in the secretary-general's report should be implemented as soon as possible:

- Grant UNIFIL full access to the entire Blue Line and increase its presence there, at the expense of activity in deeper areas where mobile reserves should be operating
- Grant free access to open areas and roads, including those barred under the "private property" pretext.
- Permit UNIFIL to patrol independent of the LAF and without detailed pre-approval each time
- Allow UNIFIL to enter and search premises for preventive inspection purposes within twenty-four hours of request, later subject to Security Council review of each case
- Require Lebanon to provide a detailed property ownership map and clarify how it will reconcile its commitments to Resolution 1701 with its claims that private properties are constitutionally excluded
- Replace Hezbollah's "[Green Without Borders](#)" observation positions with LAF or UNIFIL posts
- Remove superfluous UN positions and add more relevant ones in coordination with the parties
- Stop illegal immigrants from [crossing the Blue Line into Israel](#)
- Strengthen UNIFIL's liaison staff

In addition, Israel may allow UNIFIL to open its long-desired Tel Aviv liaison office as a measure of goodwill, though without implying any UNIFIL authority in Israel.

Enhance transparency and documentation. UNIFIL units should be equipped with blue trackers, body and vehicle cameras, and other situational awareness gear. Facial-recognition capabilities would facilitate identification of those who attack or impede patrols, enabling Lebanese criminal proceedings or international sanctions against them. The Security Council should be immediately notified of any such incidents; moreover, the UNIFIL commander should provide a monthly operational report with detailed maps and graphs showing the exact time and location of patrols and incidents (categorized by foot, vehicle, and air), as well as all areas where access is denied. A military information cell should be established at UN headquarters and given access to UNIFIL's geographical operational

database, so that member states can obtain timely and accurate situation reports on demand. UNIFIL should also provide regular reports on the following: all of its civilian projects by location and budget; any case in which the LAF prevents UNIFIL personnel from crossing into Israel; and all outstanding issues with Lebanon, including long-delayed legal procedures against suspects who have attacked or harassed patrols.

Hezbollah and its allies will no doubt try to resist these changes via threats, intimidation, and Russian/Chinese vetoes at the Security Council. One way to overcome such opposition is to present this “no change” camp with a U.S. “change or veto” ultimatum—that is, change UNIFIL or watch its renewal get vetoed in August. Since all actors want to maintain the force, this type of shock therapy could convince them to allow improvements on some or all of the above issues. Given Lebanon’s [ongoing crisis](#), now is the time for creative negotiations on mutually beneficial policies, including progress on security arrangements, Blue Line marking, water/agricultural issues, and East Mediterranean natural gas prospects.

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