

Lebanon's Crisis and UNIFIL's Mandate Renewal

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#), [Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



[Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](#)

Assaf Orion, a retired Israeli brigadier general and defense strategist whose broad research scope ranges from relations with China to Israel's regional political-military strategy and policy, is the Liz and Mony Rueven International Fellow with The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

To make UNIFIL more effective and prevent dangerous destabilization in the south, the Security Council should review the force's mandate more frequently, reallocate its resources to better fit its mission, make reporting more transparent and accurate, and hold the government and LAF accountable for their obstruction.

When the mandate for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon expires on August 31, it will almost certainly be renewed in a “technical rollover”—UN parlance for approving an extension without substantive changes. Created in the aftermath of Israel's 1978 invasion, UNIFIL was initially tasked with reestablishing security and governmental authority south of the Litani River; following the 2006 war, its duties and size were expanded to prevent the Iranian-backed Shia militia Hezbollah from stockpiling or using arms there. Yet despite performing various useful functions, the force has not made significant progress on any of these core security tasks over the decades. On August 6, Hezbollah fired nineteen rockets into Israel, and its secretary-general threatened to escalate attacks—part of a backdrop of increasing border tensions, additional rocket incidents, responding artillery fire, and the first Israeli airstrike in Lebanon in years.

Notwithstanding UNIFIL's shortcomings, France and other Security Council members will surely resist any

significant modifications to its mandate or composition in light of Lebanon's **deteriorating economic and security situation** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assessing-lebanons-political-paralysis-economic-crisis-and-challenges-us-policy>). Instead of fighting a losing battle against this consensus, the Biden administration should use the mandate renewal discussion to highlight the force's reporting and operational deficiencies with an eye toward making changes down the road. Washington should also raise pressing questions about how the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and civilian officials in Beirut obstruct UNIFIL's mandate.

Last Year's Changes Did Not Prevent Violations

As the previous UNIFIL mandate renewal approached in summer 2020, Hezbollah was steadily expanding the size and scope of its military activities in south Lebanon despite the presence of over 10,000 UNIFIL troops. The Trump administration sought to address this problem in the Security Council. On May 4 of that year, U.S. permanent representative Kelly Craft told the council that Hezbollah was still "dictat[ing] to UNIFIL where and when it can patrol," and that the government was "preventing the mission from fulfilling its mandate by denying it access to sites inside its area of operations." Although certain aspects of the mandate drew praise—including the Maritime Task Force, the "stabilizing" troop presence along the Blue Line, and the tripartite mechanism that allowed Israeli and Lebanese officers to meet routinely under UNIFIL's auspices—Craft also noted that the force's success cannot be measured solely in terms of "the quantity or frequency of operational activities." The time had come, she concluded, to either "empower UNIFIL" sufficiently to pursue its core mandate or downsize it consistent with the limited tasks it was actually accomplishing.

This reform initiative was backed by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who reportedly threatened to veto the renewal absent substantial changes. Yet while some meaningful revisions were made, they were insufficient, and the administration ultimately decided against a veto.

One useful change was to specify more frequent reporting about UNIFIL's implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. The **latest report** (<https://undocs.org/S/2021/650>), issued in July and spanning February 20-June 18, 2021, details the ongoing security regression in the force's area of responsibility, including a spike in rocket launches toward Israel and repeated border violations by Lebanese "protestors." The report also mentions allegations of "arms transfers to non-State actors," then notes that UNIFIL "is not in a position to substantiate" these allegations—despite boasting the world's densest concentration of peacekeepers per kilometer. In addition, the document enumerates Israeli airspace violations in contravention of Resolution 1701.

Another refinement in the reporting has been an added focus on UNIFIL's lack of access to locations in the south. According to the July report, LAF authorities "continued to object" to certain patrol routes that UNIFIL proposed with the aim of expanding its presence "outside main routes and municipal centres"—that is, in areas most likely to be occupied by Hezbollah. Despite "repeated formal requests to the LAF," UNIFIL had "yet to gain full access to several sites of interest," including military areas controlled by Hezbollah's so-called "Green Without Borders" organization and the entrances to four Hezbollah cross-border attack tunnels, which Israel discovered along the Blue Line almost three years ago. The report goes on to describe how the LAF has delayed UNIFIL access to rocket launch sites and dismantled launchpads before units arrived on scene, thereby tampering with investigations.

In addition to LAF obstruction, the report notes that "individuals in civilian clothes" blocked UNIFIL's access to sites, assaulted its personnel, and stole its equipment. Such actors also physically barred UNIFIL from installing Security Council-approved cameras inside its positions for better observation of hostile activities along the Blue Line.

Recommendations

The findings of the July report confirm a longstanding pattern of collusion between Lebanese government institutions, the LAF, and Hezbollah to prevent UNIFIL from implementing its mandate. For years, the Security

Council has resisted changing the force for fear of destabilizing the country, yet UNIFIL's current limitations actually promote long-term instability by allowing Hezbollah to continue dangerous activities unchecked—from rampant cross-border drug and weapons smuggling to military activities of the type that sparked the destructive 2006 war. To enhance UNIFIL's performance, the Biden administration should consider the following steps:

Review the mandate more frequently. At present, the Security Council holds substantive discussions on UNIFIL just once a year, when its mandate comes up for renewal. Given the volatility of the Lebanese theater, however, putting oversight of UNIFIL's performance on autopilot is not a sound approach. Instead of annual renewal, the mandate should be reexamined every six months—the same timeframe used for much less complex missions such as the UN Disengagement Observer Force in the Golan Heights.

More transparent reporting. Despite the improvements made to UN reporting requirements last year, more details and geographical data are needed. Whenever UN personnel are assaulted, barred from accessing a site, or otherwise impeded, the exact coordinates of the incident should be given. Moreover, the UNIFIL activities database should be made available for all Security Council members to scrutinize, and the secretary-general should issue reports four times a year rather than three. Far from threatening Lebanon's stability, improved reporting would be a vital step toward fact-based policy discussions.

Reallocate resources. Given UNIFIL's limited efficacy, the force can and should be downsized—its ceiling should be lowered from 13,000 to 9,000 troops, and its normal operating size from about 10,500 to 8,500. This reduction could lower UNIFIL's \$500 million annual budget by nearly \$100 million, and without degrading security; last year, for example, its Maritime Task Force was reduced from six ships to five with no discernible impact. Some of UNIFIL's budget savings could then be used to help provision LAF units stationed in the south—assuming the budget- and morale-challenged Lebanese institution can improve its performance and stop obstructing UN personnel.

Hold the government and LAF accountable. Lebanese civilian and military officials need to be held accountable for obstructing Security Council resolutions and failing to protect peacekeepers. UNIFIL officials should be more explicit in calling out the LAF when it prevents them from implementing their mandate, and in calling out the government when it does not promptly bring individuals to justice for assaulting UN personnel. The LAF also has an obligation to ensure UNIFIL can install cameras to monitor the Blue Line and improve force protection. As Washington, Paris, and the European Union implement or consider new sanctions on Lebanese officials responsible for obstructing government formation and reforms, they should likewise target civilian and LAF figures who obstruct implementation of Resolution 1701. At minimum, if the LAF proves unwilling to change, UNIFIL should be empowered to increase its patrolling without LAF escorts and put a hold on economic benefits.

Scrap ambitious plans for the LAF. The UN has previously proposed transferring its Maritime Task Force responsibilities to the Lebanese Navy and supporting a planned LAF “model regiment” project in the south. Yet these goals should be shelved given the state's **[more pressing priorities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mikati-government-will-not-save-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mikati-government-will-not-save-lebanon)** and the LAF's limited ability to achieve and maintain them. Foreign funding for the LAF should now be focused on **[ensuring the institution's preservation \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/preserving-lebanese-armed-forces-amid-state-decline\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/preserving-lebanese-armed-forces-amid-state-decline)** amid the state's collapse.

Demand cooperation on investigations. Beirut and the LAF have been reticent to cooperate with UNIFIL investigations into assaults against UN personnel, let alone independently investigate these incidents themselves. In multiple cases, the LAF has not even answered the UN's repeated requests for access to sites within UNIFIL's area of responsibility. The secretary-general should compile and present a comprehensive list of these unanswered questions as an annex to future reports. Officials should also press Beirut to share all information regarding the assassination of Lokman Slim, a critic of Hezbollah who was **abducted and killed**

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/other-khashoggis-dissidents-danger-across-middle-east>) in the vicinity of a UNIFIL position.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute. From 2019 to January 2021, he served as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Res.) is the Institute's Rueven International Fellow and former head of the Strategic Division in the IDF General Staff's Planning Directorate. ❖

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