

# How to Avoid Another Lost Year for UNIFIL

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Brief Analysis

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**At this point, even if the “interim” force was somehow able and willing to implement its mandate in southern Lebanon, it might not be enough to prevent war—but Washington should still press for whatever reforms it can.**

**O**n June 8, during a visit to the frontier with Lebanon, Israel Defense Forces northern commander Maj. Gen. Amir Baram stated that Hezbollah “has intensified construction on its posts right here along the border” and “is continuing to build its terrorist assets despite the presence of UNIFIL forces close to its positions.” His unusually pointed statement highlighted Israel’s mounting frustration with both the Iran-backed militia and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, which remains reluctant to fulfill its mandate. The same week, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened to attack a natural gas drilling vessel that had **just arrived at Karish field** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-karish-offshore-gas-field-facts-and-figures>), exacerbating a long-term row over disputed waters.

Against this backdrop, the UN Security Council will once again debate the renewal of UNIFIL’s mandate this summer before it expires August 31. Among other missions, the mandate defines UNIFIL’s role per Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) as helping the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) ensure that the area south of the Litani River is “free of any armed personnel, assets, and weapons” other than those of the LAF and UNIFIL. This mission has never been fulfilled—in fact, the security situation in UNIFIL’s area of responsibility has degenerated since the last Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006, and its peacekeepers have curtailed their role under ongoing violent pressure from

Hezbollah, whose military presence in the south now far exceeds its prewar levels. Absent a concerted U.S. effort to reengineer the force's mandate and operational conduct, the security situation along the Israel-Lebanon border will continue to deteriorate, and the war that all parties seek to avoid will draw nearer.

## Deja Vu All Over Again

Several attempts to reverse these trends have been made since 2017, but to no avail. In 2020, the Trump administration sought to reform UNIFIL, threatening to veto its renewal if the mandate was not changed. Some modifications were made in response, including increased reporting requirements, insertion of language calling on the Lebanese government to facilitate “prompt and full access to sites requested by UNIFIL for the purpose of swift investigation,” and a decrease in the force's troop cap from 15,000 to 13,000—a largely symbolic step intended to reflect Washington's exasperation with the organization's failures. Yet these alterations had no discernible impact on UNIFIL's effectiveness. In August 2021, the Biden administration voted to renew the force's mandate without substantive changes.

UNIFIL's activities and challenges are most clearly visible in the three reports it issues each year regarding implementation of Resolution 1701. These documents are largely boilerplate repetitions of prior reports, save for the extensive descriptions of new political and economic developments in Lebanon and the sections detailing the most serious violations of the prior four months. Disturbingly, the longstanding trend of restricted access and **violent harassment (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hiding-plain-sight-hezbollahs-campaign-against-unifil>)** of peacekeepers appears to be increasing.

The **most recent UN-issued UNIFIL report (<https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/implementation-security-council-resolution-1701-2006-during-period-26-october-2021-18>)** was released March 11 and covers the period October 26, 2021, to February 18, 2022. In describing the inhospitable operational environment on the ground, the document provides insight into why UNIFIL is not implementing its mandate. “Despite repeated requests,” it notes, “UNIFIL has yet to gain full access to several locations of interest, including several Green Without Borders sites,” referring to Hezbollah's **supposed “environmental NGO” (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/green-without-borders-operational-benefits-hezbollahs-environmental-ngo>)** locations. The report also warns that UNIFIL “faced an increasing number of restrictions to its movements and an increasing level of aggressive behaviour and confrontation,” including attacks that resulted in the hospitalization of troops and damage to UN equipment. During one incident on January 13, six individuals armed with assault rifles, machetes, and metal rods “approached a UNIFIL patrol in Ayta al-Sha'b and demanded that it [leave] the area.”

After one particularly serious attack on a UNIFIL monitoring convoy last December, the organization took the unusual step of issuing a pointed **statement (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2022-01-05/note-correspondents-response-questions-attack-against-un-patrol-lebanon>)** implicitly criticizing Beirut: “The denial of UNIFIL's freedom of movement and any aggression against those serving the cause of peace is unacceptable and violates the Status of Forces Agreement between the United Nations and the Government of Lebanon. As required under Security Council Resolution 1701, UNIFIL must have full and unimpeded access throughout its area of operations...We call on the Lebanese authorities to investigate quickly and thoroughly, and prosecute all those responsible for these crimes.”

In short, past reports, the latest report, and presumably the next report due out in July all say essentially the same thing:

- UNIFIL, the UN's largest peacekeeping force, still lacks access to significant areas under its purview sixteen years after the adoption of Resolution 1701
- UNIFIL still cannot substantiate “allegations of arms transfers” to Hezbollah

- The Lebanese state is still not meeting its obligations to UNIFIL, despite repeatedly committing to do so
- The LAF is actively contributing to restrictions on UNIFIL's freedom of operation

Perhaps the most salient symbol of this endless impasse is the attack conducted against a UNIFIL patrol on August 4, 2018, just days before former head of mission Gen. Stefano Del Col of Italy began his tour of duty. Nearly four years later, his successor, Maj. Gen. Aroldo Lazaro Saenz of Spain, is still waiting (in vain, one gathers) for the perpetrators to be brought to justice. And the violations continue: on June 11, a UNIFIL patrol in al-Louaize district was confronted by men in civilian clothes who threatened the peacekeepers and attempted to take their weapons.

## What Is to Be Done?

**P**reoccupied with Ukraine, a looming recession at home, and Lebanon's slow-motion financial collapse, the Biden administration is unlikely to press for the **deeper changes** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-crisis-and-unifils-mandate-renewal>) needed in UNIFIL's mandate this summer. And even if Washington took that route, Russia, China, and France would be loath to cooperate. What then can be done to even marginally improve the force's efficacy?

- **Hold the government and LAF accountable.** It is insufficient for Lebanon's president to apologize for attacks on UNIFIL troops when the government has only recently convicted assailants in one such incident—from 1980. If Beirut is acting in ways that obstruct UNIFIL's operational freedom in violation of Security Council resolutions, this should be called out at the UN. At the same time, as the Biden administration considers a controversial initiative to pay LAF salaries via the UN, Washington should press to make this conditional on not obstructing UNIFIL, at least for those LAF troops serving in the UN force's area of operations.
- **Establish more frequent and detailed discussions and reporting.** The Security Council holds substantive discussions on UNIFIL just once a year, when the force's mandate comes up for renewal. Given the dynamic and volatile situation on the ground, more frequent deliberations—every six months—are warranted. Provision of more data in the relevant UN reports would also be useful, including the exact coordinates of attacks against UN personnel and incidents where UNIFIL has been denied access. Moreover, the geographical database of UNIFIL activities 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.
- **Downsize the force.** UNIFIL measures the success of its mission by the numbers of patrols it takes, not by the Hezbollah weapons it interdicts or the missile and rocket launches it fails to prevent. If UNIFIL cannot or will not fulfill its mandate, then its current number of troops—around 10,500—is excessive and should be reduced commensurate with the functions it actually performs. At minimum, it could be reduced by several thousand troops with no discernible impact on its current efficacy. The large number of UN peacekeepers not only makes them a target for Hezbollah, but could also turn them into human shields in the event of a war between the militia and Israel.

Nearly forty-five years since this “interim” force was established, the Lebanese government takes UNIFIL for granted, Hezbollah essentially holds it hostage, and tensions are once again mounting along the Israel-Lebanon frontier—with more arms, more friction, and greater potential for catastrophic war. Yet the Security Council continues to resist changing the force's mandate, citing concerns about destabilizing an already tenuous status quo. Hence, UNIFIL persists as an unchanging, increasingly ineffective bureaucratic behemoth. At this point, even if the force were to implement its mandate, it might not be able to prevent war. Given the stakes, however, Washington should press for whatever reforms it can in order to forestall the worst-case scenario.

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