

# UN Forces in Lebanon Losing Ground in a Fast-Deteriorating Security Situation

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

Aug 5, 2022

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

**Despite the troubling trends and escalatory incidents described in the latest UN report, the Security Council seems intent on maintaining a failed policy instead of taking urgent action to curb the growing threat of war.**

Last month, the UN issued assessments of Lebanon that seem starkly detached from reality, at least in terms of fully appreciating the dangers threatening to erupt along the country's southern border. When the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) briefed the Security Council on July 21, these dangers were barely mentioned. In addition, the secretary-general submitted his most recent report on implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted in 2006 to monitor the cessation of hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel after their last war. Yet despite itemizing many of the troubling new developments unfolding on the ground, his report offers recommendations that are as irrelevant to the broader security situation as UNSCOL's.

In UNSCOL's [summary briefing \(https://unscol.unmissions.org/un-special-coordinator-briefs-security-council-implementation-resolution-1701-2\)](https://unscol.unmissions.org/un-special-coordinator-briefs-security-council-implementation-resolution-1701-2), "the border situation between Lebanon and Israel" is treated as an afterthought, mentioned at the end of a long list of domestic issues. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has spent the past month escalating its rhetoric and provocations. After the organization [launched unarmed drones \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-look-down-struggle-over-lebanons-airspace\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-look-down-struggle-over-lebanons-airspace) toward Israeli offshore natural gas facilities on June 29 and July 2, its leader Hassan Nasrallah [warned \(https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/291047-nasrallah-declares-beyond-karish-equation-says-war-more-honorable-than-starvation\)](https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/291047-nasrallah-declares-beyond-karish-equation-says-war-more-honorable-than-starvation), "If the objective is to prevent Lebanon from extracting oil and gas, no one will be able to extract gas and oil, no matter the consequences," noting that potential future targets included "all fields, wells, and platforms across Palestine." He then declared that "threatening with war and going to war would be more honorable than what the enemy wants for us." On July 31, Hezbollah released a [video \(https://central-](https://central-)

[media.org/36026/633](https://www.media.org/36026/633)) threatening Israel's gas vessels with antiship missiles. Such loose talk is alarming and may indicate that Nasrallah's lessons from the miscalculated 2006 war have been replaced by reckless overconfidence.

This danger is reinforced by the steady heightening of tensions along the border and inside the southern zone monitored by the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). As often reported by Israeli media, Hezbollah has stationed thousands of infantry troops from its elite Radwan unit along the Blue Line in blatant violation of Resolution 1701. The [secretary-general's report \(https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/implementation-security-council-resolution-1701-2006-during-period-19-february-20-june-2022-report-secretary-general-s2022556-enar\)](https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/implementation-security-council-resolution-1701-2006-during-period-19-february-20-june-2022-report-secretary-general-s2022556-enar), which covers the period February 19-June 20, notes that Israel continues to build T-wall obstacles along this demarcation line—indeed, Jerusalem has invested around \$900 million in such infrastructure, reflecting its grave assessment of the threat nearly four years after destroying Radwan's cross-border attack tunnels into Israel.

The report goes on to describe Hezbollah's expanding military infrastructure: "Since 30 April, UNIFIL has observed the installation of containers and prefabricated infrastructure at 11 locations...with a vantage point of the Blue Line, in the vicinity of Yarun, Hula, Ayta al-Sha'b, Blida and Rumaysh...In several cases, UNIFIL peacekeepers were warned against entering the areas...Local authorities have confirmed that some of the containers are on private land and that some belong to Green Without Borders," referring to the [environmentalist facade \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/green-without-borders-operational-benefits-hezbollahs-environmental-ngo\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/green-without-borders-operational-benefits-hezbollahs-environmental-ngo) used as cover for many Hezbollah operational observation posts.

The current report is also the first to note that the group has conducted shooting exercises at firing ranges throughout the south: "On 2 March, a UNIFIL helicopter patrol observed a firing range near Zibqin, with individuals in combat attire carrying assault weapons. UNIFIL subsequently identified three similar firing ranges from the air in remote locations near Al Qantarrah, Dayr Amis and Frun." Further shooting exercises at these locations were spotted on May 12, June 2, and June 6, and the actual number of live-fire drills is almost certainly much higher given the limited quantity and coverage of UNIFIL's air patrols. In other words, Hezbollah is frequently violating Resolution 1701 in full battle dress, in broad daylight, and in significant numbers all across UNIFIL's area of responsibility, indicating a newfound indifference to being detected by UN air surveillance even as the group continues blocking ground access to those sites.

Of course, Hezbollah has a previous track record of operating its forces in the south and using Green Without Borders sites to [threaten local Lebanese residents \(https://icibeyrouth.com/liban/105226\)](https://icibeyrouth.com/liban/105226), attack Israel, and impede UNIFIL's access to the Blue Line. Yet its current wave of new positions in operationally commanding locations and undisguised training activities indicate a wider military buildup that goes far beyond the secretary-general's expressions of "concern."

In response to these flagrant violations, the report notes that "UNIFIL has yet to gain full access" to several of the locations in question—no surprise given that the force's past requests to access tunnel and launch sites used as far back as 2018-19 remain outstanding. Hezbollah's [campaign \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hiding-plain-sight-hezbollahs-campaign-against-unifil\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hiding-plain-sight-hezbollahs-campaign-against-unifil) of hindering and terrorizing UNIFIL, injuring its personnel, damaging vehicles, and stealing gear has only intensified since February, with no less than twenty-three reported incidents. Yet despite the secretary-general calling the situation "unacceptable" and pointing out "an increasing lack of access to areas that are qualified as private property," his first proposed remedy is for "Lebanese authorities to raise awareness among local communities of the mission's mandate, including its freedom of movement"—as if security and access problems that have steadily worsened for sixteen years are a matter of public awareness rather than intentional Hezbollah strategy.

To be sure, he goes on to note that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the government in Beirut have an "obligation" to investigate harassment of UNIFIL and hold attackers accountable, but other portions of his report

illustrate how empty this formulation is given the lack of progress in criminal proceedings related to past incidents. Although making note of languishing cases from August 2018, December 2021, and January 2022 is important in terms of highlighting how Lebanon has abandoned its duties as host country, such reminders cannot be the UN's only tool for addressing the problem.

At the moment, the Security Council seems likely to renew UNIFIL's mandate later this month without any change to its size, budget, conduct, or even reporting. Internal assessments like the secretary-general's report continue to emphasize inputs (i.e., troop numbers, patrol frequency, checkpoints) while downplaying the significance of outputs—namely, an accelerating deterioration in local security metrics and a measurable increase in Hezbollah's illegal military buildup in the south. Member states will probably perpetuate the current approach with platitudes such as “Lebanon's crisis is too severe” and “changing things now will send the wrong message.” In doing so, they will be disregarding several hard truths: that the UN's main mechanism for preventing another war (i.e., making the LAF and UNIFIL the only armed forces in the south) has failed to the point of crisis; that the parties' basic interest in avoiding war may no longer outweigh the growing risk of miscalculation, particularly by Hezbollah; and that Lebanon's current economic meltdown pales in comparison to the assured devastation of another war. The UN must not let Lebanon's political and economic crises take precedence over doing what it can to avoid a catastrophic war, and [fixing UNIFIL \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-avoid-another-lost-year-unifil\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-avoid-another-lost-year-unifil)'s mission is still the main option at its disposal.

*Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Res.) is the Rueven International Fellow at The Washington Institute and former head of the Strategic Division in the IDF General Staff's Planning Directorate. ❖*

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Barzani's Failures on Freedom of Expression in Iraqi Kurdistan

Aug 4, 2022



Diary Marif

(/policy-analysis/barzanis-failures-freedom-expression-iraqi-kurdistan)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Khazali Isolated Within Muqawama Over International Zone Protests

Aug 3, 2022



Hamdi Malik,  
Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/khazali-isolated-within-muqawama-over-international-zone-protests)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Iraq's Two Coups—And How the U.S. Should Respond

Aug 2, 2022



Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/iraqs-two-coups-and-how-us-should-respond)

### TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)