

# The UNIFIL Follies Turn Deadly on the Israel-Lebanon Border

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

Jan 24, 2023

*Also published in Tablet*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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



Articles & Testimony

---

**The recent murder of an Irish peacekeeper has once again exposed the international mission as a costly failure—one that should be drastically curtailed come renewal time this summer.**

In late December, an Irish peacekeeper was killed in Lebanon. The soldier had been serving in the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon, an organization established in 1978 to stabilize the frontier between Israel and its enemies across the Lebanese border—first the PLO, and then the Iran-backed terrorist group Hezbollah. With nearly 10,000 troops from 48 nations, UNIFIL’s presence in south Lebanon represents the densest concentration of peacekeepers per square kilometer in the world. Forty-five years after this “interim” force was deployed, the Israel-Lebanon border region remains precarious, and UNIFIL peacekeepers are increasingly threatened.

Seven suspects have been charged in the killing, although only one has been rendered by Hezbollah to the Lebanese Armed Forces. Still, if past is precedent, there will be no credible investigation much less accountability in the peacekeeper’s death. The reason is simple: Hezbollah dominates Lebanon, which is essentially a failed state, and its so-called “institutions,” especially the security organs.

There is little doubt that Hezbollah was responsible for the peacekeeper’s death. Not only does the militia tightly control the area in which the killing occurred, it has a history of inciting against and attacking UNIFIL, whose mandate in part is to help the LAF ensure that south Lebanon is “free of any armed personnel, assets, and weapons” other than those of the LAF and UNIFIL.

This mission, enshrined in U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006), was intended to prevent Hezbollah from rearming after a costly 34-day war that saw the organization rain down more than 100 rockets a day on the Jewish state. UNIFIL’s presence was increased fivefold—from 2,000 to more than 10,000 peacekeepers—to accomplish this

objective, but it has never fulfilled its mandate, and Hezbollah has since fully replenished its arsenal. Today, it's believed Hezbollah possesses over 150,000 rockets and missiles, which it's actively upgrading to precision-guided munitions.

In its biannual reports to the Security Council, UNIFIL openly concedes its failure to interdict weapons destined for Hezbollah. While the contingent acknowledges allegations of "arms transfers to non-State actors" in Lebanon, i.e., Hezbollah, UNIFIL says it's "not in a position to substantiate" them. Given how ubiquitous U.N. peacekeepers are in the Hezbollah heartland, this perennial failure to observe—let alone appropriate—even a single weapons delivery is a fair measure of the utter failure of UNIFIL's mission. Regardless, Washington continues to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into this failed enterprise and its local partner, the LAF.

Since 2006, UNIFIL patrols have periodically been subjected to Hezbollah roadside bombs in what quickly proved to be a successful effort to proactively discourage the organization from executing its charge. In recent years, though, U.N. peacekeepers have increasingly been targeted by the terror organization that runs Lebanon, and which tightly controls the region that UNIFIL was set up to secure.

The latest U.N. reports tell a harrowing story of a spike in the pattern of harassment and assaults on the force. These threats and violence, typically perpetrated by men in "civilian clothes," effectively deny UNIFIL access to Hezbollah's military sites in south Lebanon.

Of course, the militia denies responsibility for the death of the peacekeeper; Hezbollah security chief Wafic Safa described the incident as "unintentional." Still, pictures of the bullet-ridden vehicle and the visible attempt to pry open the car's doors suggest the soldier was assassinated, in a clear message of Hezbollah's growing hostility toward UNIFIL.

Consider that just four months before this attack, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah publicly criticized an amendment in the UNIFIL mandate's most recent extension. The language, inserted by the Security Council in August 2022, permitted the organization to "conduct its operations independently," a modification Nasrallah described as an Israeli "trap" and "a violation of Lebanese sovereignty." For Hezbollah and its supporters, the message could not have been clearer.

Of course, the new language sanctioning independent UNIFIL operations was necessary not because of Hezbollah, but due to the dysfunctional dynamic between UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces. The U.N. expects the LAF to conduct "coordinated and adjacent patrols" with the organization, as well as to "protect UNIFIL movements and access." In collusion with Hezbollah, however, the Lebanese Armed Forces—which received \$236 million in U.S. funding in 2021—routinely obstructs UNIFIL operations and access.

According to U.N. reports, the LAF prevented UNIFIL from "expanding its presence outside main routes and municipal centres," implausibly claiming that proposed patrol routes were either private property or strategically important to the army. Among these off-limits sites are Hezbollah's so-called "Green without Borders" alleged environmental NGO sites that serve as military bases as well as exposed entrances to the militia's attack tunnels into Israel. Worse, the LAF and successive governments in Beirut have proved reticent to cooperate in investigations and hold accountable the perpetrators of the growing number of assaults against U.N. personnel. The government of Lebanon and UNIFIL itself have likewise refused to cooperate in the investigation of the 2021 murder of U.S. civil society grant recipient and Hezbollah critic Lokman Slim, who was abducted just yards away from a UNIFIL outpost in south Lebanon.

Despite its ongoing and problematic collusion, coordination, and deconfliction with Hezbollah, Washington continues to provide considerable and unconditional military assistance to the LAF. The Biden administration is also innovating a mechanism via the U.N. to pay LAF troops—that is, the same force working with and on behalf of

Hezbollah and obstructing UNIFIL—with cash stipends.

Four decades on, UNIFIL's mission has clearly become untenable. Not only is the organization ineffective, the deployment serves as a key driver of the economy in south Lebanon, employing and sustaining Hezbollah's supporters and constituents. At \$500 million a year—\$125 million of which is paid by Washington—the deployment is also expensive. Already, the force is in harm's way, and during the inevitable next war between Israel and Hezbollah, this 10,000-strong contingent will provide the militia with an impressive human shield.

Recognizing these deficits, in 2020, then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo threatened to veto UNIFIL's renewal in the Security Council if changes weren't made to the mandate to improve the security situation along the border. Judging from Hezbollah's aggressive response to even the slightest amendment to the mandate's language, it's unlikely these changes would have improved UNIFIL's performance.

Absent these revisions, the Trump administration pressed to downsize the force, consistent with its limited mission. But stiff opposition on the Security Council, particularly from France, prevented this proposed change to the mandate. Then with the August 2020 Beirut port explosion—which killed over 200 and decimated the capital—the administration balked, dropping any talk of vetoing the mandate renewal. In the end, it settled for strengthening the organization's reporting requirements and symbolically lowering the troop cap from 15,000 to 13,000 peacekeepers.

While UNIFIL provides a useful forum for talks between the Israeli and Lebanese militaries, and its maritime task force is beneficial, the peacekeepers will never play a role in constraining Hezbollah or securing the frontier. Making matters worse, neither the government of Lebanon nor the LAF will fulfill their U.N. obligation to support and protect the organization. Notwithstanding the enormous sums of U.S. funding provided to the LAF since 2006, the Lebanese military remains and will continue to remain beholden to Hezbollah. And Hezbollah's sponsors in Tehran have zero interest in securing the Lebanese-Israeli border. As a result, south Lebanon remains volatile and UNIFIL isn't helping. To wit, just weeks ago, Israel downed yet another Hezbollah drone in its airspace.

Three years into a devastating man-made economic crisis and months into a vacuum in the presidency in Beirut, Washington and Paris—the Security Council penholder for UNIFIL—are sure to resist significant changes in the status quo. Indeed, the annual French refrain during mandate renewal discussions has long been “now is not a good time.” To be sure, when it comes to Lebanon, which exists in a perennial state of crisis, there will never be a good time. But now, with Hezbollah increasingly threatening UNIFIL and with Lebanon actively obstructing the mission, it's incumbent on the Biden administration to reassess the utility of the deployment and of America's unqualified support for the LAF.

Given its deficiencies, a compelling argument could be made to scrap UNIFIL entirely. Washington could do so simply by vetoing the organization's mandate renewal this summer—as the Pompeo State Department nearly did. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, however, Israel continues to support the persistence of UNIFIL, believing that the so-called tripartite mechanism, the maritime task force, and the continued presence of some peacekeepers along the frontier may be useful in deescalating tensions.

While the administration may not be able to dispense with UNIFIL, it's time to downsize the deployment so its size is commensurate with the limited access the organization has in south Lebanon. It will take some heavy diplomatic lifting for Washington to right-size this self-perpetuating interim U.N. bureaucracy, but the effort will be worth it. Reducing UNIFIL will mitigate the risk to the peacekeepers while having only a negligible impact on stability along the Israel-Lebanon frontier. Along the way, it might even convey the message that Washington's patience with an impotent UNIFIL and intransigent Beirut is limited.

*David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Program on Arab Politics, and former assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs at the State Department. This article was originally published [on](#)*

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Egypt's Economic Freefall Provides an Opening for U.S. Assistance—and Leverage](#)

Jan 26, 2023

◆  
Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/egypts-economic-freefall-provides-opening-us-assistance-and-leverage\)](#)



### [France's Balancing Act: Mending Relations and Ending Moroccan Visa Restrictions](#)

Jan 25, 2023

◆  
Frances McDonough,  
Sabina Henneberg

[\(/policy-analysis/frances-balancing-act-mending-relations-and-ending-moroccan-visa-restrictions\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Restructuring Iraqi National Security Institutions in Sudani's Government](#)

Jan 25, 2023

◆  
Fawzi al-Zubaidi

[\(/policy-analysis/restructuring-iraqi-national-security-institutions-sudanis-government\)](#)

## TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](/policy-analysis/lebanon)