

# The Battle for UNIFIL's Independence (Part 1): Hezbollah at the UN

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Brief Analysis

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**Renewing the force's mandate while blocking Hezbollah's bid to formally hamstring it are welcome developments, but more concerted diplomatic action will be needed to reverse the downward security trend.**

**E**very August since the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel ended, the Security Council has convened to renew the mandate of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), an exercise that often simply rolls the previous year's text into the next resolution with few changes. Last year, Article 16 of [Security Council Resolution 2650 \(http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2650\)](http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2650) offered a potential improvement, stating that "UNIFIL does not require prior authorization or permission to undertake its mandated tasks and...is authorized to conduct its operation independently." This summer, however, Beirut sought to roll back the 2022 addition and condition UNIFIL's activities on prior Lebanese approval.

Toward that end, Lebanon sent Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib to UN headquarters ahead of the vote, even as Israel sent Defense Minister Yoav Gallant to warn of the growing risk of war along their shared frontier. Ultimately, Article 15 of [the August 31 resolution \(http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2695\)](http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2695) left the 2022 revision in place but added the words "while continuing to coordinate with the Government of Lebanon, as per the SOFA" (Status of Forces Agreement).

To be sure, UNIFIL's activity on the ground is not expected to change regardless of the resolution's wording, since the peacekeeping force has long been effectively deterred from fulfilling its mandate due to Hezbollah obfuscation, intimidation, violence, and military buildups (the latest details of which are covered [in Part 2 of this PolicyWatch \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-2-facts-ground\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-2-facts-ground)). Yet the manner in which various actors sought to expand or erode UNIFIL's nominal authority points to the challenges Washington and its partners will face if they attempt to take more concerted action on this increasingly troubled front.

## Political Wrangling and Hezbollah's "Resistance Diplomacy"

When the new language was added last year under U.S. pressure, it was spurred by what the resolution characterized as "attempts to deny access or restrict the freedom of movement of UNIFIL's personnel," including "attacks on UNIFIL personnel and equipment" and "harassment and intimidation." In other words, the Security Council was trying to counter [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) to blind, terrorize, and deter UNIFIL—the militia's favored method to shrink the force's footprint inside Lebanon and prevent it from exposing illicit military operations in the south.

The arm wrestling over this year's text continued until the last moment, as shown by a "[final draft \(https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/lebanon-news/720527/lbci-exclusively-receives-final-draft-for-unifils/en\)](https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/lebanon-news/720527/lbci-exclusively-receives-final-draft-for-unifils/en)" leaked before the vote. While France promoted Lebanon's request to roll back the added language, the United States objected with support from Britain and the United Arab Emirates. China and Russia registered their first abstention on this issue—Beijing's representative [cited \(https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15400.doc.htm\)](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15400.doc.htm) "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State concerned," while Russia pointed to "contentious changes" made in the final stages and emphasized the need to take Lebanon's opinion into account.

Although Hezbollah and its allies in the Lebanese government failed to achieve a China-Russia veto, the fact that two permanent members of the Security Council abstained from the vote essentially advanced the terrorist group's agenda, as did France's decision to facilitate Beirut's bid. In an August 28 speech, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah [portrayed \(https://www.memri.org/tv/hizbullah-leader-nasrallah-unifil-armed-foreign-force-violating-lebanon-spying-for-israel\)](https://www.memri.org/tv/hizbullah-leader-nasrallah-unifil-armed-foreign-force-violating-lebanon-spying-for-israel) UNIFIL as an "armed foreign force violating Lebanon's sovereignty," accusing it of working and spying for Israel: "Where Israel's drones, spies, and cameras cannot reach...UNIFIL's cameras are meant to replace them." Nasrallah thanked the Lebanese government for striving to "repair the mistake made last year—the decision that allows UNIFIL complete freedom of movement, independent of the Lebanese government or army."

Similarly, the Hezbollah-affiliated newspaper *al-Akhbar* [described \(https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/369075\)](https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/369075) the vote as a "diplomatic battle" in which Lebanon prevented "Tel Aviv, Washington, and Abu Dhabi from achieving the Israeli goal...to make the resolution harsher against Lebanon, make UNIFIL a tool for monitoring and guarding Israel's interests...free from any controls related to Lebanon's interests and sovereignty." To avoid a repetition of last year's "disastrous resolution," the paper claimed that Hezbollah had "entered the battle" and "accompanied the negotiation process on the text of the extension resolution." Specifically, the group was praised for purportedly helping Lebanon's prime minister and foreign minister craft correspondence with the UN and France threatening to withdraw Beirut's letter of request to extend UNIFIL's mandate unless the force fully coordinates with the Lebanese army. The paper also claimed that Hezbollah had communicated with other member states such as Brazil, China, Japan, Russia, and Switzerland.

Following the vote, Emirati ambassador Lana Nusseibeh [clarified \(https://uaeun.org/statement/uae-unscc-unifil-31aug/\)](https://uaeun.org/statement/uae-unscc-unifil-31aug/) the gravity of the situation. “Hezbollah has been making a mockery of Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559,” she argued, referring to past provisions regarding UNIFIL’s mandate and Hezbollah’s illegal military activities. She continued: “The UAE also fails to understand the hesitation to name Hezbollah and its group, who are actively undermining UNIFIL’s ability to conduct its mandate within its areas of operation”—a reference to Green Without Borders, a Hezbollah facade group [discussed in Part 2 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-2-facts-ground\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-2-facts-ground).

## Consequences of the Resolution

**R**enewing UNIFIL’s mandate while blocking Hezbollah’s move to formally hamstring the force are positive political developments. As Security Council reports often emphasize, the fact that Hezbollah maintains arms outside the state’s control is a violation of both Resolution 1701 and Lebanon’s sovereignty. By attempting to erode UNIFIL’s authority, however, some council members have facilitated Hezbollah military violations in the name of the same sovereignty they claim to uphold. Washington’s effort to rally partner states against this bid was a successful defense of important moral and political high ground; the UAE’s role and candor were commendable as well.

Yet the degree to which this diplomatic achievement will have significant effects inside Lebanon is doubtful. On the day of the vote, Hezbollah-affiliated reporter Ali Shoeib [warned \(https://twitter.com/alishoeib1970/status/1697267888883687765?s=48&t=uxvamAJC1hFhCbSc142GCA\)](https://twitter.com/alishoeib1970/status/1697267888883687765?s=48&t=uxvamAJC1hFhCbSc142GCA) that if UN forces change course, they will face “the local residents”—a common euphemism for Hezbollah militants. UNIFIL spokesman Andrea Tenenti promptly [assured \(https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/300080\)](https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/300080) Lebanese media that nothing will change in the force’s daily work.

Much of the blame for this inertia lies in the fact that Lebanon and its institutions are deeply complicit in enabling Hezbollah (as documented in greater detail [in Part 2 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-2-facts-ground\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-2-facts-ground)). Even as they repeatedly declare their commitment to Resolution 1701, the Lebanese government and army continue to collude with Hezbollah’s policies and actively support its blunt violations of UN resolutions and Lebanese sovereignty. Diplomatically, Beirut has promoted Hezbollah’s agenda at the UN in the name of national sovereignty, rallying China, Russia, and even France to the cause. Militarily, the Lebanese Armed Forces have offered every excuse to hinder UNIFIL’s freedom of movement, conceal Hezbollah’s violations and illicit military presence, and impede UN access, investigations, and reporting. The army and government have also backed Hezbollah’s Green Without Borders facade group as an allegedly legitimate organization and delayed legal proceedings against those who attack UN personnel.

## Recommendations

**W**ith tensions along the UN-demarcated Blue Line [higher than they have been for years \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-border-tensions-hezbollah-provocation-idf-response-and-potential\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-border-tensions-hezbollah-provocation-idf-response-and-potential), member states must redouble their efforts to avoid war. This means taking more concerted steps to implement Resolution 1701 and push back against Hezbollah’s increasing violations.

In addition, the Lebanese government and armed forces must be held accountable for colluding with Hezbollah—and they cannot use the country’s severe crisis as an excuse to delay change. Going forward, economic and logistical aid should be conditioned on Lebanon performing its professed duties as host country—namely, protecting UN forces, bringing offenders to justice, allowing prompt UN access to areas of interest, and ceasing its efforts to cover up for Hezbollah.

Unfortunately, unimpeded access to sites of interest cannot be expected anytime soon, so member states should also press for another essential improvement: enhanced reporting to the Security Council. The United States and its

partners should insist that the UN provide detailed, up-to-date statistics and geographical documentation of UNIFIL's actual operational footprint, identifying all locations where UN patrols were allowed to pass and where they were blocked or attacked. This picture would clarify both UNIFIL's shrinking footprint and the expanding, unmonitored swaths of land where Hezbollah is building up its illicit military presence and increasing the risk of war.

On a constructive note, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein, who mediated last year's [maritime border agreement \(https://warontherocks.com/2022/10/how-to-make-the-most-of-israel-lebanon-maritime-deal/\)](https://warontherocks.com/2022/10/how-to-make-the-most-of-israel-lebanon-maritime-deal/) between Israel and Lebanon, recently [visited \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-israel-hezbollah-war-looming\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-israel-hezbollah-war-looming) Beirut to discuss the possibility of negotiations on the land border. If such talks emerge, they will of course need to address Lebanon's claims and reservations about the Blue Line, including the complicated issue of northern Ghajar. Yet they must also address Israel's main concern: that Hezbollah's growing military deployments and activities on the border are greatly accelerating the momentum toward another destructive war.

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