

Preserving UN Peacekeeping in the Levant

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Violence in Syria and Lebanon coincides with diminished international commitment to UN forces monitoring the borders with Israel.

A recent spate of sectarian-inspired gun battles and kidnappings has many in Lebanon and Washington worried about a return to civil war. But the potential implications of spillover violence from Syria stretch beyond Lebanon's borders: in the past, domestic instability has sometimes led to war with Israel. In an effort to maintain calm, the United Nations has deployed peacekeepers along the volatile border region between Syria, Lebanon, and Israel for more than six decades. And until recently, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) had generally played a positive, albeit imperfect, role. Over the past year, however, UN peacekeeping in the Levant has experienced setbacks that threaten to vitiate the deployments and erode the fragile calm.

BACKGROUND

The UN has three separate peacekeeping and monitoring organizations in Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. Established in 1948, the Truce Supervision Organization was the UN's first ever peacekeeping operation. Initially created to monitor the Israeli-Palestinian truce, UNTSO evolved at the Security Council's direction to take on duties in Suez (Egypt), the Golan Heights, and South Lebanon. Today, it has an international staff of 250, including 151 soldiers from twenty-four countries, offices in Jerusalem, Ismailia, Beirut, and Damascus, and a budget of over \$70 million. In lieu of its own specific mandate, UNTSO's primary responsibilities now appear to center on supporting UNIFIL in Lebanon.

Created in 1974, UNDOF was tasked with supervising implementation of the postwar Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement in the Golan. More recently, it has conducted bimonthly inspections in Israel and Syria to ensure compliance with agreed limitations on armaments within fifteen miles of the border. Some 1,035 troops and 41 civilian staff from five countries carry out the mission, operating camps and observation posts in both countries as

well as a liaison office in Damascus. UNDOF's 2011-2012 budget is \$50.5 million.

With about 12,000 troops currently on the ground and a budget of \$545 million, UNIFIL is the largest and most important of the UN's regional peacekeeping missions. Established following the 1978 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, it was envisaged as an interim force to help restore security and government authority over the south. Initially, 4,000 troops were deployed in March 1978 for a tour of six months. Today, after nearly thirty-five years of continuous deployment, UNIFIL remains in southern Lebanon, staffed by soldiers and civilians from thirty-eight nations. In 2006, after a thirty-four-day war between Israel and the Shiite militia Hizballah, the Security Council passed Resolution 1701, increasing the number of UN peacekeepers to a ceiling of 15,000 and expanding the mission to include preventing Hizballah from rearming -- an objective that UNIFIL has by all accounts not achieved.

UNIFIL TARGETED

UNIFIL has experienced some casualties over the years, but by and large the population has welcomed its deployments and their positive impact on the local economy. From the beginning, the UN took special care not to antagonize the people, doing little to prevent the Palestine Liberation Organization and, later, Hizballah from attacking Israeli civilians. This dynamic was practical in one sense: the UNIFIL contingents lacked the intelligence components that most modern battalions require for force protection, so they depended on local goodwill for their safety. Toward this end, they also engaged in charitable activities and community outreach, offering computer and language classes, building soccer fields, conducting humanitarian demining, and -- most famously in the case of the Indian contingent -- offering veterinarian services for large animals.

The strategy worked relatively well -- at least for UNIFIL -- until 2006. When the force's mission changed after the war, however, Hizballah and Syria began to view it with suspicion. During a July 2006 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Syrian foreign minister Walid Mouallem even suggested that UN forces in Lebanon could be targeted much like U.S. troops were in 1983. Similarly, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned UNIFIL not to "spy on Hizballah or disarm the Resistance" lest it be dragged into a "collision" with the militia. Soon thereafter, UNIFIL personnel began coming under attack.

In June 2007, six members of the Spanish contingent -- reputedly the most aggressive in seeking out Hizballah weapons -- were killed when their vehicle was hit by a powerful and sophisticated car bomb. Weeks later, Tanzanian UNIFIL forces were targeted by dynamite. In 2008, two soldiers from the Irish contingent were injured by a roadside bomb. And on several occasions in 2009-2010, pro-Hizballah villagers blocked UNIFIL vehicles from entering towns. In one January 2009 instance, villagers threw stones at the peacekeepers after they attempted to investigate an explosion at an alleged Hizballah arms depot; fourteen soldiers were hurt during the scuffle. More recently, six Italian troops were injured by an improvised explosive device in May 2011, and five Frenchmen were wounded by a roadside bomb two months later. Five more French soldiers were injured in December 2011 when their patrol was targeted by a roadside bomb near Sidon.

THREAT OF ATTRITION

UNIFIL faces significant challenges in the coming months and years. In addition to increasingly difficult force-protection problems in southern Lebanon, financial pressures will complicate matters. Key European states are already beginning to bail out. In February, just two months after its contingent was last attacked, France announced that it would downsize its large regiment from 1,300 to 900 troops. Italy, too, is cutting its force -- in July 2011, two months after its contingent was bombed, Rome announced it was slashing its commitment by 700 troops, from 1,141 to 441. More recently, the Spanish Ministry of Defense has announced an immediate 20 percent cut in its 1,020-man deployment and a full withdrawal in 2013. In the best-case scenario, this means that there will only be about 2,250 Western European peacekeepers in southern Lebanon as of 2013. These departures not only reduce the

organization's utility, they could also spur a mass exodus.

DIMINISHED VALUE OF UNDOF AND UNTSO

Compared to UNIFIL, UNTSO seems a costly and largely irrelevant relic. Although it may have helped mitigate regional conflict in the past, it lacks a defined role today, with a self-described mission of "perform[ing] various tasks entrusted to it by the Security Council." Worse, the organization's \$70 million budget and expensive offices in Jerusalem, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt are excessive, especially given that UNDOF has a tangible mission, nearly eight times as many troops, and an annual budget of just \$50 million. With limited work and legendary perquisites, UNTSO's own staff has reportedly dubbed it the "Travel and Sightseeing Organization."

As for UNDOF, its mission to monitor Syrian armaments remains useful, but the organization has had difficulty carrying out its patrols lately. According to the most recent UNDOF six-month report, observer teams "continued to encounter restrictions of movement...where Syrian authorities denied access." Indeed, the Assad regime is excluding UNDOF to hide atrocities against civilians during the ongoing uprising. Yet given UNDOF's purview, the organization would likely have left that stone unturned even without regime interference. To wit, UNDOF's semiannual report did not even mention the popular uprising that had already claimed the lives of nearly 10,000 Syrians. Instead, the force has been a silent witness to repression in Syria, at a time when simply being a more active monitor and maintaining a presence in certain areas might dissuade some of the more egregious regime onslaughts on civilians.

Elsewhere, UNDOF did not intervene on May 15, 2011, when Syrian authorities brought forty busloads of Palestinians to the Israeli border fence. The move precipitated a violent clash that resulted in four Palestinians dead.

CONCLUSION

As sectarian tensions spike in Lebanon and the security situation deteriorates in Syria, the likelihood of border problems between Lebanon, Syria, and Israel is growing. Despite their well-known limitations, the presence of peacekeeping forces is helpful -- not only do they prevent Damascus from backsliding on the disengagement agreement, they also serve as a useful tripwire for quickly elevating local skirmishes into the international spotlight. Increasingly, however, it is becoming difficult for these monitors to implement their missions on the ground. These constraints, coupled with diminishing international commitment to the missions, do not bode well for calm on the borders.

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