

Realities of the UN in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

During the early-January Israeli military campaign in the Gaza Strip, unknown groups fired rockets from southern Lebanon into Israel on two separate occasions. The Katyushas were launched from an area supposedly under the control of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the Lebanese army, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701. These attacks highlight the UN force's unwillingness to carry out its mandate, as well as the international community's failure to enforce UNSCR 1701. During the Gaza conflict, this negligence briefly raised the specter of instability along the Israeli-Lebanese border and the possible opening of a second front for Israel.

Background

For several years prior to the 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah, Israel and others had called for increasing the size of UNIFIL, since the small force was never in a position to seriously impede the movements or deployment of Hizballah in the area. The understaffed contingent essentially undercut UNIFIL's ability to implement its mandate of "assist[ing] the Lebanese government in restoring its effective authority in the area."

In the aftermath of the 2006 war and the passage of UNSCR 1701, the 2,500-member UNIFIL force was bolstered to 13,000, and hopes grew that the UN resolution would at the very least inhibit renewed fighting, which it has.

However, it appears that the new rules of the security game are merely deferring the next round of hostilities in large part because, to date, UNSCR 1701 has not been fully implemented. Despite the presence of several thousand additional troops, Hizballah still has the capability to rain rockets and missiles on Israel.

Implications for Security in the South

One of the major problems, despite the explicit language in UNSCR 1701 calling for the UN to stop weapons from entering this area of operation, is that UNIFIL has no presence on the border between Syria and Lebanon -- the route used by Hizballah to transport weapons and materiel into Lebanon. Syria was the main opponent to placing troops there and threatened to close its border with Lebanon should the UN follow through with this proposal. When the idea was floated, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad announced that such a deployment would be considered "a hostile act" by the Syrian regime.

As a result, the flow of arms to Hizballah has continued unabated, allowing the Shiite organization to fully rearm in

the aftermath of the 2006 war. Camps of armed Palestinian groups located on both sides of the Syrian-Lebanese border -- beyond the control of UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) -- have facilitated much of the cross-border arms smuggling.

In addition to the recent rocket attacks, several weapons caches have been discovered in southern Lebanon (most recently, eight Katyushas in January 2009), and in November 2007, Hizballah carried out a major, three-day exercise there, sending a clear message not only to Israel, which had only a few days earlier conducted maneuvers in the Galilee, but also to the UN and the LAF. Hizballah even took steps to publicize its exercise, with senior organization officials confirming that it occurred, and allowed the media to cover it. According to Hizballah, thousands of troops took part while UNIFIL watched. Although Hizballah claimed that there was no need to coordinate this exercise with UNIFIL since there were no armed soldiers involved, this explanation is inconsistent with UNSCR 1701, which allows only the LAF and UNIFIL to operate in the area.

The Lebanese government and UNIFIL both responded weakly to the exercise, even though it was clearly intended to demonstrate that Hizballah was in charge. The Lebanese government at first denied that the exercise even occurred. Subsequently, however, the government revised its position and rationalized that the Hizballah exercise was in fact only a "simulation." UN spokesmen also minimized the November 2007 activity, as UNIFIL spokeswoman Yasmina Bouziane denied media reports of the exercise and stated that the UN relied on the Lebanese government's initial denial. She then absolved UNIFIL of accountability, stating that the LAF had primary responsibility for ensuring southern Lebanon's security.

The feeble UNIFIL response to the exercise is consistent with its broader pattern since 2006 of avoiding escalation of the situation. When UN patrols encountered Hizballah operatives laying communication cables in the south, for example, instead of conducting a thorough investigation, the UN force retreated after being pelted with rocks. Hizballah also has taken pains to prevent confrontations with UNIFIL as well as with the LAF, keeping a low profile where possible -- notwithstanding the exercise. For example, to avoid confrontations with UNIFIL as well as potentially damaging media exposure, its operatives neither wear uniforms south of the Litani nor carry arms in public.

Hizballah's Goals

The ineffectual role UNIFIL currently plays was not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, according to the UNIFIL mandate -- as well as UNSCRs 1701 and 1556 -- the force, if requested by the Lebanese government, has the authority to provide robust assistance to both the government and the LAF. This assistance includes helping to restore government sovereignty in the area, curtailing arms smuggling, and working to disarm militias, including but not limited to Hizballah. With 13,000 troops, a number that may eventually rise to 15,000, UNIFIL has a significant presence in this geographically small area of responsibility south of the Litani river, and it has enough assets to do more.

Clearly UNIFIL has not fulfilled its obligation of helping to restore Beirut's writ in the south, disarming Hizballah and other groups, or stopping the flow of arms. And now that Hizballah has reentered the Lebanese cabinet and reasserted its political power in Beirut, the issue of the organization's disarmament has been shelved indefinitely.

Today, Hizballah representatives do not hide the organization's intent to rebuild and reassert its position and capacities in southern Lebanon. With the often-stated long-term goal of calling for the destruction of Israel as a prerequisite for peace, there is no sign that Hizballah, on its own volition, will ever accede to 1701. On the contrary, as Ibrahim al-Amin, the editor of the Lebanese daily al-Akhbar and close associate of Hizballah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah recently wrote: "The actions in the field are ongoing, the ones out in the open and the ones that remain hidden in southern Lebanon, especially in the area in which UNIFIL operates south of the Litani River."

Conclusion

A robust international force to implement the ceasefire between Israel and Hizballah is clearly in the interests of both Israel and Lebanon. Such a force can be an impediment to any renewed fighting, but in order to do accomplish this task, this force needs to have a clear mandate that it is actually prepared to enforce.

Regrettably, there are no signs that UNIFIL is up to the task. To change the cautious and ineffective nature of the current deployment, pressure needs to be applied to the governments contributing troops to UNIFIL. Fearing the implications of provoking Hizballah, however, it is unlikely that UN member states would be willing to more aggressively patrol southern Lebanon.

A certain calm prevails in the south of Lebanon thanks to the modus vivendi that has been informally established between UNIFIL, Hizballah, and the LAF. As recent years demonstrate, when confrontations do occur, Hizballah is given deference in the interest of UNIFIL's preservation concerns. In this environment, if Hizballah or a Palestinian militia acts against Israel, it seems all but assured that UNIFIL will have neither the commitment nor the ability to play a useful role in preventing or mitigating the aggression.

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