An International Stabilization Force for Lebanon:

Problems and Prospects

by **Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)**

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Brief Analysis

As diplomacy to halt the violence in Lebanon slowly gathers momentum, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has endorsed the idea of an international "stabilization force" to keep the peace, seconding proposals previously put forward by UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, British prime minister Tony Blair, and European Union foreign policy envoy Javier Solana. Such a force, however, is liable to face major obstacles and incur substantial risks that could jeopardize its prospects for success. For this reason it is essential to consider what past experiences in Lebanon, the Middle East, and elsewhere teach about peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations, the sort of challenges such a force could encounter, and the kind of mandate and capabilities required to meet these challenges.

The UNIFIL Experience

The experience of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)—the current UN peacekeeping operation in southern Lebanon—provides a number of important lessons for those hoping to create a new force to take its place. UNIFIL was established in March 1978, in the wake of a bloody seaborne attack by Lebanon-based PLO terrorists, and the subsequent Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon. The UN created UNIFIL to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces, restore international peace and security, and ensure the return of central government authority to southern Lebanon, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 425.

UNIFIL is widely considered a failure; in particular, it failed to prevent attacks on Israel that sparked the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, major flare-ups with Hizballah in 1993 and 1996, and the current round of fighting. There are several reasons for these failures: (1) UNIFIL was hastily organized as an "interim" force to prevent events in Lebanon from derailing U.S. efforts to advance and broaden the then still-fragile Egyptian-Israeli peace process; as a result, many potential shortcomings related to its terms of reference and makeup were overlooked in the rush to deploy the force. (2) UNIFIL operated in accordance with traditional peacekeeping principles: impartiality in its dealings with local entities (even terrorist groups) and restraint in the use of force to keep the peace. (3) UNIFIL, even at its peak strength of 6,000 soldiers and observers (today its strength stands at 2,000), lacked the manpower necessary to secure its entire area of operations, creating numerous gaps in its deployments that were often exploited by terrorists and others seeking to disturb the peace.

Several lessons can be drawn from the UNIFIL experience. Getting the terms of reference and the makeup of a stabilization force right at the outset are essential, as there may not be a second chance to correct flaws that could prove fatal to the mission. And a new international stabilization force will need to be much larger and more robust than UNIFIL—consisting of perhaps 15,000-20,000 soldiers and observers, and it should operate under much more permissive rules of engagement. Those tasked to design a stabilization force should consider merging at least some UNIFIL veterans or units into the new organization, so that it might benefit from their familiarity with the physical and human geography of its area of operations.

Peacekeeping/Peace Enforcement Lessons Learned

Important lessons can be learned from other peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations in the Middle East and elsewhere. Since the creation of Israel in1948, there have been seven Arab-Israeli peacekeeping operations: five were sponsored by the UN, two involved "coalitions of the willing." Those operations that failed or that failed to make a difference—the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), the UN Emergency Force (UNEF I), UNIFIL, and the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH)—did so because the underlying sources of conflict had not been resolved prior to their deployment, and because they lacked the mandate or ability to enforce the peace. Those that succeeded—the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in the Golan, and the Multi-National Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai—did so because the involved parties were interested in keeping the peace along their respective borders; in such cases, peacekeepers were able to help them achieve their common goal.

The UN has conducted a large number of peacekeeping/peace enforcement operations elsewhere, including Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, while NATO has led peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. Most of these operations yielded mixed results, although the UN interventions in Somalia (UNITAF) and Bosnia (UNPROFOR) were widely acknowledged as unmitigated disasters.

Though reflecting a variety of circumstances, a number of lessons can be drawn from these experiences that should be borne in mind by those considering a stabilization force for Lebanon: (1) International forces have been most successful when they monitored political arrangements already reached, and not when they attempted to impose a settlement by force of arms. (2) In cases where political arrangements have not been reached, international forces often face the choice of being drawn into ongoing conflicts and risking international support for the mission, or staying above the fray and risking irrelevance. (3) Dealing with local spoilers who are often quite resourceful at disrupting peace-building efforts requires both substantial reserves of political will and the commitment of significant military resources. (4) In peace enforcement operations, international forces often become an integral part of the new political order, and key to preventing renewed outbreaks of violence. For this reason, peace enforcement operations often turn into open-ended commitments that may last for decades.

Setting Conditions for Success

Whether a stabilization force for Lebanon succeeds or fails will depend heavily on several factors: its political and operational environment, its mandate, and how it is equipped, organized, and led.

Political and Operational Environment. For the stabilization force to succeed, the right political and military circumstances must be created in Lebanon prior to its arrival. Hizballah must be severely weakened—militarily and politically—and the Lebanese government (which includes Hizballah) must consent to the presence of such a force, lest it be seen as an occupying force to be resisted and fought. Failure to fulfill these preconditions and to maintain them for the duration of the mission will significantly dim the stabilization force's prospects for success.

Hizballah will likely emerge from the current conflict with greatly diminished capabilities—particularly its ability to fire rockets into Israel. It is, however, likely to retain the capacity to wage guerilla warfare and undertake acts of terrorism, for even if Israel goes into southern Lebanon in a big way, Hizballah forces there will have the choice of

confronting Israeli ground forces or withdrawing north beyond the reach of Israeli ground forces should they take unacceptable losses. As a result, Hizballah will retain a significant ability to harass or attack a stabilization force, should it choose to do so. The key question is whether Hizballah will conclude that such a course of action is in its interest.

Mandate. A stabilization force must have a clear, achievable mandate, perhaps in the form of a UN Security Council resolution backed by an Arab League endorsement. Countries sending contingents must understand that by participating in such a force, they are signaling their willingness to potentially commit their contingent to combat with Hizballah, and that retribution could take the form of terrorist attacks—bearing in mind the experiences of the Multi-National Forces (MNF) in Beirut from 1982-1984, which were attacked by Hizballah, with the support of Syria and Iran. Failure to recognize this possibility up front could jeopardize the mission down the road should the going get tough.

The principle mission of a stabilization force should be to assist the Lebanese government to comply with Security Council Resolution 1559 by verifying the withdrawal of Iranian advisors from Lebanon, disarming Hizballah (and other armed groups in their area of operations, including Palestinian extremists and al-Qaeda elements), and supporting the extension of Lebanese government control to the Israel-Lebanon border. Its rules of engagement should allow all national contingents to use lethal force in fulfillment of its mandate as well as for self-defense; national reservations to the rules of engagement should be proscribed at the outset to ensure the overall effectiveness of the force.

That said, the stabilization force should fulfill its mandate, whenever possible, by working with and through Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). An implied task for the stabilization force, then, would include training the ISF and LAF so that they can eventually assume responsibility for ensuring peace and stability in Lebanon.

Force Structure and Capabilities. A stabilization force should be strong enough to deter open challenges to the LAF and to its own authority. A force of perhaps 15,000-20,000 could be required, consisting of armor, light and mechanized infantry, light artillery, and special operations forces, capable of undertaking civic action, foreign internal defense assistance, and combat (particularly counterinsurgency and counterterrorist) operations. Countries that might participate in such a mission reportedly include France, Turkey, Italy, Brazil, Pakistan, India, and Germany.

Moreover, the force must be able to help the Lebanese government deal with reconstruction challenges and to replace Hizballah and UNIFIL as the primary provider of social services to the population of southern Lebanon. It should include civil engineers to help rebuild roads and repair the power grid, and civil affairs specialists to provide assistance in the fields of public health, education, local administration, and so forth. And its mandate should allow it to use force against those who attempt to interfere with the extension of central government authority in its area of operation. Such an approach also implies a need to strengthen the capacity of government ministries devoted to the delivery of social services, as well as their local offices in parts of Lebanon that have been most deeply affected by the war. That will require military civil affairs teams to be supplemented by civilian ministerial assistance teams and advisors.

The main body of the stabilization force would probably deploy to the general area now occupied by UNIFIL between the Israel-Lebanon border and the Litani River, to prevent crossborder attacks and the launch of short-range rockets. Mobile patrols might operate elsewhere in south-central Lebanon and in the southern suburbs of Beirut, in support of LAF efforts to disarm Hizballah and other armed groups, to locate arms and rocket caches, and to investigate security incidents related to the fulfillment of its mandate.

Finally, there should be a liaison element to coordinate with monitors at Lebanon's border crossings and ports of entry, to prevent Hizballah's rearmament from abroad in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1680 and to coordinate with the Israel and Lebanese militaries. And there will be a need to coordinate border security arrangements with Israel in order to avoid "friendly fire" incidents should the latter establish a buffer/free-fire zone along its frontier with Lebanon.

Conclusion

The mandate, terms of reference, rules of engagement, composition, and leadership of an international stabilization force for Lebanon should be carefully weighed, for past peacekeeping and peace enforcement experiences and the Lebanese operational environment provide more than ample reason to believe that this will be a high-risk mission that will pose major challenges for the force. Getting these right at the outset will be critical to the success of the operation. Much will also depend on how the current crisis ends, and on the strategy that Hizballah adopts in its aftermath. For this reason, it is vital that the international community bring maximum pressure to bear on Hizballah to disarm, and warn both Hizballah and its Iranian patrons that attacks on a stabilization force could have grave consequences for both, so that the force does not become a terrorist target or another asset that Tehran can implicitly threaten in order to deflect international pressure from its nuclear program.

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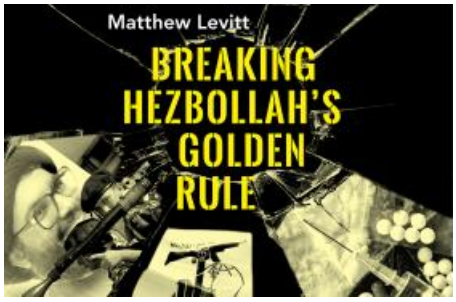

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