

The Role of UNIFIL after an Israeli Withdrawal from South Lebanon

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Articles & Testimony

This article originally appeared as a chapter in the book [The Last Arab-Israeli Battlefield? Implications of an Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon \(templateC04.php?CID=25\)](#) (Washington Institute, 2000). John Hillen is currently assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs. When he wrote this essay, he was serving on the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century. He is the author of the critically acclaimed book *Blue Helmets: The Strategy of UN Military Operations* (Brassey's, 1998).

Although the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon is officially titled an “interim force” whose mission is reviewed and extended twice yearly, the UN harbors no illusions about a quick exit from the area under any scenario. Like many other actors present over the past two decades, UNIFIL—the UN Interim Force in Lebanon—is deeply woven into the fractious fabric of political, economic, and social life in southern Lebanon. Moreover (again, like most other actors in the area), the UN would not wish to take sole or even primary responsibility for peace and security in southern Lebanon even after a withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Nonetheless, it is quite conceivable that, under certain scenarios, UNIFIL would somehow act to fill the security vacuum left by an IDF withdrawal. In the event of either a comprehensive peace agreement or even an IDF withdrawal closely coordinated with the government of Lebanon and other actors, UNIFIL could well expand in both size and operational potency in the attempt to fulfill its original mandate. The light of regional stability at the end of a more than twenty-year tunnel of frustration could convince the UN Security Council to reinforce the UNIFIL peacekeepers in order to take advantage of developments in southern Lebanon. Recent events both at the UN and in the region augur for this possibility. At its headquarters in New York, the UN appears to be rebounding from its disastrous experimentation with the large, expensive, and dangerous peacekeeping missions lasting from 1993 to 1996. In the autumn of 1999 alone, the UN approved new missions to Kosovo, East Timor, Congo, and Sierra Leone—moves that will more than double the number of “Blue Helmets” worldwide. In the Middle East, the recent pronouncements of Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak’s government regarding an IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon have prompted policymakers to consider the possible political scenarios and maneuvers discussed in other chapters of this study. If the major players in the area purposefully support the peace, the UN may take extra steps to have UNIFIL support their efforts.

Under the right circumstances and conditions, UNIFIL could play an important role. Under unfavorable circumstances such as a unilateral and uncoordinated IDF withdrawal, however, UNIFIL is unlikely of its own accord to step into a volatile security vacuum to enforce peace and security in southern Lebanon. Throughout this process, even a reinforced UNIFIL will insist that it act only as a supporting player whose actions should complement the willful and peaceable intentions of the principals—namely Israel and Lebanon (and probably Syria). If the IDF withdrawal takes place under conditions that leave southern Lebanon in disarray, it is unlikely that UNIFIL will attempt to fulfill its mandate to help restore peace and security to the region. . . . ❖

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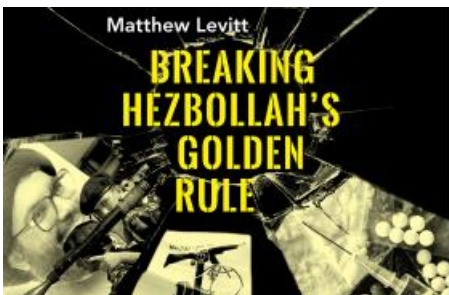
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