

UNIFIL's Strategy of Risk Aversion

May 24, 2000



Brief Analysis

In the wake of the hasty withdrawal from southern Lebanon by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the collapse of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), the role of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in trying to restore peace to the border area is far from certain. The UN Security Council and the secretary general this week insisted that UNIFIL cannot and will not attempt to restore order to the area without the cooperation of the principal actors operating in southern Lebanon. Thus, UNIFIL's capability and willingness to carry out its mandate will depend on whether Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and local guerrilla forces (primarily Hizballah) exercise restraint, a prospect which is far from certain.

Background. UNIFIL currently comprises just over 4,500 mostly lightly armed infantry soldiers from nine countries: Ghana (653 troops), Poland (631), India (619), Ireland (612), Nepal (604), Fiji (600), Finland (494), France (245), and Italy (46). Six battalions are deployed in specific areas of responsibility in southern Lebanon and are supported by engineering and logistics units, plus an Italian helicopter unit. A UN-produced map depicts most of the current UNIFIL deployments just north of Israel's now defunct nine-mile deep "security zone," with some overlap existing between the former "security zone" and the UNIFIL area of operations.

The UN Security Council on May 23 endorsed UN secretary general Kofi Annan's recommendation that UNIFIL expand the force by about 1,100 to carry out UNIFIL's first mandate, as stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 425, of confirming an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The six existing battalions would be provided with additional armored personnel carriers (APCs), two additional helicopters and crew, and more engineering detachments to dispose of explosive ordnance. After an Israeli withdrawal is confirmed, Annan calls for a second expansion of the force by another 2,300, bringing the total to nearly 8,000 troops, with eight (versus the current six) battalions deployed, augmented by more engineering and other support units.

UN Demands. In his May 22 report, Annan demands that several conditions be met before a bolstered UNIFIL deploys to southern Lebanon. Conditions that largely appear to have been met but still need to be confirmed by UNIFIL are

- full Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, including from Lebanese territorial waters and air space (Annan found that, contrary to Lebanese assertions, Israel is not required to withdraw from the Sheba farm area near Mt. Hermon for the UN to declare that it has withdrawn from Lebanon);
- demobilization of the SLA and disarmament or destruction of its heavy weapons; and
- release of prisoners held in al-Khiam prison, located in the security zone, to Lebanese authorities (the prison was overrun by southern Lebanese residents when SLA guards abandoned the site)

Annan also demands that the Lebanese government reestablish its authority in the area by assuming "normal responsibilities," including the provision of "law and order." Without specifically naming Syria, Annan also called on "member states having influence over" Lebanese and other armed groups in Lebanon to provide "cooperation and support to UNIFIL to implement Resolution 425." He threatened the complete withdrawal of UNIFIL if the conditions

are not met in a "timely manner."

Constraints. Annan's preconditions point out the chief constraint against a rapid UN deployment of additional peacekeepers to Lebanon to fill the vacuum in the South: a conservative and cautious approach to peacekeeping operations. Already smarting from the humiliating capture of some 500 UN peacekeepers in Sierra Leone, the UN wants to avoid high risk to its peacekeepers. Annan's threat to withdraw UNIFIL if conditions are not right reflects this risk-aversion strategy. All of the preconditions are intended to ensure a far less hostile security environment in southern Lebanon. Indeed, in his May 22 report, Annan said, "The security of UN personnel is a central concern." Annan pointed out that UNIFIL has suffered 77 killed and 343 wounded in action since the force deployed in 1978. The other constraints to a rapid deployment are largely administrative, organizational, and logistical. The UN will need to gather additional forces for UNIFIL from UN member states volunteering to provide them, and volunteers may be scarce if fighting in southern Lebanon escalates in the interim. The additional forces will need to be deployed to Lebanon, which could take weeks, depending on the readiness of the forces and the airlift capabilities of the contributing states. Concerns over money could also slow the deployment. UNIFIL costs about \$150 million a year to maintain, and Annan has warned that Washington's reported withholding of funds from other peacekeeping operations could jeopardize plans for expanding UNIFIL.

UNIFIL Capabilities. The planned augmentation of UNIFIL would go a long way toward improving the force's capability to fulfill its mandate. UNIFIL's first mission would be to confirm the Israeli withdrawal south of the UN-recognized border by dispatching "verification teams" along the border, protected by infantry units and lightly armored vehicles, supported by helicopters, and with additional engineering units to deal with mines and unexploded ordnance. Unless constrained by heavy cross-border fire, UNIFIL should be able to accomplish this mission. The more difficult missions would be "restoring international peace and security" to the area and "assisting the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area." This would require UNIFIL to expand its area of operations to fill the vacuum left by the IDF and SLA in the former "security zone." The existing 4,500 troops would be inadequate to man added checkpoints along roadways and observation posts and to conduct added patrols in an enlarged UNIFIL zone. The force would also require additional engineering and surveillance equipment to cover the area. Annan correctly highlights these needs in his proposal to increase the troop strength by about 75 percent. Yet, the difficult terrain in southern Lebanon, and the potential for hostilities, would challenge the new force's capability to maintain order.

UNIFIL's current conservative rules of engagement, generally limited to firing only in self-defense, greatly limit its ability to fulfill its mandate of restoring "peace and security." Expanding the rules of engagement to allow fire "when attempts are made to prevent them from performing their duties under the mandate" (as authorized by the UN) could make the force more capable of preventing or halting conflict, although this would entail a riskier posture. UNIFIL would adopt such expanded rules only if authorized to do so by the Lebanese government or by a Security Council resolution making reference to the UN's authority under Chapter VII of the UN charter to impose conditions on a member state--but neither of these circumstances is likely.

Next Steps. Annan is again dispatching his special envoy to the region to further spell out the UN's requirements before it moves forward with additional deployments. The secretary general is likely to oppose the expanded deployment of UNIFIL unless he is reasonably confident that Hizballah and the IDF, the principal combatants, will refrain from cross-border attacks, and that Lebanon and Syria recognize Israel's withdrawal to a UN-demarcated border. Such prospects are far from certain, given that both the Lebanese government and Hizballah insist that an Israeli withdrawal will not be complete unless it also withdraws from the Sheba farms near Mt. Hermon. Hizballah is also threatening to continue attacks unless Lebanese prisoners are released from Israeli jails--Israel still holds Shaykh Abdel-Karim Obeid and Mustafa Dirani. UNIFIL can play an important role in keeping the peace if the

principal players--Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and armed groups in Lebanon--decide not to attack. But UNIFIL cannot and will not attempt to impose a peace.

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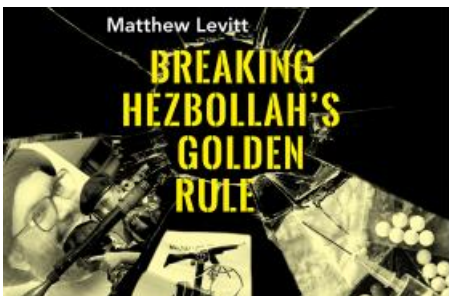
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