

Time to Change Course on the UN's Lebanon Policy

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Serious change is required to avoid decisions that accommodate Hezbollah's ends, ways, and means, and a vital first step is to look at current policy mechanics with a clear eye.

With this month marking the thirteenth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and the end of the 2006 Lebanon war, the council will soon hold its yearly debates about renewing the mandate of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. Contrasting [the Secretary General's latest report](#) on 1701 with thirteen years of lessons learned reveals a clear pattern: the victory of consciously false hopes over hard experience, particularly when viewed from Israel's perspective. Breaking this pattern will require substantial changes to the force's size, mission, and conduct.

UNDERGROUND TUNNELS, ON-THE-GROUND REALITY

From December 2018 to January 2019, the Israel Defense Forces' Operation Northern Shield exposed Hezbollah's secret cross-border tunneling project, a mainstay in the group's plans for future offensives into Israel. Although the operation neutralized the tunnels and demonstrated Israel's intelligence superiority over Hezbollah, it also provided irrefutable proof that the UN's approach to Lebanon is broken. Time and again, when faced with Israeli "allegations" regarding such activity, the UN has professed that it is "not in a position to substantiate them independently," preferring to remain in the dark instead. In the end, the IDF exposed, documented, and destroyed six tunnels, but the most the secretary-general's July 17 report could say about the evidence was that "UNIFIL has verified the existence of five tunnels, three of which it confirmed crossed the Blue Line." This short sentence encapsulates UNIFIL's willful failure to detect a multi-year, multi-site, heavy-earthwork project that flagrantly violated UNSCR 1701 right under the noses of UN forces.

On December 26, for example, UNIFIL commander Maj. Gen. Stefano Del Col personally witnessed liquid concrete gushing out of a "cement factory" in Kafr Kila, Lebanon, after it was pumped into a tunnel on the Israeli side of the border. He then "informed the Lebanese authorities...urging immediate follow-up action." On March 15, President Michel Aoun "committed to launch an investigation." On May 23 and again on June 3, Lebanese Armed Forces commander Joseph Aoun confirmed "that the LAF was taking action to gain access to the sites." As of July 17, however, "UNIFIL still has not been able to access all relevant locations north of the Blue Line," and the secretary-general was reduced to calling on the LAF "to expeditiously undertake and conclude all necessary investigations on the Lebanese side to...prevent any similar occurrences in the future." He also asked "the Lebanese authorities and the LAF to make further efforts to ensure that UNIFIL is fully able to implement its mandate."

Tunnels are hardly the only issue on which the UN combines consciously false expectations with ready evidence of their futility. As in past documents stretching back to 2006, the July 17 report calls for "the disarmament of armed groups," for the never-to-ripen "national defense strategy" dialogue, and for the long-awaited deployment of the "model regiment." Even the most basic expectation—that Lebanon prosecute individuals who attack UN forces—is left dangling. On August 4, 2018, a group of twenty people attacked a UNIFIL patrol in the village of Majdel Zoun. A year later, Lebanese authorities still "have not provided an explanation as to why the conclusions of the LAF diverged significantly from those of UNIFIL. The UN has not been informed of criminal proceedings to date to bring the perpetrators to justice." In response, the UN simply "continues to engage with the Lebanese authorities to request updates on this incident." Efforts to conclude legal proceedings against other Lebanese individuals who attacked peacekeepers—in 2007, 2008, 2011, 2014, even as far back as 1980—have been just as fruitless.

In addition, the July 17 report once again obfuscates the military reality in south Lebanon through a "UNIFIL by the numbers" approach, declaring that 10,292 troops have conducted "13,884 monthly operational activities" and "7,458 patrols" while maintaining "an operational footprint in all municipalities and villages in its area of operations." Such figures give an impression of omnipresent effectiveness, but UNIFIL's actual presence in Lebanon is largely holed up. The steep rise in operational tempo reported since summer 2017 accrued no distinguishable increase in findings, and the footprint of attacks and harassment against patrols sprawls all over the south. Worse yet, these clashes are largely papered over—by the time a field unit's incident report completes its long route through numerous UNIFIL command levels, UNIFIL political advisors, the UN special coordinator's office in Beirut, various departments at UN headquarters, and the secretary-general's office, its details and significance are greatly reduced.

Likewise, UNIFIL's Maritime Task Force reportedly "hailed 2,765 vessels" in the past four months, "of which 801

were inspected and cleared by the Lebanese authorities”—numbers that seem impressive until one realizes that [only one arms ship has been seized since 2006](#), and its cargo was destined for Syrian rebels rather than Hezbollah. Israel’s recent claims that Iran has been shipping weapons manufacturing equipment to Beirut suggest that UNIFIL’s robust hailing record is futile as long as final clearance is conducted by complicit Lebanese authorities.

Yet the crowning jewel of untruth in the latest UN report rests in the following statement: “UNIFIL continued to assist the LAF in establishing an area between the Blue Line and the Litani River free of unauthorized armed personnel, assets, and weapons other than those belonging to the Government of Lebanon and to UNIFIL.” As the UN is fully aware, the LAF has done nothing to establish this monopoly of arms along the border with Israel. And since UNIFIL is admittedly assisting with whatever the LAF is actually doing in the south, the UN is supporting a Lebanese policy that endorses continued Hezbollah violations.

Meanwhile, UNIFIL has called on the Israel Defense Forces “to suspend its construction works in the Lebanese ‘reservation’ area until an agreement [is] reached between the parties,” referring to portions of the Blue Line that Lebanon has disputed for years and blocked any substantive steps to demarcate or resolve. In other words, the UN has adopted Beirut’s narrative and claims, undermining its own duties as custodian of the Blue Line and calling Israel out for taking basic defensive measures along that frontier.

CORRECTING COURSE

Currently, the Lebanese government is part of the problem, not part of the solution. UNIFIL is blindfolded to collusion between its LAF host and Hezbollah, and unable to obtain justice when its forces are repeatedly attacked. This obstruction is perpetrated by Lebanon’s full national chain of command, from the president and the LAF commander down to the field level. The government has also regularly used “private property” claims over the past decade with the aim of blocking UNIFIL’s access to illicit Hezbollah military sites, including observation posts, rocket launching sites, arms depots, and attack tunnels. The UN has willingly respected these claims.

How does one explain this policy of seemingly deliberate futility? Fearing Hezbollah attacks, UNIFIL and its contributing countries apparently prefer to bide time, sidestep problems, and obscure reality. They have also focused on cultivating Lebanese support by providing hundreds of jobs and funding local projects, even though such assistance only perpetuates Hezbollah’s emboldened violations.

Changing this situation requires one to differentiate fact from fiction. In 2006, the authors of UNSCR 1701 rightly identified Hezbollah’s uncontrolled military presence in the south as the war’s main enabler and the most likely cause of future conflicts. Yet the mechanism proposed to remove this presence—Beirut’s commitment “to extend its authority over its territory through its own legitimate armed forces”—is no longer a valid premise for policymaking. With Iran’s help, Hezbollah and its political allies now dominate Lebanon’s government, completely undercutting Beirut’s willingness and ability to fulfill its commitments. Attentive to its political masters, the LAF will likewise keep perpetuating the problem if the current circumstances persist. Automatically and unconditionally renewing UNIFIL’s mandate while allowing it to continue providing funding and jobs in Lebanon will never push the government out of its comfort zone, and years’ worth of generous and unconditioned aid to the LAF has only exacerbated the situation.

Accordingly, UNIFIL is past due for a thorough policy review and changes, based on the following principles and actions:

Prevent war. The only way to stave off another destructive conflict in Lebanon is to address Hezbollah’s military violations and hold it accountable. UNIFIL’s liaison and de-escalation functions—including the tripartite mechanism—can help meet this goal.

Promptly address pending security issues. The UN should demand immediate UNIFIL access to all tunnel-related sites. It should also demand that Beirut provide the names of all assailants who carried out the Majdel Zoun attack on its forces, as well as immediate, time-limited legal proceedings against them.

Stop “business as usual.” More generally, UNIFIL should demand immediate, unimpeded access to all relevant sites in its area of operations, total freedom of movement sans LAF escort, and absolute cessation of all aggression and harassment against its patrols.

Uphold UN responsibilities against Lebanese pretexts. All Lebanese “private property” claims that prevent full UNIFIL access should be flatly revoked. The UN should also insist on the Blue Line’s integrity in its entirety, regardless of Lebanese “reservations” seeking to undermine it. These reservations will be addressed in future border talks between Lebanon and Israel.

Stop appeasing Hezbollah. UNIFIL should stop funding projects and hiring workers in areas where its patrols are harassed or attacked. Cutting funds for communities that support Hezbollah would have the added benefit of increasing financial pressure against the organization.

Enhance UNIFIL’s transparency. Detailed geo-reporting and chronological analysis would help illustrate how UNIFIL’s military activities and civilian projects are being conducted right alongside areas where Hezbollah’s preponderant forces operate.

Beef up UN documentation. UN reports should provide updates on all cases awaiting closure by Lebanese

authorities, not just cases from the latest reporting period.

Downsize UNIFIL. Despite [hopes of improved UNIFIL performance](#), the force's current size will never translate into efficacy given Hezbollah's local dominance and the UN's general risk aversion. UNIFIL's current performance, measured by effect rather than effort, could be met with a 3,000-strong force and a robust liaison branch. The larger the force, the more likely UN troops are to serve as Hezbollah's human shields in one of the world's densest and deadliest conflict zones.

A simple first step would be to lower UNIFIL's size cap from 15,000 troops to its actual current size, around 10,000. Next would be a 10-20 percent reduction—perhaps the removal of 1,000-2,000 troops, one naval vessel, and \$60-120 million in budget. Further cuts should be made over time depending on Lebanon's fulfillment of commitments and UNIFIL's safety and freedom. This dynamic would help the international community regain some leverage over Beirut while increasing pressure on Hezbollah. UNIFIL may gradually proceed toward a 60-70 percent cut, leaving it with 3,000 troops and a \$180 million budget.

Retool LAF assistance and consider targeted sanctions. Given the realities of UN bureaucratic inertia and power structures, rallying support for these recommendations may be easier to do bilaterally with officials in the United States and, perhaps, Europe. Moreover, real change means reshaping not just UNIFIL, but international policy toward Hezbollah and the LAF. More nations need to follow the U.S. and British example of designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The supposed environmental NGO "Green Without Borders"—a known facade for Hezbollah military operations—should be designated and sanctioned as well.

As for the LAF, even UN reports show how Lebanese commanders, units, and organs are deeply complicit with Hezbollah. Foreign officials may therefore wish to consider whether the recent U.S. designation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is a worthwhile model for portions of Lebanon's military. There is already sufficient evidence to sanction LAF Military Intelligence and certain individual officers for their affiliation with Hezbollah. At the very least, international support for the LAF should refocus on border security and counterterrorism, and aid should be conditioned on performance and personnel vetting.

Thirteen years' worth of observation and practice is more than enough to recognize the system's glaring flaws and the best means of fixing them. UNIFIL and the LAF can both be part of the solution, but only if they are dislodged from their current symbiosis with Hezbollah.

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