

The Pros and Cons of Salvaging (or Ditching) UNIFIL

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Brief Analysis

Given the current lack of viable security alternatives on the Israel-Lebanon border, Washington may try to patch up UNIFIL's many deficiencies—but it must do so with a clear understanding that the force has repeatedly failed its mission and squandered its credibility.

When the Biden administration dispatched Special Envoy Amos Hochstein to Beirut last week, his ambitious agenda included the diplomatic equivalent of a Hail Mary pass—namely, avoiding full-scale war between Iran's "axis of resistance" and Israel amid separate U.S. efforts to broker a ceasefire with Hamas, which Hezbollah regards as a sine qua non for de-escalating its own border hostilities. A major element underpinning Hochstein's initiative is the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, whose 10,000-plus personnel constitute the densest deployment of peacekeepers in the world, and whose mandate is currently up for renewal at the UN Security Council ahead of its August 31 expiration.

Unfortunately, UNIFIL has proven ineffective in carrying out its mission for decades now, and absent [significant changes \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/behind-us-plan-prevent-all-out-israel-hezbollah-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/behind-us-plan-prevent-all-out-israel-hezbollah-war), there is little hope it can play a relevant role in securing the Israel-Lebanon frontier. With hostilities intensifying and few good alternatives available, Washington and its partners should take steps to improve the force's usefulness and avoid a full-scale conflagration.

UNIFIL's Situation During the Gaza War

After the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, Security Council Resolution 1701 mandated that the longstanding UNIFIL contingent help the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) ensure that the area between the Litani River and the southern frontier was “free of any armed personnel, assets, and weapons” other than the government’s. Yet as documented in previous Washington Institute articles, Hezbollah instead **expanded its military footprint** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/red-hot-blue-line>) along the border, prohibited UNIFIL from patrolling broad swaths of territory, and **routinely harassed, assaulted, and even killed** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-unifils-independence-part-2-facts-ground>) the force’s personnel.

According to official quarterly reports on UNIFIL’s activities, the force has continued operating inside Lebanon since October, when Hezbollah stepped up its attacks on Israel in solidarity with Hamas. The force’s activities included nearly 6,000 monthly vehicular patrols in south Lebanon, consisting on average of 389 border patrols and 542 counter-rocket-launching patrols (foot patrols are a separate category discussed below). Yet these seemingly impressive numbers do not account for the many sensitive areas UNIFIL has been completely barred from entering **for years** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hiding-plain-sight-hezbollahs-campaign-against-unifil>), in blatant violation of Resolution 1701. Moreover, the **latest report** (https://unifil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2024_548-en.pdf) (covering February 21-June 20) revealed a spike in the already-common “freedom of movement incidents”—specifically, thirty-eight discrete cases in which “plainclothes” Hezbollah members or their local supporters harassed UNIFIL patrols, threatened them with weapons, fired at them, stole their equipment, or blocked their communications signals.

Regarding the UN prohibition on Hezbollah’s military arsenal south of the Litani, UNIFIL rarely if ever seized the group’s weapons prior to the outbreak of war in October and Israel’s resultant air campaign. The latest report indicates that UNIFIL found and disposed of “unauthorized weapons” on seventeen occasions since February, “mostly mobile rocket launching platforms and rockets.” More tellingly, however, it has failed to investigate a single one of the more than 3,000 Hezbollah arms depots and other military sites targeted by Israel since October—including bombed-out bases run by Hezbollah’s **supposed environmental group** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/green-without-borders-operational-benefits-hezbollahs-environmental-ngo>) “Green Without Borders.”

Risks and Recommendations

Because Resolution 1701 was passed under Chapter VI (as opposed to Chapter VII) of the UN Security Council bylaws, it is not enforceable militarily—its application is entirely dependent on cooperation from Israel and Lebanon. For years, however, Beirut has failed to honor these obligations. Far from helping the UN enforce 1701, the LAF has consistently deconflicted and collaborated with Hezbollah while obstructing UNIFIL’s access. Most recently, the LAF temporarily suspended joint patrols with UNIFIL last week after peacekeepers entered “private property” (usually code for Hezbollah locations) in the village of Kfar Hamam.

Of course, UNIFIL is likewise complicit in this state of affairs. Because the force depends on the goodwill of the population for its security and is invested in the country’s stability, it often demurs from effectively monitoring areas that might generate tension, pulls punches in its reporting, and provides economic assistance to Hezbollah’s constituents south of the Litani. These factors have eroded Israeli and American trust in UNIFIL (though Washington’s skepticism has varied between different administrations). Worst of all, UNIFIL’s most important remaining role—convening tripartite meetings with representatives from the Israeli military and LAF—has been suspended since October, closing an important channel of communication during times of crisis.

Given the situation on the ground and UNIFIL's clear deficits in effectiveness and credibility, one could argue for permanently scrapping the \$500 million per year deployment, of which the United States pays \$125 million. Yet if Washington believes UNIFIL can contribute to deferring or preventing another Hezbollah-Israel war, then it will need to take several steps to salvage what it can from the organization:

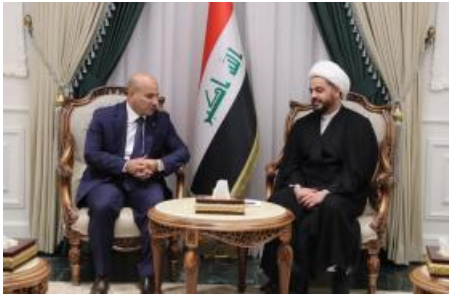
- **Pressure Beirut.** Lebanon's caretaker government remains weak and will not confront Hezbollah directly, but it should still be expected to promptly arrest, prosecute, and punish Hezbollah members or other perpetrators who harass, obstruct, or kill UNIFIL peacekeepers. Consequences, including sanctions, can be imposed on the government for its intransigence. Beirut should also be held accountable for failing to secure its border with Syria, a key transfer point for weapons to Hezbollah.
- **Hold the LAF to a higher standard.** The United States and many European countries underwrite the Lebanese military's equipment and salaries. To encourage the LAF to be more professional and cease denying access to UNIFIL, Washington, France, and other allies should condition further assistance on performance. Designating high-ranking LAF officials who collaborate with Hezbollah—particularly in military intelligence—should also be considered. Moreover, the United States should continue to ensure that the LAF does not return confiscated weapons to Hezbollah.
- **Rebuild trust in UNIFIL.** Whether by diplomacy or force of arms, Israel will do what it believes is necessary to avoid returning to the pre-October 7 status quo, when nearly 10,000 of Hezbollah's Radwan special forces were stationed on its northern frontier. If UNIFIL remains deployed in the south, it must monitor the entire area and honestly call balls and strikes. Israel currently has little confidence that the forty-nine countries who contribute troops to UNIFIL will do so.
- **Add capabilities.** UNIFIL does not have intelligence units or sufficient passive technical surveillance capabilities in Lebanon—the latter because Hezbollah has long opposed their use. This dynamic has produced UNIFIL's surreal, perennial observation that "allegations of arms transfers to non-state actors continued...[but] the United Nations is not in a position to substantiate them independently." Even as projectiles fly across the border daily, UNIFIL admits it cannot detect many of them; when it does detail such launches, it must rely on reports from the warring parties or the media.
- **Reduce the force.** Despite UNIFIL's large size, it has not fulfilled its mandate, and spillover from the Gaza war has exacerbated this problem. For example, monthly foot patrols have dropped from around 3,000 to several hundred since October. Given the organization's marginal efficacy and growing risk of being used as human shields, there is no justification for such an oversize force. The current cap of 13,000 personnel should be reduced to 10,000 or less, consistent with UNIFIL's actual activities on the ground.
- **Improve the reports.** UNIFIL recently added useful graphs to its quarterly reports, but maps should be included as well, indicating precisely where access has been denied and pinpointing those areas that the LAF describes as "strategically sensitive," "private property," and other euphemisms for closed Hezbollah military areas. The reports would also be more helpful if they provided details on violations of Resolution 1701 not currently available in the media.
- **Review the mandate more frequently.** UNIFIL's mandate is renewed annually, but the increasingly volatile regional situation might require urgent modifications to the force or mandate at any point. Washington should therefore press for biannual renewals, allowing more flexibility for such adjustments if needed.

Washington's current alternatives to UNIFIL are limited, and the Gaza ceasefire talks and impending mandate renewal process provide opportunities to revisit the mission's parameters. Regrettably, however, more frequent mandate renewals and other changes are unlikely to transform UNIFIL and empower it to play a positive role south of the Litani. Should the force continue to underperform, Washington should once again seriously consider vetoing its

mandate, ending the deployment, and starting anew.

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