

PolicyWatch #1272

United Nations Peacekeepers in Southern Lebanon: One Year After the War

By Andrew Exum and Gerri Pozez
August 16, 2007

On August 14, 2007, in a speech marking the first anniversary of the ceasefire ending the 2006 summer war, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah warned Israel of the consequences of further conflict. Addressing a mass rally in Beirut via a video link, he said: "Zionists, if you think of launching a war on Lebanon . . . I promise you a big surprise that could change the fate of war and the fate of the region." Israel is still trying to secure the release of two soldiers kidnapped from its territory by Hizballah in July 2006 -- the incident, along with the killing of three other soldiers, that provoked the war. Meanwhile, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) -- comprising approximately 14,000 soldiers from thirty countries -- endeavors to maintain a tenuous peace.

History

UNIFIL was originally established in 1978. In August 2006, its mandate was expanded from assisting the Lebanese government's return to effective authority to assisting the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in establishing an area free of "any armed personnel, assets or weapons other those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL," and also assisting the government "in securing its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry in Lebanon without its consent of arms or related material."

The post-2006 UNIFIL is regarded as more robust than its predecessor, with units that include tanks as well as armored fighting vehicles. It also has ships in a maritime task force working in collaboration with the Lebanese navy. UN Security Council Resolution 1701 authorizes "all necessary action in areas of deployment of [UNIFIL's] forces," qualifying this by also stating "as it deems within its capabilities."

Both Israeli and UN officials have reported that weapons are being smuggled to Hizballah across the border from Syria, although not in UNIFIL's area of operations below the Litani river in the south. North of the Litani river, Hizballah is reported to be building military defenses. And Hizballah flags have been placed directly on the border with Israel, to the annoyance of the Israelis, who consider it a sign of UNIFIL weakness.

The biggest challenge to UNIFIL was a June 24 roadside bomb attack on one of its military patrols, in which three Spanish and three Columbian soldiers were killed. Another roadside bomb attack on July 16, targeting a Tanzanian, caused no casualties. The June bomb was placed on the road between Khiyam and Marjayoun, in the eastern sector, close to Syria. Hidden in a car parked by the side of the tree-lined road, it was powerful enough to spin the Spanish armored vehicles 180 degrees. Nothing about the scene would have appeared out of place to a UNIFIL observer -- or any Lebanese for that matter. As such, UNIFIL patrols have now become extra cautious, alert to anything from a car with only one passenger (a potential suicide bomber) to piles of trash by the road. (There was a rocket attack on the Israeli town of Kiryat Shemona on June 17 by unidentified perpetrators, probably Sunni militants.)

Prior to the June 24 attack, the Spanish had the reputation of being the most aggressive of the UNIFIL

peacekeepers, sending reconnaissance teams into the hills surrounding the villages of the south to look for Hizballah positions and arms caches. Hizballah and others complained that the Spanish had exceeded the UN mandate. Hizballah condemned the attack, however, denying any involvement. The bomb used in the attack consisted of a military grade explosive, an advanced detonation system, and possibly an infrared trigger. Its size and sophistication suggest the possibility of a state sponsor's involvement, implying either Syria or Iran. No group has claimed responsibility, but Sunni radicals from Palestinian refugee camps were initially blamed.

UNIFIL Responses Criticized

UNIFIL's immediate response to the attack has been faulted. It took over an hour for UNIFIL forces to properly react despite friendly units stationed just minutes away. This slow response time highlighted the weaknesses of UNIFIL's military bureaucracy, and may explain why Spain has since augmented its contingent with two helicopters that could be used for either air mobility missions or casualty evacuations.

The longer-term response has been just as disappointing. Instead of increasing its patrols and their interaction with the local population, many UNIFIL contingents have opted to stay inside their bases and armored vehicles. The predictable result, in the case of the Spanish at least, is soured relations between UNIFIL peacekeepers and the populace in Marjayoun and other surrounding villages. This hurts UNIFIL because it severs a connection between the peacekeepers and the very people whose information and informal intelligence gathering might help avoid future attacks.

UNIFIL officers are divided over the best tactical response to the attacks, their differences reflecting the lack of cooperation and communication among member states. Some UNIFIL officers favor adopting a more population-centric approach, working to build up personal relationships with the villagers of southern Lebanon and even local Hizballah representatives. Others seem content to simply wait out the rest of their tours in southern Lebanon behind the razor-wire fences encircling their bases.

At the root of the problem is UNIFIL's greatest strength -- the fact that it comprises soldiers from so many different countries. This mix of contributing nations -- from both the European Union and the developing world -- is a nightmare in terms of the challenges it poses to a unified command structure. The different contingents do not just vary in training and equipment, but also in the way they conduct themselves within their own sectors. A collective UNIFIL decision to assume risk and redouble presence patrols would be nearly impossible to enforce.

Mandate for Another Year

The June attack came just a day before the government of Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora requested the renewal of UNIFIL's mandate -- which expires on August 31 -- for another year, without amendment. UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon is asking the UN Security Council to approve the renewal. At the very least, UNIFIL's presence in its area of operations south of the Litani river is a large physical obstacle in the way of both Israeli and Hizballah military planners. It has also provided Beirut with the necessary political cover to deploy the LAF to the border with Israel in previously unprecedented numbers. If UNIFIL wants to guarantee its long-term security, however, no amount of force protection can substitute for building lasting personal relationships with the people of southern Lebanon and providing continued training and assistance to the LAF.

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