



UNIFIL:

Old lessons for the new force

Richard Gowan looks at the make up of UNIFIL in both its past and present incarnations. He argues that the lessons of previous missions are essential to the success of the current one.

Peacekeeping is a repetitive business. All too often, international forces are required to return to crumbling states that have already played host to one or more peace operations – and in some cases seem to have become dependent on outside interventions. Take Haiti, to which five separate UN missions have been deployed in the last fifteen years. Or Timor-Leste, which remained stable for less than five months after the UN departed in December 2005 – UN police are back there now, alongside Australian troops. Or, looking at a longer timeframe, think of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the 1960s, the UN deployed nearly 20,000 troops to the former Belgian colony. Today, it has similar-sized force back in the country – few analysts believe it should withdraw soon.

And then there is Lebanon. Next year will be the thirtieth anniversary of the UN's first deployment to the south of the country. After last summer's crisis and the ensuing surge of UN troops, there may

be blue helmets around to mark such anniversaries for a while yet. And it is possible to identify a series of recurring patterns in Lebanese peacekeeping.

On a March night in 1978, Israeli troops pushed into South Lebanon after Palestinian guerrillas operating from there had carried out a series of bombings in Israel, killing civilians. Within days, the UN Security Council mandated the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to observe an Israeli withdrawal and help the Lebanese government restore its authority in the South – one month later, there were already 2570 international troops in place, a fifth of them from pre-existing UN missions in the Middle East. The force more than doubled in size over the next six months, involving European

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contributors including France, Ireland, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries.

Yet in spite of its impressively rapid initial deployment and continued presence, UNIFIL was soon known as, at best, a deeply troubled mission. From its inception it was dogged by convoluted command structures, questions over how far it could go in using force (even in self-defense) and its inability to tackle the militias operating in its area of deployment.

In 1982, the Israelis invaded South Lebanon again. In the aftermath, UNIFIL was expanded to nearly 7,000 personnel and there were discussions of widening its role – the US considered expanding it to up to 14,000 troops. Instead, a separate Multinational Force was deployed to Beirut, eventually suffering tragic losses to terrorist bombings. Meanwhile, UNIFIL stayed on in the South for the best part of a quarter-century, dwindling to 2,000 troops by 2006. And then the cycle started up all over again.

The events of 2006 followed the pattern of 1978 to an unsettling degree. Having evacuated South Lebanon in 2000, the Israelis invaded again after guerrillas based there (this time Hezbollah) carried out a cross-border raid (this time the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers). And the Security Council once again mandated UNIFIL to oversee an Israeli departure and help the Lebanese government restore its authority in the area.

The UN duly mounted another rapid intervention, primarily relying on EU member-states – negotiations on the composition of the force were conducted in Brussels as well as New York, with Kofi Annan shuttling between the two. By the end of October 2006 the new UNIFIL was up to nearly 9,000 troops, 80% of them from the EU (by contrast, just 3% of all UN forces in Africa were European). Notable EU contributors once again included France and Ireland, as well as Spain and Italy. Today, UNIFIL has grown to over 12,000.

As the crisis developed, numerous

newspapers pulled together potted histories of UNIFIL, but few commentators dwelt on the parallels with 1978 or 1982. This is a pity, as the mission's first decade was the subject of a thorough diplomatic history and operational analysis. Published in 1989, UNIFIL, by Bjørn Skogmo (a Norwegian diplomat at the UN in the later 1970s) provides the bulk of the historical details I have already highlighted – and deserves close attention for what it may tell us about today.

We need to learn all the lessons available, for the new and much-expanded UNIFIL finds itself stationed at the intersection of a cluster of crises with a dangerous potential to escalate: not only the confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel, but the two sides' respective Syrian, Iranian and American allies. Much has recently been made of how growing tensions between Iran and the United States might result in threats to international forces in Iraq – perhaps not coincidentally, European contributors from the United Kingdom to Lithuania have been drawing down there. But just as the UN headquarters in Baghdad was bombed in 2003, in spite of its efforts to appear impartial, UNIFIL would also almost certainly be in the firing line in any regional conflict.

So what does Skogmo's analysis have to tell us? There are naturally many differences as well as parallels between the crises. If the Security Council took days to mandate UNIFIL in 1978, in 2006 it needed over a month to hash out a resolution. That was, in part, because Washington took a very different view of the situation. In 1978, then Secretary of State Cyrus Vance told UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim that a UN force was necessary within a day of the Israeli incursion. In 2006, the US administration was initially opposed to a UN role, preferring the idea of a non-UN force – probably consisting of regional allies such as Egypt and Turkey – to proactively disarm Hezbollah.

That proved politically impossible, in part perhaps because the Israeli forces had a far harder time taking on Hezbollah than they had against the Palestinians in the 1970s. But if the Israelis struggled to win clear victories, UNIFIL was left looking outflanked and impotent. During the 1982 invasion, its troops were told put up barricades to block advancing Israeli forces but under no circumstances open fire – remarkably, one Nepali unit held its position in this way for two days. In 2006, the residual UNIFIL made no such efforts to slow operations, focusing instead on evacuation and observation. It did a good job of getting foreign civilians out, effectively coordinating sealift with the UN force in Cyprus, but was shaken by the loss of four of its military observers in one incident.

Of course, effectively resisting Israeli forces was not in UNIFIL's mandate, political interests, or operational reach in either 1982 or 2006. This remains true for the current force, although there was flurry of excitement in late 2006 when French UNIFIL forces came within seconds of shooting down an Israeli jet. But one striking lesson Skogmo has for the post-2006 UNIFIL is how far the original's reputation was undermined – for both local actors and international contributors – by its inability to project a credible presence in South

Lebanon between its original deployment and the 1982 invasion. Skogmo entitles





Irish UNIFIL troops protecting mourners at a funeral.

those years the “harassment period”. This is putting it mildly. UNIFIL was not merely obstructed but outright attacked by the Palestinian Liberation Organization and pro-Israeli militia. The latter even mounted an artillery assault on the UN’s main base and hospital. Restrained by their Chapter VI mandate, and with little in the way of robust forces or operational intelligence to go, UNIFIL’s contingents inevitably took casualties. The murder of three Irish soldiers in April 1980 by pro-Israeli militias was a cold-blooded atrocity. The memories remain strong: in the five years immediately prior to the 2006, the reduced UNIFIL did not lose any personnel to hostile acts, but UN Secretariat staff still described it as one of the most dangerous missions.

Similar recollections of this harassment period presumably informed the approach taken by troop contributors to building the new UNIFIL. Readyng their forces, European governments negotiated a mandate that, while still under Chapter VI, gives their troops markedly greater freedom to protect themselves and endangered civilians than in the past. And whereas the original UNIFIL was essentially an infantry force with the necessary support elements, the current force is distinctly heavily armed for a UN peace operation.

A tally of the contingents already in place in October 2006, conducted for the

Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2007, counted mechanised battalions and companies from France, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Nepal. These elements were making an impression on the ground. Journalist Urike Pütz visited Lebanon for Der Spiegel that October and was struck to find that UNIFIL staff were worried that the mission was too heavy. Even its spokesman went on record that “sending in highly-specialised rapid-reaction forces and ‘highly aggressive’ units at the beginning of the operation was a ‘big mistake’.”

“When patrols with tanks roll into villages,” the spokesman continued, “people perceive that as an aggressive act.” In inserting such armor at an early stage, the UN appeared to be echoing not the 1999 UNIFIL deployment, but NATO’s 1999 entry into Kosovo. That has often been criticised, as NATO forces seemed unprepared to handle the inter-ethnic violence they faced – but of course its main intention was to send a message to Slobodan Milosevic to get out and stay out. And the heavy deployment in Lebanon made much more sense if seen as a message that the UN had the capacity to handle major resistance.

But the Kosovo parallel raises uneasy questions. For all the armor that still rolls around the province (which, as anyone who has been there can attest, now looks less aggressive than just plain irritating)

NATO troops had difficulty responding to major flare-up of violence in March 2004. Some well-armed units actually retreated to barracks. The problem was not one of armaments, but of command and political will – many units had caveats from their home governments that placed restrictions on their rules of engagement and situations in which they could act robustly and rapidly during a crisis.

Similar obstacles to effective command have dogged the NATO operation in Afghanistan and affected the EU’s short-term military operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo last year. Indeed, convoluted command arrangements risk becoming the hallmark of European peace operations, whatever banner they may deploy under.

There was thus some concern when, in laying out the terms for the new UNIFIL, the European contributors demanded that a special Strategic Military Cell be set up to oversee the mission from New York. The Cell consists of some twenty-eight officers, from the troop contributors and Permanent Five Security Council members – two-thirds are European. This bypasses normal UN structures, irritating those (such as Bangladesh and Pakistan) who have put troops in harm’s way in Africa without any such mechanism.

And yet in reading Skogmo’s history, one may be surprised to discover that, however

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UNIFIL troop contributors, June 1978

France	1244
Norway	930
Nigeria	669
Ireland	665
Nepal	642
Senegal	634
Iran	524
Fiji	500
Canada	102
Sweden	[212]*

**The Swedish forces, among the first to deploy, withdrew in May-June 1978.*

controversial it may be today, the idea for a special control mechanism for UNIFIL has been round pretty much since the start. The European governments that committed troops were wary - some, like the Netherlands, and never offered troops to the UN on a serious scale before. And they were suspicious of how rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union would affect the Security Council's attitude to the mission.

Washington was sympathetic and in 1980 its Permanent Representative to the UN floated the possibility that the Security Council might ask the Secretary-General to “work closely with a commission composed of States contributing to UNIFIL to discuss and formulate new ways to help ensure the security of Lebanese inhabitants of that region and forestall acts of violence across the border, assisting UNIFIL in assisting its mandate.”

The proposal ran into immediate Soviet opposition, but in the years that followed UNIFIL contributors – including Ireland and Norway - convened a series of ad hoc discussions, sometimes at the ministerial level, on the direction the force should take.

So the idea that those countries risking troops in Lebanon should have a clear say in their use is well-established. But the consultations of its early years were doubly problematic: operationally they had little impact on the national contingents on the ground, which took highly divergent approaches to how tough or cautious they should be. Skogmo notes that contrasting these approaches and ranking the units involved “were favorite sports of both UNIFIL officers and outside analysts”. And politically, the inter-governmental discussions gradually descended into complaining forums, with some governments (such as the Netherlands) using them to set political conditions for their continued participation.

The new Cell, by contrast, has operational authority and is not a political talking-shop. And so far it has been tested by only sporadic minor challenges from Hezbollah and Israeli over-flights. But the early experiences of UNIFIL raise doubts for the future: if a deteriorating security situation in the Middle East meant that the current mission was to enter a sustained “harassment period”, how would the EU contributors use the Cell? Would it be a mechanism to coordinate an effective containment of the challenge – or would governments start to pile up new conditions and caveats on the



French UNIFIL troops in front of a Hezbollah mural

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Top UNIFIL troop contributors, April 2007

Italy	2532
France	1610
Spain	1082
India	894
Nepal	859
Indonesia	853
Ghana	850
Germany	782
Turkey	752
Portugal	463
Belgium	374
Malaysia	362
China	347
Greece	246
Qatar	214
Finland	207
Netherlands	171
Ireland	162
Norway	130
Tanzania	77

One of the concerns for UNIFIL is of increasing caveats placed on soldiers by their governments.

use of their troops?

If they were to follow the latter course, they would be bound to lose credibility with some of the non-European countries deployed alongside them. Crucially, these include not only significant traditional UN contributors (India and Ghana), but largely new Muslim force providers (Indonesia, Qatar and Turkey) and one country whose military resources may prove essential to UN operations in the years ahead: China. Last autumn, Beijing offered 1,000 troops to UNIFIL, although not all were eventually needed – how would its strategic perceptions of the UN and EU be altered if the force crumbled for lack of will?

And it goes without saying that, if UNIFIL is seen to perform badly, the UN will also suffer in American eyes. While Washington might not have wanted an expanded UNIFIL at first, it now expects the force to help safeguard its Israeli and Lebanese allies. At the same

time, it has pushed for a UN force in Darfur – four years after Iraq, the US is shifting back towards the UN. But that could all be undone by a new Lebanese crisis.

We must hope this remains a subject of speculation. But in looking ahead, European governments must remember that events in South Lebanon can be symptoms of wider shifts in global security. After all, in 1978 the Shah of Iran contributed over 500 troops to the young force. They withdrew after his overthrow. Now those directing the new UNIFIL keep a nervous eye on Tehran. Not everything in peacekeeping is repetitive.

Related reading: Bjorn Skogmo's UNIFIL: International Peacekeeping in Lebanon, 1978-1988 (Lynne Rienner, 1989) is now out of print. The Center on International Cooperation's Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2007 (Lynne Rienner, 2007) is available from www.rienner.com. Ulrike Pütz's reporting is at www.spiegel.de.