

DRAFT

**PEACEKEEPING IN SOUTHERN LEBANON
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE?**

**Marianne Heiberg
Senior Research Associate
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs**

*Paper presented to:
Peacekeeping, Water and Security in South Lebanon
Conference organised by the Centre for Lebanese Studies
in co-operation with the
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*

**October 4, 1991
Royal Institute of International Affairs, London**

INTRODUCING UNIFIL

"The weak point of the Arab coalition is Lebanon (for) the Muslim regime is artificial and easy to undermine. A Christian state should be established, with its southern border on the Litani river. We will make an alliance with it."¹

David Ben-Gurion, May 1948

"We live here as in a prison. The prison takes away our future because it takes away our hope. We no longer have freedom to move, to see our families who live outside, to discuss openly with our friends. Worse, we no longer know who our friends are. Some are locked in like us. We dream only of escaping - away to Beirut, away from Lebanon. But some escape by helping Israel make the prison secure so that none of the rest of us can ever escape."

Shi'ite man, father of 2 children, security zone, 1987

Many people at different times have described their lives in southern Lebanon by using the analogy of a prison. The analogy refers to their sense of isolation, of being cut off from the wider society to which they belong, of being subjected to a wide range of arbitrary regulations and sanctions which refer to the security needs of another country or the political aspirations of another people. Like prisoners, many people say they are forced to obey rules: but they can claim no rights to service from a civil society which is both unable and unwilling to defend them.

But in many ways the analogy of a prison is too simple to describe the afflictions of southern Lebanon and the shifting contradictions and myriad of dilemmas with which its occupants - Lebanese, Palestinian, Israeli and UN personnel alike - must contend. The prison is built out of many rooms some much more

¹. quoted in Noam Chomsky, The Fateful Triangle - the United States, Israel and the Palestinians, London: Pluto Press, 1983, p.163

permeable than others. The various parts of the prison have internal hierarchies - occupants who in their special realms have managed to occupy positions of military, political or economic power over other occupants.

Moreover, the size, shape and custodianship of the prison has changed over time. Until 1982 it was enclosed by the PLO's 'state within a state'. From 1982 to 1985, the period of Israeli occupation it consisted of the relatively large and unwieldy area from the IDF front lines at the Awali River down to the international border. Now the prison is centred on the much smaller, more stringently controllable area of the 'security zone'.

The role of UNIFIL has been to "observe and report", to certify the continuity of civility and hopefully oversee the prison's eventual disappearance.

The Mandate

The background to UNIFIL can be sketched as follows:

On March 11, 1978 a group of 11 Al Fatah guerrillas hijacked a civilian bus on the Haifa-Tel Aviv highway. Shortly thereafter Israeli security forces stopped the bus and in the ensuing gunfire 34 Israelis and 9 guerrillas were killed. In the Knesset Prime Minister Begin swore to "cut off the arm of evil" and on March 14 Israel launched "Operation Litani", a massive invasion of southern Lebanon by Israel. The initial objective was to establish a 10 kilometre wide security zone along Lebanon's southern border. The wider objective was to eradicate the PLO in southern Lebanon as a threat to Israel.

The Israeli invasion came at a particularly sensitive moment for the Americans. The centre of American Middle East policy had shifted to obtaining a peace agreement, in which a Soviet role would be excluded, between Israel and Egypt, a process still in its delicate infancy. An Israeli occupation of Lebanon would

have brought it to a halt.

On March 19, in an atmosphere of international crisis and urgency, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young, under instructions from President Jimmy Carter, proposed the establishment of a UN peacekeeping force to replace the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in Lebanon. In a little over 24 hours, this proposal resulted in the adoption of Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426 which instructed the Secretary General of the UN to set up UNIFIL for an initial period of 6 months. The establishment of UNIFIL was achieved with a haste exceptional by any standards, particularly those of the UN

UNIFIL's mandate contained 3 objectives. Within the broader context of respect for Lebanon's integrity and sovereignty, UNIFIL was, 1) to confirm the withdrawal of the Israeli forces, 2) to help restore international peace and security, and 3) to assist the Government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority to the area.

By late March UNIFIL deployment had commenced and by June the force consisted of some 6000 individuals recruited from 9 countries: Canada, Iran, Norway, Fiji, Nepal, Senegal, Ireland and France. France's participation was significant since it was entirely unsolicited. Since then, both the number of personnel and the troop contributing countries have varied over time. Currently, France, Fiji, Ghana, Ireland, Italy, Sweden, Nepal, Finland and Norway provide the Force with either infantry battalions or logistic and medical units.

Perhaps inevitably the sense of urgency and haste surrounding the establishment of UNIFIL seems to have precluded adequate, advance planning and a careful examination of the military and political factors necessary for successful execution of the Force's mandate and for precision in operational guidelines. Indeed, almost every assumption upon which UNIFIL was based and most of the guidelines the Force received proved to be insufficient,

inappropriate or unworkable.

Limitations

To begin with, none of the conditions judged essential for the mission's success pertained.

First, UNIFIL did not have the full backing of the Security Council. The Soviet Union abstained during the vote on Resolution 425 for reasons relating to, among other things, the sharp decline of Soviet-American relations. Needless to say, abstention on 425 also implied rejection of any financial responsibility to UNIFIL.

Moreover, the United States, the architect of UNIFIL, did not maintain an unflagging backing for the Force. Sufficient pressure was not placed on Israel to withdraw or to cease violating the original decisions of the Security Council which established UNIFIL. During the Reagan Administration support for UNIFIL was subordinated to other diplomatic priorities in the Middle East and the United Nations as a whole was placed in disrepute.

Second, UNIFIL also did not have the backing of the parties directly concerned in the conflict. Israel's concurrence had neither been granted nor indeed even sought. Her reluctant acquiescence was obtained only because of intense American pressure.

For their part, the PLO and Yasir Arafat gave UNIFIL conditional support, but only because UNIFIL was viewed as a deterrent to further large-scale Israeli interventions in Lebanon. Certainly the PLO did little to facilitate UNIFIL's task. It insisted that UNIFIL only deploy in those areas physically occupied by the IDF. Thus UNIFIL was prevented from occupying important PLO strongholds, such as the city of Tyre. Moreover, Arafat demanded that armed PLO fighters inside the UNIFIL area of operations

(A.O) be allowed to stay and that the Cairo Agreement of 1969 remain in force.

Obviously, Major Sa'ad Haddad, leader of the Israeli-backed Christian militias in the south, not only refused to extend support to UNIFIL, but in a country where status is often measured by military prowess, he held the lightly armed UNIFIL in contempt.

Of the local actors, only the Lebanese government eagerly accepted UNIFIL. But, characteristically, although the conflict was fought on Lebanese territory, Lebanon herself was not in a real sense a party to the war. Her support for UNIFIL was an attempt to place the Lebanese crisis at the center of international attention in the hope that the international community would impose solutions - such as the extension of governmental authority - which had so utterly eluded the Lebanese themselves.

Third, on the ground UNIFIL was not a fully integrated military unit. A confluence of factors is involved here.

Although it was explicitly understood by the US and the Security Council that UNIFIL would deploy over the entire area occupied by Israel down to Lebanon's international border, the enabling UN resolution did not specify UNIFIL's area of operation. Although initially Israel handed over control of her evacuated territories to UNIFIL, in the latter stages of withdrawal, a broad strip along the entire Lebanese - Israeli border was delivered to Major Haddad, a disgruntled and highly volatile Greek Catholic army officer who was dismissed from the Lebanese army shortly thereafter. In addition, Major Haddad's Christian militias - in UN parlance the De Facto Forces (DFF) - were granted control over a wide corridor stretching from the Litani River to the Israeli border which effectively divided the UNIFIL A.O. into two.

The effects of UNIFIL's territorial dispersal were exacerbated by the rash decision to locate UNIFIL headquarters in Naqoura, the site of the 1949 armistice talks, instead of inside the core area of UNIFIL operations. Sited on the main coastal road, UNIFIL HQ is some 4 km. from the Israeli border, completely surrounded by the Israeli controlled enclave and thus totally cut off from UNIFIL's area of operations. The dispersal of UNIFIL over 3 separated areas has had prejudicial effects on logistics as well as command and control functions. In addition, UNIFIL HQ has the status of potential hostage, a status that has often been effectively exploited by local Lebanese and Israelis alike

UNIFIL's lack of military integration has another, critical dimension apart from its geographical dispersion. Like all UN peacekeeping forces, UNIFIL is an *ad hoc* force with operational units drawn from a range of contributing countries. The national militaries of these countries tend to differ greatly as to professionalism, military culture, technological sophistication, political sympathies and motivations for and understanding of peacekeeping duties. One result of these disparities is that operational practice can and does vary dramatically from one battalion area of operations to another, thus, undermining UNIFIL's military coherence and credibility. This lack of operational continuity is aggravated by UNIFIL's system of rotation whereby most of the Force is completely changed out every six months. For a range of reasons, much of the experience and wisdom accumulated by a national battalion over its six months stay in Lebanon is not effectively transferred to the incoming contingent. Moreover, the competence of contingent commanders can also vary drastically. Thus, not only does operational practice in the field diverge greatly between national battalions, it can also vary strikingly from one national contingent to its successor contingent.

Achievements

Yet despite these many limitations, UNIFIL has exercised an

exceedingly valuable stabilizing role in southern Lebanon. In brief outline, five points can be noted. First and foremost, UNIFIL has extended to local residents a much needed security and physical protection which has made southern Lebanon one of the most stable areas of the country. The current economic boom in construction and agriculture as well as a rapid population growth are indicators of the relative stability and prosperity UNIFIL has fostered. Second, UNIFIL has been critical for rebuilding a local political infrastructure in the south and for reinforcing the stature and legitimacy of moderate local political forces. Third, the international spotlight UNIFIL represents has meant that the Israeli occupation has been arguably milder than it would otherwise have been. Fourth, UNIFIL has provided a buffer, albeit imperfect and porous, between Israel and her Lebanese based adversaries. Finally, UNIFIL has also provided a certain buffer between Israel and Syria. The stabilizing effect of this buffer has been of particular importance since South Lebanon rests on the volatile fault lines of delicate regional and, formerly, international strategic balances.

Nonetheless, UNIFIL has regularly been depicted as another hapless, outplayed and outgunned victim of Lebanon's proverbial quagmire. And certainly Resolution 425 remains unimplemented. The Lebanese government has been unable to provide either political or military back-up. The consent of the major antagonists has been either hesitant or absent. Over-armed local combatants have busily pursued old and new quarrels frequently hitting UNIFIL in the cross-fire. UNIFIL's operational area is split into 3 parts. Finally, movement toward an overall solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict has, more often than not, been minimal or shifted into reverse.

Indeed, from its inception UNIFIL has been entangled in a mutating series of predicaments. Initially, the Force faced unrelenting criticism from Israel for not cleansing southern Lebanon of Palestinian guerrillas, a task that UNIFIL was neither equipped or authorized to undertake. After 1982, UNIFIL was

strongly censured for not stopping the Israeli invasion, another task that UNIFIL was neither equipped or mandated to assume. Since 1985 on one hand UNIFIL has been berated by Israel for not preventing "terrorist" attacks on the security zone and on the other has been reprimanded by a range of Lebanese groups for impeding their recognized right to combat military occupation by all means available.

Southern Lebanon 1991 and current dilemmas

Lebanon as a whole is currently enjoying a level of stability unprecedented since 1975. In the south this new stability rests mainly on three elements. 1) The activities of the Hizbollah and Palestinian fighters have been severely curtailed. 2) The AMAL militia has been dismantled although AMAL continues to have an armed security wing. 3) Most importantly, government institutions are gradually being extended into the south. In this context, the deployment of the Lebanese army is critical.

Despite signs of progress, however, stability remains fragile and UNIFIL's predicament has entered into a new phase.

Lebanese views

Throughout the south popular support for and anticipation concerning the deployment of the Lebanese army is intense and growing. The most fervent local champion of deployment is the AMAL and in particular Mr. Nabih Berri who has left government and established residence in the southern village of Nabatiya. Local advocates of deployment point to the fact that Sidon is now under army control, some 2000 soldiers have deployed in Tyre, but only some 19 Lebanese soldiers have been permitted to deploy in the UNIFIL area of operations. In consequence, AMAL is insisting that the Lebanese army be allowed to co-deploy with UNIFIL and, indeed, stresses that such co-deployment is part of UNIFIL's mandate. AMAL states that these Lebanese units would be under UNIFIL command, therefore, avoiding the confusion of dual command

and would carry out critical functions, such as arrests, weapons confiscation and house searches, for which UNIFIL lacks authorization.

Two additional arguments are also presented. First, deployment of the army, it is argued, would result in at least the partial collapse of the South Lebanese Army since many SLA soldiers would gladly defect to a legal Lebanese force. Second, the deployment of the army would demonstrate to Israel that Lebanon has been reconstituted and that both Israel's political and military grounds for occupation no longer pertain. AMAL insists that unless Israel begins to show indications of withdrawal, armed resistance will inevitably mount, unravelling the frail peace in the south and again trapping UNIFIL in the cross-fire.

Many AMAL leaders warn that unless UNIFIL permits some form of co-deployment soon, public opinion in the south could turn sharply against UNIFIL for hindering the reestablishment of legal Lebanese authority.

UNIFIL's views

Despite popular demands, UNIFIL's leadership both in Naqoura and New York are staunchly opposed to co-deployment. Their arguments rest on several levels. First, UNIFIL underlines that if the Lebanese army is strong enough to deploy in the UNIFIL A.O., then UNIFIL would readily yield the area of its control to the army. However, the army, UNIFIL argues, is still weak, ill-trained, badly equipped and has not yet recovered from 15 years of sectarian warfare. The lines of command and control remain blurred since many soldiers continue to owe their primary loyalty to former militia leaders rather than to their army commanders. UNIFIL insists the army should first gradually deploy and consolidate positions in areas outside of the UN zone and view UNIFIL as the army's surrogate in the south. UNIFIL's assessment is reportedly shared by the Lebanese Chief of Staff, General Michael Lahoud. Second, co-deployment would erase UNIFIL's

buffer functions in case, 1) the Lebanese army cooperated with certain militia groups still active in the area or, 2) came into direct confrontation with the IDF. UNIFIL anticipates both of these possibilities to be likely. Third, UNIFIL's previous experiences with co-deployment between 1979 - 1982 and the period prior to 1985 were not encouraging.

Against the pressure for co-deployment, UNIFIL emphasizes the need for its area of deployment to be gradually and cautiously extended south with evacuated areas to the north transferred to the Lebanese. In this respect, Israeli views become vital.

Israeli views

And Israeli views are uncompromising. One high ranking Israeli official stated recently, "Let's be frank. Lebanon as a country no longer exists." The current Israeli government contends that the Taif Accord, the treaty of brotherhood and coordination between Lebanon and Syria and the Defense Pact between the two countries have effectively transformed Lebanon into a dependent district of Syria. Thus, in Israeli thinking Lebanon has been reduced to a subordinate point in a triangle which otherwise incorporates Israel and Syria. Briefly stated, for Israel the security zone is part of a wider security belt which includes the Golan and to which Syria is the pivotal threat. Israel is unwilling to negotiate any disengagement on the Golan if Syria remains on the flanks in Lebanon. In short, Israel maintains that any territorial compromise on the Golan and certainly any form of withdrawal from Lebanon must be predicated on a prior Syrian withdrawal from that country. This assessment appears to be widely accepted within Israel and is not controversial.

Moreover, Israel is deeply sceptical concerning the future of the Lebanese army. Israeli officials claim that since deployment attacks on both Israel and the security zone have increased markedly as a result of army ineptitude as well as Syrian ambitions to maintain instability in the south.

Israel appears to have abandoned its previous ambition of reshaping the political geometry of Lebanon in a manner which permits the two countries to enter into a bilateral peace agreement reinforced by intrusive security arrangements in the south. Instead, Israel's policy seems to be reduced to the piano theory of Mr. Uri Lubrani, Israel's Lebanon coordinator. This theory states that Israel will play Lebanon as it is.

The future of UNIFIL

Although the forthcoming peace conference may well produce unexpected and radical movements opening new opportunities for southern Lebanon - great events in the Middle East have rarely been predicted - the prognosis is not promising. Regardless, after 13 years the future of UNIFIL requires reexamination. Three options appear to be available: status quo, a phased reduction or a major reinforcement. This paper will conclude with a brief and very rough assessment of each.

Status quo

Unless the unexpected occurs, implementation of UN resolution 425 remains as remote as ever. However, on the positive side, UNIFIL has brought an important measure of security to southern Lebanon and extended crucial humanitarian assistance to the local population. In addition, it has been critical for the economic prosperity which is so evident in the area. Therefore, the results of a UNIFIL withdrawal could well be two-fold. 1) Because of endemic violence and economic collapse, southern Lebanon up to the Litani River would be largely depopulated. 2) Renewed violence would increase unpredictability and thus augment the danger of a regional conflagration between Israel and Syria. Because of such possible consequences, UNIFIL should remain in place for the foreseeable future despite its inability to fulfil its mandate.

On the negative side: first, UNIFIL ties up enormous assets at a time when the demand for peacekeeping is growing dramatically while simultaneously the resources upon which peacekeeping has traditionally depended are almost depleted. During the period of its existence UNIFIL has consumed on average some 2/3rd of all funds used on UN peacekeeping. Second, in many respects UNIFIL has lost a sense of real mission. It has become over-bureaucratic, administratively wasteful and inefficient. Moreover, its deficiencies both at UNIFIL headquarters and in the national battalions have irreversibly undermined its military and political creditability. Third, the implicit understandings between Israel and Syria are sufficient to prevent a major conflict between them. Finally, with the end of the cold war, the strategic importance of southern Lebanon has been vastly reduced. Although UNIFIL's role in providing security and assistance to the local Lebanese population is without doubt laudable, this role cannot be assigned a sufficiently high priority in global terms to justify the resources required to maintain UNIFIL.

Phased reduction

Failing an Israeli withdrawal, UNIFIL's main mission will remain limited to observing and reporting on events and violations as well as attempting mediation between local antagonists. These objectives can satisfactorily be fulfilled with a much smaller force than UNIFIL now commands. Arguably, in comparison to current levels of 6000 personnel, UNIFIL could function as effectively with manpower levels at 2000 or below and with unarmed observers as its main operational element. If a UNIFIL reduction is clearly signalled, carefully planned and very gradually implemented, the risks of withdrawal, mentioned previously, can be avoided.

However, such a radical reduction could also signal to Lebanon as well as Israel that the international community tacitly accepts continued Israeli occupation.

Major reinforcement

Israel views UNIFIL militarily as weak and undependable, politically as disjointed and inconsequential. Therefore, Israel argues that it would be foolhardy to depend on the Force to take up a more ambitious role and will probably prevent any significant UNIFIL expansion southward.

In order to alter this assessment, UNIFIL has to be transformed in a manner that satisfies Israel's security concerns along her northern border; in short, in a manner that would offer a convincing alternative to the security zone. This would require that UNIFIL be drastically reshaped both in terms of its military capabilities as well as its political composition and authority.

The implications for UNIFIL of a range of changes in the international arena are crucial in this context.

First, the momentous events in Europe have opened the possibility of political cooperation among nations which have been locked into antagonistic blocs for two generations. In particular, the great powers have demonstrated their willingness to collaborate on resolving those regional conflicts which can intrude upon the improving relationship between the US and USSR. The Arab-Israeli conflict, into which Lebanon has been drawn, falls into this category.

Second, not only the United States and the Soviet Union, but many other countries are showing new interest in the potential of the United Nations as a force for peace in international affairs. The UN's potential role in enhancing collective security is perhaps greater now than at any time since the organization's establishment in San Francisco.

Third, given the prospective rising demand for peacekeeping, against a continuing evolution in international relations, even such basic constraints as those inhibiting participation of the

great powers' militaries in UN operations may no longer pertain.

It is within this framework of a potential new generation of UN peacekeeping that a military and political reconfiguration of UNIFIL is conceivable. One critical political pre-condition is a renewed involvement of the United States in the fate of Lebanon.

Within this broad and in many ways uncertain context, it might be possible in the medium term to consider the renegotiation of UN resolution 425. Such a renegotiation would require a joint initiative of the US and USSR coupled to a commitment by them to assist, or perhaps participate, militarily in a new UN force in south Lebanon. The trade off would be a militarily strengthened and expanded force sufficient for Israel's security concerns, based primarily on western and eastern European units, actively backed by American involvement in return for a full Israeli withdrawal from the area.