



Another Israel-Hezbollah War Is On The Horizon. Where is UNIFIL?

April 18, 2024 David Wilezol *AFPC Insights*

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Fears of a full-scale Israel-Hezbollah war seem to grow more legitimate by the day. Ever since the barbaric Hamas attacks against Israel on October 7, Hezbollah has fired thousands of rockets and missiles from southern Lebanon into northern Israel, with the Jewish state initiating justified *ad hoc* responses. And things may soon get hotter still, on the heels of Israel's recent fatal strikes against top Quds Force generals in Damascus. The *Middle East Monitor* is now reporting that Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant is considering how best to prepare the Israeli people for an all-out Israel-Hezbollah conflict.

Here, one player is glaring because of its absence. For decades, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been active on Lebanese soil, with a charge of preventing hostilities between the two neighbors. So why is it effectively missing in action?

It's not for a lack of authority. The 10,000-strong "peacekeeping" force has been on the ground since 1978, and its mandate gives it power to "restore international peace and security" and "assist the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area." In an ideal world, UNIFIL would use this authority to turn back the progressive Hezbollah infestation of southern Lebanon.

Instead, UNIFIL has turned a blind eye as Hezbollah has dug tunnels across the Blue Line, infiltrated communities in Lebanon's south, and stockpiled some portion of its 150,000 rockets and missiles near the border with Israel. In December of 2023, Hezbollah launched a rocket attack 20 meters from a UNIFIL compound, no doubt in hopes of provoking an Israeli retaliation that would inflict damage on a UN position. UNIFIL could only shrug and declare the exploitation of UNIFIL's location "unacceptable." Earlier this month, a Hezbollah roadside bomb wounded several peacekeepers. UNIFIL responded by courageously suspending patrols for three days.

Under UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the last Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006, UNIFIL also has a charge to "assist the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in taking steps towards the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani River of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons." Here too, the LAF's facilitation of Hezbollah's buildup demonstrates UNIFIL's failures. UNIFIL's imperative to cooperate with the LAF is non-sensical, given the LAF's own willful ignorance of Hezbollah activities and its subversion of UNIFIL's mission by obstructing the installation of UNIFIL surveillance equipment. Former Israeli Brigadier General Assaf Orion has documented how the LAF plays "an active part in concealing Hezbollah's prohibited military operations."

What explains UNIFIL's failures? A lack of political will tops the list. The UN is already riven by anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, and its mandarins frequently apply an unfounded moral equivalency between Israel and its enemies. The military professionals in charge of UNIFIL's day-to-day operations may not share the bigotry of the UN brass, but what are Turtle Bay's political advisors whispering in their ears?

More seriously, what commander wants to instigate a conflict with the Middle East's best-armed terror group on its home turf, while relying on untested troops from China, Ghana, and Indonesia with no skin in the Middle East game? It's far easier to punt on the hard decisions, clear land mines, treat livestock caught in crossfire, and conduct perfunctory joint patrols with the same useless LAF forces who have done nothing to tackle Hezbollah. As a result, UNIFIL retains zero deterrence value.

UNIFIL's impotence raises the question: Why should it continue to exist? The argument has been made before; Israeli legal scholar Eugene Kontorovich has written that UNIFIL "embodies all the pathologies of the UN system—high cost, mission creep and unaccountable performance with an anti-Israel twist." In 2017, the Trump administration threatened to end UNIFIL's mandate unless it was given broader powers to conduct inspections for caches of Hezbollah weaponry. Those powers have been granted, but it hasn't mattered: Hezbollah today is stronger than ever in the area of UNIFIL's remit.

UNIFIL's mandate will be up for renewal in August of this year, and the region won't suffer any worse than it already does without this irrelevant entity. If the Biden administration is intent on keeping UNIFIL in place, it would do well to make its existence contingent on a meaningful crackdown against Hezbollah. Otherwise, Americans will have wasted another \$143 million on a multilateral endeavor whose failures, rather than preventing war, have in fact facilitated it.