

The failure of UNIFIL: Do your job, or get out of the way

written by Arsen Ostrovsky | 17.10.2024

It is hard to think of a United Nations agency with a more glaring failure in its core mission than the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, more commonly known as UNIFIL — and there has certainly been no shortage of contenders this year.

Following the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, which was initiated after Hezbollah terrorists ambushed an Israeli border patrol, killing eight soldiers and kidnapping two others, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1701. This mandated the creation of a demilitarized zone south of Lebanon's Litani River and entrusted UNIFIL to oversee Hezbollah's disarmament and withdrawal from the area.

That, however, did not happen.

Instead, with the acquiescence of the Lebanese government, Hezbollah entrenched itself, including literally burrowing in tunnels, along the common border with Israel. It amassed an arsenal of 150,000 or more Iranian-made precision guided rockets, in addition to an arsenal of missiles and suicide drones. All of this happened under the watchful eye of UNIFIL.

UNIFIL's ineffectiveness has been underscored over the last 12 months. A day after Hamas's rampage in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, Hezbollah joined the war as well, with notional plans to recreate a similar massacre in Israel's north. Since then, the group has fired more than 10,000 rockets at Israel from southern Lebanon, killing dozens and displacing tens of thousands of Israelis from their homes.

One may be forgiven for asking what, if anything, UNIFIL has done to uphold UNSCR 1701. The answer: nothing of substance.

Just this week, Hezbollah terror tunnels and weapons caches meters away from UNIFIL observation posts and bases, literally right under the noses of U.N. peacekeepers. That UNIFIL was unaware of this state of affairs is simply implausible.

Rather, it has either been grossly incompetent, acting as no more than as a passive bystander while Iran's chief terrorist proxy arms itself for war with Israel. Or, worse yet, it has become a shield allowing Hezbollah to attack Israeli civilian communities while complicating Israel's subsequent response.

On Sunday, a statement issued on behalf of U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres defiantly reiterated that "UNIFIL peacekeepers remain in all positions and the UN flag continues to fly." That's a lofty statement, to be sure. But it obscures the real contours of the problem.

By staying in place, UNIFIL is not only obstructing the IDF's legitimate military operations against Hezbollah, it is also recklessly putting its own peacekeepers at risk.

Just the other day, five UNIFIL peacekeepers were inadvertently injured when Israeli forces fired in the direction of their Lebanon headquarters in Naqoura, while engaged in a fight against Hezbollah terrorists in the vicinity. This tragic consequence was the result of UNIFIL's rejection of repeated prior requests by Israel for it to withdraw from Hezbollah strongholds and active combat zones.

But UNIFIL isn't just an obstacle; it has also become an active enabler. Over the last month, at least 25 rockets and missiles have been launched at Israeli communities and troops from Hezbollah terrorist compounds embedded near UNIFIL posts in southern Lebanon, exploiting their proximity to U.N. forces. One of the attacks even resulted in the death of two Israeli soldiers.

How, then, can UNIFIL be entrusted to keep the peace and continue its mission?

In the 18 years since the adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, UNIFIL has been an abject failure, allowing Hezbollah to rearm and entrench itself in southern Lebanon, setting the stage for the current conflict in the process. Moreover, it has done so with international support and American largesse. Last year, the U.S. appropriated \$143 million to UNIFIL for 2023, amounting to about one-quarter of the force's total budget of \$507 million. And once the current war ends, history suggests it won't not take long for Hezbollah to return to southern Lebanon, in spite of UNIFIL's presence there.

For the time being, however, there are only two feasible options. Either UNIFIL ceases to serve as a willing pawn for Hezbollah and actually enforces UNSCR

1701, or it closes up shop and leaves.

In other words, the U.N. should either do its job or let Israel do it.

The article was written in collaboration with Ilan Berman from the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C.

Published in The Hill, October 17, 2024.