

UNIFIL: The UNRWA of Lebanon



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The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was created in 1978 following Israel's invasion of Southern Lebanon against the Palestine Liberation Organization. Established under Security Council resolutions 425 and 426, UNIFIL was mandated to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Southern Lebanon, restore international peace and security, and assist the Lebanese government in restoring effective authority to Southern Lebanon. After the 2006 Lebanon War, UNIFIL's mandate was extended to include monitoring the cessation of hostilities, preventing Hizbullah from deploying south of the Litani River, and assisting the Lebanese government in preventing arms smuggling into the country.¹

UNIFIL's mandate is renewed annually by the Security Council and is slated for reauthorization in August 2025. As this paper will demonstrate, UNIFIL has woefully failed to prevent Hizbullah's rearmament. Besides mere incompetence, there are credible allegations of UNIFIL collusion and cooperation with Hizbullah. This should come as no surprise as many of UNIFIL's troops come from deeply hostile anti-Israel countries.

Instead of limiting Hizbullah, UNIFIL serves to hamper Israeli and Western action in Lebanon while providing cover for the terror organization. In 2023, the American Congress earmarked \$143 million to UNIFIL.² Despite this exorbitant sum, UNIFIL has failed consistently to fulfill its mandate. Therefore, the United States should veto its reauthorization. In the first Trump Administration, the U.S. considered ending UNIFIL, but reportedly met with resistance from the Israeli security establishment, who argued that the UN mission was better than the

1 United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. "UNIFIL Mandate." United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-mandate>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

2 Congressional Research Service. *United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)*. 27 Dec. 2022.

alternatives, just as they opposed the disbanding of UNRWA prior to October 7, 2023.³ In fact, many of Israel's leading security experts have repeatedly and consistently advocated for UNIFIL in various configurations.⁴

Given UNIFIL's utter failure and collaboration with Hizbullah, Israel must press for UNIFIL to be disbanded. As will be demonstrated, UNIFIL is hopelessly beyond repair and a modification to its mandate is insufficient.

► A | Hizbullah on the Eve of October 7, 2023

At the beginning of the recent conflict between Israel and Hizbullah, starting on October 8, 2023, Hizbullah was considered "the world's most heavily armed non-state actor".⁵ On the eve of the 2006 Lebanon War, Hizbollah was estimated to hold around 15,000 rockets and missiles. By 2023, Hizbullah's rocket arsenal expanded to 130,000.⁶ Until the 2023 Israeli air strikes in Lebanon, thousands of Hizbullah's elite Radwan Forces were poised on Israel's northern border, with plans to invade the Galilee and murder and kidnap Israeli civilians. Only Hamas' premature invasion on October 7, 2023, prevented a coordinated two-front war.⁷ Given that UNIFIL is charged explicitly with preventing Hizbullah from re-deploying in Southern Lebanon or re-arming, this is a stunning failure by any parameter. This alone should suffice to disband the organization.

3 Ravid, Barak. "U.S. Threatens to Veto UN Peacekeeping in Lebanon over Hezbollah Concerns." *Newsweek*, 12 Aug. 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/terminate-un-interim-force-lebanon-opinion-1526970>.

4 See for example Orion, Assaf. UNIFIL II Ten Years On: Strong Force, Weak Mandate. Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 14 Aug. 2016, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/unifil-ii-ten-years-on-strong-force-weak-mandate/>. Orion, Assaf. *At the Crossroads: Is Israel's Policy toward UNIFIL Changing?* Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 13 July 2017, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/crossroads-israeli-policy-unifil/>; Mizrahi, Orna. *Integrating UNIFIL into Agreements to End the War in the North: Not in Its Current Format*. Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 30 Oct. 2024, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/unifil-2024/>.

5 Shaikh, Shaan, and Ian Williams. "Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah." *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 June 2018, last modified 10 Aug. 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/hezbollahs-rocket-arsenal/>.

6 Ibid.

7 Bletter, Diana. "Hezbollah's Radwan Force Planned to Invade Israel from This Village; Now the IDF Controls It." *The Times of Israel*, 29 Oct. 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollahs-radwan-force-planned-to-invade-israel-from-this-village-now-the-idf-controls-it/>.

► B | UNIFIL is at Hizbullah's Mercy

As of 2 December 2024, UNIFIL has close to 10,000 peacekeepers from 48 countries. The most significant contributing countries are Indonesia (1,230), Nepal (876), and Malaysia (833).⁸ Foreign peacekeepers have little incentive to risk their lives for their mission. Although UNIFIL peacekeepers are authorized to use force in self-defense, they have regularly declined to challenge Hizbullah. For decades, Hizbullah routinely attacks UNIFIL patrols, confiscates weapons, and sets fire to vehicles.⁹ In February 2025, Hizbollah opened fire on a UN convoy, injuring two UNIFIL peacekeepers, in protest against the government's decision to bar two Iranian planes from landing in Lebanon.¹⁰

A 2019 report by Assaf Orion extensively details Hizbullah's *modus operandi* of harassing UNIFIL soldiers and preventing them from fulfilling their mandate while hiding under the guise of civilian protests. Since 2006, the UN has reported at least 150 incidents of Hizbullah restricting the movement of UNIFIL troops.¹¹ Hizbullah often blocks access by claiming that roads, homes, or compounds are "private property," and that these are off-limits to UNIFIL troops. In the Secretary-General's report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 from 21 February to 20 June 2024, the Secretary-General details 38 euphemistically termed "freedom of movement incidents". In each case, the Secretary-General describes "individuals in civilian clothes" blocking UNIFIL access without mentioning Hizbullah's responsibility or presence.¹²

According to Orion, the Secretary-General has reported 114 cases of violent conduct against UNIFIL troops between 2006 and 2019: twenty cases of verbal threats or insults, thirty-four physical attacks, thirty-six stone throwing, eight weapon pointing, two car ramming, five cold-weapon attacks, four shooting incidents, two improvised explosive device (IED) attack attempts, and six explosive devices attacks.¹³ In December 2022, Hizbullah attacked and killed Irish UNIFIL peacekeeper Sean Rooney when his vehicle entered the town of Al-Aqbiya. A Lebanese military tribunal indicted seven members of Hizbullah and Amal. Only one of the men charged was ever detained, although he was subsequently released for

8 United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. "UNIFIL Troop-Contributing Countries." *United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon*, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-troop-contributing-countries>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

9 Badran, Tony. "Hezbollah Ritually Humiliates the UN." *Tablet Magazine*, 16 Sept. 2018, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/hezbollah-lebanon-unifil?ref=quilllette.com>.

10 Agencies and Tol Staff. "Lebanon Claims over 25 Arrested for Attack on UNIFIL Convoy That Wounded Peacekeepers." *The Times of Israel*, 15 Feb. 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/lebanon-claims-over-25-arrested-for-attack-on-unifil-convoy-that-wounded-peacekeepers/>.

11 Orion, Assaf. *Hiding in Plain Sight: Hezbollah's Campaign against UNIFIL*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Note 71, Nov. 2019, p. 3.

12 United Nations. *Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) during the Period from 21 February to 20 June 2024: Report of the Secretary-General*. 12 July 2024, Annex I.

13 Orion, p. 4

health reasons.¹⁴ In October and November 2024, Hizbullah fired rockets on UNIFIL bases on several occasions.¹⁵

Hizbullah's use of force against UNIFIL has successfully deterred the UNIFIL from confronting the terrorist group. In a 2019 interview to *Fox News*, one former UNIFIL peacekeeper stated that UNIFIL's "decisions and orders are taken with the aim of avoiding issues with Hizbullah". Hizbullah prevents them from patrolling or taking pictures in Hizbullah's villages. A second peacekeeper revealed that the Lebanese army works in tandem with Hizbullah, sharing information. According to the peacekeeper, Hizbullah has marked certain areas in Southern Lebanon as "no-go-areas", and has taken steps to prevent UNIFIL from being "too active".¹⁶ Another former Danish UN soldier recently recounted his experiences ten years prior in Southern Lebanon. According to the soldier, the peacekeepers "were completely subordinate to Hizbullah. We had clearly limited freedom of movement. For example, we never operated after dark for fear of Hizbullah. So they had free rein in the evening and night hours."¹⁷

► C | Hizbullah's Exploitation of UNIFIL

UNIFIL's status as a UN agency provides legitimacy and diplomatic inviolability. This has encouraged Hizbullah to infiltrate, exploit, and collaborate with UNIFIL in its war against Israel. On October 13, 2024, Israel revealed that Hizbullah had dug two large military tunnels 300 feet away from a UNIFIL observation post. UNIFIL's presence gave Hizbullah cover from potential Israeli responses.¹⁸

UNIFIL refused to cooperate with Israeli requests that they evacuate their posts in Southern Lebanon as Israel struck Hizbullah targets.¹⁹ UNIFIL functions as a human shield for

14 McCarron, Jack, Mark Coughlan, and Yvonne Murray. "Two Years On, Family of Private Seán Rooney Still Awaits Answers." *RTE News*, 14 Dec. 2024, <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2024/1214/1486413-two-years-on-family-of-private-sean-rooney-still-awaits-answers/>.

15 Fabian, Emanuel. "IDF Says Hezbollah Behind Attacks on Two UNIFIL Bases Today in Lebanon." *The Times of Israel*, 19 Nov. 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-says-hezbollah-behind-attacks-on-two-unifil-bases-today-in-lebanon/; "Lebanon: Hezbollah Strike on UNIFIL Headquarters." *Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*, 30 Oct. 2024, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/news/article/lebanon-hezbollah-strike-on-unifil-headquarters-30-october-2024>.

16 "UN Peacekeeping Patrol Filmed Coming under Attack by Hezbollah in Lebanon." *Fox News*, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/un-peacekeeping-patrol-filmed-coming-under-attack-by-hezbollah-in-lebanon?ref=quilllette.com>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

17 "Michael Var FN-Soldat i Libanon: Vi Var Totalt Underlagt Hizbollah." *BT*, <https://www.bt.dk/udland/michael-var-fn-soldat-i-libanon-vi-var-totalt-underlagt-hizbollah?ref=quilllette.com>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

18 "Hezbollah Tunnel Entrances Abut U.N. Peacekeeping Position, Israel Alleges." *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hezbollah-tunnel-entrances-abut-u-n-peacekeeping-position-israel-alleges-4b821c03>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

19 "Israel Tells UN Peacekeepers to Leave Posts in South Lebanon, Ireland Fumes." *The Times of Israel*, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/ireland-fumes-at-israel-for-telling-un-peacekeepers-to-leave-posts-in-south-lebanon/. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

Hizbullah, with Israel risking diplomatic fallout with peacekeeper-contributing countries should it target terrorist positions purposefully placed near peacekeepers. Speaking in October 2024, Prime Minister Netanyahu said that UNIFIL forces' refusal to cooperate with Israel led to their injury.²⁰ Hizbullah's exploitation of UNIFIL's positions immediately brings to mind Hamas' similar abuse of UNRWA facilities as human shields. Responding to Israeli requests for Irish troops to withdraw, the Irish deputy prime minister accused Israel of undermining the United Nations and the international peacekeeping system.²¹ Josep Borrell, the European Union's foreign policy chief, similarly labeled "Israeli strikes" on UNIFIL troops as "completely unacceptable."²²

In October 2000, UNIFIL soldiers filmed Hizbullah killing and capturing three Israeli soldiers in Har Dov. The UN adamantly denied the footage, only backtracking in July 2001. Hizbullah moved the UNIFIL troops away from a border hiding place several hours before the attack.²³ According to Israeli security sources, Hizbullah bribed Indian UNIFIL soldiers to collaborate in the kidnapping, although the UN denies this.²⁴ One of the fathers of the Israeli soldiers has produced footage demonstrating UNIFIL's involvement in the abduction.²⁵ During the recent conflict, captured Hizbullah terrorists confirmed that they bribed UNIFIL to use their outposts and surveillance cameras against Israel.²⁶

20 Berman, Lazar, Tol Staff, and Agencies. "Netanyahu: UN Must Withdraw South Lebanon Peacekeepers from Combat Zones." *The Times of Israel*, 13 Oct. 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-un-must-withdraw-south-lebanon-peacekeepers-from-combat-zones/>.

21 Moore, Aoife. "Tánaiste Accuses Israeli PM of Undermining UN." *BBC News*, 14 Oct. 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3vkvzv52xo>.

22 "Israeli Attacks on UNIFIL Are 'Completely Unacceptable,' Borrell Says, Echoing EU ire." *Euronews*, 14 Oct. 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/10/14/israeli-attacks-on-unifil-are-completely-unacceptable-borrell-says-echoing-eu-ire>.

23 "IDF Unveils Hezbollah's 'War Strategy' in Southern Lebanon." *Ynet News*, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-3685705.00.html>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

24 "UNIFIL Spokesman Rejects Charges That Hezbollah Bribed Soldiers." *Archive.is*, <https://archive.is/BM3ZX#selection-515.0-515.63>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

25 UNIFIL Commander: Hezbollah Continues to Build up Forces." *Israel National News*, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/111599>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

26 "'Dramatic Testimony': UN Peacekeepers Bribed by Hezbollah." *Israel Hayom*, 21 Oct. 2024, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2024/10/21/dramatic-testimony-un-peacekeepers-bribed-by-hezbollah/>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

► D | Recommendations

While UNIFIL's defects are widely known, some have called for reforming rather than disbanding the organization.²⁷ In 2017, Resolution 2373 slightly expanded UNIFIL's role, granting it the authority to patrol areas where it previously lacked access, although it continued to face restrictions on its operations in certain areas controlled by Hizbullah. In August 2020, the US Ambassador to Lebanon, Dorothy Shea, expressed support for changes to UNIFIL's mission, saying, "We need to think about improving UNIFIL's efficiency. And if it fails to implement its mandate, questions must be asked about its effectiveness."²⁸

In an August 2024 policy paper, Assaf Orion and David Schenker suggested several reforms for UNIFIL, among them pressuring the Lebanese government to punish Hizbullah members who attack or obstruct UNIFIL forces, improving UNIFIL's intelligence capabilities to detect rocket launches, reducing UNIFIL's force size to prevent their use as human shields and improvements to their quarterly reports.²⁹ Speaking with *Foreign Policy*, Schenker also argued that UNIFIL is a moderating presence, convening tripartite meetings with the Israeli and Lebanese militaries.³⁰

The Lebanese government and Hizbullah have opposed previous attempts to give UNIFIL more potent tools to implement Resolution 1701.³¹ They will continue to oppose resolutions giving UNIFIL teeth and would certainly violently oppose UNIFIL actions to disarm Hizbullah. Nothing in UNIFIL's history suggests it has the will or the capability to confront Hizbullah effectively. As a rule, international peacekeeping operations consistently fail to engage hostile forces due to incompetence and lack of incentive.³²

Even now, UNIFIL abstains from identifying Hizbullah as the force obstructing its movement or attacking its troops, preferring instead to hide behind the euphemism of "armed civilians." This cowardice has little to do with UNIFIL's lack of ability and is unlikely to change under a reformed mandate. Furthermore, given Hizbullah's sway over Lebanese

27 "Pros and Cons of Salvaging or Ditching UNIFIL." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pros-and-cons-salvaging-or-ditching-unifil>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

28 Abi Akl, Yara. "Modifying UNIFIL's Mandate Excluded for Now." *L'Orient Today*, 4 Aug. 2020, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1228177/modifying-unifils-mandate-excluded-for-now.html>.

29 Schenker, David, and Assaf Orion. "The Pros and Cons of Salvaging (or Ditching) UNIFIL." *The Washington Institute*, 20 Aug. 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pros-and-cons-salvaging-or-ditching-unifil>; Orion, Assaf. Integrating UNIFIL into Agreements to End the War in the North: Not in Its Current Format. Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 30 Oct. 2024, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/unifil-2024/>.

30 Legorano, Giovanni. "The U.N. Is Ineffective in Lebanon—and Indispensable." *Foreign Policy*, 23 Oct. 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/23/lebanon-un-unifil-hezbollah-israel-war/>.

31 L'Orient Today

32 Kontorovich, Eugene, and Adi Schwartz. "Chronic Failure Without Accountability: International Peacekeeping and Security Forces in the Arab-Israeli Conflict." *Kohelet Policy Forum*, Dec. 2023.

government institutions, including the army, the value of UNIFIL's mediation between the IDF and the Lebanese army is questionable.³³

Furthermore, many of the leading peace-keeper contributing states are fundamentally hostile towards Israel, underscoring that an expanded UNIFIL mandate would not be effective. As evident by comments from former Irish UNIFIL commander to *The Independent*, Irish forces (among others) believe their task is to restrain Israel, as opposed to Hizbullah. In his words: "We kept them [Israel] from committing the more serious actions, or for want of a better word, atrocities, that they might have committed if we hadn't been sitting there watching them or tailing them around, as we often did."³⁴ The Irish have also accused Israel of carrying out a disinformation campaign against UNIFIL³⁵ and of committing "really dangerous, despicable attacks on peacekeepers".³⁶ In Malaysia, a major troop-contributing country, virulently antisemitic, anti-Israel and pro-Hamas and Hizbullah views are widespread.³⁷ France and Spain have also adopted anti-Israel positions. In such a reality, UNIFIL serves as a tool against Israel, not Hizbullah.

Due to its diplomatic sensitivity, UNIFIL hampers Israeli freedom while shielding Hizbullah. Many of the troops themselves come from countries deeply hostile to Israel. Similar to UNRWA's "indispensability claims," UNIFIL has had little incentive over the years to enforce its mandate. The United States has already expressed interest in vetoing UNIFIL's renewal—Israel should not save it.

33 Khatib, Lina. "How Hezbollah Holds Sway Over the Lebanese State: Influence Over Military and Security." *Chatham House*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state/05-influence-over-military-and-security>.

34 Hall, Richard. "Irish Peacekeepers Stood Their Ground in the Face of an Israeli Invasion of Lebanon. It's Not the First Time." *The Independent*, 16 Oct. 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lebanon-un-peacekeepers-irish-unifil-hezbollah-israel-b2629971.html>.

35 "Irish Military Believes Israel Behind Anti-UNIFIL Bots." *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 Nov. 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-827583>.

36 Perry, Caitriona. "Israel Attacks on UN in Breach of International Law, Harris Says." *BBC News*, 11 Oct. 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy0g2ge1k81o>.

37 Ainslie, Mary Jane. "In Malaysia, Expressing Support for Hamas Has Long Been a Means to Secure Political Power – but That's Starting to Change." *The Conversation*, 3 Dec. 2024, <https://theconversation.com/in-malaysia-expressing-support-for-hamas-has-long-been-a-means-to-secure-political-power-but-thats-starting-to-change-243749>.