



France has been a major contributor to the UNIFIL mission, with the French Army deploying its CAESAR self-propelled howitzers.

LOCAL STABILITY IN TROUBLED TIMES

The 34-day war that erupted in Lebanon in 2006 involving the Israeli armed forces and the *Hezbollah* insurgent organisation resulted in an expansion of the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Dr. Alix Valenti

On 11 March 1978, following years of mounting tensions between the Israeli government and Palestinian armed elements, principally the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) insurgent group that had been relocated from Jordan to southern Lebanon following the war fought between the PLO and the Jordanian armed forces from 1970 until 1971, known as Black September, the Fatah faction of the PLO executed the Coastal Road Massacre. This occurred Israel's Highway 2, which runs along the country's Mediterranean Coast, resulting in the deaths of 38 Israelis.

Israel retaliated on 15 March 1978 by launching Operation LITANI directed against PLO bases in South Lebanon, invading and occupying the entire southern part of Lebanon. This triggered immediate protests from the Lebanese government

The Irish Army has been one of the major contributors to the UNIFIL mission. As of May 2016, just under 200 Irish troops were supporting the mission.



UNIFIL

to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) against the Israeli invasion. As a result, on 19 March 1978 the UNSC established UNIFIL through Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426, and sent the first peacekeeping troops to the area on 23 March 1978. The mandate of UNIFIL was threefold: ensuring respect for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon by “confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon;” assisting in restoring international peace and security along the border and between (Israel and Lebanon); and assisting in the full recovery of Lebanese governmental authority in the south of the country.

On 6 June 1982, Israel launched Operation PEACE FOR GALILEE (OPG) which saw a second invasion of southern Lebanon by the IDF (Israeli Defence Force) after renewed attacks by the PLO mounted against Israel from southern Lebanon, and the assassination attempt on Shlomo Argov, Israel’s ambassador to London, on 3 June 1982 perpetrated by the Fatah PLO faction. During OPG, Israeli troops occupied West Beirut, subsequently triggering the

deployment of US, French and Italian peacekeeping forces in the capital. It was only in 1985, and after the withdrawal of US troops from Beirut in 1984, that Israel carried out a partial withdrawal of its forces, however retaining control over an area of southern Lebanon. The complete withdrawal of Israeli forces was eventually triggered in May 2000. This occurred following the collapse of the South Lebanon Army, a Lebanese Christian militia allied to the IDF fighting the PLO and *Hezbollah*, and rapid territorial advances by *Hezbollah* in southern Lebanon.

In June 2000, a special UN team complete with a cartographer and assisted by UNIFIL undertook the task of identifying a line on the ground that corresponded to Lebanon’s internationally recognised borders. Both Israel and Lebanon agreed upon the UN’s border demarcation, commonly known as the ‘Blue Line’ for its visible blue demarcations on the ground. The Blue Line was to be patrolled by both UNIFIL troops and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF); however the Lebanese government refused to send LAF troops to the Blue Line as long as there was

no comprehensive peace concluded with Israel. The LAF were eventually deployed in late 2002, leaving a gap of two years during which *Hezbollah* gathered legitimacy in southern Lebanon by performing a number of governmental functions such as monitoring the Blue Line and maintaining public order, as well as providing public services such as health and education, although the organisation had little cooperation with UNIFIL.

Despite regular violations of the Blue Line by both parties, the situation in south Lebanon remained stable until 2006, when tensions between *Hezbollah* and Israel culminated in the former launching several rockets from Lebanon towards IDF positions on 12 July 2006. This triggered a war between the two forces that ended on 18 August 2006, following the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1701 on 11 August that called for an immediate ceasefire. The extent of the war’s damage, on both a human (1187 people died and 4092 were injured in Lebanon according to official figures) and an infrastructural (bridges, roads, factories, markets, homes) level resulted in a decision by the UN to expand



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Comparatively new platforms such as the VBCI have been deployed to Lebanon to support French Army operations there.

UNIFIL's mandate and troops: reduced to approximately 2000 in August 2006, the number of troops was increased in the new mandate to accommodate up to 15000.

Although in the short-term the beefed-up UNIFIL has brought relative stability in southern Lebanon, the mission lacks the broader vision that could contribute to a roadmap to UNIFIL's eventual exit after 38 years. "UNIFIL's main accomplishment was its role as a conflict control mechanism (which allowed) the people of southern Lebanon to return to their homes," says Timur Goksel, former senior adviser and spokesperson for UNIFIL. This may appear like a minor accomplishment for a mission that was established in 1978 and which had an initial mandate to restore international peace and security. Indeed, over the past 38 years hopes for a peaceful resolution to the animosities between all of the belligerents have been continuously marred by regular violations of the Blue Line.

However, while the end of hostilities in south Lebanon may still seem a long way off, the fact that "homes, towns and villages have all been successfully repaired" in

southern Lebanon, as Mr. Goksel indicates, is considered a great achievement on its own. Doubts may exist as to whether UNIFIL could handle a full escalation of hostilities, "but the situation would be significantly worse for the local population if (UNIFIL) was not there", says an

anonymous member of the French armed forces who has supported UNIFIL.

IMAGINE A BLUE LINE

Since 2006, the ceasefire has held, and a semblance of stability has returned to the area. This, according to Mr. Goksel, is



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The French Army has deployed around 35 VAB armored personnel carriers to support the Force Commander Reserve rapid reaction force.



The German Navy deployed its 'Elbe' class replenishment vessel the FGS *Mosel* to support the MTF, the first UN peacekeeping mission deployed at sea.

in no small part due to the presence of a UNIFIL force now including 10497 troops, which keeps belligerents from escalating hostilities "out of respect for the UN". According to the UN, at present a total of 10497 personnel support the mission, from 40 Troop Contributing Countries. Andrea Tenenti, spokesperson and officer in charge of public information for UNIFIL, explains that the mission on the ground is organised into two sectors: the Western Sector, which is under the command of the Spanish contingent; and the Eastern Sector, which is under the command of the Italian contingent. Additionally, within the framework of UNIFIL's extended mandate under UNSC Resolution 1701 (see above), it was decided to establish a Force Commander Reserve (FCR), which is made up of 850 French soldiers. The FCR is deployed in both sectors and its purpose is to provide a rapid response force throughout southern Lebanon.

The Italian contingent is deployed under *Operazione LEONTE* (Operation LEONTE) and contributes approximately 1100 troops to the mission, according to the Italian Ministry of Defence (MoD),

with its headquarters located in Shama (Western Sector). It has a manoeuvre task force called ITALBATT, which contributes to the patrolling of the Blue Line with its Iveco VTLM Lince four-wheel drive tactical vehicles and Centauro infantry fighting vehicles/tank destroyers. The VTLM Lince has modular armour which can protect the vehicle against ballistic and mine threats. The Centauro provides protection against 12.7mm ammunition and shell fragments, and an enhanced armour protection over the frontal arc providing protection against 20mm ammunition. The Spanish contingent participates in UNIFIL under *Operación LIBRE HIDALGO* (Operation FREE HIDALGO) and has contributed between 600 and 700 troops to the mission since 2012, according to the Spanish MoD, with headquarters located in Marjayún, in the Eastern Sector. According to local sources, Spain also contributes VTLM Lince as well as UROVESA VAMTAC four-wheel drive vehicles.

The exact number of the vehicles being used in Lebanon by Italy and Spain is, however, unknown. The French contingent contributes to the FCR through *Opération*

DAMAN (Operation DAMAN). It is supported in its mission by 16 Nexter VBCI infantry fighting vehicles and 47 Panhard VBL four-wheel drive tactical vehicles, plus 35 Nexter VAB armoured personnel carriers. The VBCI is equipped with a one-man Nexter Dragar turret (which can also be carried by the VAB), equipped with a dual-feed M811 25mm cannon and a coaxial 7.62mm machine gun. The VBL is equipped with a PL127 turret, mounting a 12.7mm heavy machine gun that can be replaced with a 40mm grenade launcher if needed.

The French army also makes contributions to UNIFIL outside the FCR in the form of two Thales Samantha surface-to-air missile fire control systems which use Thales' TRS-2630 S-band (2.3-2.5/2.7-3.7 Gigahertz/GHz) ground-based air surveillance radars and one MBDA Mistral short-range Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) system. Additional platforms which have been deployed to support France's UNIFIL contribution include the Euro-Art COBRA C-band (5.25-5.925GHz) weapons locating radar, GIAT/Nexter AMX-10P tracked armoured personnel carriers, Nexter CAESAR Self-Propelled Howitzers (SPHs),

GIAT/Nexter Leclerc-Series 2 main battle tanks and GIAT/Nexter GCT-AUF2 155mm SPHs.

UNIFIL AT SEA

Beyond the land deployments discussed above, Resolution 1701 considerably expanded UNIFIL's mission in Lebanon, which was not only limited to the presence of peacekeepers in south Lebanon, but has also been extended to implement the first ever Maritime Task Force (MTF) in the history of UN peacekeeping. The objective of the MTF is to provide support to the Lebanese Navy in monitoring its coastlines to prevent "sales or supply of arms and related *materiel* to Lebanon except as authorised by the Government," as stipulated in Resolution 1701.

Currently, Rear Admiral Claudio Henrique Mello de Almeida, from the *Marinha do Brasil* (Brazilian Navy), commands the MTF, which comprises seven ships and 800 sailors. The BRS *Independencia*, Brazil's 'Niteroi' class frigate is the flagship. It has a

displacement of 3550 tons, and it is armed with MBDA MM40 Exocet Anti-Ship Missiles (AShMs) and Aspide SAMs, plus Alliant Techsystems/Orbital ATK Mk.46 torpedoes.

Bangladesh contributes to the MTF with the BNS *Ali Haider*, its 'Type 053H2' class frigate and the BNS *Nirmul*, its 'Durjoy' class corvette. The BNS *Ali Haider* has a displacement of 2000 tons, and is armed with China Haiying Electro-Mechanical Technology Academy C-802A ASHMs, while the BNS *Nirmul* has a displacement of 650 tons and is equipped with China Aviation Industry Corporation C-704 ASHMs.

Indonesia contributes, the KRI *Bung Tomo*, a 'F2000' class corvette with a displacement of 1940 tons, armed with MM40 Block-2 ASHMs and BAE Systems/MBDA Sea Wolf SAMs.

Turkey, meanwhile, contributes is the TCG *Zipkin*, a 'Kilic-II' class fast attack craft with a displacement of 548 tons armed with Boeing RGM-84 Harpoon family ASHMs, while Greece also contributes a fast attack craft, the HS *Grigoropoulos*, with a displacement of 580 tons. It too is



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Among the platforms deployed by the French Army to support the FCR dimension of the UNIFIL mission is the AMX-10RC reconnaissance vehicle.

armed with MM40 Block-2 ASHMs. The last contribution to the MTF is the *Deutsche Marine* (German Navy's) 'Braunschweig' class corvette, the FGS *Braunschweig*, with a displacement of 1840 tons which can deploy the Saab RBS-15 family ASHMs.

Communications across the MTF are facilitated by the Groove Chat written messaging and chat application which can run on a laptop (provided through the UN), using the Windows operating system and transmitted across Very High Frequency (30-300 megahertz) radio and satellite communications between all these ships, MTF sources informed *Armada*.

Although since the start of its operations in October 2006 the MTF has "hailed more than 70000 ships and referred about 8000 vessels to the Lebanese authorities for further inspections", as indicated on its website, the MTF is not without its challenges. The fact that this is the first UN mission with such a force means that "the UN has limited experience with naval requirements" says Lieutenant Commander Thorsten Hild, a spokesperson

for the MTF. This can hinder the ability of the mission to fulfil its objective, which also includes training the Lebanese Navy to autonomously patrol its territorial waters. Indeed, "the Lebanese Navy depends heavily on foreign donations for the acquisition of modern boats as well as for the maintenance of its existing fleet," continues Lt. Cmdr. Hild. "Thus it consists mostly of old, small units which can't stand a solid sea state." In the absence of a clear plan to overcome this significant challenge, the MTF will have to continue training the Lebanese Navy despite the latter's inadequate capabilities which seriously limit its efficiency.

ROADMAP TO EXIT

In 38 years, UNIFIL's greatest achievement has been the ability to maintain a relative level of stability in a very volatile part of Lebanon. "The relations between the troops and population are very positive, partly because there is a strong humanitarian commitment by UNIFIL to facilitate vocational training and

medical assistance," observes Mr. Tenenti. This is confirmed by French military sources who added that, as opposed to the context of other peacekeeping missions, the population in southern Lebanon "is aware of the limitations of the mission and is grateful for the relative stability that its presence brings."

However, the mission appears to operate separately from the much wider, more intricate context of the Middle East's security situation, and Lebanon's relations with its neighbours. According to Mr. Goksel, "nobody in (UN) headquarters really thinks of the challenges and what must be done," therefore maintaining a *status quo* highlights the mission's "lack of a roadmap to exit" says Lt. Cmdr. Hild. Moreover, while it is clear that the expansion of the forces' mandate and troops has proven beneficial in maintaining stability in the short term, Mr. Goksel and French military sources voiced serious concerns as to how so many different troops, serving so many different national interests, would coordinate in the event of another war. ■