

INSS Insight No. 1015, January 21, 2018

UNIFIL after Security Council Resolution 2373:
Same Forces, More Reports
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On August 30, 2017, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2373, which extends Resolution 1701 (2006) and the mandate of the United Nation's Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for another year. The main changes in Resolution 2373 from earlier resolutions lie in the request "to look at ways to enhance UNIFIL's efforts... including ways to increase UNIFIL's visible presence...within its existing mandate" and "to continue to issue prompt and detailed reports on violations of Resolution 1701...on the restrictions to UNIFIL's freedom of movement... on specific areas where UNIFIL does not access ... and to further develop a reporting mechanism in order to provide concrete and detailed information on the aforementioned issues." Israel's Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon described it as "a significant political victory that could change the situation in southern Lebanon and expose the terrorist enterprise that Hezbollah established on Israel's border," and added that "the resolution requires UNIFIL to open its eyes, and forces it to take action against Hezbollah's military force buildup in the area." In the discussion before the vote, US Ambassador Nikki Haley thanked France for its "willingness to make significant improvements to UNIFIL's mandate," and "describing "the status quo for UNIFIL is unacceptable, she said the resolution called on the Force to step up patrols and inspections to disrupt Hezbollah's illicit activities." In contrast, the day after the resolution was adopted, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah complimented Lebanon's Foreign Minister for blocking the plot of the United States, Israel, and Britain to change UNIFIL's mandate, and one of the newspapers in Lebanon reported the resolution with the headline "Business as Usual." In September, United Nations senior officials described the document as "a new resolution in old language, the same mandate in a new reality - in which UNIFIL is expected to be and appear to be more proactive, and the challenge is how to change its modus operandi and still remain a force that is accepted in Lebanon."

The first periodic report to the Security Council since the resolution was adopted, issued on November 16, 2017, provides a good opportunity to examine the mode of implementation of the resolution and its repercussions on the situation in the field. Inter alia, the report provides an update about the addition of a Lebanese military-intervention regiment to the two brigades already stationed south of the Litani River; and UNIFIL's handling of three locations of Hezbollah installations that were reported by Israel to the

UN in August: the information was relayed to the Lebanese Armed Forces, and UNIFIL closely monitored the sites “within the scope of its mandate,” but without any verified findings. The report refers to Israel’s claims of Hezbollah patrols along the Blue Line and reports that UNIFIL received official confirmation from the Lebanese government of the proper accreditation of the environmental organization “Green Without Borders,” which Israel claims is operating on behalf of Hezbollah, and that, in both instances, no evidence of violations was found. The report also cites UNIFIL’s increase in the number of its patrols, particularly along the Blue Line; difficulties encountered entering private property or difficult and rugged terrain, and therefore, “regular helicopter patrols” (141 hours of helicopter patrols between June and November, compared to Israel’s 3,188 hours of air patrols over Lebanon, according to the report); UNIFIL’s engaging in specific training for the protection of civilians from imminent threats; Hezbollah’s maintaining weapons outside the control of the Lebanese government as a key impediment to the government’s exercise of full sovereignty and authority over its territory, with reference to an interview in September, in which Lebanese President Aoun gave his “stamp of approval” for Hezbollah to maintain its weapons; and renewed calls for compliance with the international resolutions on the subject of the disarmament of all groups other than those of the Lebanese government, through the mechanism of the “national dialogue.” One new element in this report appears in the appendices, which elaborate on incidents of unauthorized bearing of arms, and aggressive actions or harassment of UNIFIL patrols, including incidents of “civilians” confiscating UN patrols’ equipment.

The descriptions in the report indicate that the situation on the ground is just as it was prior to the adoption of Resolution 2373 as it pertains to the relations between Hezbollah, the Lebanese Armed Forces, and UNIFIL. Changes, if any, are perhaps in the visibility of the UN activities and in the detailed reporting to the Security Council of a few apparently exceptional incidents, after years during which hundreds of such incidents were discussed in the trilateral meetings between UNIFIL, the IDF and the Lebanese Armed Forces. In other words, if there is any news for Israel in Resolution 2373, it is in the expansion of the political-security platform to keep the topic of Hezbollah’s arsenal on the Security Council’s agenda, but there is no indication of any change in the security reality on the ground.

An assessment of the situation from Israel’s perspective is thus again mixed: on the strategic level, the quiet on the Israeli-Lebanese line relies on the balance of interests of both sides and on deterrence, but is liable to be shattered at any time due to some tactical development. Hezbollah continues to build its military strength in Syria and throughout Lebanon, including in the south. The international community baselessly relies on the Lebanese government, when, after Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation and then retracted it, it is obvious that Iran and Hezbollah dictate the policies and

activities of this so-called “government.” Moreover, the balance of powers and interests among the various international actors (the world powers, the UNIFIL troop-contributing countries, and the UN), which prefer a grave risk in the long term over a lower more imminent risk, prevents any substantive change in the resolution, in the mandate, and in the essence of their implementation. Consequently, Resolution 1701 and its derivatives are fundamentally incapacitated, since the mechanism for implementing the resolutions regarding all matters pertaining to Hezbollah’s arsenal is paralyzed, deterred, and is largely illusory, employed as a mirage to obfuscate reality as it really is.

On the operative level, the current modus operandi is designed to ensure the preservation of the status quo: the international community will continue to consider the Lebanese Armed Forces as a stabilizing asset and as an essential “fig leaf,” and will continue to call for its strengthening and will support it. The Lebanese Armed Forces, as the leading actor in this play, will continue to refrain from exposing and embarrassing Hezbollah, and will also cooperate with Hezbollah within the framework of “national defense.” Hezbollah will continue to build its military capabilities and operate in the wide maneuvering space in which the Lebanese Armed Forces and UNIFIL allow it leeway, will largely refrain from presenting its arsenal, will operate from “private properties” and from rugged terrain that are difficult to access, and will deter UNIFIL forces and prevent them from gaining access and documenting violations through ploys of violence on the part of “angry citizens” and through the confiscation of cameras. At the same time, Hezbollah will prevent unauthorized activity in southern Lebanon by other forces such as Palestinians and global jihad groups, as long as this policy benefits it. UNIFIL will continue to demonstrate presence and visibility, but will be careful to avoid encountering Hezbollah’s arsenal, refrain from creating a situational awareness that faithfully reflects the reality in the field, and issuing reports that would require a change in its modus operandi; this, by using only the narrowest of interpretations of the resolution and the mandate language, which ensures a constant gap between appearance and reality (“no evidence”). The authorities in Lebanon will continue to declare their commitment to the resolution and to UNIFIL on the one hand, and defer legal proceedings against accused perpetrators of offenses against UNIFIL and refrain from enforcement, on the other hand.

For its part, in routine times, Israel has to balance between the following considerations: security stability in the north; Hezbollah’s military strengthening, particularly with high quality and precision weapons, and its entrenchment on the Syrian front; Israel’s relations with the leading UNIFIL troop-contributing countries; UNIFIL’s contribution to keeping the calm and reducing the risks of escalation through the coordination and liaison mechanisms; and UNIFIL’s negative contribution to a realistic situational awareness of the Security Council, as a result of the nature of its operations and reporting. These grave existing trends will be exacerbated on D-Day, when the massive presence of international

forces in close proximity to Hezbollah's military deployment in southern Lebanon will severely constrain the IDF's ability to take action against Hezbollah to protect Israel and its population. At the same time, the Lebanese Armed Forces, which enjoy international support and the UN's encouragement to further deploy in the south, will become a certain enemy for IDF forces fighting against Hezbollah in the area. Due to the proven limitations in the nature of UNIFIL's operations, it is clear that there is no justification for such a massive force in the area and it can be reduced without compromising its mission. In order to prevent a total collapse of the force, a gradual and controlled approach should be taken.

In the current situation, Israel should strive to promote several policy components, as follows:

It should strive to achieve a gradual reduction of the UNIFIL force. Already today, the UNIFIL force comprises 2,000 fewer soldiers than the total number permitted in Resolution 1701, and therefore, at the initial stage, it is possible to reduce the current force of about 10,500 soldiers to about 8,500, while preserving the contribution level of the leading European countries: France, Italy, and Spain. By the same logic, some reduction in the number of vessels in the maritime task force is warranted.

Israel should continue to strive to present an accurate picture of the reality on the ground to the Security Council through the continued collection of intelligence and exposure of Hezbollah activities, by sending select Hezbollah sightings to UNIFIL and documenting the response to them by the UN, the Lebanese Armed Forces, and Hezbollah, while timing the efforts according to the dates of the reports to the Security Council. Concurrently, Israel should encourage UNIFIL and the UNIFIL troop-contributing countries to improve their situational awareness through the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, and to reduce Hezbollah's leeway.

In addition, Israel should encourage and strengthen UNIFIL's coordination and liaison mechanism and propose the formation of a joint emergency liaison infrastructure to UNIFIL, within the scope of its civilian-protection preparations. The goal is to reduce the risks to UNIFIL forces and to the civilian population on the one hand, and to minimize the interference with IDF missions on the other hand.

Furthermore, Israel should coordinate efforts with the United States to advance these steps and reduce the support to the Lebanese Armed Forces beyond counter-terrorism capabilities and capabilities in securing Lebanon's borders from the east and north. The most recent US assertive positions in the international institutions may serve as an appropriate backdrop for these efforts, as well as the declared US policy to weaken Iran's

malign influence in the region and counter Iran's terrorist activity, subversive efforts, and the activity of its proxies.