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**On the Brink of Escalation: The UNIFIL Mandate Renewal is a Victim  
of the Beirut Explosion**

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**On August 28, 2020 the Security Council adopted [Resolution 2539 \(2020\)](#), thereby renewing the mandate of UNIFIL, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, for another year. The resolution calls on the Lebanese government to facilitate UNIFIL freedom of access to the tunnel sites and all along the Blue Line; requires UNIFIL to report incidents promptly; and requires the UN Secretary General to present a plan for improvements to the force. The Israeli Foreign Ministry announcement implies the limitations of the achievement: “Now the test...for the government of Lebanon and UNIFIL is to implement all of the resolution’s demands.” In other words, any actual improvement depends on the will of UNIFIL, which was so far been wary of such measures, and on the Lebanese government, which from the start has been a major part of the problem. At the height of a multi-faceted crisis in Lebanon, the diplomatic efforts of France and the United States to promote government reforms in Beirut pushed the security challenges in southern Lebanon to the margins of the agenda. The unprecedented events and tension on Israel's northern border only highlight the gap between the reality on the ground and UN reports and resolutions, which deliberately blur the clear drift down a path toward escalation, avoid taking any preventive measures, and immerse in foot-dragging and wordplay.**

The renewal of the UNIFIL mandate is discussed by the Security Council every year in August, the month when the Second Lebanon War ended in 2006. This year the debate took place in the shadow of the destructive August 4, 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut, and accordingly, the resolution begins with an expression of solidarity with Lebanon, praise for international assistance efforts, and a call to form a government that can deal with the present challenges, including the reconstruction of Beirut, imperative reforms, the severe socioeconomic crisis, and the Covid-19 dangers. Noticeably absent are the security tensions initiated by Hezbollah along the border with Israel and its illicit military deployment and operations in southern Lebanon. Symbolically, and not for the first time, Hezbollah is not even mentioned in the resolution.

The declarative section of the resolution expresses support for Lebanese sovereignty and the implementation of Resolution 1701, and “deep concern” over the lack of progress

toward a permanent ceasefire and ongoing breaches “in the air and on the ground.” Buried among the many declarations is a reference to “the risk that violations of the cessation of hostilities could lead to a new conflict.” This is followed by condemnation of incidents on specific dates, which tacitly but unequivocally refer to Hezbollah attacks on Israel. The resolution expresses concern that UNIFIL is still denied access to all the tunnel sites in Lebanon, and calls on its authorities to complete their investigations of the matter in swift fashion. The Council is “determined” that no intimidation will prevent UNIFIL from exercising its mandate; it reiterates the call to ensure the security of the force and its freedom of movement, and “condemns in the strongest terms” the attacks on its patrols near the town of Majdal Zun, in Brashit and in Belida (August 2018, February and May 2020, respectively). Concluding the declarative section, the resolution states that the situation in Lebanon continues to represent a threat to international peace and security, but this statement does not translate into any practical urgency.

Operationally, the Council decided to extend the UNIFIL mandate for another year without change; requested a timetable and milestones for the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces in the south and in its territorial waters (whereas this process is actually receding); requested a presentation within 60 days of the main points of an implementation plan for the recommendations of the [Secretary General's report on UNIFIL](#) of June 1; praised and called to strengthen the tripartite dialogue mechanism between the IDF, UNIFIL, and the Lebanese army; reiterated the call (article 14) for the Lebanese government to complete its investigations of the attacks on UNIFIL speedily and bring the attackers to justice; and asked for reporting “within a reasonable timeframe” on further incidents and ongoing investigations. Article 15 calls on “all parties” to ensure UNIFIL’s freedom of movement and its access all along the Blue Line, “condemns in the strongest terms” attempts to limit it and the attacks on it, and calls on the Lebanese government to quickly facilitate its full access to all sites relating to the tunnels. The resolution again calls on all states “to fully support and respect the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani River of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and UNIFIL.” The UN Secretary General is asked to continue reporting on the implementation of 1701 every four months “or at any time as he deems appropriate,” including swift and detailed reports of any violations of 1701, Lebanese sovereignty, restrictions on UNIFIL movements, specific areas where it is denied access, and the reasons for this. Finally, the resolution decides to lower the ceiling of UNIFIL’s permitted forces from 15,000 to 13,000 – a step with no practical significance, not only as the current size of the force is only slightly over 10,000 personnel, but also because since 2006 its numbers have never reached 13,000.

Overall, the resolution has indeed added some items with potential to improve UNIFIL action on the ground and reporting to the Security Council, but as in the past, its implementation depends entirely on the determination of UN elements in Lebanon and New York, against all the familiar pressures, to reach the sites where access is barred and to report quickly and in detail on the difficulties mounted by the Lebanese. The resolution continues to embellish reality, as when it heralds the “new strategic environment in southern Lebanon” created by UNIFIL together with the Lebanese Army when in fact the current security situation there is far more dangerous than at the end of the war in 2006, and lauds the “continuing progress in marking the Blue Line,” a process that has been utterly frozen since 2016.

But the main defects of the resolution lie not on its margins, but at its core. The paramount goal of Resolution 1701 (2006), which was drafted during the war, was first and foremost to prevent another war; the military presence of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon was appropriately identified as the reason why war erupted, and therefore 1701 correctly defined the prohibition of non-governmental weapons in the area as the main means of preventing another war. From the outset, the biggest defect in 1701 lay in its method and structure: UNIFIL supports the government and, at its request, the army of Lebanon, to impose its sovereignty on the ground. Since 2006, Hezbollah has commandeered the political system in Lebanon, bent the government to its will, increased its military power, and reinforced its deployment nationwide, particularly in the south. The Lebanese government, either as a hostage or a willing accomplice, has not only failed to implement 1701, but has also clearly helped to conceal and enable Hezbollah’s objectives to violate the resolution.

It is true that the port explosion drew all attention to Beirut, but in the current circumstances the grave situation in southern Lebanon cannot be ignored, as it stands in stark contrast to the lack of any sense of urgency in the Security Council. Since the killing of a Hezbollah activist in the Israeli Air Force attack in Syria in July, Hezbollah has made three attempts to attack the IDF, including a foiled sniper attack on Mt. Dov, a failed “lure attack” near Shtula, and fire at IDF forces two days before renewal of the UNIFIL mandate. So far, the IDF response has been quite restrained, including decreased exposure to Lebanon, messaging designed to calm and deter, response fire to screen, disrupt, and provide illumination, and recently also a direct strike on Hezbollah’s “civilianized” ([Green Without Borders](#)) observation posts. Nasrallah continues to aver that Hezbollah will continue to try to kill an IDF soldier and establish “an eye for an eye” deterrence equation with regard to Hezbollah casualties in Lebanon and Syria, while Israel for its part reportedly continues to attack in Syria. Throughout this period of tension, which almost certainly includes intensive Hezbollah activity along the Blue Line, UNIFIL observed nothing before, during or after the attacks, despite the IDF

announcement that the latest round of Hezbollah fire came from near UN positions. If UNIFIL is unable to see anything at the height of tensions, it is naturally unable to prevent attacks, and can at best focus on carrying messages between the parties, reporting on Israeli reactions, and asserting that the IDF has not presented sufficiently clear evidence. The likelihood of escalation in the near future, therefore, remains high.

The wording of Resolution 2539 was finalized between the United States, which requested some changes and enhancements, and France, which as a rule supports the continuation of the mandate without change, while the agenda of each country extends far beyond the UNIFIL mandate. The explosion in Beirut reinforced the image of Lebanon as a disaster victim in need of aid, and the reshuffling in the government released it from serving as the address for substantive demands. France seeks to promote a wide-ranging program in Lebanon, as shown by the visits of President Emmanuel Macron to Beirut, his energetic activity and plans on the matter, and his meetings with Hezbollah members. Apparently Paris has subordinated UNIFIL and security in the south to this politically-centered agenda. The Elysee can perhaps record a diplomatic feat in imposing its will on Washington, but it has also therefore assumed responsibility for future calamities. Ultimately, the port explosion, like the economic crisis, is the result of Lebanon's corrupt political order, whose "stability" has so far been staunchly protected by France, which it is now trying to reform. The failure to prevent the emerging escalation in the south reflects a preference for this illusory "stability" over tackling real fundamental problems.

The most serious aspect of the latest resolution is that it sends Lebanon and Hezbollah a message of "business as usual": none of the criticisms of their policy are translated into direct demands, or on the other hand, to a reduction in the budget or the size of the UNIFIL forces, which are a source of income and baseless political prestige. Lebanon is outstanding at foot-dragging, as shown by its conduct in the UN and the international community for many years. The UN mechanisms play into Lebanon's procrastinating hands when they restrict themselves to condemnations and "reiterated calls" to the government of Lebanon, instead of action. From a temporal perspective, the most significant damage of the resolution is the extension of the mandate by a full year (instead of six months, as the United States wanted), which means no potentially "biting" discussions before next summer. In contrast, when the French President [sought recently](#) to generate urgency and an incentive to meet his demands for immediate reforms in the Lebanese government, he stipulated only three months before imposing sanctions.

Resolution 2539 does not respond substantively to the serious lapses in 1701 and the performance of UNIFIL, and at most offers potential for future improvement. In order to realize this potential, Israel must frequently and urgently put pressure on UNIFIL to implement access all along the Blue Line, including the tunnel sites and the sites of

Hezbollah operational activity in preparation for the next attack; encourage it to report on its findings, harassment, and attacks, quickly and in detail; and move forward on building its capabilities in line with the Secretary General's June report. Israel for its part can do more to vividly expose Hezbollah activity and attacks to members of the Security Council and in public, and thus demonstrate the growing danger they represent. In the political sphere, it would be right for Israel to increase its engagement with France and the United States, for the purpose of incorporating security aspects into their political initiatives in Beirut. As Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi assessed: "The security incidents along the northern border...illustrate more than anything the need for a strong and effective UNIFIL force," but in the end, "the security of the State of Israel will be ensured by its security and political strength."