

## Time to End UNIFIL's Mandate in Southern Lebanon?

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During the war between Israel and Hezbollah, the total failure of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to help prevent Hezbollah's military entrenchment in southern Lebanon was exposed. Despite UNIFIL's presence, Hezbollah managed to organize militarily in the area on a large scale. In light of this, the question of the usefulness of UNIFIL's continued presence has become more pressing. The host country, Lebanon, is seeking to extend the mandate, which expires this coming August. However, voices in Israel and the United States are calling for its termination. Although Israel has an interest in ending UNIFIL's ineffective mandate in order to preserve its own freedom of action, the timing is not yet right; the Lebanese army is still incapable of operating independently against Hezbollah. Diplomatically, in the absence of an international consensus to end the mandate, a US veto would be required to block a Security Council resolution to do so. Therefore, it is proposed that in the upcoming Security Council discussion on UNIFIL's mandate, Israel should suggest a temporary extension, conditioned on improved efficiency and operational performance. It is also suggested that Israel, in parallel, promote a dialogue with Lebanon under American auspices, with the goal of formulating a new security arrangement to replace UNIFIL's presence.

In the upcoming Security Council discussion on extending UNIFIL's mandate, which is set to expire at the end of August, a fierce debate is expected among council members regarding the future of the force. This comes amid growing criticism of its ongoing ineffectiveness in implementing its mandate—an issue that became starkly clear during the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah, when the massive scale of the group's military operatives, weaponry, and infrastructure in southern Lebanon was revealed. Hezbollah's military entrenchment in this region has deepened since the end of the Second Lebanon War, in blatant violation of Security Council Resolution 1701, which was adopted at the war's conclusion in 2006 and called for the upgrading of the UN force to assist the Lebanese army in implementing the resolution. Currently, UNIFIL has at its disposal some 10,000 soldiers from about 50 countries and enjoys a budget of over half a billion dollars annually to carry out its missions.

Over the years, Hezbollah has managed to neutralize UNIFIL's activities, preventing its personnel from entering areas under its control—where it has established its presence—claiming these are private lands. Since October 2024, following the IDF's ground maneuver, extensive weapons caches have been discovered in southern Lebanese villages. These include missiles, launchers, combat gear, and ammunition stored in public buildings, private homes, and agricultural areas. UNIFIL also failed to detect Hezbollah's intensive activity to dig a wide network of underground tunnels, including very close to the Israeli border. These tunnels included weapons depots intended for use by Hezbollah's Radwan Force in a planned ground

assault on the Galilee. A particularly striking example is the existence of a tunnel shaft in the Labouna–al-Naqoura area, used to store weapons just a few dozen meters from a UNIFIL post and within direct line of sight of its watchtower—exposed by the IDF on October 13, 2024.

Beyond that, UNIFIL’s conduct during the war between Israel and Hezbollah—until the ceasefire on November 27, 2024—further reinforced Israel’s claim that the force’s presence interferes with IDF operations and at times even serves Hezbollah’s interests. During this period, UNIFIL significantly reduced its movement in southern Lebanon (its personnel remained confined to their bases out of fear of harm and ventured out only for limited missions such as providing humanitarian aid to Lebanese civilians and transporting essential supplies). Still, it posed a challenge to the IDF, which had to operate in close proximity to UNIFIL positions. The force even lodged several complaints about being harmed by the IDF, yet rejected Israel’s demand to vacate combat zones, arguing that it was stationed there under a Security Council mandate and at the request of the Lebanese government—and would only withdraw if the Security Council decided so.

Since the ceasefire, there has been a noticeable shift in the operational characteristics of UNIFIL, coinciding with the launch of activity by the Quintet Committee—comprising the United States, France, Israel, Lebanon, and UNIFIL—which is led by the United States and tasked with supervising the enforcement of the ceasefire agreement. This development has occurred alongside a significant change in the performance of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) under the guidance of Lebanon’s new political leadership. The LAF has shown greater resolve in identifying and seizing Hezbollah weaponry. Its presence in southern Lebanon has been significantly reinforced, with approximately 6,000 soldiers now deployed in the area (with an additional 4,000 slated for recruitment). These forces are organized into two brigades—Brigade 5 in the western sector and Brigade 7 in the eastern sector—supplemented by a rapid deployment commando unit and aerial reconnaissance patrols. According to Lebanese sources, the LAF now maintains commanding positions, including along the border. It conducts vehicle patrols, has established checkpoints and inspection stations at southern crossings, and has raided over 500 Hezbollah positions. The LAF has reportedly seized and destroyed Hezbollah weapon stockpiles. A senior Lebanese security official told a French news agency on April 30 that the LAF had dismantled over 90% of Hezbollah’s infrastructure.

Even if these figures are not entirely accurate, they reflect a significant shift in the intentions and capabilities of the LAF to act against Hezbollah—despite the LAF’s desire to coordinate with Hezbollah and avoid violent confrontations with its operatives on the ground. UNIFIL has supported this effort by accompanying LAF operations and assisting with intelligence sharing, despite concerns that information may be leaked to Hezbollah in time for it to obscure its activities. Nevertheless, UNIFIL’s effectiveness remains limited, as it still struggles to operate independently. Several recent incidents have highlighted this weakness, particularly when LAF forces are not present. For example, UNIFIL troops have been expelled from villages by local residents—Hezbollah operatives in disguise. On May 16, residents of the village of Jmayjmeh attacked a UNIFIL force attempting to enter the village, blatantly violating UNIFIL’s mandate, which guarantees its freedom of movement. This principle was further reinforced by Security Council Resolution 2650 (August 2022), which extended UNIFIL’s mandate and stipulated that

it must be allowed to conduct patrols without prior notice and without interference. These events underscore UNIFIL's operational weakness and its inability to fulfill its missions, as the safety of its personnel and bases remains its top priority.

#### Positions of the Parties Ahead of the UNIFIL Mandate Extension

Following the war, voices within the Israeli establishment have called for the termination of UNIFIL's presence in southern Lebanon, arguing that it serves no useful purpose. Moreover, UNIFIL's presence is seen as harmful to Israel, as it restricts the IDF's operational freedom, which acts continuously to prevent Hezbollah's renewed military entrenchment in southern Lebanon. UNIFIL tends to adopt the Lebanese side's position against IDF activity in the south. For example, on May 6, the UNIFIL force commander called on the IDF to withdraw entirely from Lebanese territory and cease its strikes—even though these actions aim to prevent violations of the ceasefire agreement by Hezbollah and, in effect, serve Lebanese interests as well. There has also been a significant decline in UNIFIL's previously important role as the liaison between the IDF and the LAF within the framework of the Trilateral Military Committee (IDF, LAF, and UNIFIL), which has not convened since the outbreak of the war. It has been replaced by the Quintet Enforcement Committee, tasked with overseeing the implementation of the ceasefire agreement.

The United States, which plays a central role in enforcing the ceasefire and facilitating dialogue between the parties—and holds veto power over any Security Council resolution extending UNIFIL's mandate—has reportedly expressed dissatisfaction with the international force's performance. According to *Al-Jadeed* (May 10, 2025), Washington is demanding substantial changes to the mandate and has even threatened not to renew it. In contrast, Lebanon supports extending UNIFIL's mandate. UNIFIL ostensibly assists the weakened LAF and provides economic benefits to Lebanon—ranging from aid to residents and the LAF to the influx of US dollars into Lebanon's severely troubled economy. At a Lebanese cabinet meeting held on April 17—attended by President Joseph Aoun and the chief of staff—it was decided to support extending UNIFIL's mandate by another year ahead of the upcoming Security Council deliberations. Lebanon's position carries considerable weight, as the host country of UNIFIL, whose consent is required for the force's continued presence. In the past, Lebanon has enjoyed the backing of France, Russia, and even China within the Security Council.

#### Alternatives for Israel Regarding UNIFIL's Mandate

Assuming that, due to UNIFIL's poor performance, Israel is unlikely to agree to extend its mandate in its current format for another year, Israeli decision-makers are presented with two main alternatives:

**1. Demand a Fundamental Change to UNIFIL's Mandate as a Condition for Its Continued Presence.** Israel, in coordination with the United States, would promote concrete amendment proposals, including a demand to streamline the force by reducing its size and extending its mandate for only six months, thereby requiring more extensive supervision of its performance during that period; a modification of the mandate to allow the force to act more effectively in preventing violations by Hezbollah; a change in the composition of the participating countries, ensuring the involvement of states acceptable to Israel with a higher standard of military

professionalism; an upgrade of its surveillance capabilities through advanced technological systems (including drones and night vision equipment); and strengthening UNIFIL's presence at border crossings and increasing patrols along routes leading from northern to southern Lebanon.

**2. Demand the Immediate Termination of UNIFIL's Presence in Southern Lebanon.** Israel would oppose UNIFIL's continued presence due to its ineffectiveness, the improved performance of the LAF, and the establishment of the US-led Quintet Enforcement Committee—rendering UNIFIL's ineffective presence obsolete. The United States could veto any Security Council resolution to extend the mandate, motivated by the high maintenance cost of the force (about 25% is funded by the US budget) and in line with past policy under President Trump, who had already ordered reductions in US aid to the UN. The result would be the immediate cessation of UNIFIL operations in Lebanon at the end of its current mandate. The force would be required to halt all operational, administrative, and logistical activities and withdraw within a short timeframe. Responsibility for implementing the ceasefire agreement would then fall to the LAF, in coordination with the Quintet Committee.

#### Conclusion and Recommendations

The outcomes of the war between Israel and Hezbollah—and the subsequent developments—present Israel with an opportunity to establish a new security regime along the Lebanon border. At its core would be the elimination of Hezbollah's military presence in the area while preserving the IDF's freedom of action to counter emerging threats. Given that UNIFIL, in its current format, does not contribute to Israel's security interests—and may even impede the IDF's efforts to fight Hezbollah—the upcoming Security Council discussion in August on the mandate's extension offers a suitable platform for change. The debate in the Security Council will likely be preceded by intense diplomatic efforts by both Israel and Lebanon, with international involvement.

From Israel's perspective, it would be preferable to end UNIFIL's presence, and under the Trump administration, this may be feasible. However, from a security standpoint, concerns remain that an immediate end to operations would leave a vacuum that the LAF is not yet fully equipped to fill. The LAF still lacks the capacity to implement Resolution 1701 and maintain the ceasefire agreement, and the Quintet Committee has no physical presence on the ground. Diplomatically, at this stage, an agreement is unlikely with Lebanon and its supporters in the Security Council—especially France, which consistently supports Lebanon's position. As a result, terminating the mandate would require a US veto—something Washington may wish to avoid exercising at this time. In any case, before Israel demands an end to the international force's operations, it must ensure that conditions on the ground are conducive to such a move. This includes strengthening the LAF—ensuring it is free of Hezbollah sympathizers—so it can take on the critical role of preventing Hezbollah's military buildup in southern Lebanon. In parallel, it is also necessary to solidify and reinforce the status of the Quintet Enforcement Committee.

**Accordingly,** in the diplomatic engagements leading up to the upcoming Security Council discussion on UNIFIL's mandate, it is recommended that Israel present clear demands for

improved performance as a condition for agreeing to the force's continued presence. These should include a commitment to revisit the issue after six months, with the explicit caveat that if no improvement is observed, Israel will then seek to end UNIFIL's presence in southern Lebanon. In parallel, Israel and the United States should launch a joint diplomatic initiative to terminate UNIFIL's mandate as part of a broader security arrangement between Israel and Lebanon—under American sponsorship—which would include complementary security mechanisms to replace the international force. The growing rapprochement between the United States and Gulf states may serve as a foundation for involving Saudi Arabia and the UAE in this arrangement, particularly in support of upgrading the capabilities of the LAF.

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