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A Ship Upon a Bygone Sea:

The UN Force in the Golan Heights at the Start of 2016

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The security regime that ended the Yom Kippur War on Israel's northern front was designed to prevent another war from breaking out, either as a result of the surplus of combat forces in close proximity to each other, which made a surprise attack possible, or following tactical friction. It was therefore agreed to have the armies separated by a UN force that would be interposed between them and would replace the IDF forces in the enclaves conquered in Syrian territory, and to establish symmetric areas of force limitation on both sides of the Area of Separation, in which the size of the forces stationed would be subject to agreed-on restrictions. In accordance with the agreement and Security Council resolution 350, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) was established in June 1974 in order to maintain the ceasefire between Israel and Syria and supervise their compliance with the disengagement of forces agreement. The force was limited to 1,250 soldiers, and was deployed in positions in the area of separation and in logistics bases in Israel (Ziouani) and Syria (al-Faouar). In order to carry out its mission, UNDOF was assisted by military observers from the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), founded in 1948.

For decades, UNDOF's operations were conducted along Israel's calmest border. Regular activity included observation of the Area of Separation and patrols, bi-weekly inspections in the areas of force limitation on both sides, relay of messages between the parties, and assistance to the Red Cross in humanitarian tasks, such as passage of brides and students through the Quneitra border crossing, and exports of apples from the Druze villages in the Golan Heights to Syria. Under the agreement, UNDOF's mandate was extended every six months, with two reports a year submitted to the UN Secretary General. These reports were invariably short, routine, and repetitive.

The civil war that broke out in Syria in early 2011 gradually changed the force's operational environment. In the fighting between the regime and the rebels, control over most of the force's area of responsibility passed from the Syrian state and its army to the rebels. The risk to UNDOF forces gradually increased, first because of their proximity to

the fighting. They later became a target for violence aimed at promoting the military, political, or material goals of some of the rebel factions.

In July 2012, the inspection patrols to the areas of force Limitation on the Syrian side stopped, after the Syrian army failed to assign liaison officers to accompany the UNDOF personnel due to security reasons. In May 2013, a number of UNDOF soldiers were kidnapped in the southern Golan Heights by rebels from the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade and released shortly afterwards. In August-September 2014, rebel forces, including the al-Nusra Front, advanced in a northerly direction, wresting control of most of the area of separation and the Quneitra border crossing from the regime's army. The rebels took 45 UNDOF soldiers from the Fijian contingent hostage, and besieged two positions manned by dozens of Philippine soldiers. The surrounded forces escaped to Israeli territory. In the following weeks, UNDOF abandoned most of its positions in the Area of Separation and its headquarters in al-Faouar, and withdrew most of its forces to Israel. In view of the situation, the Quneitra border crossing was closed, and in order to facilitate the continued operation of the UNDOF positions, the provision of combat supplies, and medical evacuation, the IDF opened alternative crossings to and from Israel.

In its first decades, UNDOF had two infantry battalions, and enjoyed the support and assurance of both Israel and Syria. In 2002-2012 the force numbered about 1,000 soldiers, and its annual budget was \$40-50 million. When the security situation deteriorated, several developed countries withdrew their contingents from UNDOF. Between the spring of 2013 and the summer of 2014, the force grew to a peak of 1,271 soldiers. After the events of the summer of 2014, however, more forces left UNDOF, and the force now numbers fewer than 800 soldiers, the lowest number since it was founded. In the summer of 2014, the force's annual budget exceeded \$60 million, and is now \$64 million. The current annual cost of each UNDOF soldier is 140% of what it was in 2002.

The force size currently is equivalent to one battalion, with a Nepali company deployed in the four Hermon positions, a Fiji company in position 80 close to Rafid and Israeli territory, and a reserve company from Ireland in Camp Ziouani. The force also mans a number of observation positions along the Israeli border of the Area of Separation. Since 2013, the frequency and scope of the periodic reports to the UN Secretary General has doubled, but these deal mainly with findings in Israel and the area near it. On the maps attached to the recent reports, the force's 46 positions and its observation point still appear unchanged, even though most of them have been abandoned, seized by the rebels, and looted in recent years. The reports express the force's wish, with the support of the Israeli and Syrian governments, to return to the Area of Separation when the security situation allows, but it is difficult to predict if and when the conditions for this will occur.

In early 2015, Major General Purna Chandra Thapa of Nepal replaced Lieutenant General Iqbal Singh Singha of India, who commanded the UNDOF force for two and a half years. The new commander established his headquarters in Damascus, where he spends most of his time, in contrast to previous commanders, who divided their time between Camp Faouar and Camp Ziouani and frequently visited the Quneitra border crossing. The new location does not help UNDOF maintain the excellent working relations at a senior level that it needs on both sides of the border, even given the presence of the force's deputy commander in Israel. It was reported recently that the Nepalese UNDOF commander has been promoted to Lieutenant General, and was informed of his imminent return to his country for promotion in the Nepalese army after only one year as UNDOF commander.

The expected change of commanders in early February is an opportunity to examine the state of the force and how it operates, in view of the situation in the area. Clearly, a significant and widening gap has emerged between the force's mandate, structure, and missions and the current reality in which it operates. The original architecture of UNDOF's activity, which included the support of two sovereign countries, was undermined after the regime in Damascus lost its monopoly over military force and its control of the territory east of Israel. Preventing war between the Israeli and Syrian armies is no longer as relevant as it was in the past. Supervising the force limitations and the Area of Separation lost its value when both the Syrian regime and the rebels fighting against it are using military assets in violation of the restrictions under the agreement. Inspection of the restrictions on forces occurs only on the Israeli side, and the relevance of its finding is doubtful.

Nevertheless, Israel and Syria support the continuation of the force's mission, each for its own reasons. For Israel, this reflects a commitment to agreements in the framework of a desirable state order, and draws international attention and relatively objective reporting (although not entirely free of bias) from a rather turbulent border area. The IDF's consistent, professional, and responsible aid to the UNDOF forces earns it credit among armies and leaders around the world, beyond what is reflected in the UN reports. For the regime in Damascus, UNDOF's continued activity gives the appearance of order and ostensible sovereign state status in an area where it has in fact lost control. In addition, this situation provides the regime with leverage over UN members and agencies that are structurally dependent on it, as well as undeserved political credit in UN reports that provide it with flattering lip service.

The bottom line, however, is that UNDOF's value to the two sides lies in its status as a reliable channel of communication between Israel and the Assad regime – a channel that helps prevent deliberate or incidental cross-border fires from leading to escalation.

In the situation that has emerged, Israel should consider efforts to influence UNDOF in the following directions, which will make it more relevant in the current environment and help advance Israel's goals. As a basic assumption, changing the mandate in the current circumstances is impossible, for various political reasons. At the same time, the UN's room for interpretation makes it possible to adapt the tools, methods, and means utilized by UNDOF, as follows:

- a. It is essential that UNDOF continue to man the Hermon positions. If these fall into the hands of Sunni terrorist groups or the radical Shi'ite axis, they will pose a grave threat to the nearby IDF positions, and demand an appropriate response.
- b. Israel must insist that the commander of the force operate from offices in both Syria (Damascus?) and Israel (Ziouani), and that he be allowed to move directly between the parties, subject to security conditions. For this purpose, Israel must demand that the Assad regime refrain from forcing UNDOF to reach Israel through Lebanon, as is currently the case.
- c. In view of the situation on the ground, UNDOF must be able to contact and reach understandings with local power groups that control territory, and to perform stabilizing humanitarian missions through provision of medical services, food, and aid to civilians. These capabilities, despite the Assad regime's opposition, are an essential element in the renewal of the force's activity on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, and are likely to help improve the situation of the local population, encourage support for the UN presence, and enhance prospects for UNDOF's return to the Area of Separation. UNDOF should also be mandated to remove mines, which provide terrorist groups with an available source of standard explosives.
- d. In view of its current number of positions, the size of the force can be further reduced, as long as reinforcements are available for action or redeployment as needed.

