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Background and Implications of the Israeli Attack on the UNIFIL Mission

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After Israel announced the beginning of a ground invasion into southern Lebanon on 30 September 2024, the Israeli army launched multiple attacks against United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) positions, wounding several members of the peacekeeping forces and inflicting severe damage on UNIFIL facilities. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu demanded that the UN immediately have UNIFIL evacuate its positions around the “Blue Line,” claiming that Hezbollah was using them as a human shield. The UN refused to submit to this demand and insisted on keeping the peacekeeping forces in southern Lebanon despite the escalation of the armed confrontation between the Israeli army and Hezbollah fighters endangering its troops. UNIFIL’s steadfastness seems to be hindering Israel’s plan to overrun south Lebanon, while putting the occupying state at odds with a number of allied European states whose soldiers serve in the mission.

I: UNIFIL Background

UNIFIL was established by Security Council Resolution 425 in March 1978 in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon under what was dubbed “Operation Litani,”¹ to ensure the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon, restore security, and assist the Lebanese government in re-establishing its authority in the area. Following Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, the UN established a temporary 120-kilometre “withdrawal line” separating Lebanon and Israel which has come to be known as the “Blue Line,” and charged the UNIFIL mission with monitoring it and facilitating regular patrols. Following the 2006 war, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1701 under Chapter VI of the UN Charter on the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The resolution aimed to achieve a permanent ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel by establishing an area between the Blue Line and the Litani River free of any militants, war machinery or weapons other than the Lebanese Armed Forces and UNIFIL, which it tasked with assisting in the establishment of this area.² Under the same resolution, the Security Council expanded the Mission’s mandate and tasked it with monitoring the cessation of hostilities between the two parties, accompanying and supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces during their deployment throughout southern Lebanon and the withdrawal of Israeli forces, ensuring the safe and voluntary return of displaced persons, patrolling southern Lebanon, and reporting any violation of Resolution 1701 to the Security Council.

Since 2006, UNIFIL has been equipped with a maritime force whose function is to support the Lebanese Navy in monitoring Lebanese territorial waters and prevent the unauthorized entry of weapons and related material into the operations area.³ Since its establishment, the Mission has faced numerous Israeli attacks, most notably the “Qana massacre” on 18 April 1996, when the Israeli army shelled a UNIFIL base in the southern Lebanese village of Qana. The base had been sheltering nearly 800

1 “Resolution 425 (1978) of 19 March 1978, adopted by the Security Council at its 2074th Meeting,” accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3Am7fxk>.

2 United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 1701 (2006) adopted by the Security Council at its 5511th session held on 11 August 2006,” accessed on 23/10/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/4dWikOD>.

3 For more on this topic, see: United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, “UNIFIL Maritime Task Force,” UNIFIL website, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3Ugby4k>.

Lebanese civilians who had sought protection. The attack killed at least 106 civilians, including 52 children, and wounded many others, including a number of UNIFIL personnel.⁴ Despite evidence that the Israeli army deliberately attacked the UN Mission headquarters, the UN investigation concluded that “it is unlikely that the shelling of the (UN) compound was the result of gross technical and/or procedural errors.”⁵ Given the Security Council’s tolerance of the Israeli army, its assaults on UNIFIL have continued ever since.

Between 10 and 18 October 2024, the Mission was subjected to five attacks by the Israeli army, which wounded five peacekeepers and caused extensive damage to its facilities.⁶ UNIFIL announced that the Israeli army had crossed the Blue Line into Lebanon in violation of Security Council Resolution 1701.⁷ Netanyahu denied that Israeli forces had deliberately attacked UNIFIL, and called for its temporary removal from “combat zones,” claiming that Israel was concerned for its safety.⁸ In a rare instance of UN defiance of the occupation state, members of the Security Council unanimously rejected the Israeli demand, and resolved to keep the peacekeepers deployed in all their positions.⁹

II: UNIFIL Legal Framework and Israel’s Lack of Accountability

The UNIFIL mission was deployed under a Security Council mandate at the request of the host country, Lebanon.¹⁰ Accordingly, the Council alone may decide to modify the nature of UNIFIL’s deployment or to terminate its presence if the Lebanese government no longer consents to the Mission’s presence in the country, or if the countries participating in UNIFIL decide to withdraw their troops. In keeping with this legal framework, Israel has no right to demand that peacekeepers leave their positions or to obstruct their movement and patrols. In paragraph 12 of Resolution 1701, the Council grants UNIFIL the right “to resist attempts by forceful means to prevent it from discharging its duties under the mandate of the Security Council, and to protect United Nations personnel, facilities, installations and equipment, [and to] ensure the security and freedom of movement of United Nations personnel, [and] humanitarian workers.”¹¹

International law criminalizes the Israeli army’s attacks on UNIFIL forces, their facilities, or their property if it is established that such acts were carried out intentionally. Article 9 of the Convention

⁴ United Nations, The Question of Palestine, “Written Statement Submitted by North-South XXI, a non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status,” 22/12/2000, para. 1, accessed on 23/10/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/4fddt1x>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “UNIFIL: It is important that the UN flag remain flying in southern Lebanon,” UN News, 18/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/4fbu9GD>.

⁷ United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, “UNIFIL Statement (13 October 2024), UNIFIL website, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3BTXd7n>.

⁸ “Netanyahu Denies Targeting UNIFIL, Calls for Withdrawal,” *Reuters*, 15/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4dV5KUF>.

⁹ “UNIFIL: It is important that the UN flag remain flying in southern Lebanon.”

¹⁰ See paragraph 12 of Security Council Resolution 1701, which states: “Acting in support of the request of the Government of Lebanon for the deployment of an international force to assist it in exercising its authority throughout the territory of Lebanon,” in: United Nations, Security Council, “Resolution 1701 (2006) Adopted by the Security Council.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*

on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel of 1994 defines the crimes against UN and associated personnel as follows:

1. The intentional commission of:
 - (a) A murder, kidnapping or other attack upon the person or liberty of any United Nations or associated personnel;
 - (b) A violent attack upon the official premises, the private accommodation or the means of transportation of any United Nations or associated personnel likely to endanger his or her person or liberty;
 - (c) A threat to commit any such attack with the objective of compelling a physical or juridical person to do or to refrain from doing any act;
 - (d) An attempt to commit any such attack; and
 - (e) An act constituting participation as an accomplice in any such attack, or in an attempt to commit such attack, or in organizing or ordering others to commit such attack, shall be made by each State Party a crime under its national law.¹²

Since the establishment of UNIFIL in 2006, the Israeli army has repeatedly violated the Convention without facing legal accountability, as both UNIFIL and the Security Council have refrained from accusing Israel of deliberately targeting the peacekeeping force. Emboldened by the impunity it enjoyed following its perpetration of the Qana Massacre, Israel went on to kill four unarmed UN observers on 25 July 2006 by bombing an observation post occupied by United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) peacekeepers in the southern Lebanese town of Khiam.¹³ The Security Council issued a presidential statement – which, unlike its resolutions, is not legally binding – acknowledging that the Israeli army had fired on UNIFIL and killed the military observers. However, rather than taking further action merely urged Israel to carry out a comprehensive investigation into the incident- a request Israel refused to fulfil.¹⁴ During the 2006 war, UNIFIL faced additional attacks from Israel, yet Israel remained unaccountable, as both UNIFIL and the Security Council continued to refrain from accusing Israel of deliberately targeting its personnel and facilities.¹⁵

In an unprecedented move during the ongoing assault on southern Lebanon, UNIFIL has openly accused Israel of targeting its headquarters and forces in “five deliberate attacks”.¹⁶ However, the Security Council responded by issuing nothing more than a press statement on 18 October 2024 expressing “deep concern” and urging all parties to “respect the safety and security of UNIFIL

¹² See The Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel,” accessed on 4/11/2024 at <https://www.un.org/law/cod/safety.htm>.

¹³ “Attacks Against United Nations Personnel in 2006 Go Unpunished, Staff Union Says,” United Nations, Meeting Coverage and Press Release, 2/1/2007, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4eSu7nr>.

¹⁴ “Statement by the President of the Security Council,” at the 5497th meeting, 27/7/2006, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4dXQ0Ap>.

¹⁵ “Attacks against United Nations Personnel in 2006 Go Unpunished, Staff Union Says.”

¹⁶ “UNIFIL: It is important that the UN flag remain flying in southern Lebanon.”

personnel and United Nations premises”.¹⁷ It has consequently avoided directing blame at Israel specifically. Under pressure from the United States, the Council continues to ensure Israel’s impunity, thereby emboldening it to persist in its attacks on peacekeeping forces in Lebanon. Nevertheless, despite Resolution 1701 authorizing them to use force in self-defence, UNIFIL forces avoid engaging the Israeli military. The Resolution also mandates them to prevent hostile activities in their area of operations; to resist attempts to hinder their work; to protect UN personnel and installations; to ensure the safety and freedom of movement of UNIFIL personnel and humanitarian workers; and to protect civilians facing imminent threats of physical violence.¹⁸ The Mission seeks to avoid any military confrontation with the Israeli army, as its military capabilities are modest compared to Israel’s military might, and it remains cautious not to become a party to the conflict.¹⁹

III: Motives and Implications of the Attack

In justifying its deliberate attack on UNIFIL headquarters on 13 October of this year,²⁰ the Israeli army claimed that the incident had occurred “during the evacuation of wounded soldiers under enemy fire.”²¹ However, given Israel’s record of targeting UNIFIL, its rejection of the Mission’s presence and its dissatisfaction with its performance, Israeli forces’ continued attacks on the Mission appear to serve at least three interrelated objectives, namely:

1. *To neutralize a key hindrance to the Israeli ground invasion of Lebanon*

In early October, the Israeli army announced the beginning of a limited ground operation directed against Hezbollah targets and infrastructure in villages close to Lebanon’s southern border.²² However, given the history of previous Israeli invasions of Lebanon, these statements lacked credibility. In 1982, and later in 2006, Israel initially announced a limited operation that quickly turned into a full-scale invasion and long-term occupation.²³ Furthermore, the forced displacement of Lebanese villages and towns in the south suggests that UNIFIL positions along the Blue Line constitute an obstacle to the Israeli army’s advance in its fourth invasion of Lebanon since 1978. The Mission’s presence in southern Lebanon hinders the achievement of Israel’s undeclared objectives, which include either occupying the area south of the Litani

¹⁷ Edith M. Lederer, “UN Security Council Voices ‘Strong Concern’ for UN Peacekeepers after Israeli Attacks,” *AP*, 15/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/40gQBKf>.

¹⁸ “Explanatory Article: What is Security Council Resolution 1701?” *UN News*, 2/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at <https://news.un.org/en/>.

¹⁹ “UNIFIL: It is important that the UN flag remain flying in southern Lebanon.”

²⁰ United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, “UNIFIL Statement, 13 October 2024.”

²¹ “Israeli military says UNIFIL incident ‘occurred during evacuation of wounded soldiers under enemy fire,’” *BBC News Arabic*, 10/13/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOXU>.

²² “IDF Launches Localized and Targeted Raids against Hezbollah in the Border Area of Southern Lebanon,” *Israel International News*, 1/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3BSB2hR>.

²³ Barak Ravid, “Past Wars Loom over Israel’s Ground Operation in Lebanon,” *Axios*, 1/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4fiaUvd>.

River, launching an all-out invasion, or establishing a depopulated “buffer zone” to impose a new reality on the ground.

2. *To prevent monitoring of Israeli violations*

Based on information gathered through its patrols and its monitoring of the situation from its various observation posts, UNIFIL fulfils its mandate by reporting to the Security Council on any violation of UNSC Resolution 1701 by either Israel or Hezbollah. Israel has regularly denied its violations over the years and expressed its resentment towards UNIFIL, describing it as “useless” and considering the UN a failed institution. It also frequently accuses UNIFIL of being biased towards Hezbollah, failing to prevent the group from reinforcing its presence in south Lebanon, and overlooking its regrouping and rearmament.²⁴ The UN has responded to these accusations by asserting that responsibility for the implementation of Res. 1701 rests with Israel, Hezbollah and the Lebanese Government, whereas UNIFIL’s role is limited to providing support to the aforementioned parties in keeping with its mandate.²⁵

In this context, UNIFIL’s removal from south Lebanon would prevent it from monitoring Israel’s violations of Security Council resolutions, as well as other violations of international law that embarrass its allies (the United States, Britain, and France) in the Security Council. Israel’s attack on UNIFIL is also consistent with the strategy it has adopted in its genocide in Gaza, where it has sought to prevent international observers, humanitarian workers, or international journalists from entering the sites of its military operations, thereby allowing it to dispute local reports and cast doubt on their credibility.

3. *To avoid a clash with allied states and the loss of their support*

UNIFIL forces consist of troops, police, and civilians from some 50 countries, with notable participation by European states. As of 20 October 2024,²⁶ European countries had contributed thousands of peacekeepers, their respective contributions being: Italy (1,043), Spain (676), France (665), Ireland (351), Poland (282), Finland (205), Serbia (182), Austria (149), Greece (141), and Germany (102).²⁷ This prominent European military presence on the shores of the Mediterranean constitutes the largest contribution by European countries to the ongoing eleven UN peacekeeping missions. Consequently, these countries are concerned about withdrawing their forces from a conflict so close to their borders, with some, such as Italy and Greece, also concerned about the potential repercussions of the war’s escalation, including the possibility of a wave of refugees towards their shores. The importance of

²⁴ “Defying Israel, UN Peacekeeping Force in Southern Lebanon Insists it is Staying Put,” *The Times of Israel*, 15/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/48klwHJ>.

²⁵ “Officer of peacekeeping operations: UNIFIL will remain in all of its positions in south Lebanon despite Israeli calls,” UN News, 14/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at <https://bit.ly/4hk359V>.

²⁶ United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, “UNIFIL Contributing Countries,” UNIFIL website, accessed on 23/10/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3NCFyUc>.

²⁷ David O’Sullivan, “German Peacekeeping Warship Shoots down Drone off Lebanese Coast,” *Euronews*, 17/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4hezdMe>.

the European role is highlighted by the 17 October 2024 incident in which a German UNIFIL warship shot down a drone off the Lebanese coast.²⁸

Thus far, there is no indication that the European Union's unified position will prompt it to agree to calls by Spain and Ireland to suspend the trade agreement between the EU and Israel and ban the supply of weapons to the latter. However, this stance could shift if European citizens were to be killed at the hands of their Israeli ally. As for China, it has also condemned the Israeli attacks on the UNIFIL Mission and demanded an investigation into the incident in order to hold those responsible for the attack accountable.²⁹ Given the international and European stance, Israel's attempts to expel UNIFIL from its positions in south Lebanon can be seen as an effort to avoid a more serious attack on the Mission that might result in casualties among its European allies, particularly at a time when Israel may need their support with respect to Iran.

Conclusion

Israel's relationship with the UN is generally tense, marked by the lack of respect for the organization, its agencies, and its senior officials. This was most recently manifested in Israel's declaration of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as "persona non grata", barring him from entering the country. Its wars on Gaza and Lebanon have been marked by direct attacks on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and UNIFIL.

However, the implications of Israel's recent assaults on UNIFIL go beyond a confrontation with the UN to impact its relations with its European allies as well. This crisis represents a major test for the UN, which has faced criticism since the 1990s for its failure to prevent genocide and atrocities in Rwanda, Srebrenica, Myanmar, Gaza and elsewhere. In response to accusations of failure and bias directed at other UN peacekeeping missions, the Security Council has been obliged in recent years to withdraw such missions from Darfur (Sudan), Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the request of these countries' own governments. Therefore, if the European countries can keep their UNIFIL forces in their positions, they may help salvage the Organization's reputation to some extent, while also sparing Lebanon a massive ground invasion and all-out war.

However, if Israel continues its attacks on the Mission's personnel and causes losses in human life, some participating countries may be forced to withdraw their troops. This could either weaken the Mission or require its evacuation at a time when Lebanon most depends on its presence. This worst-case scenario could pave the way for a full-scale Israeli invasion, potentially leading to several outcomes, for which the UN would bear partial responsibility.

²⁸ "Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on Recent Attacks against UNIFIL," *European Council*, 13/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4hk3yZl>.

²⁹ Zhang Yuying & Zhang Wanshi, "Israeli Attack on UNIFIL Sparks Condemnation, Grave Concerns," *Global Times*, 13/10/2024, accessed on 23/10/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3YyqaOT>.



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