

Four Decades of UNIFIL

Mandates, Contributions and Challenges

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Established in 1978 with the objective of ensuring Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been a key factor in maintaining stability along the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon since then. There are divergent views on the achievements of the mission after more than four decades of its deployment. While UNIFIL's contribution towards maintaining stability and preventing conflicts in the region has been widely acknowledged, it has also drawn criticism from different quarters including Israel and Hezbollah over its role, efficacy and achievements. Amid the continuing tensions along the Israel–Lebanon border, its role has become indispensable for maintaining peace and stability in the region. The key actors—Israel, Lebanon and Hezbollah—have their own set of interests and issues with the UNIFIL, which create challenges for the peacekeeping force to achieve its mandates. Despite the achievements and success in collaborating with the key players involved in the conflict, UNIFIL continues to face massive challenges that hinder it in performing its responsibilities.

Keywords: *UN Peacekeeping, United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), United Nations Security Council, Israel, Lebanon, Hezbollah*

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was created by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in March 1978 in the backdrop of the deteriorating security situation along the Israel–Lebanon border. It remains deployed even today after more than four decades,

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as the situation continues to remain tense and fragile. Operating in a difficult terrain and challenging political and military situation between Israel, Lebanon and Hezbollah, the UNIFIL's role and achievements have always come under the scanner. There are mixed responses on the contribution of the mission towards maintaining peace and stability in the area. All the key actors involved in the conflict carry different perceptions towards the UNIFIL, and therefore, their engagement with the peacekeeping mission have varied from each other. Their level of cooperation with the UNIFIL has also fluctuated from time to time depending on the situation on the ground. The UNIFIL, undoubtedly, has been contributing towards maintaining peace and tranquillity along the Blue Line despite recurring violations from all the sides. As the key political and security issues between Israel and Lebanon remain unresolved, there is high apprehension that ending the UNIFIL mission might lead to further conflagration in the area, and the gains made in all these years might be lost in a few days. In this backdrop, this article intends to analyse the conflict background, mandate of the UNIFIL, response and interests of all the key actors and challenges it has been facing in undertaking its mandates. The article also makes an assessment of the contribution of the UNIFIL towards maintaining peace and stability in the area, and the contribution of India towards the UNIFIL peacekeeping force.

CONFLICT BACKGROUND AND UNIFIL'S MANDATE

During the long course of the Israel–Palestine wars, Palestinian groups established the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1968 and a number of Palestinian militant groups established their bases in South Lebanon and continued their terror activities against Israel. After the crackdown on the PLO by the Jordanian authorities, a large number of its leaders and fighters moved to South Lebanon where they found a safe haven to launch their attacks on Israel. On 11 March 1978, a group of Palestinian Fatah members entered Israel via the sea route and hijacked a bus. In the subsequent engagement with Israeli security forces, 38 Israelis including 13 children were killed. This incident, known as the 'Coastal Road massacre', triggered massive waves of political as well as emotional reactions from the people and the political leadership alike in Israel. The Israeli political and the military leadership decided to take strong and decisive action against the Palestinian groups based in South Lebanon. On 14 March, Israel announced the 'Operation Litani' with

an objective to destroy the Palestinian militant infrastructure in South Lebanon and push them to the north of the Litani River. Israeli military entered South Lebanon, and Israeli Air Force and Navy also launched bombardments on their targets. Hundreds of people were killed, and many were internally displaced in Lebanon. Israel announced the end of Operation Litani on 21 March.

Looking at the worsening condition on the ground, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolutions 425 and 426 on 19 March 1978, which called upon Israel to respect the territorial integrity of Lebanon, to cease its military operations in Lebanon and, more importantly, decided to establish the UNIFIL.¹ The first UNIFIL forces landed in the area on 23 March 1978, and established its headquarters at Naqoura in South Lebanon. Though the UNIFIL was established for an initial period of six months, its mandate since is renewed every year by the UNSC, and it has been operational for more than four decades.

Despite the continued presence of the UNIFIL in the region, the political and security situation on the ground has always remained tense and fluid. Armed conflicts have taken place regularly between Israel and the Palestinian armed groups based in South Lebanon. On 3 June 1982, a group of Palestinian terrorists attacked and critically injured Shlomo Argov, the then Israeli ambassador to the UK. This incident triggered the next Israeli attack on Lebanon. On 6 June Israel launched a military attack on Lebanon codenamed 'Operation Peace for the Galilee'. This attack was more devastating in intensity as the Israeli military sieged Beirut and the war resulted in thousands of casualties. The PLO leadership and the fighters had to relocate to Tunis as a result of the war.

The June 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon took place under the helpless watch of the UNIFIL. As the war intensified, the UNSC realised that the situation on the ground had now fundamentally changed from the situation when the mandate under Resolutions 425 and 426 was approved. Therefore, Resolution 511 was adopted on 18 June 1982, which authorised the UNIFIL to 'extend their protection and humanitarian assistance to the population of the area',² as per the report of the Secretary-General on UNIFIL. In May 2000, Israel withdrew its forces from South Lebanon. As the Israeli forces left, the UN marked a line of withdrawal along the Israel–Lebanon border. This line is known as the 'Blue Line' as blue barrels were put up along the border, not to be crossed by either side. The UNIFIL now guards the Blue Line with the objective of maintaining peace along the Line and to prevent unnecessary

provocations and hostile actions from either side. Crossing the Blue Line is a violation under UNSC Resolution 1701. The Blue Line is not the international border between Israel and Lebanon. In 1923, Palestine and Lebanon had marked the international boundary between them; and in 1949, Israel and Lebanon signed the Israel–Lebanon Armistice Demarcation Line (ADL) and accepted the 1923 line as their boundary. The ADL was re-demarcated in 1949–51 by a sub-committee of the Israel–Lebanon Mixed Armistice Commission (ILMAC).³ However, despite the re-demarcation, boundary disputes persist between the two countries.

As the PLO fled to Tunis, Hezbollah was steadily emerging as a key force in South Lebanon. Inspired by the Islamic revolution in Iran that brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power, Hezbollah espoused radical Shiite thinking and was determined to counter Israeli aggression. It was ideologically and financially backed by the revolutionary Iranian regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. Gradually, the emergence of Hezbollah became yet another critical factor in the complex security situation in the region as it started attacking Israeli targets. This became an additional challenge for the UNIFIL. As the UNIFIL did not have any mandate to interfere or engage militarily in the war, it mostly remained a mute spectator of the exchange of fire from both sides. Israel's security concerns emanating from Lebanon continued to increase as the PLO and the Hezbollah not only ran their activities from Lebanon, but also the leadership of the organisations were given shelter and free passage in the country. Israel continued to face terrorist attacks from its northern border from these groups.

The 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah was yet another critical development that changed the security situation in the region. On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah launched an attack on Israel patrolling vehicles, killing three Israeli soldiers and abducting two others. Hezbollah demanded the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel as a condition to release the two abducted Israeli soldiers. Israel did not agree to the Hezbollah demands and started attacks on Lebanon, thereby escalating tension in the region. On 11 August 2006, the UNSC approved Resolution 1701, intended to stop the hostilities and expanded the scope and mandate of the UNIFIL. Among others, Resolution 1701 was authorised to increase the strength of UNIFIL to 15,000, as well as authorised to monitor the cessation of hostilities, accompany the Lebanese armed forces, assist in ensuring humanitarian access and return of displaced persons and coordinate with the Israeli and Lebanese governments.⁴

To further strengthen the peacekeeping force, in 2006, UNIFIL established a Maritime Task Force (MTF) as smuggling of weapons into South Lebanon by Hezbollah became rampant and Israel imposed a maritime blockade on Lebanon. The blockade was deployed under the mandate of UNSC Resolution 1701. Establishment of the MTF is the first such instance of an UN peacekeeping force having a naval unit in its mission. The MTF works closely with the Lebanese Navy; it is authorised to monitor the territorial waters of Lebanon and to secure the coastline by preventing weapon smuggling into Lebanon.⁵

ISRAEL AND UNIFIL

Israel is certainly benefitted by the deployment of UNIFIL in South Lebanon as it has checked the Hezbollah activities to a significant extent. But UNIFIL has not been able to completely check the Hezbollah activities in the region, nor has it in any way weakened its military power. Israel has always remained concerned about the activities of Hezbollah in South Lebanon despite the presence of the UNIFIL. Israel has brought the extensive network of Hezbollah's underground tunnels that are used to cross into Israeli territory to the notice of the UNIFIL. As Israel perceives Hezbollah as a proxy of Iran, this network is not only a violation of Israeli sovereignty but also a national security threat.

Israel has also expressed serious concern that even though the UNIFIL forces are present in the region, Hezbollah has been able to dig tunnels in the border areas in order to quickly move their weapons and fighters to launch attacks on Israel. Though the UNIFIL has acknowledged the finding of tunnels across the Blue Line,⁶ it has not been able to prevent the digging of new tunnels by the Hezbollah. As no significant action was taken by the UNIFIL, Israel started Operation Northern Shield in December 2018 with the objective of destroying the Hezbollah tunnels. Discovery of an extensive tunnel network also made Israel suspect a nexus between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government, accusing the latter of failing to secure South Lebanon.

Israel has accused the UNIFIL of bias against the Israeli defence forces. For Israel, though, Hezbollah is involved in numerous armed attacks and is not being caught by the UNIFIL, it is lodging complaints against Israel even as Israeli soldiers are acting in self-defence against the Hezbollah aggression.⁷ Further, Israel alleges that Hezbollah has militarised a large number of villages in South Lebanon, which work as human shields⁸; and that the UNIFIL has been unable to check such

occurrences. It has time and again appealed to the UN that the UNIFIL must be empowered to access areas that are used by Hezbollah to provide a safe area for its personnel, terrorist infrastructure as well as to store arms and ammunitions.⁹

Israel also goes to the extent of urging the UN to give powers and authority to the UNIFIL to enter homes and search for terrorists and their weapons, which are hidden in private homes and villages in the area. In August 2020, Israel's representative to the UN complained to the Security Council about the heightened tension along the Israel–Lebanon–Syria border. In his letter, he urged the UNSC to expand UNIFIL's "access and oversight into areas where Hezbollah operates".¹⁰ Israel alleges that UNIFIL is intimidated by Hezbollah's dominating armed presence in the region. Therefore, Israel urges the UNIFIL to strictly implement Resolution 1701 and the extended mandate it has received.

Israel wants the Lebanese government to take responsibility for what is happening in its territory in the South. But given that Hezbollah has become an extremely powerful entity in Lebanon—being a recognised political party, being in power in Beirut and having its own militia as well—makes it difficult for the Lebanese government as well as the UNIFIL to check its activities. Israel also accuses Hezbollah of obstructing the UNIFIL forces in carrying out their duties and continuously harassing them. Israel alleges that the UNIFIL has proven to be incompetent to check the smuggling of weapons from Syria reaching the Hezbollah. Also, despite the deployment of the UNIFIL, Hezbollah continues to fire rockets towards Israel, which prompts Israel to carry out air strikes against Hezbollah targets. Israel has also complained that despite its heavy armed presence along the Blue Line, the UNIFIL has not been able to deter the Hezbollah from firing rocket attacks on Israel.

LEBANON AND UNIFIL

The continued domestic political tension and the existence of deep societal divisions has weakened the central decision-making in Lebanon. This has been a reason for the lack of a strong military to deal with the internal security challenges and external aggression. The formalised confessional arrangement between the Maronite Christians, Sunnis and Shias of the country to share power as president, prime minister and speaker of the parliament, respectively, has remained as the most determining and distinguished fault line in Lebanese politics. Along with the political and sectarian division of the society, radicalism also continued to grow.

This led to a civil war and involvement of external powers in Lebanon, resulting in more friction in the society and weakening of the central authority in Beirut. The interference of Syria in Lebanon further eroded the power and legitimacy of the government.

In the aftermath of the first Israel–Palestine War in 1948, around 1,00,000 Palestinian refugees entered Lebanon who were living mostly in the refugee camps in South Lebanon. In the 1970s, a large number of Palestinians fled Jordan after a crackdown by the Jordanian authorities and landed up in Lebanon. Using the Lebanese territories, the Palestinians in Lebanon ran their terrorist activities against Israel. This brought Lebanon under frequent Israeli attacks even though the country did not want a direct war with Israel. For these reasons, Lebanon welcomed the UN decision to deploy the peacekeeping force on its borders with Israel. Lebanon believed that the presence of the UN peacekeeping forces on the border will help calm down the situation and it will be able to assert its sovereignty in the south of the country. It also presumed that the UNIFIL's presence would check Israeli aggression across the border in the South.¹¹ Further, Lebanon was deeply worried about the frequent Israeli incursions into its territory, and it was embarrassed over its maintaining sovereignty over these areas. Besides, the presence of Palestinian groups and their terrorist activities on Lebanese soil also outraged the Lebanese government. The Lebanon government, therefore, believed that the presence of the international forces would be able to check their activities and assist it in establishing government control in the South.¹²

A key objective of Resolution 1701 was that the Lebanese government gain complete sovereignty in the South and to enable the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to control the area. But Hezbollah has been extremely domineering and has overshadowed the Lebanese government and military as well. It has been a part of the government since 1992, its leaders have held cabinet positions in the government and has, thus, continued to influence the government's policies. While increasing its political power and military presence all over the country including in the South, it has eclipsed the effective power and authority of the Lebanese government. Often the Lebanese government has been a hostage to the intentions of Hezbollah. This defeats the core objective of Resolution 1701, which intends to empower the Lebanon government and fully restore its sovereignty in the South.

The gradual weakening of the Lebanese state has been a major factor leading to the current state of affairs. Strengthening the political,

economic and military capability of the central authority in Beirut would significantly change the political and military situation in the region. Though the UNIFIL has been working in this direction, it has not been successful. The Lebanese state, therefore, wants the UNIFIL mission to continue even though it is not successful on many aspects. Apart from security and maintaining stability in the South, Lebanon has also indirectly benefitted financially from the economic aid and packages it has received from the UN. While it remains weak, authorities in Beirut expect the UNIFIL to resolve the political issues with Israel and rein in the Hezbollah. At present, this seems to be an unrealistic expectation from the UNIFIL, but a weakened state like Lebanon does not seem to have any better choices right now.

The internal political crisis in Lebanon has been another reason that has contributed to the continuation of tension along the Blue Line. The responsibility of defending the country is on the Lebanese military, but because of the internal crises, the LAF has remained weak, and sometimes helpless, in front of the Hezbollah, which gets cross-border support from Syria and Iran. The LAF's cooperation with the UNIFIL to maintain stability in the south of the country is one of the key objectives of the UN resolutions. But the LAF has mostly been at the receiving end, given the complex nature of the conflict. It faces retaliation from Hezbollah in the South Lebanon region and also has to come to the defence of the country if there is an attack from Israel.

As Lebanon faces security challenges, the LAF has engaged with the UNIFIL in a strategic dialogue to build new units and further building the capacity of the existing forces in the South.¹³ In 2018, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2433 and proposed to build a 'Model Regiment' of the LAF to operate in the South and to gradually shift the responsibilities of the MTF to the Lebanese Navy.¹⁴ Reiterating that the LAF is the only legitimate military force in Lebanon, this resolution sought to further strengthen it and make it more independent and a powerful entity. This indicates a significant change in the approach of the UNIFIL to give more responsibilities to the Lebanese Army and the Navy to protect their territory. Given the current situation, this seems to be a quite difficult, though not an impossible, proposition. The UNIFIL has been successful, to a large extent, in strengthening the Lebanese military. But Lebanon's internal political complexities and the strong military presence of Hezbollah are major hurdles in the way of achieving that. The UNIFIL leadership acknowledges that the constant dialogue between the UNIFIL

and the LAF has improved confidence building in the region and this has prevented unilateral military action by the parties involved.¹⁵ The LAF also has substantial military support from the US, which has been a key contributor to the Lebanese defence and security sector. The US supports Lebanon by cooperating in the sectors such as border security, arms transfer, counter-terror cooperation, military education and training among others.¹⁶

HEZBOLLAH AND UNIFIL

With its political and military power, Hezbollah has become a 'state-within-a-state' in Lebanon.¹⁷ Both politically and militarily, Hezbollah has taken the Lebanon government hostage as it has been a part of the government in Beirut. Besides being politically active, Hezbollah is deeply entrenched in the political, socio-cultural and economic life in Lebanon. It has emerged as a key player in the confessional political system of Lebanon, where the parliamentary seats are divided between the Maronite Christians, Sunnis and Shias. By directly taking part in national politics, Hezbollah has received recognition as a political institution among the people and after being a part of the government it has access to the central resources of the country.¹⁸ It has maintained a huge military arsenal that overshadows the Lebanese armed forces. It has taken advantage of the domestic political instability in Lebanon and has continuously accumulated strength. Recently, Hezbollah chief Hasan Nasrallah stated that he has 1,00,000 fighters in the organisation. No Lebanese government has had the courage to launch a military crackdown against Hezbollah. Iran has been providing political, ideological and financial support to Hezbollah. According to the US Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, Hezbollah receives most of its funding from Iran with approximately US\$ 700 million annually.¹⁹ Besides, Hezbollah also receives funding from private donations, smuggling, narcotics trafficking and money laundering.²⁰ Such unwavering political support, funding and a huge army of fighters has emboldened Hezbollah to carry out military strikes against Israel, often disregarding the Lebanese government. Over the decades, Hezbollah has emerged as the single-most effective adversary against Israel.²¹ Hezbollah has not only launched attacks on Israel, it has also provided guerrilla training and tactical expertise to other anti-Israel groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.²²

This is the biggest hindrance in the way of the Lebanese government exercising political sovereignty and military power in the southern part of

the country. In many instances, it has acted with impunity disregarding national and international law and thereby destabilising regional peace and security. Often Hezbollah's decisions have hampered the Lebanese national economic and security interests as well. The Lebanese government is hesitant to take action against Hezbollah while the latter continues to expand and strengthen its arsenal and military capabilities and continues to operate from private properties and terrains that are difficult to access.²³ Therefore, disarming Hezbollah has been one of the key objectives and mandates of the UNIFIL. But despite having such mandates, the power of Hezbollah has only continued to increase.

The UNIFIL faces a huge dilemma over Hezbollah. On the one hand, it cannot disarm this huge organisation deeply entrenched in the ground, and on the other hand, it cannot openly challenge Hezbollah for it will lead to further instability in the area. As fighting against Hezbollah is not the stated mandate of the UNIFIL, Hezbollah has taken advantage of this fact. There have been several instances of the UNIFIL forces being attacked by the Hezbollah in South Lebanon. On a number of occasions, the UNIFIL has also faced combative and threatening locals who are backed by the Hezbollah.

For Hezbollah, an international peacekeeping force like the UNIFIL not using force against it and remaining restrained is an ideal situation. It perceives the UNIFIL as an international observer force and resists if it undertakes military operations in South Lebanon.²⁴ Thus, Hezbollah has also exploited the presence of UNIFIL along the Blue Line. As long as the UNIFIL patrols the Blue Line and does not engage with it militarily, the situation remains favourable for Hezbollah. Further, the UNIFIL not pressurising Hezbollah to disarm and continuing to patrol the Blue Line also favours Hezbollah as it maintains status quo in the area.

Though publicly Hezbollah has stated that the presence of UNIFIL along the Blue Line is in Israel's security interest, it realises that the presence of UNIFIL is a deterrent for Israel to attack Hezbollah. In fact, the Hezbollah leaders have had extensive contacts with the local commanders of the UNIFIL. Further, as the UNIFIL forces manned the Blue Line, Hezbollah exploited the situation and established a second line of defence north of River Litani. They also established training camps, storage facilities and increased their number of positions.²⁵ Therefore, Hezbollah would want the mandate of the UNIFIL renewed every year without giving it any further teeth.

INDIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO UNIFIL

In keeping with its rich tradition of contributing towards maintaining international peace and security, India has been a major troop-contributing country to the UNIFIL. India has been contributing troops to UNIFIL since 1998. As of 31 December 2021, there are 10,048 peacekeeping forces from 46 different countries deployed in the UNIFIL.²⁶ India is the third-largest troop-contributing country with 895 peacekeepers to the UNIFIL after Indonesia (1228) and Italy (1060).²⁷ The Indian Battalion (INDBATT) in UNIFIL includes an infantry battalion, medical team and staff officers. India has also expressed its willingness to further strengthen the UNIFIL by contributing a contingent to the MTF. Indian forces have always been admired for their dedicated service in keeping peace and security, and have been commended for their distinguished service. India has blended well in a multinational peacekeeping mission like UNIFIL, been operating in one of the most challenging conditions and even continued with peacekeeping operations during the height of the Israel–Hezbollah War of 2006.²⁸ The Indian contingent has been deployed in the Eastern sector of the Blue Line and its areas of operation include sensitive zones of Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms.²⁹

Officers from the Indian contingent have also held high positions in the UNIFIL mission. Indian peacekeepers in UNIFIL have received huge support from the government as well as from the Indian Army. In January 2018, Lieutenant General Ajae Kumar Sharma in his capacity as the Director General Staff Duties, Ministry of Defence, visited the UNIFIL Headquarters in South Lebanon. He met the leadership of the UNIFIL, visited bases along the Blue Line and interacted with the peacekeepers deployed in the areas of operation.³⁰ On several occasions, the Indian ambassadors to Lebanon have also visited the INDBATT and interacted with the contingent.

Besides the military operations, Indian peacekeeping forces have engaged in social development, environmental and humanitarian operations in South Lebanon. They have been helping local people with medical service, veterinary service, providing help in rehabilitation centres, building schools, vocational training and sports among others.³¹ In 2020, INDBATT received the UNIFIL environment award for increasing awareness and protecting the environment in their areas of deployment.³² A contingent of peacekeepers from Kazakhstan are now co-deployed with the Indian Battalion in UNIFIL, under an agreement between India and Kazakhstan.³³ The Kazakh forces also received

training in India before joining the UNIFIL mission in 2018. Such co-deployment of forces for peacekeeping missions happened for the first time in the history of UN peacekeeping.

UNIFIL'S ACHIEVEMENTS

Since its deployment along the Blue Line, UNIFIL has been constantly monitoring the situation in one of the most dangerous areas in the world. Operating in such a conflict-ridden zone, the UNIFIL has been monitoring along the Blue Line thus foiling a number of violent escalations. This in itself is an achievement of the UNIFIL. Though it has not been able to establish peace in the region, its presence along the Blue Line and coordination with all the major stakeholders to reduce friction among them has been widely recognised as a big achievement.

Deployment of UNIFIL in the burning South Lebanon has eased the situation in the region to a large extent. The UNIFIL has been the key agency to coordinate among the principal actors in the region. Its presence has been a key factor of stability along the Blue Line. Though it could not prevent the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon nor has it been successful in deterring the numerous Hezbollah attacks on the Israeli targets,³⁴ UNIFIL's presence has prevented a number of potential conflicts over the decades. Despite having international support, the UNIFIL has not been successful in pushing the Israeli Army from South Lebanon, which was its original mandate. The peacekeeping forces deployed in South Lebanon are simply no match for the powerful Hezbollah or the Israeli security forces who were able to launch military operations in the area at their own will. This has been a severe blow to the competence and accomplishments of the force in South Lebanon.

The UNIFIL has been operating in a very hostile territory and difficult geographical terrain. The Israeli defence forces have launched military operations despite the presence of the UNIFIL and the forces themselves have been attacked by the Hezbollah and other local and militia groups. During the four decades of its deployment along the Blue Line, the UNIFIL has not been able to overcome this challenge.

The MTF has played a significant role in securing the threats coming from the seas. Palestinian terrorist groups as well as Hezbollah have used the sea route to illegally smuggle weapons into South Lebanon as a strict vigil of their weapons smuggling was observed on the land routes. The establishment of the MTF significantly checked weapon smuggling into South Lebanon through the sea route. The MTF has also been working in

close collaboration with the Lebanese Navy to monitor potential security threats along the Lebanese coastline. The MTF provides information to the Lebanese Navy, on the basis of which the latter takes action against suspicious activities and potential threats. A number of Hezbollah's weapon consignments were seized by the UNIFIL. Later, with continuing weapons smuggling, Israel imposed a sea blockade on Lebanon thereby affecting the bilateral trade and commerce between the two countries. The presence of the MTF and its cooperation with the Lebanese Navy significantly improved the situation and later, in September 2006 Israel lifted the sea blockade on Lebanon.³⁵

Restoring Lebanese sovereignty in the South is important for restoration of peace and stability in the region. Despite all the efforts and mandates by the UN, the UNIFIL has not been able to achieve any significant progress on this front. Though the peacekeeping force has contributed to reducing tension in South Lebanon, complete Lebanese control over the South has still not been achieved. Hezbollah remains the most critical factor in the internal security and stability of the country, and in the absence of a consensus among the key factions in Lebanon, the UNIFIL faces challenges to control the situation in the region.

CHALLENGES BEFORE UNIFIL

Continuing violence between Israel and Hezbollah

Regulating the indiscriminate use of force has been a key challenge for the UNIFIL. Despite the presence of the UNIFIL, Hezbollah and Israel have continued to engage militarily. Violence has continued in the area disregarding all the international norms, rules and condemnations. Several escalations have taken place between Israel and Hezbollah despite the deployment of the UNIFIL. For Israel, its national security is paramount and rocket attacks and infiltrations from South Lebanon is a red line. Israel has not hesitated to use its military force, sometimes disproportionately, against the Palestinian terrorist elements and Hezbollah upon provocation, regardless of the presence of the UNIFIL. Such acts are not only embarrassing for the UNIFIL but also often challenges the very capability and effectiveness of its more than four decades of presence in the area.

Disarming Hezbollah

Hezbollah has emerged as the key element of instability in the region, and thus, a strong challenge to the smooth operations as well as the safety

and security of the UNIFIL personnel deployed along the Blue Line. Besides being a strong military power, Hezbollah's growing political power in Lebanon has also been the main strength of its legitimate power and authority in the country. Even when out of power in Lebanon, it has the capability to flout the orders of the Lebanese government and launch military attacks on Israel, often derailing the political understanding between the two countries. Further, Iran's continuous support for Hezbollah makes it militarily stronger and politically even more a legitimate force in Lebanon.

Initially, resistance against Israeli occupation and solidarity with the Palestinian cause was their primary objective. Hezbollah's role in Lebanese politics has increased substantially during last four decades. The emergence of Hezbollah as a key factor in Lebanese politics has further complicated the already tense internal political situation, relationship among different religious and ethnic groups in the country and as well as the security situation in the South. Hezbollah's relationship with the central authorities in Beirut has always remained controversial and highly contested. Its gradual rise to power from a resistance movement to a mainstream political party sharing power in Beirut has had severe implications on the political situation in the region as well as the security situation along the Blue Line.

Therefore, disarming Hezbollah remains the most important challenge for UNIFIL. The UNSC resolutions on Lebanon have always appealed for disarming Hezbollah. However, despite all the efforts made by the international community and the UN, Hezbollah remains armed and powerful. The UNIFIL forces have also been attacked in the past by Hezbollah forces. Therefore, it is important for UNIFIL that Hezbollah is disarmed, though in the present circumstances it seems an impracticable and unrealistic proposition given the political influence and military power it has at its disposal.

Instability in Lebanon

To further add to the woes of the UNIFIL, Lebanon has witnessed continuous political instability and the central authority in Beirut has remained weak and inefficient. Since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, politics in Lebanon has remained divided. The Beirut blasts had a deep impact on Lebanese politics and there have been frequent changes in the leadership of the country as no prime minister has been able to gather support of the people and the political parties to stay

in power. The political crisis has been intensified by recurring protests by the people over issues like economy, security, unemployment, inflation, etc. Continuing political instability has left the central leadership weak and ineffective to check the activities of the non-state actors operating out of the country. This poses a difficult challenge for the UNIFIL to operate in the area as well as to forge a future roadmap towards establishing long-term peace along the Blue Line.

Lack of Cooperation from the Parties Concerned

For the establishment of peace, it is important that all the parties to the conflict cooperate with the UNIFIL forces on the ground. But the UNIFIL has not received the desired level of cooperation from any of the parties, mainly because of the differing perceptions of the parties towards the UNIFIL and varying interests with regard to the presence of the international peacekeeping forces in the region. This remains as one of the key challenges for the UNIFIL. Further, the recurring violence along the Blue Line has led to complex political negotiations and bargaining among the key players. Though the UNIFIL is in constant interaction with all the major stakeholders in the region offering to provide all possible help, it has also become a victim to the complex and competitive regional geopolitics. The fragile security environment and continuing violence has drawn the attention of the international community. Regional and international powers have been also involved in the conflict. In such circumstances, the UNIFIL has not been able to achieve its desired objectives.

Dilemma Over Use of Force

It is often argued that a good peacekeeping force need not use strong military force in order to achieve its objectives. But, the parties involved in the conflict have remained obstinate in their respective positions and have used force disproportionately. In such circumstances, the UNIFIL was mandated to use force in its self-defence. Even today the dilemma over use of force remains a challenge for the peacekeeping forces along the Blue Line. Often, the failure of the peacekeeping forces to take action against the aggressive approach taken by the armed elements on the ground has been interpreted as a weakness of the UNIFIL.³⁶ Though the UNIFIL has the mandate to use force in self-defence, it has often been constrained by the existing political realities.³⁷

CONCLUSION

After four decades of continuous deployment along the Blue Line, the UNIFIL has got mixed achievements to its credit. It has been operating in an environment of incessant armed conflicts and hostilities between different parties, both state security forces and non-state armed groups. The UNIFIL has engaged and interacted with all of them with the objective of establishing peace in the region. Engaging in a different and difficult terrain, and operating with multinational forces, the UNIFIL has been successful to a large extent. The UNIFIL, undoubtedly, has its own limitations, which are both political and military in nature, however despite that, it has been a stabilising factor in the restive region amid the frequent Israel–Lebanon–Hezbollah clashes. But the key question is that for how long the peacekeeping force can remain deployed in one of the most sensitive conflict zones in the world. Its mandate is renewed every year and withdrawal of the force is not discussed or deliberated by the UN or the international community. The UNSC Resolution 2433 of 2018 has proposed to give more responsibility to the Lebanese armed and naval forces. As the situation stands today, withdrawing the UNIFIL forces from South Lebanon would derail the relative calm that has been achieved till now. Given the accumulated political and military power of Hezbollah, Israeli sensitivities towards its national security and a weakened central authority in Lebanon resulting in a spiralling political and economic crisis, it seems like the peacekeeping operation is slated for continued deployment in the foreseeable future.

One of the key efforts of the UNIFIL has been to create trust and understanding among the principal actors. Given the unending cycle of conflict and intensity of the hostilities, such efforts are difficult to materialise in the short and medium term. Till such time arrives, the presence of the UNIFIL forces plays the role of a buffer, stabilising and harmonising the situation along the Blue Line between Israel–Lebanon–Hezbollah. In the present context, its withdrawal would certainly have a destabilising effect on the situation in the region. Its achievements are manifold but at the same time, the challenges remaining in front of the UNIFIL are even more gigantic.

NOTES

1. See the text of the UNSC Resolution 425 and 426, 19 March 1978, available at <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27->

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