

The UNIFIL Experience in 2009

Timur Goksel

Instructor on Conflict Management
American University of Beirut
Former Official Spokesman and Senior Adviser of
UNIFIL

Because of the international concern it attracts and its highly emotional nature, the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to be the core issue destabilising the Eastern Mediterranean, overshadowing other potentially dangerous unsolved conflicts. One of these is the Israel-Lebanon front, which was the scene of the latest violent Middle East confrontation in 2006.

Despite the parties' warlike rhetoric, apparently intended mainly for their domestic audiences, this Eastern Mediterranean front has been relatively calm ever since, thanks to the conflict management efforts of the United Nations working through its long-time peacekeeping force in the area, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which received a strong boost from Europe following the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war. No doubt the potential for an even more violent confrontation that could destabilise the Eastern Mediterranean and affect Europe has led to unprecedented efforts, mainly by Mediterranean countries, to contribute to management of the conflict. Spain, which now commands UNIFIL, has a large infantry unit and makes occasional contributions to the first-ever UN Maritime Task Force. Italy, which has had a small helicopter wing with UNIFIL for many years, now has a sizable infantry presence, as well as naval units. France has contributed a strong ground force and occasional naval units. Turkey and Greece participate in the naval force.

As much as their physical presence, the political interest shown by these Mediterranean countries, the frequent troop visits made by top politicians and

officials, and their contacts with the parties to the conflict have given UNIFIL more political clout than it has enjoyed since its inception in 1978. Belligerents in the conflict, mainly Israel and Hezbollah, are very much aware of European concern and are wary of antagonising these countries, let alone harming their peacekeepers. As long as this European engagement continues, it is highly unlikely that any one side will initiate a major conflict that could quickly escalate into a regional war. Nevertheless, the persistence of several unresolved issues means the cessation of hostilities agreed to in 2006 remains fragile and that no consequential steps have been taken to achieve a permanent ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon. The only forum for contact between the two countries is the tripartite meetings of the UNIFIL Force Commander with senior representatives of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Israel Defense Forces (IDF), in which key security and operational issues, as well as UNIFIL's investigation of serious incidents, are discussed. The positive experience of these meetings could lead to an arrangement along the lines of the now defunct Israel-Lebanon Mixed Armistice Commission. This liaison and communication work is one of the unheralded essential services that UNIFIL has provided from the moment it was created to ease the conflict and stymie its escalation. A typical example can be found in 2009, when Israel launched a widely publicised and exaggeratedly reported home-front exercise, which certain parties in Lebanon saw as a prelude to a military operation against their country. UNIFIL maintained close contacts with the IDF, understood this was basically a long-programmed civil defence exercise and was able to ease the apprehension in Lebanon. As on many prior occasions since 1978, UNIFIL's liaison arrangements with the parties helped to prevent misunderstandings that could have led to a rise in tension.

Today UNIFIL has about 12,500 troops of all ranks out of an authorised strength of 15,000. Long-serving Polish logistics troops have been replaced by a logistics company from Denmark. In August, Italy handed over the command of the Maritime Task Force to Germany.

There has been occasional criticism with regard to whether UNIFIL's strength should be kept at this high level, as the force is not initiating security operations by itself and limits its activities to supporting the LAF, which has about 5,000 troops in South Lebanon. Such questions, while legitimate given the high costs and the need for peacekeepers at other trouble spots around the globe, ignore what has been achieved on this volatile front. This is the first time a Lebanese army force of this size has been deployed in South Lebanon since the early 1970s. The region had been beyond the control of the Lebanese state and had become a violent battleground between Lebanese and Palestinian armed groups on one side and Israel on the other, as well as internally between different Lebanese and Palestinian factions. Though still frail, short of manpower, and inadequately trained and equipped, the LAF, which was recently transformed into a volunteer force, is overloaded with domestic security duties, mainly to cope with the heavily armed militia groups found in most parts of the country. UNIFIL's presence and its unstinting support of the LAF is essential to further boosting the state's control of security.

South Lebanon saw a perceptible increase in tension at the beginning of 2009 with the Gaza crisis. Despite the presence of some 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and a multitude of armed Palestinian factions, escalation on the Lebanese front was averted with considerable effort by the LAF and UNIFIL. In the first quarter of 2009, rockets were fired three times from Lebanon, each time in salvos of two to three rounds, causing minor injuries to four civilians in Israel. The LAF/UNIFIL also found and disarmed other rockets ready to be fired. The IDF responded each time with brief artillery responses to the origin of the rockets, without causing casualties or damage. Although no group claimed responsibility for any of these rocket attacks, it was strongly believed that they were the work of small factions, possibly including jihadist groups, to demonstrate support for their brethren in occupied Palestine. The only exception was the firing of two long-range Katyusha rockets from close proximity to the village of Al Qulaylah, south of Tyre. Prior to that attack,

none of the rockets had come from built-up areas and none had reached the northern Israeli town of Nahariyah. This was the only time there was suspicion of local collusion, as no Lebanese or Palestinian faction would have dared to invite IDF retaliation on a Lebanese village. This retaliation came in the form of 12 artillery rounds but did not cause any Lebanese casualties.

The relative calm that has prevailed in South Lebanon and the daily increasing presence and influence of the long-absent state do not, however, mean that the state or its arm are fully in charge. This situation at times affects UNIFIL operations, as well. There have been several cases of either Hezbollah members or the local population, which is highly supportive of the party, impeding LAF/UNIFIL investigations of security incidents.

The relative calm that has prevailed in South Lebanon and the daily increasing presence and influence of the long-absent state do not mean that the state or its arm are fully in charge

Incidents and violations involving the IDF likewise continue. There are daily violations of the Lebanese airspace by Israeli aircraft and drones despite constant protests by UNIFIL. In October, near the village of Houla, an unmanned, underground IDF sensor system that tapped into a Hezbollah communications system was discovered. The IDF has occupied the northern part of the village of Ghajar since 2006 in an embarrassing and pointless act of defiance of Security Council Resolution 1701. In June 2008, UNIFIL submitted a proposal to facilitate the withdrawal of IDF troops from Lebanese territory at Ghajar. Both the Lebanese and Israeli governments expressed willingness to discuss the UNIFIL proposal, which would have been a demanding and possibly risky arrangement for the UN peacekeepers. Since then, however, the Israeli side has been stalling its response despite heavy UN and other international pressure, apparently because of domestic political considerations. The result has been a serious blow to UNIFIL's credibility. Further prolongation of an Israeli withdrawal could have dangerous consequences.

In 2009, LAF/UNIFIL and several international organisations continued with the essential work of clearing mines and the cluster munitions fired extensively by Israel in the 2006 war, although at a reduced pace due to a shortage of funds. So far, more than 1,000 cluster bomb strike locations have been identified, contaminating areas of some 48 million square metres. Close to 160,000 cluster munitions have been located and cleared, leaving about 12 million square metres to be cleared.

Following a few incidents of accidental breaching of the Blue Line, mainly by farmers and shepherds unaware of where the line is, UNIFIL undertook to visibly mark the line, a task that, incredibly, had been neglected in 2000, when the line was agreed to by both states. Another related essential project is for the LAF to build a road parallel to the Blue Line with UNIFIL engineering support. Completion of this road will provide the LAF and UNIFIL with quicker access and intervention capability along the length of the Blue Line.

Not seen by the public is the work of the Maritime Task Force (MTF). Since October 2006, the MTF has hailed and queried over 28,000 ships. Although operating at a reduced strength of seven to eight vessels, the MTF has inspected over 400 suspicious ships in coordination with the Lebanese navy. The Lebanese navy, while checking ships approaching Lebanese

ports with MTF support, is suffering from a lack of adequate naval units.

In the absence of any meaningful attempt to achieve a permanent ceasefire and resolution of the conflict, UNIFIL's main role is currently to preserve the status quo and serve as a permanent crutch for Lebanon

In the absence of any meaningful attempt to achieve a permanent ceasefire and resolution of the conflict, UNIFIL's main role is currently to preserve the status quo and serve as a permanent crutch for Lebanon. Ways and means must be found, without upsetting the delicate political equations in Lebanon, for the Lebanese state and the LAF to take on more responsibility in governing South Lebanon, winning over its long neglected population and emerging as the sole authority for war and peace. It is a fantasy to expect UNIFIL to solve the conflict between Israel and Lebanon, but it can surely encourage the Lebanese state to become just such an actor in the future.