

Legitimacy of UN Peacekeeping in Southern Lebanon: Expectation from Successful UN Peacekeeping Operations

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The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been deployed in southern Lebanon for 48 years. Despite its consistent and significant contribution to peace in southern Lebanon, the UN Security Council decided to terminate UNIFIL at the end of 2026. The decision of the Council was considered mainly due to the political influence of Israel and the US. Meanwhile, the decision has encouraged research and review of UNIFIL, questioning its effectiveness and whether it has been positively evaluated for its deployment in southern Lebanon for nearly half a century. Therefore, the aim and scope of this article is to discuss the negative and positive aspects of UNIFIL, considering both visible and invisible effectiveness of the operations, and then assess the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of UNIFIL's capability as a UN peacekeeper. The decision to withdrawal UNIFIL has had a huge impact on academics of UN studies and practitioners of UN peacekeeping operations, since UNIFIL has been one of the major and traditional UN operations. Therefore, one could conclude that the evaluation of UNIFIL would be equivalent to that of UN peacekeeping operations as a whole.

Keywords: *UNIFIL, UN peacekeeping operations, Lebanon, Israel, legitimacy*

Introduction

As generally said, “Lebanon was primarily a victim of other people’s war” (Skogmo 1989, p. 69), the origin of UNIFIL stems from the animosities among many factions in Lebanon. Lebanon in the 1970s had two separate but related conflicts: Israel vs. the PLO, and the Christian militia vs. Muslim factions, which compounded the intractable political situation¹. Moreover, the main three militias in Lebanon; the PLO, the Christian militia and Syrian forces have legitimacy for basing themselves in Lebanon. It was one of the main problems in establishing the mandate of UNIFIL. By the late 1970s when UNIFIL was established, the Lebanese government had already lost its authority to control almost all militias in the state.

The ultimate catalyst for UNIFIL happened when a PLO command raided an Israeli bus near Tel Aviv on 11 March 1978, and in the following shoot-out, 37 were killed and 76 wounded. In retaliation, the Israeli forces invaded Lebanon on the night

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¹As an article written in 1999 mentioned, “Lebanon became a land of death and unimaginable destruction, a country without a government, a fertile ground for the development of militant Shi’ite politics and Iranian influence, a background of Muslims and Christian militias, Israeli and Palestinian forces and a land of hijacking, kidnapping and attacks on Western embassies and personnel” (Nachmias 1999, p. 96).

of 14/15 March, and in a few days occupied the entire region south of the Litani River except for the PLO base of Tyre. In this situation, UNIFIL was established according to Security Council Resolution 425(1978), which, as the mandate, called for:

1. Confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces.
2. Restoring international peace and security.
3. Assisting the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area.

Since its establishment, the evaluations of UNIFIL have varied. However, international criticism of UNIFIL particularly intensified after the breakout of the exchange of fire between Israel and Hamas in October 2023. On 7 October 2023, the initial attack of Hamas led to the death of 1,200 Israeli and foreign nationals. The retaliatory attack by Israel resulted in the killing of 41,000 Palestinians in Gaza. On 8 October, a conflict between Israel and Hezbollah began which led to a prolonged exchange of bombardment and extensive displacement in southern Lebanon where UNIFIL has been deployed.

UNIFIL was incapable of preventing Israeli aggression and had done little to help the Lebanese authorities maintain control over their southern territory and protect the civilian population. This failure raised important questions about the presence of UNIFIL in southern Lebanon. UNIFIL has also been criticized for its incapability of implementing the mandate of disarming the militias in Lebanon, especially, Hezbollah. In particular, the US, Israel's ally, criticized UNIFIL for being both too expensive and ineffective, adding that UN peacekeeping operations on the whole offer little value for money. In June 2025, when the UN General Assembly approved the same budget for UNIFIL as was allocated in 2024, the US cast the dissenting vote (Wood 2025).

As a result, the US and its close ally Israel strongly demanded the withdrawal of UNIFIL from southern Lebanon. Finally, on 28 August 2025, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to terminate UNIFIL at the end of the next year. However, considering the maintenance of security for more than forty years in southern Lebanon, it should be debatable to argue that UN peacekeeping operations should be terminated and withdrawn simply because they failed to prevent major warfare.

This article will provide the historical analysis of UNIFIL, evaluating its negative and positive aspects. Finally, this article will ask a simple question of what one should expect from UN peacekeeping operations in general.

UNIFIL as a Failure? - A Historical Analysis of its Negative Aspects

Failure in Implementing the Mandate of UNIFIL in its Early Stages

UNIFIL failed to implement the mandate satisfactorily in its early years, especially, from 1978 to 1982. Most critics who claim that UNIFIL was a failure point out its poor performance as peacekeepers in its early stages. Each of the three mandates in Resolution 425 (1978) can be discussed regarding implementation.

a) Confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces

The withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from southern Lebanon was to be completed in three phases. Its first withdrawal was completed on April 11, 1978, when the northeastern sector and part of the eastern sector were transferred to UNIFIL. Its second withdrawal was completed from southeast of the Litani River followed in April 1978.

However, when the IDF withdrew from its remaining positions in southern Lebanon as the final phase on June 13, 1978, it transferred them to the command of Major Saad Haddad of the Christian militias, which were called the De Facto Forces (DFF). The areas occupied by the DFF were 30% of the whole area in which UNIFIL was expected to operate. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in March 1978 was aimed at establishing a 10-kilometer zone along the border. Therefore, Israel succeeded in the de facto establishment of the “security belt” in southern Lebanon by turning the area over to its subordinate militia. Israel’s security belt was to play a major part in preventing UNIFIL from carrying out its mandate fully in later years (Erskine 1989). UNIFIL managed to establish some positions there as an enclave. However, UNIFIL was not in control of the enclave and faced many problems, including restrictions on its freedom of movement during the next several years (James 1983, p. 620).

b) Restoring international peace and security

UNIFIL was established in southern Lebanon without either the PLO’s or Israel’s full consent. In the early years of operations, UNIFIL faced numerous operational difficulties, especially, harassment from the DFF. According to the report of the Secretary General to the Security Council in January 1979, incidents involving the DFF occurred almost daily at that time. UNIFIL installations had been harassed by firing including mortar fire. The DFF also threatened the inhabitants of the villages with further firing if they did not support them. These actions prompted a number of civilians to leave their homes for safer areas².

Meanwhile, a number of armed elements, especially the Palestinian guerrillas, continued their attempts at infiltration into the UNIFIL area of operation. During the period from June to December 1979, 110 infiltration attempts, involving 785 armed persons, were recorded by UNIFIL. In August 1979, Nigerian and Fijian patrols were ambushed by armed elements, resulting in the deaths of three Fijian soldiers. A Senegalese soldier was fired upon and wounded while on checkpoint duty in October 1979. Furthermore, there were frequent exchanges of fire across the UNIFIL area involving the DFF in the enclave. On a number of occasions, IDF personnel joined the DFF in the firing³.

The highly tense and volatile situation in the local area also caused UN casualties. The Secretary General reported to the Security Council on 10 June 1982 that since UNIFIL was established, 75 members of the Forces had died, 34 of them as a result

²UN Document S/13026, 12 January 1979, paras. 27-28.

³UN Document S/13691, 14 December 1979, paras. 36-37.

of firing and mine explosions, 31 in accidents, and 10 from natural causes, and that some 115 had been wounded in armed clashes, shelling and mine explosions (Skogmo 1989, p. 59).

- c) Assisting the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area

This mandate was essentially difficult to implement due to the fact that the Lebanese state had not enjoyed sovereign rights over entire country since the late 1960s. A first step to implement this mandate was to re-establish some symbols of civilian authority in the UNIFIL area. This was achieved during June and July 1978 through the stationing of a civilian administrator in Tyre and approximately 100 gendarmes based at five different stations. The gendarmes gradually assumed some of the regular police functions in the area (Skogmo 1989, p. 63). A second step was the presence of the Lebanese army in southern Lebanon. Despite assurances from Israeli Defence Minister Weizman that the state would not interfere with the move, the advancing Lebanese battalion was bombarded by the DFF and was prevented from advancing any further when it reached the town of Kawkaba in the northwestern sector of the UNIFIL area in July 1978 (Kawkaba incident) (Weinburger 1983, p. 353).

Despite intense shelling by the DFF as hostile measures, a Lebanese army battalion of 500 men was deployed in the UNIFIL area in April 1979, and in June 1981, a second Lebanese battalion was brought to the operational area, which raised the total strength of the Lebanese army presence in southern Lebanon to 1,350 of all ranks. However, this achievement by the Lebanese government was insufficient to restore its authority over the local factions based in Lebanon, such as the PLO, the DFF, and over the presence of Syria. The deployment of the Lebanese Army was “little more than a token gesture, either in its own right or as a symbol of the existence of an authoritative government in Beirut.” (James 1983, p. 631).

On the whole, in its early years, UNIFIL could hardly implement its mandate given in Security Council Resolution 425 (1978). In his report on UNIFIL to the Security Council, the Secretary General Kurt Waldheim on 13 September 1978 accepted that “the present situation ... is unacceptable”⁴, or “... little further progress (in UNIFIL operation) has been achieved so far”⁵, and he continued making almost the same comments in his reports in the sequel.

Meanwhile, the general role of UN peacekeeping is to observe the peaceful situation after the parties concerned reach a suitable ceasefire. However, the role of UNIFIL was to observe the withdrawal of the military force of one state concerned without reaching any satisfactory ceasefire. Furthermore, one party (Israel) supplied its substitute force (DFF) upon its withdrawal. Therefore, UNIFIL was not able to win the confidence-building measures among the parties concerned, and obtain local consent. It would be the main reason why UNIFIL failed to implement the mandate in its early stages. The hasty establishment of UNIFIL by the UN Security Council without the basic principles of UN peacekeeping operations was due to a

⁴UN Document S/12845, 13 September 1978, para. 60.

⁵UN Document S/13384, 8 June 1979, para. 20.

lack of political will by the international community led by great powers. As a result, the operational failure of UNIFIL in its early stages was inevitable. It was rather a political failure.

Failure in Preventing Israeli Invasions of Lebanon?

One can witness Israeli invasions or large-scale of military offensives against southern Lebanon several times even after the establishment of UNIFIL in 1978. First, in June 1982, the IDF conducted a large military offensive, crossing the border of Lebanon to attack the military base of the PLO in eastern Beirut. It is called *Operation Peace for Galilee*. It aimed to prevent the rocket missiles from the PLO targeting northern Israel by demolishing the fortress of the PLO and establishing a safe zone. The invasion was a human tragedy, with some 18,000 people killed and about 30,000 injured (Nachmias 1999, p. 98). By 8 June 1982, UNIFIL became the first UN mission operating in a country occupied by a foreign army (Sitkowski 2006, p. 58). However, under the circumstances, UNIFIL had little choice but to stand back. In fact, not a single statement could be heard in the Security Council criticizing the order not to take active military measures against the Israelis as they pushed through UNIFIL lines.

In July 1993, Israel launched *Operation Accountability* against Hezbollah, resulting in the displacement of 300,000 civilians. Then the IDF again shelled the Hezbollah's position in southern Lebanon for three weeks in retaliation for the latter's rocket attacks on northern Israel (*Operation Grapes of Wrath*) in April 1996. Thousands of Lebanese left their homes. On 18 April, the IDF shelled UNIFIL's base at Qana, killing more than 100 civilians seeking shelter there ("Qana massacre") ((Nachmias 1999, p. 105).

In July 2006, the IDF launched large-scale air strikes on southern Lebanon, demolishing 30 public facilities including roads and bridges. The Israeli government announced that the state's military offensives and the subsequent ground battles against Lebanon were caused by the abduction of three Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah. The response of the UN to the newly emerged security crisis was to strengthen the size and capability of UNIFIL. In accordance with Security Council Resolution 1701(2006), the total strength of UNIFIL significantly increased from about 2,000 to 15,000.

Finally, in October 2023, Hezbollah fired rockets at Israeli garrisons, proclaiming solidarity with the Palestinian people, after Israel began its assault in Gaza. On 13 October 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu called on the UN Secretary General to move the UNIFIL soldiers out of "harm's way" since he claimed UNIFIL had become "human shields" for Hezbollah. UNIFIL did not comply with the order, reaffirming their support for the mission. As a result, some UNIFIL troops were injured and damaged by the subsequent Israeli attacks on Hezbollah. UNIFIL's presence did not prevent Israel from pressing its advantage. For another two months, Israel continued to demolish Hezbollah and the community (Wood 2025).

On the whole, some academics and political figures did not regard the UNIFIL deployment in southern Lebanon as a successful case. They claimed that UNIFIL was not helpful as rocket fire from Palestinian camps rained over the heads of peacekeepers into Israel, followed by Israeli retaliatory raids (Diehl 2008, p. 124).

However, one should consider several arguments which have different or

opposing views to the above critics. First, the above cases raise one the question of the effectiveness of UNIFIL. On the one hand, the role of peacekeeping operations is “to keep the peace”. On the other hand, in the post-Cold War period, a more coercive peace operation, so-called “peace enforcement”, was innovated with the use of more robust force. However, UNIFIL maintained the status of traditional peacekeeping with the use of minimum force. Furthermore, peace enforcement had been adopted for internal conflicts, mainly, in Africa. Peace enforcement for inter-state conflicts in the Middle East, which include states with significant military powers, would intensify the conflicts, resulting in more humanitarian casualties in the region.

Second, the security issue of the Middle East involving Israel has been superpower-related, and if Israel made a decisive decision including launching major warfare, it would no longer be an issue which only local UN peacekeeping operations should be involved in. It would be beyond the control of UNIFIL. The missions of UNIFIL as a protector of security would focus on the areas of the Blue Line where UNIFIL would be in charge of minor incidents, which would play a role in preventing them from escalating into major incidents.

Third, currently, warfare that would result in major human tragedies has been seriously criticized by the international community as a breach of international laws. In fact, arrest warrants have been issued for several heads of state, even from major powers or permanent members of the UN Security Council, by the International Criminal Court (ICC)⁶. There should be a clear division of labor in the resolution of international conflicts according to the intensity of conflicts.

Inability to Disarm Hezbollah?

Many political figures in the international community criticized UNIFIL for its inability to disarm Hezbollah. For example, according to Sarit Zehavi, an ex-IDF officer and the founder of a research institute on Israeli security issues, UNIFIL was detrimental to the mission of disarming Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. He continued that UNIFIL’s mandate allowed it to patrol freely in open areas to search for weapons caches, but it had done nearly nothing to confiscate these weapons or eliminate Hezbollah’s military infrastructure (Helou et al. 2025). The US government has provided similar comments on this issue.

However, disarming Hezbollah and other militias in Lebanon is an international issue which the international community should tackle for the maintenance of peace in the Middle East. One should not regard it as merely an issue of UN peacekeeping operations.

In fact, a total of five international agreements and resolutions have been provided concerning the disarmament of Hezbollah. The first one is the Ta’if Agreement in 1989. This agreement was negotiated in Ta’if, Saudi Arabia, designed to end the civil war in Lebanon and demanded the disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. However, Hezbollah was allowed to stay armed in its capacity as a resistance force rather than a militia for fighting Israel in southern Lebanon (Norton 2018, p. 71). In fact, in the early 1990s, most Lebanese militias were disarmed, except Hezbollah.

⁶In fact, the arrest warrant was issued to the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by the ICC on 21 November 2024 as a war criminal and a criminal of human tragedies in Gaza since 2023.

Chen Kertcher argued that, in the 1990s, the UN Secretariat focused only on the strategic goal of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in the UNIFIL areas. Therefore, it negatively affected Lebanon's sovereignty, resulting in Syrian military dominance and the increase in Hezbollah activity in Lebanon (Kertcher 2025).

In 2004 and 2006, UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1680 were authorized. They were the second and third international agreements or resolutions concerning this issue. They called upon all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon, and also called for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias.

The 2006 war led to the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006), which was the fourth international agreement or resolution concerning this issue. The Resolution restricted Hezbollah's presence south of the Litani River and asserted the authority of the Lebanese army in South Lebanon. This resolution also asserted that there shall be no weapons in Lebanon without the consent of the Government of Lebanon.

The fifth international agreement or resolution concerning Hezbollah's disarmament was the Baabda Declaration in 2012. It was issued by the National Dialogue Committee on 11 June 2012. The agreement essentially demanded distancing Lebanon from the Syrian conflict across the borders in order to avoid the negative spillover of such tensions into the country. In addition, the agreement enforced and respected the Ta'if Agreement and Resolution 1701 (Naoum 2014, pp. 86–88).

On the whole, there are multiple legal frameworks for the disarmament of Hezbollah. However, in reality, the disarmament would be difficult. There are several reasons for it. First, Hezbollah has its status not only as a military but also as a political organization in Lebanon. Currently, Hezbollah has 13 seats in the state's 128-member Parliament. Hezbollah and its allies, including Amal and the Christian community, have nearly 60 seats in the parliament. It means that about half of a parliamentary figures have opposed the disarmament of Hezbollah.

Second, Hezbollah has won strong support from Shiite Muslim people in southern Lebanon. In fact, Hezbollah's social and humanitarian contributions to the south Lebanese community have played a significant role in gaining support in the state. For example, Hezbollah spent \$300 million on its construction sector to repair damaged or destroyed homes after the 2006 war. Hezbollah has contributed to all levels of Lebanon's educational system, as well as its youth camps and religious programs (Ishizuka 2020, p. 19).

The third reason is the immaturity of the military capability of the Lebanese Armed Force (LAF) and the virtual approval of the deployment of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. From the viewpoint of UNIFIL, it is a traditional type of peacekeeping with the minimum use of force and therefore does not, essentially, possess the coercive measure of disarming Hezbollah.

In his official report to the Security Council on the situation of UNIFIL in July 2019, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres accepted that maintenance of arms by Hezbollah is outside the control of the state of Lebanon⁷. It is also outside the control of UNIFIL.

⁷UN Document S/2019/574 *Implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) during the period from 18 February to 24 June 2019, Report of the Secretary General*, 17 July 2019, para. 30.

UNIFIL Has Worked: The Positive Aspects of UNIFIL

Enhanced Effectiveness of UNIFIL in the Operational Areas

Major General Apurba Bardalai, retired from the Indian Army, conducted extensive research on the effectiveness of UNIFIL as a peacekeeping operation. In his article “United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon: Assessment and Way Forward,” he conducted extensive interviews and questionnaires with former military peacekeepers of officer ranks serving in UNIFIL. In the interview, a former senior French General and Chief of Staff at UNIFIL HQ stated that the absence of war is due to the enhanced efficacy of UNIFIL. Others attribute the current stability to the role of UNIFIL and its rapid response to crises. In the book, 41 UNIFIL officers answering the questionnaires indicated that there have been occasional incidents with the potential to trigger major conflicts since 2006. They agreed that the presence of UNIFIL prevented the escalation of violence. Furthermore, a majority of 29 respondents among them indicated the view that UNIFIL had been able to take effective control of such incidents in time. It is an invisible effect⁸.

Bardalai argued that preventing another war which could result from possible changes in the bilateral relationship between Israel and Iran will be beyond the control of UNIFIL. At the same time, he continued that preventing a conflict from recurring because of minor incidents near the Blue Line (BL)⁹ should be within the reach of UNIFIL. Such minor incidents include: BL violations because of accidental or deliberate land crossings, the firing of a rocket by armed elements from southern Lebanon into Israel, hunting by local Lebanese near the BL provoking IDF soldiers on duty, smuggling of arms and other arsenals into southern Lebanon, an attack on IDF posts near the BL by Hezbollah operatives, protests by Lebanese near the BL against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, throwing stones at IDF soldiers, and provocative actions by either side near disputed areas (Bardalai 2022, pp. 121–127). As Vanessa Newby pointed out, these minor issues result in significant risks to the region since “they are sparks that can light the fire of a larger existential conflict” (Newby 2018, p. 81). In other words, the lower frequency of trivial or minor issues indicates the effectiveness of the operations of UNIFIL as an invisible effect. The frequency of throwing stones, the pointing of weapons by the IDF and LAF, and the incidents of firing rockets by Lebanese armed groups, for example, had decreased in the 2010s. This was due to some strict control measures by UNIFIL (Bardalai 2022, pp. 130–131).

Lise Howard, in her book *Power in Peacekeeping*, supports the arguments of Bardalai and Newby. She concluded in the book that UNIFIL has been effective for the following reasons. First, the situation in southern Lebanon would be even worse without UNIFIL. In fact, UNIFIL has prevented accidental outbreaks of armed confrontation from escalating into war. Second, violence in southern Lebanon has

⁸Major General Apurba Bardalai, “United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon: Assessment and Way Forward,” p. 166.

⁹The term “Blue Line” refers to the semi-defined border between Israel and Lebanon. It was published by the UN on 7 June 2000 for the purpose of determining whether Israel had fully withdrawn from Lebanon.

arisen in areas where UNIFIL is not deployed, when there are changes in troop rotations, and/or when UNIFIL is low numbers. Therefore, UNIFIL has created a predictable security environment that has helped to create peace for local citizens. Third, UNIFIL has been deployed in southern Lebanon largely because the government of Lebanon does not appear capable of assuming responsibility from UNIFIL. Therefore, UNIFIL has been contributing to relative stability for the political, security, and economic aspects in southern Lebanon. For the above reasons, Howard argued that UNIFIL has proven effective at reducing violence and restoring peace and security in areas where it is deployed (Howard 2019, pp. 100–108).

UNIFIL has also been contributing to normality as well as stability in the society of southern Lebanon. In fact, resistance is necessary for political and security reasons in the minds of the people in southern Lebanon. Normality might be the opposite conception to resistance, although the people in southern Lebanon are striving for both simultaneously. The normal life in southern Lebanon can be created by “everyday peace” with routinized practices used by individuals living there. Episodic violence, trivial fighting and resistance have been frequently identified in the BL, and normality in the minds of the people in southern Lebanon has been disrupted by such events. However, since the frequency of the events has been reduced by the operations of UNIFIL personnel, and normality has been increasingly brought to southern Lebanon, one can conclude that UNIFIL has been effective. While the UNIFIL operation is unable to influence political actors to generate a peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict, it has created conditions conducive to normality (Newby 2018, p. 172). Newby argued that by getting to have a normal life for a protracted period, the local community will gradually lose interest in war and will be more difficult to mobilize in support of war. Therefore, the normalization of peace in everyday life will change normative ideas about the value of war versus a peaceful life (Newby 2018, p. 173).

What are the causal factors of the enhanced effectiveness of UNIFIL as peacekeepers? Virginia Page Fortna gave the key functions for traditional peacekeeping to be effective: i) serve as investigators to document and prevent unwanted escalations and resumptions of war, ii) serve as impartial referees to relay the intentions of parties to the other side, and iii) serve as an interposed physical barrier that can raise the cost of invasive activities (Fortna 2004, pp. 481–519). Zachary Myers and Walter Dorn argued that these functions successfully applied to the three traditional UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East: United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), and UNIFIL. In terms of UNIFIL, as this article stated before, UNIFIL could not prevent the major wars between Israel and the armed groups in Lebanon including Hezbollah. However, Myers and Dorn concluded their article on the UN peacekeeping operations, including UNIFIL as follows:

Certainly, the United Nations could do more to mitigate conflict and promote peace and security, but the current missions (including UNIFIL) have had success. The long-term view shows how war and conflict have not emerged for the majority of the time; the mere presence of these peacekeepers, with their ability to observe, report, inspect, mediate, and investigate, has served as a deterrent to many forms of spontaneous escalation (Myers and Walter 2022, p. 20).

“Perceived security” among people in southern Lebanon by the simple deployment of UNIFIL also has contributed to the total effectiveness of UNIFIL. People said, “I feel that UNIFIL is good to be here. That they give a sense of security” (Behne 2015, pp. 104–105). UNIFIL has been perceived by the Lebanese population as a positive security factor. For example, during the attack in 2006, UNIFIL itself suffered casualties during rescue missions for Lebanese civilians, which gave a basis of trust in UNIFIL among the population. It also recognizes the deterrent effect of the mission (Behne 2015).

Humanitarian Assistance

Essentially, humanitarian activities and personal outreach have been effective in UN peacekeeping. Jan Daniel and Marketa Wittichova conducted extensive research on civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) in UN peacekeeping and counter-insurgency operations. In their research, many interviewed CIMIC officers in their operations in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Afghanistan (International Security Assistance Force: ISAF) or Iraq (War on Terror) said that while many outreach projects serve humanitarian and development purposes, they are closely aligned with military priorities and contribute to achieving the goals of the operation. It means that such activities serve to enhance the effectiveness of military operations by engaging in a more people-oriented military practice (Daniel and Wittichova 2020, p. 608). Whether in peacekeeping or counter-insurgency operations, humanitarian actions are now considered standard army actions (Duran and Bueno 2024, p. 509).

As far as UNIFIL is concerned, it has traditionally provided humanitarian assistance to the local population in the area of operations. In fact, humanitarian missions have been consistently requested and demanded since the early periods of UNIFIL. According to Skogmo, the humanitarian tasks became even more important in the period between the second Israeli invasion on 6 June 1982 and the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in February-June 1985, when UNIFIL could do very little to implement any of the three parts¹⁰ of the original mandate. In this situation, it became essential to give UNIFIL meaningful tasks, both to justify its continued presence and to keep up the morale of UNIFIL’s troops (Skogmo 1989, p. 91). In the mid-1980s, UNIFIL cooperated with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in extending assistance to the local people. Humanitarian assistance was extended to refugees as well as local populations in Lebanon. For example, in 1985, a number of Christian refugees sought safety in UNIFIL, where they received shelter, food, and other provisions. The confidence-building value of these tasks became an important asset for UNIFIL (Skogmo 1989, p. 94).

¹⁰As mentioned in this article, the three parts of UNIFIL’s original mandates in Security Council Resolution 425 (1978) are: 1) to confirm an immediate Israeli cease-fire and withdrawal from Lebanese territory, 2) to restore international peace and security; and 3) to ensure the restoration of Lebanese governmental authority and its territorial integrity etc.

In the late 1990s, the advent of the norm of “protection of civilians”¹¹ in armed conflicts was broadly advocated in the international community. The newly advocated norm promoted the legitimacy of humanitarian assistance in UN peacekeeping operations. In fact, many troop-contributing states to UNIFIL have also valued a humanitarian aspect in their mission in UNIFIL.

It is to be noted that compared to original Resolution 425 (1978), Resolution 1701 for new UNIFIL (2006) has a mandate adding the humanitarian tasks, “extending its assistance to help ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations and the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons”¹².

Among the troop-contributing states, Ireland has a consistent and positive policy towards humanitarian assistance in UNIFIL. Despite the constraint of their location between the IDF and the South Lebanese Army (SLA) and the Islamic Resistance emerging from the north, Irish battalions maintained offering humanitarian aid to the local people. McDonald cites the example of the 64th battalion, which suffered the biggest number of casualties in Lebanon but provided various forms of humanitarian assistance: donating \$1,700 to buy diesel oil for the Tibnin hospital; setting up medical clinics in Ayta Az-Zutt, Brashit, and Tulin; buying glass for a damaged mosque in Quabrika, etc (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs 2013, p. 17). In 2008, at the International Conference for Support to Lebanon, the Irish Minister for Education Affairs, Noel Treacy, announced that the Irish contribution would reach 5 million Euros in bilateral humanitarian and recovery assistance in the aftermath of the 2006 war, which displaced over one million people, and caused large-scale destruction (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs 2013, p. 18).

During the author’s interviews at the Irish Headquarters in UNIFIL in August 2019, a number of Irish soldiers and officers referred to humanitarian missions as a core task in Lebanon. One officer stated that UNIFIL has been evolving its peacekeeping missions since his first deployment in the 1990s. When he was first deployed in the 1990s, UNIFIL was regarded as a purely operational mission that supervised peace in the BL between Israel and Lebanon. Currently, the officer stated that the first priority is to support local people, the second is to train the Lebanese Armed Forces, and the third priority is the operational mission. His statement might be rather exaggerated, although he implied that the evolution of UN operations means the enhancement of local peace and more focus on humanitarian activities¹³.

According to Vanessa Newby, most battalions in UNIFIL provide some form of medical and dental care for the local population living in their areas. Some have a hospital that local residents can visit twenty-four hours a day, and all medical services and medication provided by the battalion are free. In addition, many battalions also operate an outreach service whereby they visit the villages in their area on a rolling basis and set up a medical center to provide care locally (Newby

¹¹In February 1999, the first debate on the protection of civilians was held in the UN Security Council, which adopted a presidential statement expressing grave concern over the civilian toll of conflict casualties. Then the UN Secretary-General was requested by the Security Council to submit annual reports with recommendations on how it could improve both the physical and legal protection of civilians in situations of armed conflicts.

¹²UN Document S/RES/1701 (2006), 11 August 2006, para. 11.

¹³Interview with an Irish officer, Irish Battalion Headquarters, UNIFIL, 26 August 2019.

2018, p. 142). The Spanish and Indian contingents in UNIFIL uniquely offer veterinary care in Sector East. This service appears more popular than the medical services. Local shepherds said that the veterinary service is an incredible advantage in Lebanon, where there are few veterinarians, who charge high fees for their services. Newby described that the veterinary service by UNIFIL helps to improve the economic environment of the region, as it enables farmers to continue to function and produce goods for sale on the market (Newby 2018, p. 143).

After the 2006 war, UNIFIL innovated the new humanitarian project, the so-called “Quick Impact Project (QIP).” QIPs are funded by UNIFIL headquarters with a total annual budget of US\$500,000. Each battalion in UNIFIL is allowed to submit a proposal for spending the fund in order to meet local needs with a maximum of US\$25,000 for each project. The projects vary, from providing solar system lights to teaching computer skills or yoga (Newby 2018, pp. 145–146)¹⁴.

For example, Spain has attached great importance to QIPs. 53.8% of the Spanish troops interviewed in 2015 answered that they had engaged in humanitarian assistance in Lebanon. Between 2006 and 2016, Spain carried out a total of 645 QIPs, serving 54 villages and towns and a total population of 99,000. The social activities there included ones related to gender equality, children, and women, and ones in the field of cultural relations involving teaching the Spanish language to about 5,500 students in 10 years (Duran and Bueno 2024, p. 508).

One can also identify the research result from the National Defence University of Malaysia that there is a positive relationship between economic activities and local acceptance in UN peacekeeping operations. In other words, the results of the questionnaires to about 500 Lebanese citizens indicated that respondents, who enjoyed enhanced economic activities provided by the Malaysian peacekeepers, including QIPs, tend to enhance accepting their presence as the UN operation in southern Lebanon (Nordin et al. 2022).

The QIPs positively affected the economy of UNIFIL’s area of operations and led to economic growth. Most of the developmental projects were executed by Lebanese labor, which contributed to local employment. All the projects facilitated life by providing better roads for transportation, training farmers and ranchers to increase productivity, and improving the quality of education. Above all, it is estimated that UNIFIL annually contributes with approximately US\$ 40 million to the Lebanese economy (Saad 2021, pp. 17–18).

According to the Secretary-General’s report, from 21 October 2024 to 20 February 2025, UNIFIL coordinated 1,578 civilian or humanitarian activities, including the transportation of medical supplies, the notification of funerals, the repair of civilian infrastructure, the movement of civilian rescue and recovery operations, as well as the clearance of roads. During this period, UNIFIL approved 11 QIPs, 8 of which were in support of crisis response efforts, including support for the Lebanese Red Cross in Tyre and the provision of food parcels, blankets, hygiene kits and winter clothing¹⁵.

¹⁴For example, Taekwondo instruction was provided by the South Korean component, and Tai Chi tuition was provided by the Chinese contingent.

¹⁵UN Document S/2025/153, 12 March 2025, paras. 29-30.

Assistance of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)

As mentioned before, Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) was adopted following the heavy airstrikes by the IDF against Hezbollah and the citizens of southern Lebanon. The mandate required UNIFIL to assist the LAF in taking steps towards the establishment of the areas¹⁶. For example, UNIFIL has been expected to help the LAF disarm non-state actors in southern Lebanon, chiefly Hezbollah, and monitor ceasefire violations. The mandate would be necessary and appropriate due to the inevitable dependence of the Lebanese government on Hezbollah instead of the LAF in maintaining the security of southern Lebanon. It means that the LAF needs to enhance its military capability and ability to assert its authority and defend the security of the state on its own. At the time of writing, a total of 8,985 personnel of the LAF are deployed in the area south of the Litani River in southern Lebanon.

UNIFIL assists the LAF in building the latter's capability in two main ways: by supporting financial donations among the contributing states to UNIFIL and other states to improve its military equipment, and by helping make improvements at the operational level. More needs to be done in terms of financial support. There is a shortage of basic materials, fuel, and money to pay the LAF soldiers. In reality, the LAF soldiers have to do other jobs simultaneously to finance themselves, which means that many soldiers only work part-time (Behne 2025, p. 90).

Meanwhile, relations between UNIFIL and the LAF are good in terms of operational activities, according to interviews with the military officers of troop-contributing states (Bardalai 2022, p. 168). In the area of operations, the LAF and UNIFIL conduct daily joint patrols to prevent violations of the BL and to search for unexploded ordnance and unauthorized weapons. When some Lebanese violate the BL during joint patrols, UNIFIL plays the role of observers, and the LAF plays a key role in deciding what measures should be taken regarding Lebanese citizens. When some incidents happen between UNIFIL staff and Lebanese citizens, UNIFIL staff stand back, and the LAF defuses the situation (Newby 2018, p. 127). When unauthorized weapons are identified by UNIFIL, they are removed by the LAF. According to the report of the Secretary General on UNIFIL in November 2025, UNIFIL identified unauthorized weapons on 117 occasions, including 75 unguarded arms caches as well as individuals carrying rifles or pistols on 6 occasions during the reporting period. The LAF was successful in removing 96 percent of the caches referred to them by UNIFIL¹⁷.

UNIFIL also supports the LAF in strengthening diplomatic relations with the IDF. Since the war in 2006, UNIFIL has organized the monthly "tripartite meetings" among representatives of the LAF, IDF, and UNIFIL itself. In fact, UNIFIL has been the only forum through which the LAF and IDF officially meet. The meeting consists of the UNIFIL force commander, 14 senior UNIFIL staff, and 6 or 7 senior officials from the LAF and IDF each. According to the Secretary General's report in 2013:

¹⁶UN Document S/RES/1701 (2006), 11 August 2006, para. 11.

¹⁷UN Document S/2005/738 "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701(2006) during the period from 21 June to 20 October 2025: Report of the Secretary-General", 11 November 2025, para. 25.

These meetings are the most significant stabilizing factor within the framework of resolution 1701(2006), serving to build confidence between the parties and defuse tension in potential flash points, as well as providing a platform through which UNIFIL can facilitate practical arrangements on the ground between the LAF and IDF¹⁸.

Among the tripartite mechanism, a “hotline” was established between the UNIFIL Force Commander and the IDF to report BL violations and any other emergency issues, and a similar mechanism was also established with the LAF in Tyre and in the Defense Ministry headquarters (Novosseloff 2015, p. 773).

The tripartite meetings create several benefits for both sides. They are important as a confidence and mutual understanding mechanism in their daily life. In emergencies, both the LAF and IDF ensure that UNIFIL can keep the parties in communication to avoid a deterioration of relations. The meetings also provide the opportunity for UNIFIL to report the findings of its investigations into incidents on the BL (Newby 2018, pp. 96–97).

Conclusion

On the whole, this article discussed both the negative and positive aspects of UNIFIL. On the negative side, it was clearly pointed out that UNIFIL could not implement its mandate at all, especially, in its early days. UNIFIL failed to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces; to restore international peace and security; and to assist the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area. UNIFIL failed to prevent several Israeli invasions of Lebanon. Furthermore, UNIFIL did not have the ability to disarm Hezbollah. On the positive side, UNIFIL has enhanced its effectiveness in maintaining peace in the area of operations, especially, in the post-2006 period. UNIFIL consistently had remarkable records in the field of humanitarian assistance since its establishment in 1978. Furthermore, UNIFIL has been successful in assisting the LAF which means that UNIFIL even partly implemented its mandate adopted by Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006).

Above all, it can be concluded that UNIFIL has been improving its missions as a “new UNIFIL” or “UNIFIL II” in the post-2006 period. In retrospect, Security Council Resolution 425 (1978) for an “old UNIFIL” or “the first UNIFIL” was so inappropriate and demanding for local security and therefore almost impossible to implement. In those days, there was no peace to keep in southern Lebanon, so UNIFIL as a peacekeeper could not have the minimum conditions to implement the mandate in the area of operations. Meanwhile, after the 2006 war, the new UNIFIL extended its functions and increased its military strength, and gradually enhanced its effectiveness and performance. Eventually, UNIFIL gradually helped calm high tensions in southern Lebanon. UNIFIL has prevented numerous flare-ups from spiraling into war.

Presumably, disarming Hezbollah, which would be included as part of the mandate of UNIFIL, and the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, would

¹⁸UN Document S/2013/381, 26 July 2013, para. 7.

also be beyond the ability and capability of UNIFIL. Hezbollah currently has significant military and political power and influence in Lebanese society. The issue of disarming Hezbollah should continue to be solved within the framework of international law. On this issue, UNIFIL's presence was an imperfect but useful device for discouraging Hezbollah's re-emergence in the borderlands or a new surge of Israeli ground troops.

The current situation in southern Lebanon, where Israel and Hezbollah have exchanged fire and UNIFIL will have terminated its mission by the end of 2026, would be discouraging for those who work in and with the UN and specialize in the UN studies. In fact, in southern Lebanon, violations of Resolution 1701 (2006) continue, and the mandate has not been fulfilled completely. However, this does not mean that UNIFIL is ineffective or unimportant. UNIFIL would be the last stabilizing buffer in an increasingly fragile region.

Therefore, the UN decision to terminate UNIFIL at the end of 2026 was immature. Several specialists in UN peacekeeping argued that a sudden UNIFIL withdrawal would create multiple risks: the possibility of a surge in Hezbollah activity in the south, and increasing the prospect of another indirect conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, and another Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon. Some of the above scenarios have already happened even before the actual withdrawal of UNIFIL.

On the whole, what should we expect from UN peacekeeping operations? UN peacekeeping operations are one of the most useful instruments in conflict resolution. However, they are not panaceas. As the term suggests, we expect them to keep the peace. However, real peace can be brought about only by political settlement, and political settlement cannot be created by the presence of peacekeepers alone but by diplomatic efforts. As this article argued, UNIFIL has been contributing to fragile peace in southern Lebanon. However, concerning southern Lebanon, political and diplomatic efforts by host states and the international community have not been significant. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to assume that peacekeeping operations can apply to the type of intractable regional and international conflicts like the one in southern Lebanon.

Furthermore, one can conclude that peacekeeping operations should be expected properly when the mandates are suitable. Withdrawing the Israeli troops was among the mandates in Resolution 425 (1978) and 1701 (2006), although the IDF launched retaliatory campaigns several years after the withdrawal. The violations of UN resolutions by parties concerned were partly due to the unsuitability of the UN mandates, and partly due to the absence of the main principle of UN peacekeeping operations, namely, local consent.

The selective nature of UN peacekeeping would be inevitable. However, realistically, several peacekeeping operations, such as UNIFIL, have been inevitably established without proper conditions, including proper mandates, local consent, and political backing among great powers, for emergency purposes. In these situations, one should expect UN peacekeeping to maintain fragile peace, hopefully with humanitarian assistance, and then to calm the situation moderately.

Abbreviations

BL: Blue Line
 CIMIC: Civil-Military Cooperation
 DFF: De Facto Forces
 IDF: Israeli Defense Forces
 ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
 ISAF: International Security Assistance Force
 LAF: Lebanese Armed Forces
 PLO: Palestine Liberation Organization
 QIP: Quick Impact Project
 SLA: South Lebanese Army
 UN: United Nations
 UNDOF: United Nations Disengagement Observer Force
 UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
 UNIFIL: United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
 UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in Near East
 UNTSO: United Nations Truce Supervision Organization

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