Ending UNIFIL

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The withdrawal of UNIFIL marks the end of a painfully long 'interim mission' and the beginning of an uncertain course that is no longer controllable or predictable. The direction Lebanon will take is up to its government, the numerous states that have always exerted influence on this small country and, finally, the Lebanese people.

This is precisely why the announced end of UNIFIL is not a technical mission management procedure, but a political decision. It removes an international presence, observation and communication instrument from an already fragile border area without a robust replacement for the implementation logic of UNSCR 1701 yet in hand. UNIFIL was never designed to enforce peace; however, for decades it has been an anchor of stability in a border conflict without a viable peace process (Behne, 2023).

Background

UNIFIL has been present in Lebanon as a peacekeeping mission since 1978. In response to Operation Litani, during which the Israeli Defence

Forces occupied parts of Lebanese territory to counter attacks by Palestinian armed groups, the mission was established by UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 425 and 426 (UN Security Council, 1978a, 1978b). The mission's objectives were to monitor the withdrawal of the IDF, restore international peace and security, and support the effective authority of the Lebanese government in the south of the country.

UNIFIL was unable to persuade the IDF to withdraw completely, nor was the mission able to restore the Lebanese government's effective control over South Lebanon. The result was further military clashes, ongoing instability along the Israeli-Lebanese border and, ultimately, the July War of 2006, following which UNIFIL's mandate was significantly expanded (UN Security Council, 2006). The aim of this second phase of the mission was to achieve the mandate objectives formulated in 1978 and in UNSCR 1701 from 2006 under changed political and military conditions.

UNSCR 1701 gave UNIFIL a more robust mandate, without however turning it into a Chapter VII mission (UN Security Council, 2006). Since then, UNIFIL has been supporting the Lebanese government in stabilising South Lebanon, but does not replace it. The strategic core of the mandate lies in the gradual implementation of a 'long-term solution', including the establishment of a weapons-free zone south of the Litani River (with the exception of the Lebanese Armed Forces and UNIFIL), the containment of arms deliveries, mine clearance and the resolution of outstanding border and sovereignty issues. It is noteworthy that Hezbollah, as a key non-state actor, is not explicitly mentioned in the mandate, which structurally limits the political and operational focus of the mission (UN Security Council, 2006).

At the latest with the war between Hamas and Israel following the events of 7 October 2023, the conflict along the Blue Line escalated once again. The relative stability that had previously existed was massively disrupted. Fighting between Hezbollah and Israel increased significantly, while UNIFIL had little room for manoeuvre within its mandate to actively counteract this and had to largely limit itself to observation, documentation and de-escalating communication (UN Secretary-General, 2024).

How Effective Is UNIFIL?

The effectiveness of a UN peace operation could be summed up very simply: either it fulfils the objectives of its mandate or it does not. UNIFIL has not succeeded in bringing a permanent end to the fighting in South Lebanon and has therefore not achieved the objectives of its mandate in the narrow sense. However, the reality is much more complex.

This structural limitation is further exacerbated in the Lebanese context by weak and fragmented statehood. Practical power relations and hybrid constellations of actors shape the security reality more strongly than formal state authority. Against this backdrop, mandate fulfilment is not a binary

category. In peacekeeping research, effectiveness is correspondingly controversial; the concept of 'impact' is often more analytically viable than a narrow logic of success/failure (cf. Behne, 2023; Fortna, 2008).

While UNIFIL may appear ineffective in terms of formal mandate objectives, positive effects can certainly be observed at the micro and meso levels. Through continuous patrols, monitoring of the Blue Line, the Tripartite Mechanism as the only institutionalised channel of communication between the parties to the conflict, and smaller humanitarian projects in South Lebanon, UNIFIL has been able to contribute to stabilising the conflict dynamics over many years (Behne, 2023).

In addition, there are passive effects that are often underestimated: the economic influence of the mission, the sense of security among the local population created by the presence of the blue helmets, and the international attention maintained by the participation of numerous troop-contributing countries. These factors account for a significant part of the actual impact of peace operations (Behne, 2023).

UNIFIL thus failed to achieve its mandate objectives, but did manage to establish anchors of stability within its limited scope. These could not prevent the war after the events of 7 October 2023, but they did help to limit the escalation of the ensuing conflict – in particular through presence, observation and de-escalating communication in a politically deadlocked environment (cf. UN Secretary-General, 2024).

The Withdrawal: Decision and Context

In Resolution 2790, the UN Security Council announced that this would be the last extension of UNIFIL's mandate. The mandate runs until 31 December 2026, followed by a structured withdrawal planned within one year (UN Security Council, 2025).

This decision implies that the implementation or at least the management of UNSCR 1701 is considered sufficiently guaranteed even without UNIFIL – whether by Lebanese actors, alternative international arrangements or deterrence logic along the Blue Line. Given the escalation dynamics since 7 October 2023, this assumption poses a considerable political risk.

This decision comes at a critical juncture in Lebanese politics. With Nawaf Salam as Prime Minister and Joseph Aoun as President, a new political leadership took office in early 2025 with the aim of re-establishing a functioning government after years of institutional paralysis. In its first year in office, the government was able to expand its influence in South Lebanon with the support of UNIFIL, which was also linked to a temporary weakening of Hezbollah as a result of the war.

However, the window of opportunity is narrow. Parliamentary elections are already scheduled for May 2026 – a decisive moment that will show whether the new government can consolidate its ability to act or whether

there will be a return to the political deadlock that characterised previous years (L'Orient Today, 2026).

The announcement of UNIFIL's withdrawal comes at this fragile stage. Why the decision to withdraw has been taken at this particular point in time, after more than 45 years of mission, remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that the withdrawal will leave an economic, political and military vacuum. The Lebanese Armed Forces have so far been largely unable to ensure effective control in South Lebanon on a permanent basis.

For the international community, the withdrawal also means the loss of key eyes and ears along the Blue Line. The information situation will deteriorate, and international attention to the conflict is likely to decline – with potentially destabilising consequences.

What Now?

The end of UNIFIL does not mean the end of UNSCR 1701. The international community's objectives along the Israeli-Lebanese border remain unchanged, and various follow-up options are being discussed. In addition to an unlikely revival of UNIFIL with a modified mandate, the idea of a UN observer mission with a reduced military profile is also being considered. This would strengthen monitoring and accountability, but at the same time abandon the military buffer function that is central to Israel.

Options outside the UN framework are also being discussed. An EU mission could take on individual tasks, such as the monitoring of the territorial waters of Lebanon. France or other states could become more strongly engaged bilaterally, for example through existing capacity-building initiatives such as the German contribution to the development of maritime surveillance capabilities.

Essentially, however, no new mission will be established without the consent of the Lebanese government. It remains to be seen whether a viable replacement arrangement will be found by the termination of UNIFIL operations at the end of 2026. Ultimately, it will be crucial to understand UNSCR 1701 not only as a text, but as a practical approach to conflict resolution. This moment marks a crossroad for South Lebanon, the Lebanese state and regional stability as a whole.

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