

Hezbollah Flexes Its Muscle in Southern Lebanon

By Dr. Nizar Amin, Middle East Analyst based in Abu Dhabi, UAE

United Nations peacekeeping forces have always weathered some unwelcome treatment and inhospitable environments in many areas of the world where they have been called upon to provide badly needed respites from warfare. In fact, and despite the bad press the mother organization receives from friends and foes alike, peacekeeping forces have performed ably and admirably against sometimes-formidable odds, from Africa to Asia and from the South Pacific to Europe. But their deployments have rarely been devoid of drama because of the political nature surrounding them, the circumstances governing their operations, and the political advantages local and international actors feel they have with their presence. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is no different in all these respects, with the added caveat that it is surrounded by a population that, while benefiting economically and socially from its presence, can be used to manipulate its fortunes.

The unpleasant atmosphere surrounding UNIFIL today in southern Lebanon is a case in point. Since the end of June, and not for the first time, the supposed hospitality that today's force has been enjoying since its deployment after the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah has suffered bouts of

acrimony and discontent. Young activists from the local Shi'a community have been harassing UNIFIL soldiers – specifically French but also Italian – performing their duties. The latest incident on June 29 involved objections to UNIFIL manoeuvres around villages on the border with Israel that ended with laying siege to French and Italian troops, pelting their vehicles with rocks, actually disarming a unit of French peacekeepers, and physically injuring the unit's commander. That incident ended with the interference of the Lebanese Army that calmed the atmosphere, returned confiscated weapons, and re-affirmed the inviolability of UNIFIL's operations and personnel.

The local community is a stronghold of Hezbollah, the Islamic Republic of Iran's reserve force in southern Lebanon. Although prohibited by UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (11 August, 2006) from operating within UNIFIL and Lebanese Army area of operations that extends 20 kms from the Israeli border, Hezbollah counts on its civilian infrastructure in the border area to influence events there. Media coverage of the events has made obvious that the party is conducting a sophisticated operation of UNIFIL harassment and intimidation on the eve of UNSC deliberations next August on renewing the force's mandate. Lebanese government officials at odds with Hezbollah are warning that such actions are detrimental to Lebanon's interest in defusing any possible danger of war that Israeli officials have threatened will involve all of Lebanon this time around because of the party's participation in the government.

Resolution 1701, Paragraph 12, has specifically allowed UNIFIL freedom of movement and activities in accordance with the stated purpose of securing the area of all hostile actions. Indeed, UNIFIL has for the last four years been conducting the same kind of operations that were the purported reasons for the June 29 incident. Interestingly, many of those interviewed by news outlets, including seemingly common folks going about their daily business, have spoken of UNIFIL's supposed changes to 'rules of engagement,' a term not normally used by ordinary people, indicating that a campaign for organized 'talking points' was conducted to make sure everyone knew the script. An accompanying common refrain was that UNIFIL was spying on 'the resistance' (to Israel) – a term reserved for Hezbollah – and jeopardizing its security. Concomitantly, Hezbollah issued statements supporting the people's claims and defending their 'right' to 'protect the resistance.'

Lebanese President Michel Suleiman is said to be livid at Hezbollah's disregard of Lebanon's precarious situation and its open defiance of the country's commitment to Resolution 1701 that is seen as the only protection against an Israeli assault. Prime Minister Sa'ad al-Hariri rushed to Paris where he met with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner to calm things down before UNIFIL renewed deliberations. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, leader of the Shi'ite AMAL Movement and Hezbollah's ally, also voiced his displeasure over this incident

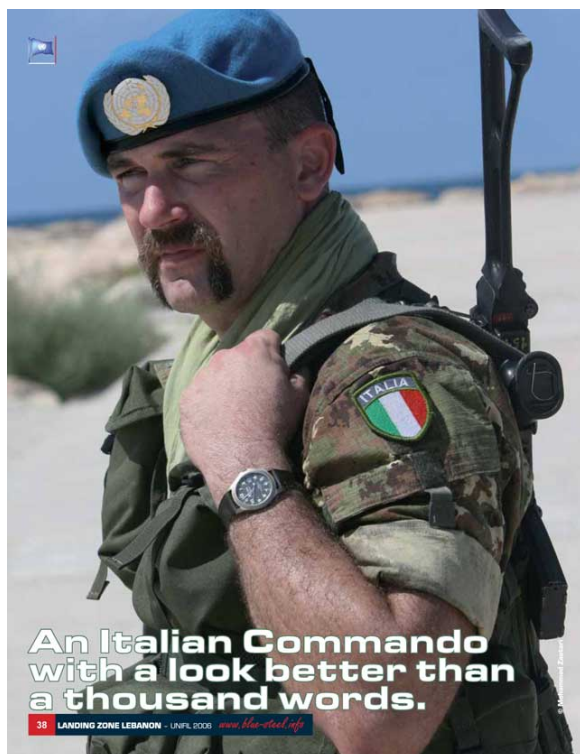
because of the repercussions it might have on the area. Syria cannot be but displeased also since any instability in southern Lebanon exposes it to both criticism that it cannot control its allies and ostracism by Europeans it has been trying to woo over the past few years.

Many Lebanese also see the hand of Iran in the latest attacks on the force. Of 31 contingents from different countries participating in UNIFIL's almost 15,000-personnel force, the French contingent received the worst treatment, followed by the Italian. France was and remains one of the most ardent supporters of sanctions against Iran, imposing its own set, voting for UNSC Resolution 1929, and working within the European Union for this body's batch of sanctions. Oblivious to the detrimental effects on UNIFIL's mission in protecting Lebanon from Israeli aggression, the Iranian regime found southern Lebanon to be a willing and fertile ground for exacting its revenge on French soldiers. But by acting as an Iranian surrogate, Hezbollah throws its commitment to abide by 1701 to the wind, jeopardizes its own community's relations with UNIFIL which provides badly needed services and economic assistance, and proves that it may not be trusted as a responsible political actor.

Hezbollah seems to have committed itself more than ever before to a course of action that cannot be in the country's interest. As an organization that claims to represent Shi'ite and other interests in Lebanon, Hezbollah has strayed far and wide off what the

overwhelming majority of the Lebanese want: a peaceful, prosperous country that deserves a few days of rest from the continuous drumbeat of war that the party loves to hear. It may be difficult for Hezbollah to disavow its loyalty to its creators in Tehran, but it has become impossible for many in Lebanon to believe that the party has any loyalty to Lebanon.

Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International



UNIFIL image:

<http://www.blue-steel.info/images/UNIFIL-2006-38.jpg>

(Accessed: 10/07/2010)