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UNIFIL and the Political and Military Developments in Southern Lebanon (1990-2005)

قوة الأمم المتحدة المؤقتة في لبنان (اليونيفيل) والتطورات السياسية والعسكرية في جنوب لبنان (1990-2005)

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Abstract:

This research focuses on the significance of UNIFIL's presence in southern Lebanon from 1990 to 2005, a period that is characterized by extensive changes in politics and militarily in relation to the Israeli-Lebanese conflict, especially after the signing of Taif Agreement and the end of the Lebanese Civil War. This period witnessed a marked intensification of armed confrontations between the Lebanese resistance movement, principally presented by Hezbollah, and the Israeli occupation forces together with their local ally, the South Lebanon Army. The period was further shaped by two major Israeli Military offensives which was operation Accountability in 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996 which participated a serious deterioration in the security and humanitarian conditions of southern Lebanon and revealed the limited capacity of UNIFIL to restrain the escalation of hostilities.

The aim of the research is to explore the history of the role played by UNIFIL and to evaluate the degree of success attained by the mission in performing its mandate of maintaining stability in the region, verifying the Israeli withdrawal, and ensuring international peace and security. As a result, the research demonstrates that UNIFIL acted as an important intermediary institution in preventing military escalation and containing the tensions in the southern part of Lebanon via surveillance of events on the ground, reporting on military violations and border infringements, and providing regular reports to the United Nations. Also, UNIFIL made important contributions to the provision of humanitarian and social assistance to the local civilian community impacted by the conflict. However, the inherent constraints of its mandate, as well as ongoing Israeli military activities and their violations, have impeded UNIFIL's ability to fulfill its mandate effectively, since the operational function of UNIFIL was limited only to surveillance, monitoring, and reporting.

Further, this study clearly shows that the Israeli pullout from Southern Lebanon in 2000 and its South Lebanon Army's disintegration was another crucial point in the history of UNIFIL's operations. Since then, its function changed from one of surveillance of Israeli troops' operations in the occupied territory to observation of the Blue Line and reporting of any violations of the border zone. The United Nations consequently cut down its forces until 2002, bringing the total number of UNIFIL to approximately two thousand troops. Nonetheless, this mission continued to be highly important in the list of United Nations' missions in the Middle East region.

Keywords: United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Southern Lebanon, Hezbollah, Israel, South Lebanon Army.

المخلص:

يركز هذا البحث على أهمية وجود قوة الأمم المتحدة المؤقتة في لبنان (اليونيفيل) في جنوب لبنان خلال الفترة الممتدة من عام 1990 إلى عام 2005، وهي فترة اتسمت بتغيرات سياسية وعسكرية واسعة في سياق الصراع الإسرائيلي-اللبناني، ولا سيما بعد توقيع اتفاق الطائف وانتهاء الحرب الأهلية اللبنانية. وشهدت هذه الفترة تصاعداً ملحوظاً في المواجهات المسلحة بين حركة المقاومة اللبنانية، التي تمثلت بصورة رئيسية في حزب الله، وقوات الاحتلال الإسرائيلي إلى جانب حليفها المحلي، جيش لبنان الجنوبي. كما اتسمت هذه المرحلة بهجومين عسكريين إسرائيليين رئيسيين، هما عملية تصفية الحساب عام 1993 وعملية عنقيد الغضب عام 1996، اللتان أسهمتاً في تدهور خطير للأوضاع الأمنية والإنسانية في جنوب لبنان، وكشفتا محدودية قدرة اليونيفيل على كبح تصعيد الأعمال العدائية.

يهدف البحث إلى استكشاف تاريخ الدور الذي اضطلعت به اليونيفيل، وتقييم مدى نجاحها في تنفيذ ولايتها المتمثلة في الحفاظ على الاستقرار في المنطقة، والتحقق من الانسحاب الإسرائيلي، وضمان السلام والأمن الدوليين. وتوصل البحث إلى أن اليونيفيل أدت

دورًا مهمًا بوصفها مؤسسة وسيطة في منع التصعيد العسكري واحتواء التوترات في جنوب لبنان، من خلال مراقبة الأحداث على الأرض، والإبلاغ عن الانتهاكات العسكرية والتجاوزات الحدودية، وتقديم تقارير دورية إلى الأمم المتحدة. كما أسهمت اليونيفيل إسهامًا مهمًا في تقديم المساعدات الإنسانية والاجتماعية إلى السكان المدنيين المحليين المتضررين من الصراع. ومع ذلك، فإن القيود الملازمة لولايتها، إلى جانب استمرار الأنشطة العسكرية الإسرائيلية وانتهاكاتها، حذت من قدرة اليونيفيل على تنفيذ ولايتها بفعالية، إذ اقتصرت وظيفتها العملية على المراقبة والرصد والإبلاغ.

وعلاوة على ذلك، توضح الدراسة أن الانسحاب الإسرائيلي من جنوب لبنان عام 2000 وانحياز جيش لبنان الجنوبي شكلا نقطة تحول أخرى مهمة في تاريخ عمليات اليونيفيل. ومنذ ذلك الحين، تغيرت وظيفتها من مراقبة عمليات القوات الإسرائيلية في الأراضي المحتلة إلى مراقبة الخط الأزرق والإبلاغ عن أي انتهاكات للمنطقة الحدودية. وبناءً على ذلك، خفضت الأمم المتحدة عدد قواتها تدريجيًا حتى عام 2002، ليصل العدد الإجمالي لقوات اليونيفيل إلى نحو ألفي جندي. وعلى الرغم من ذلك، ظلت هذه القوة ذات أهمية كبيرة ضمن بعثات الأمم المتحدة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط.

الكلمات المفتاحية : قوة الأمم المتحدة المؤقتة في لبنان (اليونيفيل)، جنوب لبنان، حزب الله، إسرائيل، جيش لبنان الجنوبي.

Introduction

In this period, namely from 1990 to 2005, there were notable political and military happenings in the South Lebanon, considering that Lebanon is at war with Israel, which has led to changes within the political and security system of Lebanon. The time period of 1990-2005 was defined by the presence of military conflicts in the southern part of the country due to the ongoing occupation of the area by Israeli forces and growing efforts of the Lebanese resistance movement, particularly Hezbollah, in its fight against Israeli occupation and the SLA, which is an essential ally for the Israeli troops there.

In this highly complicated context, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) became one of the international actors assigned, through United Nations Security Council resolutions, the role of ensuring stability in Southern Lebanon, monitoring the ceasefire and restoring international peace and security in the region. Furthermore, the mission of UNIFIL included endorsing and assisting the process of Israel's withdrawal from Southern Lebanon. However, the complexities involved in this particular situation and the high number of parties interested in the matter put certain limitations on the actions of UNIFIL.

There was an increased intensity of the conflict especially during Operation Accountability in 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996. In these two military operations, there was a massive escalation by both parties to the conflict leading to many losses and a major influence in the humanitarian situation in southern Lebanon. Moreover, these confrontations have revealed that the effectiveness of UNIFIL in intervening to prevent escalation is rather limited.

The importance of the current research is found in its consideration of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)'s involvement at this important stage, as well as in the assessment of the nature of UNIFIL's mission, taking into account its functioning in a period when the area was occupied by Israel and the South Lebanon Army (SLA) played the role of the auxiliary unit for the occupying forces. Also, the study is to focus on the issue of how effective UNIFIL was able to perform its mission aimed at ensuring peace and stability in Southern Lebanon. It will also consider the new aspects associated with the transformation of UNIFIL's mission after the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Southern Lebanon and the dissolution of the South Lebanon Army.

The present study uses the historical and analytical research methodology in analyzing the political and military events, as well as the various resolutions of international organizations related to UNIFIL operations in Southern Lebanon from 1990 to 2005. Through such methodology, there is greater

comprehension of the involvement of UNIFIL in the region in relation to the larger context of the Israeli-Lebanese conflict.

The study is divided into an introduction and three main sections:

- Section One: UNIFIL and the Political and Military Developments in Lebanon (1990–1999).
- Section Two: The Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon and the Delineation of the Blue Line in 2000.
- Section Three: The Situation within UNIFIL’s Area of Operations (2001–2005).
- **The Historical Background**

The security and political situation in Lebanon have been unstable since the 1970s due to deteriorating conditions inside the state and the presence of the general Arab-Israeli conflict. Specifically, the southern part of Lebanon has become one of the most prominent battle grounds between Israeli forces and the Palestinian resistance movements, and then with different Lebanese paramilitary organizations. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1978 created a serious escalation of the security situation, making the UN intervene into the issue in order to prevent further deterioration of the situation and maintain stability and peace in the area. The UN Security Council passed Resolutions 425 and 426 on March 19, 1978 and the establishment of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was envisaged by these resolutions (Hanf, 1993, p288). UNIFIL was charged with confirming the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon, restoration of international peace and security, and the restoration of the sovereignty of the Lebanese government in the south of the country (Al-Samarrai, 2022, p170).

PART ONE: UNIFIL’s Position toward the Political and Military Developments in Southern Lebanon (1990–1999).

Immediately after the completion of the Taif Agreement and the end of the Lebanese Civil War, the Lebanese government issued the Document of National Accord, in which it reiterated its commitment to being fully responsible for Southern Lebanon. The next step was the disarming of the various militia groups based on the stipulations made in the Taif Agreement, except Hezbollah (Al-Rubaie, 2015, p299), which took upon itself the task of resisting both the Israelis and the South Lebanon Army (SLA) (Al-Assafi, 2021, p94). To maintain its position as a resistance force without being categorized as one of the militias meant to be disarmed, Hezbollah implemented several strategies. Notable in these efforts was the decision by Hezbollah not to establish overt military camps and to limit its operations to military operations only against the military bases of both the Israelis and the SLA. Also instrumental for Hezbollah was the political clause in the Document of National Accord, which stated that the resistance was not to be targeted or restricted in any way (United Nations Security Council, 1990).

Consequently, Hezbollah remained largely beyond the direct authority of the Lebanese state and was insulated from demands and pressures exerted by certain Lebanese political actors seeking its disarmament (Al-Omari, 2018, pp. 169–170). On the other hand, the implementation of the Taif Agreement enabled the Lebanese government to reassert its authority over the cities of Sidon (Saida),

Tyre (Sour), and Jezzine, as well as a number of villages located within the eastern sector of the UNIFIL area of operations. Nevertheless, UNIFIL continued to function as the principal civil authority across a substantial portion of its operational zone (Clawson & Eisenstadt, 2000).

However, in the beginning of the 1990s, the instances of resistance attacks against the Israeli troops and their collaborator, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), increased dramatically. On October 25, 1990, the Hezbollah militia initiated a military attack against Israeli troops stationed on the Bayt Yahoun Road, with the result that six Israeli troops were either killed or injured (Al-Omari, 2018, p 171). In addition, on July 19, 1991, the Amal militia conducted another military attack against the Israeli troops causing death to three and wounding three other soldiers (Al-Assafi, 2021, p95).

In November 1991, Hezbollah conducted a series of attacks against positions held by Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army. In retaliation, Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army launched punitive operations and engaged in indiscriminate shelling of villages adjacent to the border strip, employing heavy artillery and air power. Throughout 1991, Hezbollah claimed responsibility for approximately ninety-nine military operations targeting personnel and positions affiliated with Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army, while United Nations observers officially recorded eighty such incidents (Al-Omari, 2018, pp 171-173).

The escalation of events pointed to the increased hostility in the Southern Lebanon region, and also highlighted the increasingly intricate security situation in which the mission was operating. Indeed, the ongoing hostilities between the resistance groups, the Israelis, and the South Lebanon Army had presented significant challenges for the Force in terms of peacekeeping.

Israel grew increasingly concerned about the expansion of resistance activities, particularly in the wake of the coordinated operations conducted by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement along the border zone. As a result, and in an attempt to exert pressure on Lebanon, two Israeli helicopters carried out an airstrike on 16 February 1992 over the town of Tafahata, in the Sidon district, targeting the convoy of Abbas al-Musawi, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah. The attack resulted in the death of al-Musawi and members of his family, after which Hassan Nasrallah was elected as the new Secretary-General of the organization (Ahmad, 2006, pp 13-14).

Hezbollah responded to the assassination on 21 February 1992 by launching Katyusha rockets against positions held by Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army. The introduction of Katyusha rockets into the conflict represented an important development, serving as a means of offsetting the military asymmetry between the two sides. On 19 May 1992, Hezbollah fighters captured the positions of Shoumiyah and Alman, taking four members of the South Lebanon Army prisoner and killing the garrisons stationed at the two sites. Within hours, the South Lebanon Army retaliated by shelling several villages within the border strip, while Israeli aircraft conducted accompanying air raids. These attacks resulted in dozens of casualties and injuries among the civilian populations of Suar and Sayda, Al-Nabatiah (Al-Omari, 2018, pp 173-174).

During this period, UNIFIL was subjected to repeated attacks by Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army, which targeted both its personnel and positions (Sayyah, 2018, pp 172-175). The Secretary-General of the United Nations emphasized the necessity of respecting the international and impartial character of UNIFIL and formally protested to both the Lebanese and Israeli authorities regarding the attacks directed against the peacekeeping force (Blue Helmets, 1999, P 75).

On the other hand, Hezbollah continued with its military actions in the first six months of 1993. Fifty-five operations were carried out by the terrorist group against the Israeli army and the South Lebanon

Army during this period (Al-Omari, 2018, p 175). In light of the rising tensions, the Israeli army conducted a major military offensive on 25 July 1993 that was named Operation Accountability as a counterattack to the rockets fired by Hezbollah on northern Israel. The offensive comprised heavy bombardment and air attacks on various places in southern Lebanon (Clawson & Eisenstadt, 2000, p52). As a result of the American intervention, the Israeli offensive ceased in the evening of July 31, 1993 after coming to an informal agreement between Israel and Lebanon known as the July Agreement. In the agreement, Hezbollah promised to stop launching Katyusha rockets into northern Israel while Israel promised not to attack Lebanese villages and civilians. While the casualties and damages as a result of the offensive depended on various statistical calculations, the official number of dead Lebanese was 132 people, with around 500 injured, and destruction inflicted upon 20,000 buildings. (Al-Assafi, 2021, pp 103-104).

During this operation, UNIFIL's role was limited to monitoring field developments and documenting the violations and breaches that accompanied the Israeli bombardment. Its military role remained restricted due to the nature of its mandate, being confined to observation and the recording of activities. UNIFIL reported the killing of 15 civilians and the injury of 27 others within its area of operations (United Nations Security Council, 1994). It also estimated that approximately 22,000 Israeli artillery shells were used throughout the 1993 war, along with around 1,000 surface-to-air missiles. As for Hezbollah's rockets, they were estimated at approximately 235 Katyusha rockets targeting the occupied border strip and Israeli settlements (Mustafa, 2003, pp180-181).

Following the end of the Israeli offensive, UNIFIL continued to provide humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in the form of medical supplies, water, clothing, food, fuel, electricity, and engineering works. During the second half of 1994, the situation in southern Lebanon remained tense and volatile. Attacks carried out by Hezbollah elements against Israeli forces and their collaborators within Lebanese territory persisted. During this period, incidents also occurred involving rocket fire directed at northern Israel, to which Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army responded with heavy artillery shelling. Meanwhile, UNIFIL continued its efforts to contain the expansion of the conflict and protect civilians from acts of violence, increasing its patrols across its entire area of operations in order to safeguard villages and farmers working in the fields (United Nations Security Council, 1994).

Despite the change in the Israeli government following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995 and the subsequent assumption of the premiership by Shimon Peres (Saadi, 1998, pp89-90), military operations between the Israeli and Lebanese sides escalated significantly during the period from July 1995 to April 1996. Hezbollah launched a series of attacks against Israeli forces stationed in southern Lebanon, which prompted a severe Israeli response manifested in the shelling of towns and villages in southern Lebanon and the western Bekaa. During this period, UNIFIL recorded 129 military operations carried out by Hezbollah against Israeli forces deployed along the border strip. In turn, Israel responded to these operations by launching air-to-ground missile strikes that resulted in the killing and wounding of numerous civilians in southern Lebanon (Al-Assafi, 2021, pp106-107).

The military escalation between the two sides continued, and with the arrival of April 1996, Hezbollah intensified its attacks against Israeli forces, launching approximately 400 Katyusha rockets at the security zone and 70 rockets at Israeli towns and cities in the Galilee. In response, Israel launched Operation "Grapes of Wrath," a heavy artillery campaign targeting Hezbollah positions as well as civilian areas in Lebanon. On 18 April of the same year, the most severe Israeli strike occurred when the Israeli army bombarded the Fijian battalion headquarters in the town of Qana. The site was sheltering between 500 and 800 civilians who had fled there to escape the shelling. The attack resulted

in the killing of four UNIFIL personnel and approximately 100 Lebanese civilians, in addition to numerous injuries.

Operation “Grapes of Wrath” ended after Lebanon and Israel reached a written agreement on 26 April 1996, reaffirming the same principles that had underpinned the 1993 arrangement. These provisions were primarily intended to protect civilians; however, unlike the earlier understanding, the 1996 agreement was formally written and publicly disclosed rather than verbal (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2013, p 81).

During Operation “Grapes of Wrath,” UNIFIL’s role was largely confined to documenting violations within its area of operations and providing protection and shelter to Lebanese civilians who sought refuge in its positions from the Israeli bombardment. Despite this humanitarian mandate, UNIFIL positions themselves were not spared from attack, as the Force recorded more than 600 Israeli air raids within its area of operations, in addition to the firing of approximately 25,000 artillery shells by Israeli forces targeting the Fijian, Nepalese, Irish, and Ghanaian battalions (United Nations Security Council, 1996).

Following the end of the operation, UNIFIL stood firmly alongside the civilian population, employing all available resources to assist in the evacuation of the wounded and the provision of medical care. It also contributed to facilitating the return of civilians to their homes, clearing mines and unexploded Israeli ordnance, and providing water supplies and electrical generators to affected areas in need (Al-Tufaili, 2008, p 29).

As we have seen above, the contribution of UNIFIL in both Operation “Accountability” and Operation “Grapes of Wrath” appears to be limited only to humanitarian purposes and surveillance, but not the use of force. Such restriction can be justified by the narrow mandate of the Force established under United Nations Security Council Resolution 425 and inability of the Force to participate directly in stopping the military action. Therefore, all actions undertaken by the Force were directed to observing the situation, documenting violations and protecting civilians in the area.

In mid-1996, Benjamin Netanyahu came to power after winning the Israeli elections (Al-Ashqar & Al-Rifai, 2007, pp125-127). His government adopted a new approach to the Lebanese file, promoting the slogan of “security first” and granting extensive authority to the Israeli army. In coordination with military commanders, it introduced changes in operational tactics in southern Lebanon, including the fortification of positions and the tightening of security measures during the movement of military patrols (Al-Muzani, 2020, p250).

Tension and escalation in confrontations between the two sides continued. On 8 January 1997, Hezbollah operatives detonated an improvised explosive device against an Israeli force advancing toward the Abu Rashid area, resulting in five injuries. Israel attempted to respond by storming one of the Marjayoun axes, which led to clashes that left one Israeli soldier dead and four others wounded (Al-Nahar, 1997).

Hostilities persisted throughout the first half of 1997. UNIFIL recorded approximately 154 military operations carried out by armed elements against the Israeli occupation forces and the South Lebanon Army. It also reported more than 210 operations north of the Litani River, most of which were conducted by Hezbollah. Previously, UNIFIL had obtained commitments from the Israeli Defense Forces to respect its area of operations, and assurances from Hezbollah not to conduct military activities in proximity to its positions. However, there were a total of 86 cases where the position or the personnel of the Force came under fire (United Nations Security Council, 1997). In 1998, the Norwegian troops

that had been deployed for a long time in UNIFIL were replaced by an Indian battalion (Clawson & Eisenstadt, 2000, p54).

Hezbollah continued its military operations throughout 1998. On 2 July, it carried out 18 attacks against Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army positions in the security zone, managing to seize the Hadatha position. On 9 August of the same year, Hezbollah operatives stormed the Sajad post, where one of them engaged an Israeli soldier, slapped him, and then withdrew. The incident was recorded by Hezbollah cameras, and Israel described it as a “disgrace and a catastrophe” (Mustafa, 2003, p496).

On another respect, the Amal Movement conducted 17 military operations during the same year against Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army in the security zone, resulting in dozens of casualties among their ranks. It also shelled several positions inside Israel, particularly the Braachit area, using artillery fire that achieved direct hits on enemy targets (Banout, 2008, pp188-189). On 27 November of the same year, the Israeli military spokesperson announced the killing of two soldiers and the injury of others as a result of an improvised explosive device placed near the Blat position in the western sector. This incident led Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to hint at the possibility of withdrawal (Al-Muzani, 2020, P290).

Meanwhile, commanders of the South Lebanon Army expressed growing concern over a potential Israeli withdrawal, which contributed to the emergence of a state of dual loyalty within its ranks and facilitated security breaches. Hezbollah operatives were able to infiltrate the SLA’s security apparatus and eliminate several of its commanders. The Israeli army commander stated that intelligence leaks had occurred through Druze and Shiite elements whose loyalties were considered ambiguous (Al-Safir, 1999).

With the beginning of 1999, the political and military landscape witnessed significant developments. On 15 May 1999, Hezbollah fighters succeeded in capturing the Beit Yahoun position and eliminating a number of South Lebanon Army personnel (Mustafa, 2003, p496). Following Ehud Barak’s victory in the Israeli prime ministerial elections on 17 May 1999, he announced the onset of a new phase in which the Israeli army would withdraw from Lebanon before July 2000, either through an agreement or unilaterally. From that moment onward, a broad political consensus emerged within Israel calling for withdrawal from southern Lebanon, particularly after the collapse of the South Lebanon Army (Al-Omari, 2018, pp207-208). While the transition of power was taking place between Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, the Israeli army launched its most intense airstrikes, targeting Lebanon’s infrastructure, especially electricity stations and facilities in Baalbek, Deir Nbough near Zgharta, and Al-Jamhouria near Beirut (Baqradi, 2009, p113). Hezbollah’s response was swift, as it shelled the Israeli settlements of Nahariya, Kiryat, and Shmona in northern Israel with Katyusha rockets, resulting in two fatalities. By 17 September 1999, the nature of operations had shifted into a pattern of hit-and-run engagements due to Israeli fortifications. Hezbollah subsequently succeeded, through a series of operations, in inflicting significant losses on Israeli forces, including the killing of three soldiers and the injury of others. Hezbollah concluded its military activities for 1999 with a commando operation on 30 December along the Qlaia–Marjayoun road, targeting an Israeli military convoy, which resulted in the killing of seven soldiers and the injury of others (Al-Muzani, 2020, P298). In terms of UNIFIL’s position on these political and military developments, the weakness of the Lebanese government’s authority, the continuation of Hezbollah’s military operations, and the control exercised by the Israeli army and the South Lebanon Army over its area of operations since 1982 significantly reduced the Force’s prospects of restoring peace and security in the region. As a result, the United Nations was compelled to accommodate this prevailing reality. During the 1990s, UNIFIL substantially simplified

its operational activities, a development that amounted to an implicit acknowledgment of its inability to fully accomplish the mandate set out in Security Council Resolution 425 (Clawson & Eisenstadt, 2000, p54).

Nevertheless, UNIFIL continued to exert maximum effort to contain the conflict, contribute to stability, and protect the civilian population within its area of operations. Its mandate was repeatedly extended on the basis of recommendations by the Secretary-General and at the request of the Government of Lebanon (Al-Fatlawi, 2011, P386).

Part Two: The Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon and the Demarcation of the Blue Line.

During the new millennium, Hezbollah stepped up its attacks on Israel as well as the South Lebanon Army, succeeding in hitting the South Lebanon Army hard by assassinating its second in command, Aqeel Hashem (Qaeiq, 2013, pp115-117). Hezbollah operatives successfully ambushed him, leading to his death on 30 January 2000. Twenty-four hours after this operation, Hezbollah launched a rocket attack against the Israeli Azziyeh facility situated on a strategic hill overlooking the Litani River, resulting in the death of three Israeli soldiers and the injury of several others.

On 4 February 2000, under mounting pressure from Hezbollah, the South Lebanon Army withdrew from the strategically important Sujd position, which overlooks the Al-Tuffaah region. Two days later, on 6 February, a Hezbollah unit ambushed an Israeli patrol in the western sector, killing three soldiers and wounding four others (Al-Muzani, 2020, PP299-300).

In the aftermath of these developments, Israel's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Yehuda Lancry, stated before the Security Council on 9 February 2000 that his government was determined to carry out its withdrawal within the framework of an agreement. He further called upon the Lebanese government to engage in negotiations aimed at resolving the conflict and restoring peace and security along the common border between the two states (United Nations Security Council, 2000).

On 4 April of the same year, a meeting was held in Geneva between the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan (Al-Beitar, 2003, p411), and the Israeli Foreign Minister, David Levy. During the meeting, the latter addressed his government's decision to withdraw from southern Lebanon in accordance with Security Council Resolution 425, emphasizing that the withdrawal would be carried out in a single phase and completed by the end of July 2000. He also affirmed his government's commitment to cooperating with UNIFIL throughout the withdrawal process. The parties further agreed on the necessity of cooperation among all concerned actors in order to prevent a deterioration of the situation during the Israeli withdrawal (United Nations Security Council, 2000).

As a consequence of the escalating military confrontation, the intensification of Hezbollah's attacks, and mounting pressure from Israeli public opinion, Israel was unable to sustain its position and withdrew approximately forty-five days ahead of the announced schedule. Beginning in early May 2000, Israeli forces started evacuating a number of villages. On 16 May, both the Israeli army and the South Lebanon Army abandoned several of their positions amid heavy exchanges of fire.

Hezbollah quickly taken advantage of the situation and, on 19 and 20 May, launched a series of operations against the remaining positions, including the Israeli-held sites of Braachit, Hadatha, and the Rayhan barracks, as well as several other military installations. On 21 May 2000, Israel ultimately yielded to the prevailing realities on the ground and commenced its withdrawal from southern Lebanon and the western Bekaa without reaching any formal agreement with Lebanon. The following day, local

residents opened the Khiam Prison and freed its detainees, while a mass popular movement spread across the region as towns and military positions were liberated one after another (Al-Muzani, 2020, P306).

On 23 May, the South Lebanon Army collapsed completely, enabling Hezbollah to establish full control over the security zone. Following the disintegration of the South Lebanon Army, approximately 4,000 officers and soldiers, together with their families, fled to Israeli settlements in the north, while around 1,500 personnel surrendered themselves to the Lebanese authorities (Ibrahim, 2001, p21).

During the period between 25 May and 7 June 2000, the United Nations, with the assistance of UNIFIL and following consultations with the concerned parties, established a line on the ground for the purpose of verifying the Israeli withdrawal. It was explicitly stipulated that this line should under no circumstances be regarded as an official international boundary between the two states (Pelletgrini, 2012, p55). This demarcation became known as the “Blue Line “zone (Matthews, 2008, p23), a designation derived from the blue barrels placed along its course to mark the withdrawal line (Sayyah, 2018, p217).

Despite expressing certain reservations regarding the line, both the Israeli and Lebanese governments affirmed that its delineation fell within the responsibility of the United Nations and declared their intention to respect it as determined by the Organization. On 8 June, UNIFIL contingents commenced operations to verify the Israeli withdrawal beyond the Blue Line (Pradhan, 2022, p125).

UNIFIL forces were subsequently deployed throughout southern Lebanon along the Blue Line, while the Lebanese Armed Forces were able to assume control over only a limited number of the areas vacated by Israel. This situation created a substantial operational space for Hezbollah to expand its presence and influence. These developments gave rise to a complex security environment that fell short of achieving the desired peace and left open the possibility of serious incidents and renewed tensions.

Nevertheless, UNIFIL sought to adapt to the new realities on the ground by expanding its activities in pursuit of its original mandate and by playing a significant role in verifying the Israeli withdrawal and conducting the daily monitoring of the Blue Line. Furthermore, the Force strengthened its coordination and working relationships with both the Israeli and Lebanese armies in the hope of containing violations and mitigating the impact of the incidents that inevitably occurred along the line (Al-Fatlawi, 2011, p 388).

Part Three: The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations 2001-2005

In January 2001, the Secretary-General of the United Nations indicated that UNIFIL had accomplished two of its principal tasks, namely confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces and assisting the Lebanese authorities in returning to the areas vacated by Israel (Aoun, 2018, P 24). The situation in UNIFIL’s area of operations remained generally calm. Small units of the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces established checkpoints in the evacuated areas, thereby controlling movement and maintaining law and order. UNIFIL continued to monitor the line of withdrawal on a daily basis, conduct patrols throughout the area, and, in cooperation with Lebanese authorities, provide humanitarian assistance to the local population (Fawaz, 2012, P5).

On 31 July 2001, the Security Council extended UNIFIL’s mandate for an additional six months. The Council also called upon the Lebanese government to take further measures to ensure the effective restoration of its authority over all areas of southern Lebanon (United Nations Security Council, 2001).

As a result of the stabilization of the security situation and the return of relative calm to southern Lebanon, the Security Council gradually reduced the size of UNIFIL's forces, until their number reached approximately 2,000 personnel of various ranks by the end of 2002. The Council also urged the Lebanese government to extend its authority and deploy the Lebanese Army in the border area in coordination with UNIFIL forces.

However, the Lebanese government did not implement these measures, leaving the border strip with Israel under the de facto control of Hezbollah, with the exception of UNIFIL positions and patrols (Schaefer & Pletka, 2025).

During the first six months of 2003, the environment of UNIFIL's mission area stayed comparatively quiet. Tensions, nonetheless, started rising between Hezbollah and Israel during the year, when Israeli airplanes intruded in Lebanese airspace on several occasions. In addition, the violation of the Blue Line by UNIFIL was reported nearly every day. As a reaction to the above violations, Hezbollah made use of anti-aircraft weapons.

As part of its cease-fire maintenance duties, UNIFIL conducted air and mobile patrols along the Blue Line in addition to monitoring from static locations and contacting the relevant parties in an effort to solve any problems. Additionally, UNIFIL provided humanitarian aid to the local population by giving them assistance in health, water projects, and social welfare needs (United Nations Security Council, 2003).

By the end of 2003, the relative calm that had characterized the first half of the year began to deteriorate due to renewed exchanges of fire in the Shebaa Farms area. Airstrikes and cross-border incidents resulted in the killing of three Israeli soldiers and three Lebanese civilians. Meanwhile, UNIFIL continued its support for the civilian population and worked toward integrating previously occupied areas into the rest of the country (United Nations Security Council, 2004).

As UNIFIL's mandate approached its expiry, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1525 on 30 July 2004, extending its mandate for a further six months (United Nations Security Council, 2004). On 2 September of the same year, the Council adopted Resolution 1559 by a vote of 9 in favor out of 15. The resolution called for respect for Lebanon's sovereignty and required the withdrawal of all non-Lebanese forces, particularly Syrian forces, from Lebanon. It also demanded the disarmament of all militias, especially Hezbollah and Palestinian armed factions, and urged the Lebanese government to extend its authority over the entirety of its territory (Pelletgrini, 2012, pp62-63).

Israeli aircraft continued to violate Lebanese airspace throughout the second half of 2004. In parallel, Hezbollah launched an unmanned aerial vehicle that penetrated Israeli airspace. On 9 October 2004, Hezbollah fired a rocket from a position near Yaroun towards Israel; however, the missile malfunctioned and fell on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line. On 28 October of the same year, another rocket was launched, which landed inside Israeli territory.

Under these circumstances, Hezbollah maintained its presence close to the Blue Line through a network of mobile checkpoints, positions, and fixed patrols, while refraining from interfering with the freedom of movement of UNIFIL forces. UNIFIL, for its part, continued its activities, including mine clearance, monitoring the Blue Line, and maintaining the ceasefire through both ground and aerial patrols within its area of operations (United Nations Security Council, 2005).

On 14 February 2005, the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was assassinated in a massive explosion that killed 22 people and injured around 100 others. In response, the United Nations Security

Council dispatched an investigative mission to Lebanon. The mission arrived in Beirut on 25 February 2005 and concluded its inquiry on 16 March of the same year. The investigation revealed deficiencies in securing the crime scene and a lack of seriousness in the initial Lebanese inquiry following the explosion. It also pointed to Syria and its Lebanese allies as being implicated in the incident (Pelletgrini, 2012, p65).

These events development triggered a wave of demonstrations demanding the disclosure of the truth behind Hariri's assassination and the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. This movement was countered by rival demonstrations organized by pro-Syrian factions within the country. As a consequence of these political developments, the government that widely perceived as aligned with Syrian influence has resigned. On 26 April 2005, Syrian forces completed their withdrawal from Lebanon (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2013).

These events had no direct impact on the Blue Line or on UNIFIL's presence. The Security Council nevertheless recommended extending UNIFIL's mandate until 31 January 2006, without changes to its size or structure. The Council also reiterated its call for the Lebanese government to deploy its armed forces in the area between the Litani River and the Blue Line; however, these efforts did not yield tangible results (Pelletgrini, 2012, p66).

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that southern Lebanon experienced a particularly sensitive phase during the period 1990–2005, characterized by escalating political and military tensions that directly influenced the nature of UNIFIL's operations. Despite the limitations imposed by its mandate as a peacekeeping force rather than a peace-enforcement mission, UNIFIL contributed to reducing escalation and containing numerous tensions along the Blue Line. It also played an important role in monitoring developments on the ground and providing humanitarian assistance to the local population.

As soon as Israel withdrew its troops from southern Lebanon in 2000, UNIFIL's functions changed greatly, and it's purely military aspect became less prominent, whereas observation and coordination were emphasized. Moreover, at that time the number of UNIFIL personnel was reduced from several thousand soldiers to 2,000 as military conflicts decreased. Of course, the violations still happened; nevertheless, UNIFIL helped to avoid full-scale confrontations in the area and provide security to people.

The research reveals the following:

1. In the timeframe covered in this research, UNIFIL successfully performed the function of preventing escalations from limited conflicts into an all-out war. However, it was not able to provide a full-fledged security control due to the nature of its peacekeeping mandate.
2. The withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in 2000 and, consequently, the disbandment of the South Lebanon Army became the critical factor changing the role of UNIFIL in this region. Namely, UNIFIL's functions evolved from the military observation to the Blue Line monitoring and coordination of logistic actions. Correspondingly, the number of the Force personnel was decreased to around 2,000 people of different rank.

3. UNIFIL made a significant contribution to observing developments and recording any breaches. Moreover, it performed its humanitarian mission through providing assistance to the local communities affected by military actions.
4. It is important to note that due to the prolonged presence of the Israelis in some parts of southern Lebanon up to 2000, in addition to the intensification of military clashes with the Lebanese resistance in "Operations Accountability" and "Grapes of Wrath," UNIFIL found itself in difficult circumstances that seriously hindered its activity in fulfilling its mandate.
5. At the same time, there were persistent violations of the Blue Line, despite the presence of UNIFIL troops in the area, which showed that the operation had rather modest results. Although it was indeed an instrument of maintaining relative stability, it could not solve the existing problems decisively.
6. Finally, it can be stated that despite the aforementioned restrictions on the part of UNIFIL's mandate, it continued to fulfill its functions as one of the longest-running peacekeeping missions of the United Nations.

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