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The decision to deploy a Defence Forces mechanised infantry company to the Golan Heights as part of the United Nations Disengagement Force (UNDOF) follows a significant reassessment of the situation by the UN Secretary-General. This UN observer mission was deployed in 1974 following the cessation of hostilities between Israel and Syria after the so called Yom Kippur war in the Middle East.

The most recent UN reports from the region point out that despite the deteriorating situation, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria was generally maintained. A serious threat posed to UN personnel is being caught in the cross fire between Syrian forces and armed opposition groups. Although the Irish forces will be part of an observer mission that will not require enforcing the terms of agreement between Israel and Syria, it does mean some exposure to risk.

In theory, the parties to the conflict are required to co-operate with the UN forces. In reality, there have been some serious clashes between the Syrian forces and opposition forces in the so called zone of separation. The Syrian military presence in the zone is a violation of the ceasefire agreement with Israel. The exchanges of fire between Israel and Syria have been serious. Tank, missile and heavy machine gun fire have led to casualties.

The civil war in Syria has led to violations of the ceasefire agreement that have precipitated military responses from Israeli forces. This has led to serious incidents in recent months involving exchanges of fire between Israeli and Syrian forces. The opposition forces in Syria are a disparate group with no central command and control structure. This makes negotiations with such groups problematic. Added to this, there has been some serious infighting among the opposition forces. Mines also pose a threat to UN and civilians in the area.

In response to the military activities in the area, Syrian forces have established checkpoints. These have interfered with the freedom of movement of the UN observers. They have also hampered operations and normal supply arrangements to UN posts in the zone. Freedom of movement is essential in order to be able to carry out the mandate. UNDOF and the other UN observer mission in the region, UNTSO, have relied on static but vulnerable positions.

UN posts have been subject to direct and indirect fire from Syrian forces and opposition groups, forcing UN personnel to take shelter. This is not a safe and secure environment for any UN personnel. That being said, Ireland was specifically requested to support this mission. From a logistical point of view, it is an efficient and cost effective deployment as Ireland has much of what is needed for this mission in the region owing to the downsizing of the Irish contribution to UNIFIL in Lebanon. This makes Ireland well placed to supply the personnel and equipment needed given the threat assessment. It reflects the acknowledged expertise of Defence forces personnel in the region. Although this is the first time Ireland will contribute a contingent to this mission, Irish officers are already present there as part of the UNTSO observer mission and others have served in senior posts and as military observers in the past. The geo-political situation and whole region are familiar to Defence Forces personnel.

The current UN forces are being subject to continuous harassment. There have been threats, kidnappings, theft and destruction of equipment. Although UN observers should not need to be armed, the situation on the Golan requires troops with good force protection and

mobility capabilities. The Defence Forces have experience in similar roles in other conflict zones. This is what makes the Irish contribution so imperative. The role of the Defence Forces contingent will be to provide a mobile Company as Force Headquarters Reserve in UNDOF to cater for reinforcement, escort and other operations.

The deployment comes in response to the Austrian and Croatian decision to withdraw. The situation in Syrian can only be described as dire and the UN has been prevented from responding adequately to the humanitarian tragedy unfolding there. This is a small but significant contribution to the maintenance of international peace and security in the region. It also vindicates the Defence Forces decision some years ago to invest heavily in force protection capacity. In the past, the government and Defence Forces have been accused of being risk averse in terms of UN peacekeeping missions. The decision to deploy should be seen as a pragmatic and positive commitment to UN efforts to contain the crisis there.

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