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## **Irish and UN forces faced with dilemma in Lebanon - published in *The Irish Times* 20 December 2010.**

Preparations are now underway for Irish forces to return to south Lebanon as part of the UNIFIL force in 2011. Irish troops will act in a ground holding capacity similar to that undertaken previously for over thirty years. However, the Irish contingent will be a mechanized battalion with significant patrolling duties like those performed in Chad and Liberia. This will suit the Irish in terms of equipment, recent experience and training.

The general situation in Lebanon presents a dilemma for the UN and any Irish forces deploying there. There was much talk of an aggressive or robust mandate back in 2006 after the Israeli Hezbollah conflict. The delay in adopting Resolution 1701 did not auger well for the 'new' force. Agreement of the parties to a conflict is essential if the UN force is to have any prospect of success. As the first UNIFIL force discovered to its cost in 1978, even agreement by leaders or governments does not always translate into co-operation on the ground.

When the proposal to establish the original UNIFIL mission was made in 1978, UN officials expressed reservations about assuming such a role. There was no clear policy then either on how the peacekeeping force would deal with armed elements or what action it would take if the Israeli forces did not withdraw completely. It is worth recalling that Lebanon did not attack Israel in 2006 and this fragile democracy had already demonstrated that it did not have the capacity to restrain or disarm the Hezbollah militia. In the end, the urgent necessity to do something to alleviate the immediate crisis while there was some broad consensus in the Security Council meant that such misgivings were put aside.

Resolution 1701 contains a number of provisions which have proved difficult to implement. It calls for a permanent ceasefire, the creation of a weapons free zone and disarmament of all armed groups. It also calls for no foreign forces or arms in Lebanon without the consent of the government. Israel was required to provide the UN with all remaining maps of land mines in Lebanon. Such information has important operational significance taking into account the threat posed by unexploded ordnance and mines.

The mandate authorizes UNIFIL to take all necessary action in areas of deployment as it deems within its capabilities to ensure that its area of operations is not utilized for hostile activities and to resist attempts by forceful means to prevent it from discharging its duties under the mandate. It also authorizes the use of force to protect UN personnel and equipment, ensure freedom of movement and protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence. While the mandate is more comprehensive than other resolutions in relation to UNIFIL, four years later it is far from evident how it will be implemented. Especially difficult are the security arrangements to prevent the resumption of hostilities and the creation of a demilitarized zone. Ensuring freedom of movement is also a matter of concern. What is meant by protection of civilians under imminent threat and how will UNIFIL respond should Israel and Hezbollah resume hostilities?

Working alongside Lebanese forces is also problematic. Resolution 1701 does not expressly say who should disarm Hezbollah, but the implication is that it should be Lebanese Forces, with assistance from UNIFIL. However, the 'modalities', to use UN terminology for such action, are not explained. The Israelis had high expectations for UNIFIL in terms of disarmament of Hezbollah, however, these were never realistic. The

Lebanese government and armed forces are too weak and divided to be able to take any kind of offensive military action against Hezbollah fighters. Can UNIFIL use force to disarm Hezbollah? The answer must be no, otherwise the UN will end up trying to do what the Israeli forces could not achieve by force. Hezbollah's tenacity has given it significant stature in the region and there is evidence that it is rearming and preparing for another confrontation with Israel. French and American forces sustained serious casualties when part of the Multi-National Force deployed in the 1980's, a similar fate awaits any international force that takes on Hezbollah in south Lebanon.

While deployment in Lebanon does not present the logistical or security challenges of Chad, no peacekeeping mission is without risk. The uncertainty over Iran and the broader issue of Palestinian-Israeli relations provide a potentially volatile regional backdrop to UNIFIL. The mission will be good for the Defence Forces in terms of training, experience and morale. It is consistent with Irish foreign policy objectives and support for the UN. In these days of austerity, UN reimbursement of expenses incurred is crucial. Having recently pre-empted a UN decision to withdraw from Chad, Ireland is fortunate to be given the opportunity to participate in another UN mission at this time.

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