



# Walking the Blue Line: Lebanon's Security Sector Reform

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**Following civil war, re-establishing the legitimacy of a state's army is a crucial part of security sector reform and international actors can aid this process. The capacity-building work of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon provides a useful example of this.**

Rebuilding a national army after civil war is an important part of security sector reform (SSR) to help ensure the survival of the institution and its effectiveness in the long-term. Based on a recent article in *Contemporary Politics*, this blog post discusses the strategies used by an international actor, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), to contribute to the capacity and legitimacy of a local institution, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). This case study revealed that a sustainable strategy for SSR requires a long-term, flexible, and pragmatic approach; and that successful capacity building can take place when the normative values of the SSR project are accepted by key stakeholders and the local population.

### The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

The UNIFIL mission has been present in South Lebanon since 1978. United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1701 (11 August 2006) is the mandate under which UNIFIL has operated since 2006 after the July war between Hezbollah and Israel. It clearly states that a key objective of the mission is assisting with the reintroduction of LAF throughout Lebanon; prevent violations of the line of withdrawal – called the Blue Line – that borders Israel and Lebanon, and clear unauthorised weapons from the area of operations.

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UNIFIL has targeted three main areas in capacity building the LAF: building relationships through regular liaison and communication; lobbying for money and resources from the international community; and conducting a comprehensive strategic review of LAF's operational capabilities. One of the biggest challenges has also been handling the political situation which UNIFIL has negotiated with a combination of flexibility and pragmatism. But underscoring UNIFIL's success is the fact that the army is considered legitimate in Lebanon by the local population and at the national political level. Furthermore, the LAF share the normative assumptions of the international community in terms of how they wish to rebuild.

Whilst LAF was not present in the south until 2006, its popularity has increased since the Syrian withdrawal in 2005. The Lebanese Armed Forces is the only national institution that is genuinely regarded as non-sectarian, and has an approval rating of over 75 per cent amongst the Lebanese population. A [survey](#) of civilians in the south of Lebanon found that 91.5 per cent of civilians stated that they thought that LAF should be responsible for national security.

## **The Political Challenges**

The main challenge to both LAF and UNIFIL authority in South Lebanon is the presence of Hezbollah. LAF and UNIFIL must respect the legacy of Hezbollah's military success in not losing the 2006 war, and its important role in ejecting Israel from Lebanon in 2000. Whilst Hezbollah agreed in 2006 to withdraw to positions north of the Litani River (outside the area of operations), it is commonly believed by many Lebanese, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), and the Israeli government, that Hezbollah retains weapons caches within the area of operation.

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For many Lebanese citizens, the continued presence of Hezbollah's armed faction – who use a combination of traditional and guerrilla warfare techniques – is considered a necessary deterrent to Israeli aggression. LAF, whilst respected is regarded as underfunded and under-equipped and therefore not *able* to be fully in control of the security situation at the present time. Interviews for this case study, however, revealed that after years of living under foreign occupation, southern Lebanese are happy to see LAF patrolling the area with UNIFIL.

Whilst UNIFIL's mandate requires the mission to rid the area of operations of all weapons not belonging to the Lebanese Armed Forces, it is not possible for either UNIFIL or LAF to aggressively hunt for weapons stored in the area without risking the loss of local support. Hence UNIFIL is pragmatic when negotiating the tension between its mandate and local perceptions of its role in relation to local security. When unauthorised weapons are found, UNIFIL interprets the mandate on this issue by asking LAF to retrieve the weapons. They report the findings to LAF and then wait for them to arrive and deal with the recovery. This means that UNIFIL does not have to deal directly with the removal of illegal weapons which may or may not belong to Hezbollah but which can be a contentious issue with the local population.

### **Building relationships**

UNIFIL contributes to re-establishing LAF's presence by conducting joint patrols, helping to build LAF's CIMIC activities and ensuring LAF takes the lead in local disputes and in highly politicised situations. When patrolling alongside LAF, UNIFIL is careful to play the role of observer as much as possible. LAF is deliberately placed at the forefront of any Blue Line violations involving local civilians in order to empower LAF to deal with any situation in its own way and

to help build its credibility. Furthermore, as UNIFIL is not allowed to physically restrain anyone who is violating the Blue Line, LAF plays a key role in deciding what measures (physical or verbal) they wish to take in regard to Lebanese citizens on Lebanese territory.

Time has played an important role in maintaining good UNIFIL–LAF relations. Interviews with LAF officers indicate that long-term UNIFIL staff who understand the local political and social culture in the region are valued highly. Constant staff rotations frustrate the LAF as personal relationships are considered highly important to successful liaison and cooperation. Flexibility has also been of benefit in helping UNIFIL build strong relationships with LAF, officers gave very positive reports of their relationship with UNIFIL staff and in particular their commitment to helping to resolve problems when they arose.

### **Building capacity**

UNIFIL works to try and build LAF's operational capabilities in a number of ways as this is regarded as an essential part of UNIFIL's eventual exit strategy. First of all it lobbies the international community independently to gain support and donations for LAF and requests donations from current battalions for example UNIFIL vehicles at the end of their lifecycle. UNIFIL also seeks funding from the EU and internationally for LAF battalions based throughout Lebanon, not in the area of operations. Since the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, the EU has been supportive of UNIFIL's efforts to capacity build LAF. Furthermore, since the emergence of IS in 2014, Lebanon has been seen as a key buffer state, so interest in providing assistance to LAF has further increased.

Another example of UNIFIL's flexible approach to interpreting its mandate is a joint project entitled the Strategic Dialogue. In recent years, UNIFIL Political

Affairs Officers and LAF engaged in a full analysis of LAF's structure and capabilities and produced a joint report that identified gaps in LAF's structure. UNIFIL Political Affairs Officers have since organised a coordinating mechanism with UNSCOL and now work jointly to seek contributions from the US and European states to specifically fill these gaps. Finally, battalions within UNIFIL conduct joint exercises with the LAF which can include shooting, artillery, administrative tasks and computer exercises.

### **Future lessons**

Lebanon's SSR may carry useful lessons for the international community when looking to help other post-conflict countries transition into peace – namely Iraq, where the security environment remains both complex and challenging. The rise and territorial gains of so-called Islamic State in Iraq reflects a failed security sector reform policy which has seen 100 billion US Dollars invested in it. Implementing a more effective SSR policy in Iraq will be a crucial prerequisite for both long-term stability and peace.

When rebuilding a national army after internecine warfare, obtaining support from the domestic constituency is as important as capacity building the force in order to present as a credible deterrent. The Lebanese Army has worked very hard to minimize sectarian differences within the institution both during and after the civil war and this has been very helpful in enabling it to build a largely positive image amongst the people of Lebanon itself. But the sectarian nature of the armed forces in Iraq will make the rebuilding of the army a great deal more challenging in terms of winning broad popular support in Iraq. A key task therefore will therefore be for the Iraqi national army to become openly inclusive of multiple ethnicities and religious sects as quickly as possible.

Long term planning in SSR is crucial. One challenge faced in rebuilding the national army in Lebanon is ensuring a regular budget flow to the army and national political cover from politicians. Whilst UNIFIL has been successful in terms of identifying the gaps in LAF expertise and in seeking funding and training to assist in capacity building, the lack of a regular budget for the army still hampers the LAF's ability to make long term plans for growth and development.

In addition, politicians in Lebanon are broadly supportive of the LAF, but ongoing political cover remains important especially when the national military is faced with domestic disturbances, particularly outbreaks of sectarian violence. It is imperative the LAF are viewed as impartial by the Lebanese to avoid being drawn into domestic political conflict and thus far the LAF have managed this extremely well. These are considerations that Iraq may face in the future.

Since the peace deal of 2006, UNIFIL has been successful in re-introducing LAF into the south of Lebanon. But this has required a nuanced approach because there is a delicate balance between the imposition of an agenda and local agency in peacebuilding projects. Ultimately the success of SSR depends on the degree to which the reforms resonate with institutional and local interests and ideas.

Faced with the aforementioned myriad of sectarian and security challenges, any future attempts to capacity-build the Iraqi army would do well to take a pragmatic approach and be prepared to sacrifice quick wins for the sake of long-term objectives. The first step will involve a careful focus on making the army representative of the Iraqi people and beyond that ensuring national financial and political support is maintained to allow the army the political

space to rebuild trust with the all-important domestic constituency of the Iraqi public.

Image of an Italian peacekeeper of UNIFIL patrols the “Blue Line” that demarcates the border between Lebanon and Israel. Image credit: [UN Photo](#)

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