



France must save UNIFIL

military-Earth thinking notebook

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The report is not new. It was formulated two years ago by the Chief of the Armed Forces Staff: "UNIFIL[1] has reached the end of what it can do militarily" [2]. 2] At the end of a struggle for influence between those in favour of disengagement and those in favour of maintaining a military presence, the President of the Republic chose a compromise solution at the beginning of the year: to reduce the French contingent on Lebanese soil by one third. This decision implicitly acknowledges the bankruptcy of UNIFIL, which, six years after its vote, is still unable to enforce its mandate. But France cannot stop there: it must now launch an international reflection on the mission of the Blue Helmets in Lebanon. Without it, UNIFIL will continue to crystallize a precarious security situation in which the only real loser remains the population of southern Lebanon.

1] The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon was created in 1978. Following the July-August 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, its mandate and structures were strengthened, sometimes giving rise to the name UNIFIL Reinforced or UNIFIL II.

2] Admiral Guillaud's hearing on 6 October 2010 before the deputies of the National Defence and Armed Forces Commission

A paralyzed and discredited military force

Certainly, the action of UNIFIL is not useless, far from it.

First of all, in terms of security, where its soldiers play at least the role of "qualified witnesses" [1] to the cessation [2] of hostilities between Lebanon and Israel: these firefighters in blue berets prevent the dozen or so border incidents recorded daily from igniting a new conflict.

Secondly, on the socio-economic level, where the direct (demining, construction, education, health) or indirect (contracts) contribution of UNIFIL amounts to several tens of millions of dollars [3].

3] Finally, at the political level, thanks to the tripartite mechanism, where the UN succeeds in getting two countries that officially do not speak to each other to sit at the same table. During this monthly meeting, military leaders can discuss their security concerns and sometimes reach agreement on the delimitation of the "blue line", the provisional border that has separated the two countries de facto since June 2000.

4] Six years after the vote on its new mandate, the "reinforced" UNIFIL is still struggling to convince. Of the six tasks assigned by resolution 1701, only two can be considered as fulfilled: monitoring the truce and providing humanitarian aid. The other tasks, which are at the heart of its mandate, are aimed at demilitarising the area of operations (of Hezbollah militias) and helping the Lebanese regular forces to establish their authority there. However, the results are more mixed in this regard. The latest report[5] of the UN Secretary General confirms, like the previous ones, the presence of "weapons and armed elements[6] ready to use them in the zone". For its part, Israel acknowledges that its drones violate Lebanese airspace on a daily basis.

The causes of this failure? They are at least twofold.

First, the political will that presided over the regeneration of UNIFIL has evaporated. The European capitals very soon buried the provisions that allowed the adoption of so-called robust rules of engagement, that is to say, rules that were more binding on the protagonists. Were they afraid of Hezbollah? No one can say for sure, but we remember that its leader Hassan Nasrallah had clearly decreed the disarmament of his red-line militia. The fact is that, although UNIFIL was authorized to "take all necessary measures" [7] to carry out its mission, it has operated an extremely cautious interpretation [8] of resolution 1701, hiding behind the aspect of assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces. As a result, while the mandate gave UNIFIL the legal flexibility to exert pressure on the parties, the Force is now 100% dependent on the goodwill of the parties.

But it is not only politicians who are responsible for this setback; the failure is also military. The new UNIFIL, which was tested in autumn 2006, quickly lost credibility with all the players. Vis-à-vis the IDF, whose F15 fighters were never worried even when they simulated attacks [9] on the ground of UN posts. With regard to Hezbollah, whose factions were able to see that a handful of teenagers were enough to block an armoured patrol, steal their mate, and so on. If the lesson did not prove sufficient, they could molest their personnel if they persisted in entering the forbidden zones. With regard to the Lebanese Armed Forces, they quickly realized that UNIFIL, despite its legal legitimacy and the enormity of its means, would be content to be a docile and generous partner. Last but not least, to the Lebanese people, with whom UNIFIL has lost its image as a powerful and resolute actor in a few weeks. However, in this type of mission, where the support of part of the population cannot be acquired, the credibility of the Force is its centre of gravity.

On balance, and without denying its humanitarian or social contributions, it is difficult to deny that the security role of UNIFIL is today limited to that of an observer of the truce, an "honest broker", between the Lebanese and the Israelis, far removed from its initial

ambitions.

By reducing its contingent, France implicitly acknowledges UNIFIL's bankruptcy.

This was not the wish of President Chirac who, in 2006, with the support of the United States, attempted to transform the area of operation into a "zone of peace". UNIFIL's area of operations into a real buffer zone under the strict control of a force modelled on the ISAF[10] deployed in Afghanistan. Faced with the Lebanese refusal, France had had to content itself with a reinforcement, albeit significant[11], of the UN force and its command structure[12], largely inspired by NATO standards. More awkwardly, in September 2006 it announced the sending of heavy tanks and artillery guns supposed to provide additional credibility. A clumsy gesture, because in addition to being unsuited to the terrain, this equipment proved to be both too heavy for a surveillance mission and too few in number to dissuade Israel's neighbour.

Unable to strengthen both the Force and its mandate, France gradually resigned itself to the idea of its decline. Since the departure of General Pellégrini, it has not proposed a Force Commander either, whose double-hatted position as commander of the troops and head of mission nevertheless allows him to influence the strategy of the Force [13]. It took note of the disappearance of the military-strategic cell and got rid in spring 2011 of the Leclerc tanks, whose usefulness [14] had never been demonstrated in the Lebanese context. The coup de grâce came in May 2012 with the withdrawal of 400 soldiers out of the 1,300 that his contingent counted. Although Paris tried to minimize the scope of its disengagement,[15] the message was no less clear: UNIFIL was not and is no longer in its eyes a tool likely to contribute to the settlement of the Israeli-Lebanese dispute.

In so doing, France implicitly acknowledges the failure of UNIFIL as it had hoped for in 2006. But it does not put an end to the game of deception in which all the supporters of the status quo are playing. After all, who sincerely wants UNIFIL to fulfil its mandate? Certainly not Hezbollah, which pretends to have withdrawn its weapons north of the Litani River, but which all reports suspect of maintaining an advanced line of defence in southern Lebanon and of phagocytizing the local intelligence services. Certainly not the Lebanese Government, which, preoccupied by other fronts, is satisfied with the precarious calm on its southern border and continues to postpone the deadline for the completion of the process.ance of its assumption of effective authority in the area of operations and sees cooperation[16] with UNIFIL above all as a means of claiming military equipment from the troop-contributing countries. Even less so Israel, which, ironically, justifies its daily overflights of Lebanon by UNIFIL's inability to enforce a mandate that it contributes to weakening. The United Nations is not fooled either: its semi-annual reports tirelessly call on the parties to respect its mandate. In other words, no one is fooled: UNIFIL is naked and incapable of fulfilling its mandate. But, as is only natural, no State wants to denounce the deception in which it is participating. So what can be done?

France must put an end to the game of dupes.

First, understand that the interest of peace in Lebanon does not lie in maintaining this security illusion. Recognize, as most of those who have come into contact with the Lebanese reality write and think, that the current situation once again brings together the

conditions [17] that led Israel to invade Lebanon four times in less than a generation [18].

Secondly, to speak the language of truth. Translating the practitioners' observation into political words: whatever the causes, UNIFIL no longer has the means to fulfil the mandate for which it was intended. France owes this frankness to its Lebanese friend, with whom it has forged long-standing and solid ties of friendship. More broadly, it owes this consistency to the Arab populations who want to continue to believe in the homeland of human rights and to forget the attitude of Paris during the Tunisian and Egyptian "springs".

Thirdly, it is essential to propose solutions, for which it must be admitted that there is little room for manoeuvre. If we exclude the status quo, however, two options are possible.

The first would be the most difficult to implement. It would nevertheless be the most durable solution, the most likely to put an end to the chronic instability on the Israeli-Lebanese border. In short, it would involve resuming the initial 2006 plan and calling for a new resolution that would establish a buffer zone along the "blue line" under the strict responsibility of the United Nations. Opponents of the plan will explain that Hezbollah's ballistic arsenal already makes this type of demilitarized zone obsolete. They forget that it is not so much rockets as multiple border incidents that maintain a permanent state of tension between the parties and serve as a pretext for the security rhetoric of each side. Obtaining a buffer zone would prevent provocations on either side of the border, prevent their reappearance on the other side of the border, prevent their reappearance on the other side of the border, and prevent them from being used as a pretext for the security rhetoric of each side. The buffer zone would prevent provocations on either side of the border, prevent their recurrence, speed up the marking of the "blue line" and remove a considerable obstacle to the settlement of the territorial dispute in Ghajar [19].

The second option would be less comprehensive but more realistic. It would require not the writing of a new mandate but the revision of the Force's rules of engagement. These rules, which are negotiated between the United Nations and the parties, would allow UNIFIL to patrol without having to inform the Lebanese Armed Forces in advance, to set up autonomous checkpoints and to search at any time dwellings it deems suspicious. Three types of mission are currently completely impossible to plan without the formal authorization of the Lebanese. Granting UNIFIL this degree of autonomy, while ensuring the systematic inclusion of the Lebanese armed forces in the conduct of operations, would make it possible to establish a true partnership between the two forces on the ground. It would shatter pretences, remove hidden agendas and force the two forces to establish a relationship of trust based on transparency. Paradoxically, UNIFIL would force the Lebanese Government to accelerate its assumption of responsibility in southern Lebanon. Without denying its status as the first resistance fighter against Israel, or challenging its political and social hold on the region, it would persuade Hezbollah to continue its process of institutional normalization[20]. 20] Finally, it would participate in resolving the security dilemma by removing from Tel Aviv the official justification for its daily overflights and from Hezbollah the official justification for maintaining its weapons south of the Litani River.

If it is so much that it has a long-term foreign policy, France has every interest in putting an end to the UN's fool's game in southern Lebanon. It can convince its European partners[21], who are still the backbone of UNIFIL, that the European Union must no longer accept a status quo that erodes its credibility as a peace actor. It can put pressure on the Lebanese, who remain fiercely attached to the maintenance of an interposition force in Lebanon, and make the maintenance of this force conditional on the revision of its

mandate or rules of engagement. It can convince the new administration of the United States State Department to influence the Jewish State, which has a vested interest in stabilizing its northern front, to stop its violations in return for a reinforcement of UNIFIL.

By refusing to make short-term compromises, by choosing the truth with its partners and consistency with its own values, by proposing bold but lasting solutions, France would certainly not choose the easy path. It would emerge all the stronger for it.

1) Expression used by General (2S) Pellégrini in "...A fiery summer in Lebanon in 2006. Behind the scenes of a predicted conflict». Editions Economica 2010, p.29

2) The two countries have agreed on the terms of a cessation of hostilities but have still not signed a ceasefire.

3) The figures are around 70 million dollars per year, according to General (2S) Pellégrini, op. cit. , p.154

4) The Blue Line was drawn within a few weeks by UN geographers during the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in June 2000. The route is disputed by both parties.

5) Report S2012/502 of 28 June 2012 on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006), paragraph 21, p. 5.

6) United Nations term for Hezbollah's militias as the primary source of the term "Hezbollah militias".

7) Article 12 of resolution 1701 recalls in its preamble that UNIFIL is acting pursuant to a request for support from the Lebanese government (and therefore under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, which implies the cooperation of the parties), but expressly authorizes the Force "to take all necessary action in areas where its forces are deployed and, when it deems it feasible within its capabilities, to ensure that its theatre of operations is not used for to resist attempts to prevent it by force from discharging its obligations under the mandate entrusted to it by the Security Council, and to protect its personnel, premises, installations and equipment" to ensure the security and freedom of movement of United Nations personnel and humanitarian workers and, without prejudice to the responsibility of the Government of Lebanon, to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence'. According to Alexandra Novosseloff, these terms permit the use of force without the need for a Chapter VII reference. "Chapter VII and peacekeeping, an ambiguity that needs to be deconstructed", Peacekeeping Bulletin No. 100, October 2010, p.4.

8) "UNIFIL prefers to interpret its mandate in a very narrow way. The UN's resolution gives it the right to use force and to ensure that its territory is not used for hostile purposes", in Experts: Unifil stronger but still lacking, Brooks Tigner, ISN ETH Zurich, 15 March 2007.

9) This incident of October 30, 2006, however, was condemned by France at the UN, General (2S) Pellégrini, op. cit. p. 140.

10) International Assistance and Security Force

11) Resolution 1701 authorizes UNIFIL to increase the number of its peacekeepers to 15,000, compared to about 2,000 before the 2006 conflict.

12) Notably by the creation of a military-strategic cell that is supposed to ensure a better military translation of political directives.

13) As head of mission, the UNIFIL Force Commander is the direct interlocutor of the Secretary General of the United Nations (although this role is in practice delegated to the head of the Department for Peacekeeping Operations) and the highest Lebanese authorities. At the end of 2010, strategic disagreements between Paris and Madrid over the conduct of the mandate, with the French criticising the Spanish for their too "passive" stance, nearly cost Major General Alberto Asarta the renewal of his mandate.

14) Some opponents will argue that the Leclerc tank was not a tactical weapon, but a political deterrent, just like the nuclear component. This would have required a credible threat to use it, which was never the case.

15) In this respect, France has drawn on the conclusions of the UNIFIL Strategic Review (March 2012), which it was not uninvolved in formulating and which recommended, among other measures, a review of the UNIFIL mission. The conclusions called, among other measures, for a reduction in the size of the Force in order to have a lighter but no less effective force and an acceleration of the transfer of responsibility to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) (<http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/countries-geo/liban/la-france-et-le-liban/events-4386/article/liban-revue-strategy>)

16) Initiated in 2010, the aim of this cooperation, known as the "Strategic Dialogue", is "to carry out an analysis of land forces and maritime assets and to define a set of criteria reflecting the correlation between the capabilities and responsibilities in

relation to the capabilities and responsibilities of the Lebanese Armed Forces in order to identify what the Lebanese Armed Forces need in order to carry out the tasks prescribed in resolution 1701 (2006)", according to resolution 2004 of 30 August 2011. In practice, the dialogue often boils down to a discussion of the material claims that the LAF makes to the troop-contributing countries.

17] On the possibilities of a new Lebanese-Israeli conflict, see "Drums of war: Israel and the Axis of resistance", Middle East Report N 97, ICG, 2 August 2010 or "A third Lebanon war", Contingency Planning Memorandum N.8, Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations, July 2010.

18] 1978 "Operation Litani", 1982 "Operation Peace in Galilee", 1996 "Operation Grapes of Wrath" and 2006 "Operation Change of Direction".

19] The Israelis mainly use the security argument (protection of the villagers who have obtained Israeli citizenship) to end the military occupation of the northern part of the village of Ghajar, cut in two by the "blue line".

20] Under international pressure (resolution 1559 of 2004), Lebanon resolved to engage in a "national dialogue" aimed at disarming the "Blue Line". 20] Under international pressure (resolution 1559 of 2004), Lebanon resolved to engage in a "national dialogue" aimed at disarming all militias present on its territory (in particular Hezbollah) and thus comply with the Taif Accords that put an end to the civil war (1975-1989).

21] Italy (1,205 personnel), Spain (993) and France (909) are the three main European contributors to UNIFIL (official UNIFIL website, <http://unifilunmissions.org>, 3 November 2012).

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