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Chapter 2
The Struggle for Power in Southern Lebanon: Israel, Hizbullah, and the UN Peacekeeping Forces

Susann KASSEM

1. Introduction

My work in this chapter is a critique of international peacekeeping. Following the Cold War peacekeeping was increasingly militarized, and the budget for United Nations peacekeeping missions has been increased from a total of US $3.6 billion in the year 1994 to US $8.27 billion in the year 2016. Furthermore, peacekeeping practices are increasingly merged with more comprehensive state building and civilian activities, such as peace negotiation and dispute resolution, community development, and providing humanitarian assistance and aid in post conflict zones. These practices are implemented with the goal of winning the trust of the local population, in order to facilitate the military goals of the mission. Linking multinational aid with a multinational army is a new form of external domination highly reminiscent of colonialism. Despite using military force, the attempt is to rely on soft power and implementing peacekeeping. Along the lines of similar studies in the field of anthropology, such as the anthropology of development, law, and human rights, my research views the most recent changes to the United Nations peacekeeping in a neocolonial context.

My research analyzes the conceptualization and practices of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), one of the oldest

and largest peacekeeping forces active today, positioned in the South Lebanese border zone since the Israeli invasion of 1978. It is based on ethnographic research that I undertook in the last ten years in rural South Lebanon. I tracked how UN peacekeeping merges military activities with civilian practices of economic, civic and cultural engagement in an attempt to implement an idealized political order in the former colonial world. I especially analyze the role of UNIFIL's mission under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which followed the 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel, after which UNIFIL was much expanded, moving from about 2,000 soldiers to a maximum of 15,000. At this time, the mission was largely staffed by European countries, Italy, France and Spain, which are also leading the mission.

UNIFIL after 2006 aimed to eliminate Hizbullah's political and military activities. Additionally, UNIFIL was much more heavily armed than the previous force. UNIFIL's most recent force is aimed at delimiting the power of Hizbullah, which is largely blamed for the conflict. In contrast, UNIFIL's previous mandate was initially deployed to ensure the withdrawal of Israel's foreign occupying force, which had occupied South Lebanon between 1978 and 2000. Hizbullah, however, is a locally recognized, democratically elected powerful political party that has several members of Parliament and held government ministries in past coalition governments. It is made up of South Lebanese themselves. UNIFIL is largely led by the more general and comprehensive peacekeeping approach that I mentioned before, that combines state building and civilian activities. UNIFIL's mandate omits the historical context of Hizbullah's creation: Hizbullah's resistance was largely aimed against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon.

Geographically my field is mostly encompassing the area of South

Lebanon that lies south of the Litani River, which also defines UNIFIL's area of operations. During my fieldwork I lived in Blida, a small Shia village on the southeastern border with Israel. I stayed there several times for a duration of several months each time, mostly between 2009–2015.

For a long time, South Lebanon was rather peripheral, abandoned and neglected by the Lebanese state. The same cannot be said today, as South Lebanon after 2006 has emerged as a geostrategic center and hub for flows of soldiers and experts, and as a place to which humanitarian and development aid are directed. Figure 1 shows the entrance to the village of Blida. You can see the standard blue welcoming signs that every municipality has, but then in the front you also see one that has been erected by UN peacekeepers with a Nepalese flag. Then, in the background, there's a welcoming poster from the village, showing Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbullah's Secretary-General.

Figure 1. The Entrance to Blida
Source: Author

Figure 2 shows a large Hizbullah flag, on top of the hill in Blida overlooking the village. Blida is one of UNIFIL's hotspots where

UNIFIL often clashes with the local population, which supports Hizbullah, and which I will talk more about in this chapter.

Figure 2. Hizbullah Flag
Source: Author

South Lebanon, as you maybe have already learned, is the main operating area of the strongest single political force and movement in Lebanon, Hizbullah. Additionally, it hosts UN institutions, international government and development institutions, and a whole range of national and international NGOs.

2. Historical Overview

To give a brief historical overview, large parts of South Lebanon were occupied by Israel in the past. Israel first took up positions within Lebanon during their invasion in 1978, as I already mentioned, and between 1982 and 1985, the Israeli army occupied about half of the country reaching up to Beirut and laying siege to the capital in the

summer of 1982. In that year alone it is estimated to have killed 20,000 people. The population of South Lebanon inside the occupied area lived under the arbitrary rule of a hostile foreign military occupation for 22 years. This is also what is largely now UNIFIL's area of operations, where Blida is also located. Hizbullah emerged in the mid-1980s, to resist this occupation, as I already mentioned, while advancing a Shia Islamic revolutionary ideology inspired by Iran. (The evolution of Hizbullah's ideology policies and objectives are beyond the scope of this chapter, so I am not going to focus on them.)

3. UNIFIL in South Lebanon

In stark contrast to UNIFIL's mission, the majority of the South Lebanese population emphasizes Hizbullah's legitimacy as a resistance force that both liberated South Lebanon from Israeli occupation in the past, and regards Hizbullah as the only force that stands ready to defend it when facing Israeli military power in Lebanon. While the last war between Lebanon and Israel was 15 years ago, the last 15 years did not pass without confrontations. Israel's nearly daily reconnaissance overflights and frequent smaller confrontations between Israel in Lebanon create a constant threatening presence in the life of the villages in this border zone. UNIFIL's mission requires it to delimit the power of Hizbullah in a region highly supportive of the organization and where it functions as a military force, political party, social movement and provider of essential services. Figure 3 shows a Hizbullah poster and a UNIFIL vehicle side by side, which depicts the environment I am describing. These two politically opposing camps demonstrate the contrast of the two different social and political orientations, inhabiting a rather a small area of about 1000 square kilometers in South Lebanon. Based on this discrepancy regarding Hizbullah's role,

UNIFIL is generally rejected and distrusted by the majority of the South Lebanese population. The distrust of the UNIFIL mission also results from the fact that UNIFIL is only stationed on the Lebanese side of the border, thereby subjecting the South Lebanese population to surveillance by foreign military troops of up to 15,000 peacekeepers, an international mission highly reminiscent of colonial supervision. There is no equivalent to UNIFIL's mission on the Israeli side of the border from which the most violent attacks have been launched, which adds to people's suspicions towards UNIFIL. So how is UNIFIL able to implement a mission that is largely opposed by the local population? This is where my research looked at the role of UNIFIL's civic engagement activities and public relations campaigns. My research analyzes how UNIFIL's implementation is negotiated daily on the ground among a population, which regards UNIFIL with suspicion and is unsupportive of its mission.

Figure 3. UNIFIL Vehicle and Hezbollah Poster
Source: Photo by Reuters/Aflo

(1) UNIFIL's Public and Private Transcripts

In its public performance, UNIFIL presents itself as a successful

peacekeeping operation valued by the local population that has been responsible for the relative peace between Israel and Lebanon since 2006. On UNIFIL's website, and in the public outlets in local TV and radio stations, it advertises its work and good relationship with the local population. Pictures and videos of UNIFIL peacekeepers helping the local population in various undertakings such as assisting during the olive harvest and teaching children in schools. My research reveals a different political reality. UNIFIL's public performance — how the peacekeepers presented their work to me and in public — was quite different from what I was able to observe on the ground.

During my research, confrontations between the local population and the international peacekeeping forces happened very frequently. Confrontations did not only happen when UNIFIL was actively searching for Hizbullah weapon depots, but especially in more day to day occurrences, such as when UNIFIL drove through villages, entered local school buildings, observed the border, or tried to meet villagers outside of an official setting within the municipality. The cause of conflicts was rooted in UNIFIL's goal to contain Hizbullah's movement and its power. The majority of the South Lebanese population highly supports Hizbullah as indicated and opposes UNIFIL's attempts to contain it. The population is suspicious of UNIFIL's behavior, and they often view it to be taking Israel's side in the conflict.

(2) Blue Line Border Confrontations

The borderline between Israel and Lebanon at several places such as in Blida, has never been fully delineated or enforced. One of UNIFIL's goals is to demarcate the border in order to seek to ease tensions between the two states. UNIFIL began the ongoing demarcation of the border in 2000, after Israel withdrew from Lebanon, in order to confirm the withdrawal. UNIFIL refers to the temporary line as the "Blue Line,"

which is supposed to serve as an unofficial and temporary solution in the absence of mutual recognition and a peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel. The Blue Line is still disputed, and at places such as in Blida, highly contested, as it cuts through olive groves and an ancient well.

In opposition to UNIFIL's view, many villagers in Blida regard the Blue Line as yet another effort in a series of western attempts to control their land, dating back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and competing French, British and Zionist claims over Lebanon, Syria and Palestine.

After having discussed the confrontations between UNIFIL and the local inhabitants, I want to now focus on the question, how is UNIFIL able to establish a basic amount of acceptance among the local population and present its mission as successful, as we have seen earlier, despite these confrontations? This is where I argue the role of UNIFIL's "Quick Impact Projects" is important and deserves attention.

4. UNIFIL's "Quick Impact Projects"

In order to improve support for the UN peacekeeping effort, the so called "Quick Impact Projects"(QIP) became a major subject of my analysis. QIPs are small scale and quickly implementable short-term development projects. They cost usually up to US $25,000 each and can consist of anything from teaching language lessons, yoga courses, to providing electricity generators to the villages and other infrastructure improvements. My research examines UNIFIL's QIPs as one of United Nations peacekeeping's key institutionalizations. UNIFIL and its troop of contributing countries' budget for QIP amounts to approximately US $5 million yearly, which constitutes a considerable amount on a small territory like South Lebanon.

For example, in Blida, as I briefly mentioned, the villagers were against UNIFIL's Blue Line demarcation as it cuts through locally

owned olive groves and cuts access to an ancient well, that, if the boundary were to be strictly demarcated, would become off limits for the villagers and would lie in the Israeli territory. Villagers from Blida protested this Blue Line demarcation over several months. When UNIFIL tried to hinder the people visiting the well they would make their protest larger and louder.

In order to avoid people's protest against the Blue Line in Blida, UNIFIL funded several water-related projects in the village: It improved the water distribution system by pipelines, built a water tower, where water can be connected and stored, and devoted a lot of time and money, much more than the usual US $25,000 per village towards this project, about at least three times this amount. Yet villagers kept visiting the well and protesting the Blue Line demarcation in this area ignoring UNIFIL's attempt to demarcate a new borderline. UNIFIL's approach fails to address the historic value and meaning of the border demarcation for people in this area. The demarcation should be seen in a context of previous border demarcations and appropriations of land that I mentioned before.

While the villagers ignored UNIFIL's efforts, and kept on visiting the well, UNIFIL was still able to present this mission as a successful one, precisely through the funding of the QIPs. When funding projects, UNIFIL celebrates inaugurations with the local population, invites the local mayor and leader to inaugurate a project, and takes nice pictures showing them working happily hand in hand with the local population.

QIP projects primarily serve two essential functions: to institutionalize and legitimize UNIFIL's mission among the local population, and then as tangible evidence to present the mission as a success to international stakeholders. UN peacekeeping practices merge development practices with military activities to reach political goals that fundamentally alter the sovereignty of the host state in the

furtherance of foreign-directed political goals. In UNIFIL's case, this essentially presents political roles of the European powers leading the mission.

The objective of UNIFIL's CIMIC (Civilian Military Coordination) and Civil Affairs department is to convince the local population that UNIFIL's presence and projects for the region are beneficial for them. I argue this comprehensive scope of the UN peacekeeping framework, which includes military practices as well as peace negotiations, dispute resolution, and community development shows typical characteristics of a neocolonial government project, on par with a state. My research shows that while municipalities accept the funding of the QIP, they resist the implementation of the political goals of the mission, such as implementing the Blue Line, or letting UNIFIL search houses and enter villages freely or have contact with the local population outside of formal events organized through municipalities.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, in reality, the tensions and the conflict still exist. UNIFIL, which is supposed to be an "interim" peacekeeping force has not been able to make itself redundant in over 40 years of its presence in South Lebanon. UNIFIL's mission portrays the conflict as a Lebanese problem that is due to the presence of Hizbullah and the unstable economic situation. This, however, excludes the long history of conflict from the Israeli occupation, as well as land appropriation. The majority of the South Lebanese population does not support Hizbullah because of economic underdevelopment, but due to the long-term Israeli occupation and ongoing Israeli violence that the border communities face.

By excluding the regional context, especially any consideration of Israeli agency in producing the situation, while attempting to contain a

social and political movement that is concerned with addressing Israeli intervention in Lebanon, UNIFIL's deployment lacks parity. It favors one side of the conflict — Israel — while subjecting South Lebanon to an international mission, highly reminiscent of colonial supervision. For this reason, the local population does not support the aim of UNIFIL's mission. They likely never will, as long as disarming Hizbullah along the border with a historic adversary with one of the most powerful militaries in the world remains the aim of the mission.

Unlike UNIFIL's mission, which isolates Hizbullah's role in South Lebanon and presents it as primarily responsible for the Lebanon-Israeli conflict, my descriptions of the research environment and the political situation indicate peace and war in South Lebanon do not exist in a vacuum, but are a products of regional and international development and contestations over political power. My research depicts Hizbullah as only one of the multiple forces in the field, both internal and external, that are vying for power and influence in the region, including UNIFIL itself. Without a political solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict, any peacekeeping mission will be able only to survive, but not to solve the root issue of the conflict, namely the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian refugee question. UNIFIL's Blue Line initiatives and other activities signify the emphasis on a security approach, which is limited to its own established boundaries. Two decades after the end of Israeli occupation, and 15 years after the war of 2006, southern Lebanon remains a stronghold of social, political and military support for Hizbullah. Little else could more clearly indicate the frustrations or even failure of UNIFIL's mission, or more precisely that of its main Western Security Council sponsors in the aftermath of the 2006 war.

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