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Editors' Forum **Hot Spots**

# Reflections on UNIFIL's "Impartiality" Amidst Israel's Genocide

FROM THE SERIES: [Another Season of War in Lebanon](#)



Ramia, South Lebanon. February 2025. Photo by Munira Khayyat.

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“Peace? What is peace?” Peace is . . . my life, I am supposed to decide about my life, without anybody violating my land. Peace gives no country the right to invade my country and occupy my land, to march in, whenever it wants, and act like it wants in the whole region. No. If there would be sanctions [against Israel], yes, that would change the situation.

– Mayor of a front-line village, May 2009

The quote above is from an interview that I did in my village, one of the villages situated on the southern border of Lebanon that was destroyed by Israel over the course of the last seventeen months. The mayor headed the first municipality after the end of Israel's occupation, which resumed its work in 2004. The interview took place in the *riad* of his house on a Sunday afternoon in May. The room was filled with the smell of *zaatar* that was drying on a large blanket. The mayor and I discussed the role of Hizballah's military resistance, which he supported. While talking about UNIFIL, he underlined several times that people here don't want anything other than a right to exist and a desire to be listened to by the international community.

He was very critical of UNIFIL's role: “Are they here to make peace? Peace for whom?” and then he continued to tell me about how only a few months ago two farmers were kidnapped from the village while tending to their land without UNIFIL's intervention. “Where were you, we asked? We demand our rights in regard to Israel's crimes [...] so that they

forbid the violations on Lebanon.” Throughout our discussion, his three sons curiously peeked their heads out of their room, and at the end of the interview, they came out and joined us. All three boys were close in age, about six years and under. One of them asked their father about who I was. “She is from here, *ya baba*,” the father lovingly told his son.

Amidst Israel's genocide in Gaza, the most recent war between Lebanon and Israel has recently brought attention to UNIFIL, the international peacekeeping force stationed in south Lebanon. Throughout my long-term fieldwork on UNIFIL in South Lebanon, many inhabitants have expressed criticism of UNIFIL's purpose and actions, particularly its policies toward Israel. UNIFIL had been stationed in South Lebanon as an “interim” force since 1978 to ensure Israel's withdrawal from its invasion that year, its largest to that date. However, since Israel remained in Lebanon, so did UNIFIL. After the 2006 war its mandate was expanded under UNSCR 1701 and grew from about 2,000 soldiers to up to 15,000. UNIFIL's mandate prior to 2006 was designed to ensure the withdrawal of a foreign occupying force. However, its [renewed mandate](#) sought to replace the power of Hizballah, the party it sees as responsible for the 2006 war, with its own and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The extent of UNIFIL's disarmament efforts became the subject of a prolonged internal political [debate](#) and continuous [confrontations](#) between UNIFIL and inhabitants of south Lebanon. There is no equivalent mission operating in Israeli territory, even though of the two parties Israel has launched the most violent attacks, usually in clear violation of international law.

Much as scholars have analyzed the politicized nature of peace and development interventions in other contexts, UNIFIL's military and civilian activities in south Lebanon are designed to change the Lebanese political landscape. UNIFIL regards southern Lebanon, not Israel, as the area to be pacified. The meaning of efforts to curtail one of the few groups militarily committed to limiting Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza deserves further attention. UNIFIL's current mandate claims to be restoring Lebanon's sovereignty through its aim to replace Hizballah's authority in South Lebanon with their own and with that of the Lebanese

army. Here lies a basic contradiction at the heart of UNIFIL's mission: state sovereignty is dependent on the intervention of foreign troops who are tasked with carrying out key military and surveillance activities within Lebanon. After 47 years, this allegedly "interim" force has only grown, rather than shrank.

In September 2009 I spoke with one of the farmers who had been kidnapped by Israel. He walked me to his olive groves and showed me where he had been abducted along the undemarcated border with what is called occupied Palestine here. Part of UNIFIL's role, is to demarcate and monitor violations of the Blue Line, an unofficial boundary between Lebanon and Israel based on British, French, and Israeli colonial campaigns. However, UNIFIL only monitors the border on the Lebanese side. It does not patrol Israeli-occupied parts of south Lebanon that are in direct violation of the Blue Line, such as the village of Ghajar and the occupied part of the Sheb'a Farms. The farmer's olive groves, which belonged to his family for generations prior to the founding of the state of Israel, are on the Israeli side of the [Blue Line](#). Every time this farmer visits his groves, including the day I went with him, UNIFIL records a violation. Regarding UNIFIL the farmer told me, "[they] see with one eye only." He continued to tend to his olives every day, despite Israel's threats and the attempted authority of UNIFIL and the LAF, "just to demonstrate that this is my land, and they are not able to take it away from me."

The inhabitants of this village repeatedly demonstrated UNIFIL's boundary demarcation. Many saw it as yet another Israeli appropriation of land. Villagers claim to have lost up to 80 percent of their farmland to Israel in the past, mostly in 1948, and refuse to give up more of it. Yet, UNIFIL's mandate does not contextualize these claims historically. UNIFIL saw this village and people's protests as a problem area and responded by [expanding](#) humanitarian and development efforts. To keep villagers away from a historic well that the Blue Line cuts through, UNIFIL funded several projects to improve its access to water resources. When the villagers continued the protests despite this, UNIFIL officers thought the protests to be politically motivated by Hizballah. As a Civil Affairs representative I talked to in December

2014 relayed to me: “this shows you that it is not just about water for them, because if it was, they would have stopped after we funded the project there.” She had no awareness nor sympathy for the villager’s graspable fear of losing more land.

UNIFIL’s public relations conceal its political ambitions in Lebanon behind its humanitarian relief efforts. For example, in this war, UNIFIL has [drawn attention](#) to its efforts to help trapped villagers to flee, coordinate funeral processions, and provide provisional shelter and aid for some of the [displaced](#) (prior to Israel’s ground invasion and ongoing occupation). These are all important, needed, and welcomed interventions. Rather, the discrepancy between UNIFIL’s political and humanitarian dimensions is the key driver of its conflicts with inhabitants of south Lebanon. This is especially highlighted in a situation of war. UNIFIL’s reports over the last year of war between Lebanon and Israel were very explicit about its political role: it conducted increased patrols targeting Hizballah activities, including what it calls “counter-rocket-launching [patrols](#),” in which it tries to detect any positions from which actors in Lebanon have been firing at Israel. It has also monitored and reported the [presence](#) of armed men, arms, and the location of tunnels. Hizballah’s presence south of the Litani and actions are considered violations of [UNSCR 1701](#), and reported to Israel.

UNIFIL’s mission presents Hizballah as the major reason for the weakness of the Lebanese state. Such a stance omits acknowledgment of Hizballah’s *raison d’être*: its creation out of the twenty-two year-long Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, as well as Israel’s continued military and political hostility. Many view the Lebanese state as having stood idly by during this war that has overwhelmingly targeted its Shi’a community, and has even withdrawn the LAF from parts of the south in accordance with Israeli requests. It allows UNIFIL to relay sensitive reporting to Israel during a devastating war on its population and territory. These actions, and many similar decisions over decades, have undermined popular confidence in the LAF as the defender of Lebanon’s people and territory, and has led scores of southern Lebanese to look beyond the state for protection from Israeli actions. Furthermore, the civil

authorities have not prioritized the region's development, much like other rural peripheries, leaving social movements to redress this marginalization by Beirut. Hizballah's hegemony in South Lebanon cannot be understood outside of this context.

Sixteen years after my above interviews with the mayor and farmer, Israel has ethnically cleansed our village. It's springtime now, the *zaatar* is growing wild, but there is no one in the village left to pick it. Israel destroyed key infrastructure in this and other border villages, so that even after its troops withdrew at the end of February 2025, it continues to be difficult for people to return. The former mayor's house is one of the 450 of about 1,000 houses in the village that Israel destroyed completely. One of his sons, now in his early 20s, was killed as martyr for Hizballah at the end of October 2024. Israel burned much of the village's farmland along the border with white phosphorus. It uprooted many of its olive groves. Israel expanded its occupation of south Lebanon once more during this war. It continues to occupy [five strategic hills](#) and adjacent farmland, including one very close to this village. Israeli settlers have already visited and reoccupied the gravesite of Sheikh Abbad in the nearby village of Houla. Images of settlers in South Lebanon provide a grim premonition of what will happen to these border villages if the Lebanese side of the border is not defended militarily. The farmer's insistence to continue tending to his olive groves to avoid losing his land has, sadly once again, proven to be true. And UNIFIL? It now monitors Israel's new, militarily imposed, boundary.

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