**Hezbollah Ritually Humiliates the UN**

By: Tony Badran

Tablet Magazine

September 16, 2018

https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/270867/hezbollah-lebanon-unifil

In what is becoming a yearly ritual, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2433 end of August, extending the mandate of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for another year. The usual actors played their familiar scripted roles: Hezbollah restated its red lines through its habitual threats. Hezbollah’s little helper, “the Lebanese government,” demanded the world continue with the status quo and otherwise keep quiet, and, finally, the Europeans, namely France, led the charge at the UN Security Council to ensure the Lebanese got what they wanted, and blocked any attempt by the United States to introduce amendments to the mandate.

There was one change from last year’s performance, however. Whereas a year ago U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley expressed optimism at the minor and entirely cosmetic changes the United States did manage to introduce, this year, Amb. Haley didn’t even attend the voting session and declined to issue a statement afterwards.

This was fitting, as UNSCR 2433, like its predecessor UNSCR 2373, is an abject failure. What was lauded last year as an improvement, which was supposed to enhance UNIFIL’s freedom of operation, of course always in coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), predictably proved hollow. In fact, Hezbollah made a point to underscore that fact.

On August 4, following a well-established modus operandi, Hezbollah orchestrated an attack on a UNIFIL patrol in the town of Majdal Zoun, north of Naqoura. “The locals”—a Hezbollah tongue-in-cheek euphemism—spotted the Slovak unit taking pictures and surrounded it and obstructed its path. When the patrol tried to escape, the Hezbollah “locals” attacked it, damaging its vehicles. As the patrol moved on, Hezbollah operatives in nearby villages cut it off again, attacked it, confiscated some of its weapons, its cameras and equipment and set fire to their vehicle near the headquarters of the Italian contingent. Later on, Hezbollah “negotiated” the return of the equipment through the LAF, clarifying precisely the role the LAF plays in Lebanon, that of Hezbollah errand boys.

The attack was part of a concerted Lebanese messaging campaign—itself now a fixed annual ritual—in the lead-up to the UNIFIL mandate renewal. In particular, the messaging targeted the incoming UNIFIL force commander as well as France. The message was the same as ever: follow the red lines Hezbollah sets, don’t think about changing UNIFIL’s mandate, or else.

As usual, the pro-Hezbollah newspaper al-Akhbar was the preferred conduit for these threats. Addressing the incoming Italian commander of the force, Maj. Gen. Stefano Del Col, al-Akhbar advised the new UNIFIL commander to understand that his mission is “to keep the peace in the south, and not to protect Israel’s security.” Consequently, it added, “he should jettison NATO and Chapter 7 experiences which are impossible to implement in Lebanon.”

The Hezbollah mouthpiece also addressed the French—in keeping with last year’s practice—dispensing with the veneer of subtlety altogether: “the French have approached the matter of renewing the international force’s mandate not as a file which concerns Israel’s security, but as one which concerns French national security, considering the presence of French officers and soldiers in south Lebanon (around 1,200 soldiers). And so they responded to the Americans’ requests by rejecting any attempt to amend UNIFIL’s mission—out of their concern for the security of their soldiers in the south.”

The French seem to have obliged once more. Reportedly, the United States wanted to introduce a condemnation of Hezbollah’s armed activity by name—incredibly, a resolution about armed activity in south Lebanon never mentions the group by name—as well as of Hezbollah’s environmental organization, “Green Without Borders,” which has observation posts along the Blue Line under the cover of environmental work. Apparently, this was not acceptable to the other members of the Security Council.

The United States did manage to add an expression of “concern” over the publicized visits last year by commanders of Iranian-led Shi’ite militias to the Blue Line. Needless to say, there was no holding the Lebanese to account. Instead, when not praising them effusively, UNSCR 2433 robotically continues the practice of urging more international funding for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in order to extend “the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory.”

All of which underscores why this approach is a fool’s errand. It’s not just because not one European country would agree to any meaningful changes to the UNIFIL mission, but also because the force’s mandate is predicated on coordination with the Lebanese government and the LAF. That would be the LAF which chaperoned Hezbollah’s media tour along the Blue Line last year. As for the Lebanese government, a couple of weeks ahead of the vote to extend UNIFIL’s mandate, the Minister of Finance Ali Hassan Khalil declared in an interview that in 2006, “There were those who thought of taking advantage of the Israeli aggression to pounce on the Resistance and the weapons of Hezbollah.” Khalil then added, “Today, it is forbidden to raid the Resistance’s arms depots, and any idea of pulling the arms to beyond the Litani River, we refuse to even discuss.” That is, lest anyone harbor any illusions about what “coordinating” with the LAF and “extending government authority” actually mean.

Naturally, Washington ignores this inconvenient reality. At the same time, the United States managed to add to the UN Secretary General’s reporting obligations a request for “an annex on the implementation of the arms embargo.” It should make for interesting reading, considering that Iranian airliners fly in weapons straight into Beirut Airport. However, one must question the point of it if we’re not going to hold the Lebanese to account, and instead continue to churn out inanities about “strengthening state institutions.” For if there’s one thing more useless than UNIFIL, it’s the Lebanese state with which it’s required to coordinate.

The failure reflected in UNSCR 2433 is an outgrowth of the abject failure and ludicrousness of U.S. policy in Lebanon. As a result, any attempt to tweak the existing, flawed framework ends up in the realm of the absurd. Take for instance UNIFIL’s Maritime Taskforce. In its bid to cut spending, the US is looking to reduce the Taskforce, ultimately leading to its termination. There is little doubt about the ineffectiveness of the Taskforce, since, like UNIFIL more broadly, it cannot interdict and board vessels, and must refer them to the LAF. Over more than a decade, it referred 10,500 suspicious vessels to the LAF, which unsurprisingly found none to be carrying arms. The times such cargo ships get interdicted is when the Israeli navy does it, as happened in 2009 with the MV Francop, which was carrying hundreds of tons of Iranian arms to Hezbollah.

But what UNSCR 2433 does is to call on Lebanon “to develop a plan to increase its naval capabilities, including with appropriate support from the international community” so that the Taskforce’s responsibilities could transition to the LAF, as the latter’s capabilities are built up. In other words, the proposed remedy to the ineffectiveness of UNIFIL and the direct, active complicity of the LAF in facilitating arms smuggling to Hezbollah, is to … give more money to the LAF. I mean, what better way to spend the money we would save from funding UNIFIL?

Both the LAF and UNIFIL share the same objective of not disturbing the status quo, which is to say, not to cross Hezbollah’s red lines. In turn, this raises a question about the point of underwriting this arrangement altogether, while pretending UNIFIL is doing something that it clearly cannot and will not do. Instead, UNIFIL has become more akin to yet another UN aid agency. It clears minefields, and works “together with the Lebanese authorities, in creating the conditions conducive for the population to build their future.” It also “works closely with many municipalities and local authorities to strongly support their communities.” It even hires Hezbollah members and supporters!

Beside that, UNIFIL, as Hezbollah’s effective threats have demonstrated, functions as hostages or human shields of sorts. As the pro-Hezbollah al-Akhbar put it, after it relayed the group’s threat, “the ‘internationals’ [UNIFIL] have proved that what matters to them most is to finish their term without any Israeli aggression.” That is, do the time, keep the peace with Hezbollah, and don’t rock the boat.

In other words, the UNIFIL mission will continue to be a waste of time and money. Its mandate will continue to be predicated on coordination with the LAF, especially as no contributing state will want to risk the safety of its soldiers. Which is to say, the whole affair is an elaborate make-believe. We make believe UNIFIL is doing its job. Washington makes believe the LAF is a real option for advancing the US interest in Lebanon, which is the disarmament of Hezbollah. Since this is not reality, the US government compensates this failure with platitudes and Arab-style poetry about the LAF as the “sole legitimate defender” of Lebanon, and about the “reactivation of Lebanese state institutions,” and other meaningless words.

Perhaps we should start to consider bringing down the curtain on the whole sorry play.