

The UNIFIL II Mission in Lebanon: Italy's Contribution

Lucia Marta *

Theme: Italy has contributed to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) since 1979 and is the first contributor to UNIFIL II since 2006.

Summary: Italy has contributed to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon since 1979, its ITALAIR being the mission's longest-serving unit. After the fighting in July 2006 on Lebanese soil, Italy joined the leading group of European countries that promoted a new UN mission, mandate and force (UNIFIL II). Italy organised a diplomatic Conference in Rome on 26 July 2006 that helped to approve Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) on 12 August under "Chapter VI plus". As of 30 June 2009, Italy deploys 2,662 troops –more than France (1,444), Indonesia (1,248) and Spain (1,044)–, reflecting the importance of the UNIFIL II mission in Lebanon (Operation 'Leonte') for the Italian authorities.

Since then, Italian troops taken an active role in its implementation and UNIFIL II was under the Command of Major General Claudio Graziano from February 2006 to February 2010. This ARI describes the mandate, activities and contribution of Italian troops in monitoring the cessation of hostilities along the border (the Blue Line), the permanent deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces in Southern Lebanon, assistance to the Lebanese Government in securing its borders and the disarmament of armed groups in the area of operations.

Analysis: The United Nations mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was deployed in 1978, following the Israeli intervention to create a security zone separating the two countries, and the subsequent Security Council Resolution (SCR) 425 (1978) and 426 (1978). A small peacekeeping force was given the task of monitoring the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon and assisting the Lebanese Government to restore its authority in the southern part of the country. In the following years, other minor and major conflicts broke out (1982, 2000) and the Hezbollah party was created, supported by the Arab population and backed by Syria and Iran, especially from the logistical point of view (weapons and equipments). UNIFIL was unable to prevent violent events, targeted murders from Israel (a Hezbollah leader in 1992) or the launching of rockets from Southern Lebanon across the border mainly due to the force's small size, weak mandate (use of force only in self-defence) and the uncooperative attitude of the parties involved.¹

The years between 2001 and 2006 were a period of relative calm along the Blue Line, with UNIFIL forces reduced to a minimum (200 peacekeepers). Nevertheless, Hezbollah continued to stockpile weapons and to reinforce its position in the south, while Israeli forces continued to occupy some territories –including the Sheba'a Farms, part of the

* Research Fellow at the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Paris

¹ See N. Ronzitti & F. di Camillo, 'Italy's contribution to UNIFIL II', in N. Pirozzi (Ed.), *Strengthening the UN Security System, Quaderno IAI*, nr 11, Rome, 2007.

village of Ghajar and an adjacent area north of the Blue Line—. The spark that ignited the latest war between Israel and Lebanon on 12 July 2006 was the launching by the Hezbollah militia of a series of rocket attacks against Israel and an incursion into Israeli territory that attacked a patrol, killing two Israeli soldiers and capturing two. Immediately, a major conflict erupted and the Israel's response was to invade Southern Lebanon and carry out air raids on the country, including Beirut. The hostilities ended 34 days later, on 14 August.

Following a series of diplomatic efforts, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1701 on 12 of August under its 'Chapter VI plus'. The Resolution strengthened the previous UNIFIL mission (hereafter UNIFIL II) through an increase in the Peacekeeping Force (to 15,000), a more robust mandate and a set of mandatory provisions (such as the imposition of an arms embargo). In addition to its previous activities, the new Mission had to:

- Monitor the cessation of hostilities.
- Accompany the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in their deployment in Southern Lebanon.
- Help ensure humanitarian aid.
- Assist the government in keeping Southern Lebanon free from militias and foreign forces and to disarm armed groups.
- Assist the Lebanese government in securing its borders to prevent the entry of weapons and related materials.

UNIFIL II is deployed between the Litani River and the Blue Line and peacekeepers can use force beyond cases of self defence. Nevertheless, since Resolution 1701 was the result of a tough Security Council negotiation, it contains ambiguities, especially with regard to the use of force while carrying out certain activities, such as those related to the disarming of Hezbollah. In particular, when the mandate (*italics added*) 'authorizes UNIFIL to *take all necessary action* [...] to ensure that its area of operations is not utilized for *hostile activities* of any kind, to resist attempts by forceful means to prevent it from *discharging its duties* under the mandate of the Security Council' it seems to permit the use of force when 'duty' means 'assisting' the LAF in disarming Hezbollah. Does this mean only after the LAF has requested assistance or also on UNIFIL's own initiative when confronted by armed Hezbollah troops, even if not engaged in hostile activities? The question was the subject of debate in Italy, although the answer was finally negative, at least according to UNIFIL II's Commander General Graziano.²

The Italian Contribution

Among other diplomatic and political initiatives, Resolution 1701 was adopted following intensive diplomatic efforts aimed at finding a common position among different countries. Within the Security Council, indeed, national positions were far distant: France sought a strong Resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and an immediate ceasefire, while the US had publicly backed Israel in its bid to defeat Hezbollah. Negotiations delayed the adoption of a Resolution, an embarrassing stalemate that was overcome at a diplomatic conference held in Rome on 26 July 2006. The left-centrist Government of Romano Prodi took this important political initiative due to Italy's interests in the Mediterranean but also to fulfil promises made during the recent election campaign regarding the new and strong

² See Tramballi, 'Inizio positivo, ma dateci tempo', interview with UNIFIL Force Commander General Graziano, *Il sole 24 Ore*, 2/IX/2007, and the speech of Defence Minister Arturo Parisi before the Defence and Foreign Affairs Commissions at the Senate, 4/X/2006, <http://www.senato.it/lavori/index.htm>.

international role he wanted Italy to take on (especially after the decision to withdraw from Iraq for internal political reasons). The conference was co-chaired by Italy and the US and was attended by international institutions and 15 States, although Israel was absent.³ The final declaration stated the need for a ceasefire in the short term (not immediately) but achieved nothing else, given Israel's absence. Another important political initiative was undertaken on 7 September, when the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Tel Aviv and managed to get the Israeli naval blockade lifted by offering the Italian Navy to patrol Lebanese waters⁴ until a Maritime Task Force led by Germany with the participation of other European countries could be deployed. This proposal was accepted by the parties involved and by the UN. The blockade was lifted the day after the Italian vessels Garibaldi, San Giorgio, San Marco, San Giusto and Fenice formed the 'Interim Maritime Task Force in support of Lebanese Navy for the control of the territorial waters'.

The diplomatic initiatives were successful thanks to bipartisan support for the UNIFIL mission, expressed by the two main coalitions (the centre-left Democratic Party, leading the government until May 2008, and later the centre-right coalition Popolo delle Libertà), including its establishment, renewal and confirmation in debates in Parliament.⁵ Only the right-wing *Lega Nord* asked for more robust rules of engagement to enhance troop protection, although the government (before and after May 2008) sought to maintain the existing rules. Public opinion, despite a significant pacifist movement contrary to any kind of armed intervention abroad, supported UNIFIL II on the basis of the existence of the UN resolution approving the peacekeeping mission.

On the military side, Italy has also played an important role, both in its decision to lead the mission and in committing a relevant number of troops (encouraging other European States to follow), as reflected in the assignation of key places in UNIFIL II's command structure. At a strategic level, the Italian General Giovanni Ridinò was appointed head of the *ad hoc* Strategic Military Cell (SMC) established in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) in New York. In March 2007 the French General Bruno Neveux took over, with Italy's Captain Giuseppe Guglietta as Deputy Director. The DPKO included the SMC (also on Italy's initiative) specifically for the UNIFIL II mission. The initiative had at least three purposes: (1) to support the DPKO with a pool of military experts; (2) to create a stronger link between New York and the theatre of operations; and (3) to involve key troop-contributing countries (like Italy) in the military planning at the strategic level.⁶

In the theatre of operations, the mission's command was held by France until February 2007 (General Alain Pellegrini) and thereafter by Italy. Major-General Claudio Graziano, who was confirmed by the UN for the second time until February 2010, acts not only as a the Military Force Commander of UNIFIL II in Naqoura –thus being responsible for the protection and coordination of more than 12,200 troops from 29 different countries– but

³ Other participants in the conference were Canada, Cyprus, Egypt, the EU (High Representative for CFSP, Finnish Presidency, European Commission), France, Germany, Greece, the Holy See (observer), Jordan, Lebanon, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, the UK and the World Bank. Israel was invited by Condoleezza Rice during her visit to Israel on 24 July but refused to take part (probably because the conflict was still open and given its absence of diplomatic relations with Lebanon and Saudi Arabia).

⁴ 'Il ruolo della Marina Militare nella crisi libanese', *Rivista italiana difesa*, nr 2, February 2007, p. 53-57.

⁵ See, for instance: Minister of Foreign Affairs Frattini to the Senate, 27/V/2008; Ministers Frattini and La Russa (Defence) to the Foreign affairs and Defence Committees of the Chamber and the Senate, 11/VI/2008; and discussions on the renewal of the international missions at the Chamber, 21/I/2008.

⁶ The Cell was set up under an Italian and French initiative in order, according to General Carlo Jean, to remove direct control over the mission from the DPKO, which had not achieved good results in the past (C. Jean, 'L'intervento nel Libano e gli interessi nazionali italiani', *Affari Esteri*, nr 153, January 2007).

also acts as the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative (since UNIFIL II, unlike other UN missions, was not provided with such a representative). Moreover, and more importantly, it is under his coordination that a series of tripartite meetings between UNIFIL II, LAF and Israeli Defence Force take place regularly. Given the lack of diplomatic relations, these meetings are the sole forum for discussion (albeit on mainly technical matters, such as Israel's withdrawal and the visible marking of the Blue Line) and for confidence-building, exemplifying UNIFIL II's role in promoting political dialogue.

In military terms, although it is a UN mission, UNIFIL II is mainly composed of European troops (6,664 out of 12,370 as of April 2009), particularly Italian (2,845), French (1,461) and Spanish (1,050).⁷ As far as the Maritime component is concerned, Italy's mission in the Lebanon first involved rescue and humanitarian action (Operation Mimosa) and subsequently patrolling activities ([Interim] Maritime Task Force), both within a national framework first and later a multinational one. A few days after the IDF's decision to enforce a full naval blockade of Lebanon in order to prevent Hezbollah from receiving weapons and related material, under pressure from the international community Israel allowed the establishment of humanitarian corridors to allow the evacuation of foreign citizens and the supply of humanitarian aid. It was estimated that 25,000 US, 20,000 French, 15,000 Canadian and several thousand other European citizens, including around 1,000 Italians, were in Lebanon at the time. On 16 July the Italian Navy reached the port of Beirut and evacuated the first group of 340 people to Cyprus. The Italian Navy destroyer Durand de la Penne and two Italian Air Force C-130Js were deployed, supported by the joint helicopter component already in the theatre since 1978. By the end of July around 1,600 people had been evacuated by Australia, Canada, France, Italy, the UK and the US by air and sea.

Moreover, on 23 July, the Italian Navy's amphibious transport ship San Giorgio was the first to disembark naval units and helicopters carrying 120 tonnes of humanitarian aid, and Civil Protection and Red Cross personnel to Beirut. The amphibious transport ship San Marco also landed Italian Civil Protection personnel and tons of medical aid. Other countries also contributed to the humanitarian mission until it was completed on 23 August. Moreover, European countries, including Italy, responded to the urgent request from the Lebanese authorities for support to contain the damage created by a major oil spill along the Lebanese coast.

As regards the Maritime Task Force, Italy assumed the responsibility of patrolling the Lebanese coast and managed to have the Israeli naval blockade suspended, while the multinational Maritime Task Force 448 (TF 448) was preparing to take over the mission. TF 448 is the naval component of the UNIFIL II mission whose task is to prevent the illicit trafficking of weapons and related material to Lebanon, in accordance with Resolutions 1701 and 1773, besides supporting the Lebanese Navy by patrolling the country's territorial waters. TF 448 comprises maritime units from Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey. In March 2008 a European maritime force, Euromarfor, was formed by France, Italy, Spain and Portugal as part of the UNIFIL II mission under the command of Admiral Ruggiero Di Biase of the Italian Navy, with France taking over in September 2008, Belgium in February 2009 and Italy again in May 2009. Naval operations included patrolling and inspecting vessels destined for Lebanese ports. In

⁷ These figures include maritime and land components. Data updated to April 2009, available on the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations website <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/>. Other important non-European contributors to UNIFIL II are Indonesia (1,246 troops), India and Ghana (880) and Nepal (868).

March 2009 the vessel Artigliere replaced Comandante Foscari, after 1,300 hours of navigation and the identification of more than 400 vessels.

In the mission's land component, Italy participates in UNIFIL II as part of 'Operation Leonte'. The Italian General Carmelo De Cicco commands the western UNIFIL II sector and is in charge of two Italian, one French and one Ghanaian battalion and troops from South Korea and Slovenia. The Italian troops deployed before December 2006 supervised the Israeli withdrawal, while subsequent units engaged in logistic support and specialised activities such as engineering, transmissions, civil-military cooperation (CIMIC), non-conventional threats (CBRN) and explosive ordnance disposal, together with aerial support. The second phase of deployment included mechanised infantry battalions from Italy and other countries. Besides the implementation of the UN Resolution SCR, one of the most important challenges for the UN land component was gaining the trust of the Lebanese population and the local authorities. This was not immediately achieved and it required intensive communication efforts together with the implementation of quick-impact projects (for which the UN allocated US\$500,000 per year) and other CIMIC activities provided by national funds. These activities ultimately contributed to enhancing the contingent's security and, according to some analysts,⁸ 'whereas stone-throwing at UNIFIL II units by the local population was a regular, even daily occurrence during the initial period of its deployment, after May 2007, such demonstration of anger towards UNIFIL had been largely eradicated, with perhaps one or two such incidents a month by the end of 2007'. Trust, however, was predicated on UNIFIL sticking to a narrow interpretation of Resolution 1701 and not adopting a pro-active stance towards the disarmament of Hezbollah units.

Finally, the Italian Government requested and the Parliament authorised a financial commitment to UNIFIL II of around €415 million for 2008 and €194 million for the first half of 2009. The budget includes both the land and maritime components, civil-military cooperation programmes and assets for the Lebanese Armed Forces (Laws nr 45 of 13/III/2008, nr 183 of 20/XI/2008 and nr 12 of 24/II/2009). Moreover, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has financed cooperation and emergency programmes in Lebanon worth over €200 million.⁹

Mission Assessment: Outcomes and Shortcomings

An assessment of Italy's contribution should focus on the outcomes and shortcomings of the entire mission, considering that these results are also, but not only, Italian results. In this regard, the most important achievements of UNIFIL II have been the pacification of the Blue Line, a success compared with the previously unstable situation, and the deployment of the Lebanese Army in the south of the country after decades of being absent. The overall situation has remained stable despite the fragile cessation of hostilities and agreement with Israel and occasional tension between internal factions in the north of the country (in May 2008). UNIFIL II has helped to prevent the escalation of violence into the civil wars of the past. The presence of LAF and UNIFIL II forces has ensured respect for Resolution 1701 and peace at the southern border. However, some doubts were certainly raised about UNIFIL II in May 2008, when heavy fighting broke out between Christian and Shiite factions, especially after the LAF –still UNIFIL II's partner, according to General Graziano^{–10} failed to react to the *coup d'état* staged by Hezbollah in

⁸Karim Makdisi et al., 'UNIFIL II: emerging and evolving European engagement in Lebanon and the Middle East', *Euromesco Paper 76*, January 2009, p. 25.

⁹ http://www.ambbeirut.esteri.it/Ambasciata_Beirut/Archivio_News/090129+Tavolo+Confronto.htm.

¹⁰ See the interview with General Graziano, 'Unifil ultima chance per il dialogo politico', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 13/V/2008, p. 13.

the capital city, and the Government's power was strongly undermined. Nevertheless, the situation did not deteriorate further during the Gaza crisis (December 2008-January 2009), despite the sporadic launching of rockets from the Lebanese side and the response of artillery fire from Israel, although the appropriate precautionary measures were adopted by the Italian contingent.¹¹

Regarding the Maritime component, achievements include training of the Lebanese Navy in border control and patrolling activities, enhancing their operational capabilities and developing joint maritime operation procedures, together with the UN, Israeli, and even Syrian navies. In January 2009 the Lebanese navy took over responsibility for inspecting vessels approaching Beirut. Israeli flights over Lebanese airspace above the sea by Israel also allowed the development of early warning procedures.¹² Also, it should be mentioned that UNIFIL II carries out humanitarian activities, especially in relation to medical and educational services, including lectures on the danger posed by cluster bombs. This is important from a practical point of view, but also has a symbolic value, since the reconstruction of welfare structures in Southern Lebanon was usually undertaken by Hezbollah, *de facto* replacing the Government and gaining popular support.

Finally, there is also a political and diplomatic achievement: UNIFIL II chairs monthly tripartite meetings that allow dialogue on security issues and confidence building between the parties involved (ie, IDF and LAF). This is the only existing forum of discussion between Israel and Lebanon, as they have not yet re-established diplomatic relations.

In March 2009, General Graziano admitted that Southern Lebanon was quiet, although not completely so since terrorist activity persisted (although Hezbollah's implication in launching rockets at the beginning of 2009 has not yet been confirmed).¹³ There is also the risk of potential exchanges of rocket and artillery fire (see the *Ninth Report of the Secretary-General on Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006)*, 3/III/2009, S/2009/119), not to mention the remaining weapons stockpiles in the area. This is perhaps the part of the mandate in which the Lebanese Government, and indirectly UNIFIL II, have not yet gained satisfactory results: the border with Syria is still used to transfer weapons and related material to Hezbollah, contributing to potential instability in the long term and giving Israel a cause for and a reason for not cooperating. Weapons trafficking has been publicly denounced by the Israeli authorities, with Israel's Ambassador to the UN having denounced Hezbollah for rearming and blamed UNIFIL II. Moreover, the Israel newspaper *Haaretz* openly blamed Italian troops and General Graziano on its front page for being negligent in assuring that Resolution 1701 was being complied with (precisely for not using force against Hezbollah troops suspected of transferring weapons).¹⁴ Despite General Graziano's statements about the lack of evidence of weapons being transferred across the frontier, an independent task force submitted a UN security border report to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon on August 25 2008, confirming Israeli claims ('the overall situation renders Lebanon's borders as penetrable as they were one year ago', *Report on the Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team II*, S/2008/582, August 2008). The Report also stated that one of the causes was that Lebanese border-control officials lacked the necessary equipment, procedures and coordination among the various agencies involved and thus recommended the establishment of a border commission with

¹¹ See 'Massima allerta per i soldati italiani in Libano', *La Repubblica*, 4/I/2009, p. 4.

¹² See General Graziano, 'A window of opportunity for sustainable peace', *UNIFIL magazine*, nr 4, February 2009, p. 8-9, <http://unifil.unmissions.org/portals/UNIFIL/Magazine/issue04/English-%20issue%2004.pdf>.

¹³ See 'Libano, nuova fiducia con l'aiuto di UNIFIL e dei soldati italiani', *Avvenire*, 31/III/2009, p. 15, and the *Ninth Report of the Secretary-General*, p. 4.

¹⁴ 'Hezbollah è cinque volte più potente, ma per UNIFIL "é tutto Ok"', *Il Foglio*, 17/VIII/2008, p. 3.

funds and equipment. Indeed, elsewhere it was recognised that there was a need to improve Lebanese territory and border control capabilities (J. Kéchichian, 'A Strong Army for a Stable Lebanon', *Policy Brief*, nr 19, The Middle East Institute, September 2008) and beyond the legitimate suspicions about a lack of will, above all, on the part of the Lebanese Forces, what this reveals is the mission's lack of a training component for local forces, an element that is increasingly present in most international peacekeeping processes. Finally, UNIFIL II has neither prevented the IDF from flying over Lebanese airspace nor stopped Israel from occupying part of Lebanon, in violation of Resolution 1710. Neither has UNIFIL II gained Israel's cooperation in providing information about the number and location of cluster munitions dropped during the war (from July 2006 to March 2009 27 civilian were killed and 238 injured by cluster munitions, together with 14 fatalities and 43 injured due to clearance activities, according to the UN Secretary General's Report).

Conclusions: Considering the mission's mandate, the general outcome of UNIFIL II can be considered positive. Three of the mandate's five goals have been fulfilled, with doubts about the achievement of the last two (to assist the Government to keep Southern Lebanon free from militias and to disarm armed groups, and to assist the Lebanese Government to secure its borders). The last two points, however, requires that UNIFIL II supports the LAF, who are responsible for the country's security (including border control and disarming militias). The poor results achieved in this respect are important and need to be addressed, but cannot be attributed exclusively to UNIFIL II. Moreover, both issues are also the most politically delicate since resolving them would require a stronger mission under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, for which there was no political agreement among the main international players.

On the other hand, a couple of suggestions for UNIFIL II could be advanced: a strong training component to the mission and a commitment to provide the LAF with the necessary equipment and procedures. UNIFIL II's naval component has already adopted this approach with very good results, including maritime border control. Similarly, some States have adopted the same approach through bilateral agreements: eg, Germany trained Lebanese officers to use a coastal radar system that was handed over to the Lebanese authorities in February 2008. This should probably accompany the temporary strengthening of UNIFIL II (with additional manoeuvring units at company level) in order to intensify territory patrols, as requested by the UN Secretary General, especially after the likely intensification of Hezbollah activities following the Gaza Crisis. Apparently, it is not yet time for a gradual downsizing of the international troop contingent.

Meanwhile, the strong political and financial support of the international community for the LAF, Lebanese institutions and civil society should be ensured in order to consolidate internal stability while the window of opportunity created by the peacekeeping mission is still open. Indeed, UNIFIL II does not have the ambitious goal of achieving internal political stability: this is a fundamental issue that must be solved in non-military forums, given its undoubtedly relation with the Middle East's general state of instability.

Considering the leading role played by Italy –including political and diplomatic efforts and the important contribution at the command level both in New York and in the field– and the considerable amount of resources and troops engaged –in terms of equipment, professionalism and training–, UNIFIL II's success reflects the positive contribution made by Italy.

Lucia Marta, Research Fellow at the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Paris