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Editors: Sławomir Dębski, Patrycja Sasnal, Wojciech Lorenz

The Role of Poland's Return to UNIFIL in its Policy Towards the Middle East

Sara Nowacka

The return of the Polish contingent to the UNIFIL peacekeeping mission in Lebanon after a 10-year break will have a positive impact on Poland's image at the UN and confirms its commitment to global security. While cooperation between UNIFIL troops and the Lebanese Army (LAF) is progressing nearly flawlessly, Lebanon is facing a financial crisis that has led to a sharp decline in the LAF's logistical and operational capabilities. Supporting the LAF will be important in the further fight against paramilitary organisations in UNIFIL-controlled areas, including the dominant Hezbollah, which also spreads Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine.

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Lebanon in Polish Foreign Policy

In recent years, Lebanon's significance as an important point of reference for Polish politics in international organisations has grown. In line with the announcements of President Andrzej Duda in 2015 regarding "Poland's greater contribution to the maintenance of peace and security," in 2019 the Polish military contingent (PLMC) returned to participate in the UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) peacekeeping mission. Additionally, from April last year, Joanna Wronecka, a Polish diplomat and former Permanent Representative of the Republic of Poland to the United Nations, became the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon. This involvement was part of Poland's efforts to become a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 2018–2020,¹ and then of the Human Rights Council in 2020–2022.²

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The situation in Lebanon is also significant in the implementation of the goals of Polish policy towards the Middle East concerning combating irregular migration and Russia's influence in the region, mainly because of the civil war in Syria, bordering Lebanon. The war became an opportunity for the Russian authorities to strengthen their presence in the Middle East and build an international image of a force that stabilises this country. The Lebanese authorities recognise that Russia's presence in Syria facilitates the return of refugees now in Lebanon and who are blamed for weighing on state services and the financial system. Therefore, the authorities' attitude to Russia's role in the region remains positive, and in addition, Hezbollah, one of the largest Lebanese parties, supports Syrian state leader Bashar al-Assad in addition to Russia.

Irregular Migration

Since 2011, Lebanon has been a vital migration point for those fleeing the Syrian civil war. Counteracting irregular migration from the Middle East to the EU has been one of the main assumptions of Polish policy towards the region since the refugee and migration management crisis of 2015–2016,³ and thus support for Lebanon is part of the efforts to address the root causes of mass movements of people. For this reason, in September 2018, Lebanon was added to the list of priority recipients of Polish development aid.⁴ The Polish government, while paying attention to the limited capabilities of the Lebanese state, decided that the earlier humanitarian aid focused mainly on support of the Syrian refugees was insufficient. The enrichment of Polish support with a development component was aimed at improving the living conditions of the Lebanese themselves, who were exposed to deterioration in the quality of services provided by a state whose infrastructure had been "outgrown" by the admission of thousands of Syrians. However, even though Lebanon was granted priority status, the total amount of support provided as part of bilateral development assistance to this country has decreased since 2019. In 2018, it amounted to PLN 18.5 million, in 2019 to PLN 8.5 million (a year-on-year decrease by 54%),⁵ and in 2020 to PLN 15.5 million (about 17% lower than in 2018).⁶

When the financial crisis began in Lebanon in 2019, the risk of irregular migration of Lebanese increased. According to a report by the Central Statistical Office of Lebanon and the International

¹ R. Tarnogórski, S. Zaręba, "Poland on the UN Security Council," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 1 (1574), 3 May 2018, www.pism.pl.

² R. Tarnogórski, "Poland Joins the Human Rights Council," *PISM Spotlight*, No 55, 25 October 2019, www.pism.pl.

³ S. Nowacka, "Polityka Polski wobec państw Bliskiego Wschodu i Afryki Północnej w latach 2018–2019," *Rocznik polskiej polityki zagranicznej, 2019*, PISM, 2021.

⁴ "Liban został wpisany na listę priorytetowych odbiorców polskiej pomocy rozwojowej w 2018 r.," Polska pomoc, www.gov.pl/web/polskapomoc.

⁵ Polish Development Cooperation, "2018 Annual Report," Polska pomoc, www.gov.pl/web/polskapomoc; Polish Development Cooperation, "2019 Annual Report," Polska pomoc, www.gov.pl/web/polskapomoc.

⁶ "Polska Oficjalna Pomoc Rozwojowa (ODA) 2020," Polska pomoc, www.gov.pl/web/polskapomoc.

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Labor Organization (ILO), more than 30% of the Lebanese workforce is unemployed, and 48% among people between 15 and 24 years of age.⁷ The average monthly salary in 2018–2019 was the equivalent of about \$1,500 but that has fallen to just \$150 among people with higher education. The economic breakdown and the lack of trust in the corrupt government meant that nearly half of Lebanese in 2021 declared their intent to emigrate (63% of people between 18 and 29 years of age).⁸ The progressive deterioration of living conditions influenced the presence of Lebanese among the groups of migrants trying to get to Poland and other EU countries through the territory of Belarus.⁹ However, despite the actions of tourist agencies in Lebanon cooperating with Belarus, the Lebanese state authorities reacted to the requests of Polish diplomacy and suspended the issuance of visas to Belarus and flights to Minsk, which stopped migrants from traveling this route.¹⁰

Hezbollah's Cooperation with Russia

From the Polish perspective, the situation in Lebanon is gaining importance in connection with efforts to limit Russia's degradation of international security. The social divisions in Lebanon resulting from a political system in which access to power is designated to given religious groups prevent the Lebanese authorities from taking a firm stance on the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Although Lebanese sympathise with Ukrainians as victims of foreign aggression, the state authorities avoid gestures of firm support for Ukraine or the Western states assisting it. This was evident, for example, in the votes at the UN General Assembly where Lebanon supported a resolution condemning the Russian aggression but did not vote on Russia's exclusion from the Human Rights Council.

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This ambiguity is related to the influence of Hezbollah, which is dominant on the political scene in Lebanon. This Shi'ite party, with its own militias constituting one of the strongest irregular armed forces in the world, and despite the Lebanese state's assumption of neutrality to the war in Syria, supported Bashar al-Assad in the fight against the rebels. Actions to prevent a change of power in Syria are consistent with the goals of Russia in the Middle East, which has been supporting Assad militarily since 2015, allowing him to regain control over most of the country.¹¹ In 2018, Duda described Russia's support for Assad and its cooperation with Iran (Hezbollah's main partner) as destabilising for NATO's southern neighbourhood.¹²

Common goals in Syria contributed to political rapprochement between the Hezbollah and Russian authorities. The organisation maintains constant contact with representatives of Russia. In March 2021, Hezbollah leaders met in Moscow with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, where they discussed how to improve communication between the group and the Russian authorities. A month later, Hezbollah announced that it was planning to open a representative office in Russia.

⁷ K. Farah, R. Tabbara, "Almost one-third of Lebanon's labour force is unemployed: survey," *L'Orient Today*, 12 May 2022, <https://today.lorientlejour.com>.

⁸ "Arab Barometer VI, Lebanon country report," Arab Barometer, 2021, www.arabbarometer.org.

⁹ Author's conversations with representatives of Polish diplomacy, April 2022.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ S. Nowacka, "Syria: The End of Isolation? Arab States Seek to Normalise Relations," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 83 (2281), 16 April 2021, www.pism.pl.

¹² "Address by the President of the Republic of Poland at the Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Poland's President Andrzej Duda," 28 May 2018, www.prezydent.pl.

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Hezbollah and Russia also support each other's policy narratives in the region and in the world, both in international organisations, in relations with other countries, as well as for internal needs. In 2019, for example, Russia attempted to remove points relating to "Hezbollah's destabilising activity" in a resolution extending the mandate of the UNIFIL mission. When the U.S. reintroduced them, Russia threatened a veto.¹³ It also criticised the recognition of Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation by some countries (including the U.S., Canada, and the EU). In turn, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which was officially condemned by Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdalla Bou Habib, Hezbollah separated itself from the state's position and criticised it as inappropriate and not agreed with all parties present in parliament. The party's leader and Shi'ite clergyman Hasan Nasrallah stated—in line with Russian propaganda—that the U.S. is responsible for the war in Ukraine.

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Hezbollah's rhetoric resonates in Lebanese society, which is distrustful of the U.S. because of its support for Israel and its Middle East policy, seen as imperialist. This is especially visible in regions where the Shi'ite population is dominant. Russian flags appear more and more frequently in the south of the country (where UNIFIL operates), inhabited mainly by members of this religious group. The cross-border nature of Hezbollah's actions and its cooperation with other, mainly Islamist political organisations strengthens Russia's role in the Middle East and facilitates its access to militants, whom it recruits to support its activities in Ukraine.

Importance of the UNIFIL Mission for the Situation in the Middle East

Conflict in Southern Lebanon

The repeated occupation of Lebanese territories by Israel has resulted in an extremely hostile attitude towards the latter and high legitimacy for Hezbollah among Lebanese, especially in the south of Lebanon. Israel invaded Lebanon for the first time in 1978 in connection with the escalating attacks by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) on the Israeli population from within Lebanese territory. In March 1978, the UN Security Council approved the mandate for the UNIFIL mission, urging Israel to cease military operations in Lebanon and withdraw from its territories. The UN's actions were also aimed at restoration of the full power of the Lebanese state in these territories, contested both by the Israeli army and Palestinian groups. However, the then ongoing Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) allowed Israel to indirectly control the south of Lebanon, thanks to the cooperation with the Christian militia of the Lebanese Free Army.

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In 1982, Israel once again invaded the territory of Lebanon, occupying the territory of West Beirut, except for the south of the country. The Israeli army then took part in the Sabra-Shatila massacre.¹⁴ Its soldiers were securing the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp when Christian militants (including the Free Army of Lebanon) murdered between 763 and 3,500 Palestinian refugees from the Shatila camp and Lebanese living in the Sabra district (mostly Shi'ites). In the same year, Hezbollah was founded on the initiative of Shi'ite clerics disappointed with the participation of other Shi'ite parties in talks with Christian militia leaders. Its task was an armed resistance to the Israeli occupation, including

¹³ B. Ravid, "Days After Netanyahu-Putin Meeting, Russia Threatened to Veto anti-Hezbollah Move Led by Israel and U.S. at UN," *Haaretz*, 6 September 2017, www.haaretz.com.

¹⁴ S. Aude, Sabra and Chatila, "Violence de masse et Résistance – Réseau de recherche," 14 March 2008, <https://www.sciencespo.fr>.

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terrorist activities, such as suicide bombings. In addition to targeting Israeli troops, Hezbollah attacked targets in the U.S. and France, and killed Lebanese politicians, especially those who criticised the influence of Syria, which, along with Iran, supported the militia.

Fighting Hezbollah and other Shi'ite militias became the main goal of the Israeli troops, which retreated to South Lebanon in 1985 while continuing to cooperate with Christian militias. Israel's actions included forcing mass displacements (by destroying housing and entire villages), raids killing civilians (including one at the UNIFIL mission in Qana), restrictions, and curfews. This led to more and more support for Hezbollah, an increase in its actions, and protests from the population. As a consequence, Israeli troops withdrew completely from Lebanon in 2000 (except for the territory of the disputed Sheba farms), which ended the period of the conflict in southern Lebanon (1985–2000). However, this did not end the hostility between Hezbollah and Israel.

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In July 2006, there was another escalation between their forces following a militia attack on an Israeli border patrol during which fighters killed three and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. In retaliation, the Israeli army launched an invasion of southern Lebanon and numerous bombings within the country, including Beirut. Hezbollah responded with rocket attacks on northern Israel and guerrilla warfare. Israel suffered significant losses (e.g., lost 52 tanks) and failed to achieve its goal of depriving Hezbollah of its operational capabilities, which was a success for the group and increased its legitimacy in Lebanon. In August 2006, the UNSC passed Resolution 1701, and Nasrallah declared that Hezbollah would honour its calls for a ceasefire, which allowed the suspension of military action. The deal, however, only stipulates the suspension of fighting, and Hezbollah and Israel remain in a state of war.

UNIFIL: Role and Legal Framework

The UNIFIL mission was established in 1978 under UN Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426 to monitor the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon and assist the authorities in restoring their full legitimacy and control in the south of the country. At that time, 5,931 soldiers from nine countries took part in the mission.¹⁵ Since the withdrawal of the Israeli forces in 1978, the functions of the state in the south of Lebanon were effectively carried out by other militias. This was initially a consequence of the conflict between Lebanese militias, and later of Hezbollah's growing social legitimacy as the only effective defender of the inhabitants of this part of Lebanon against Israel.

The number of UNIFIL employees has decreased since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, but another conflict in 2006 was a breakthrough in the mission's activities and resulted in its

UNIFIL aims to support LAF in deploying troops to the south of the country, cooperation with the governments of Lebanon and Israel, and ensuring with the Lebanese army that the zone between the blue line and the Litani River is free from armaments and troops outside the control of the LAF and UNIFIL.

enlargement, extension of the mandate, and modification of the so-called blue line.¹⁶ The current shape and objectives of the mission are regulated by UN Resolution 1701 of 2006, which initially increased the staff number to 15,000. At the same time, in addition to monitoring the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah and preventing another escalation of the conflict, UNIFIL aims to support LAF in deploying troops to the south of the country, cooperation with the governments of Lebanon and Israel, and ensuring

¹⁵ A. Olender, "Znaczenie udziału w misjach pokojowych dla pozycji międzynarodowej polski na przykładzie misji UNIFIL," *De Securitate et Defensione. O Bezpieczeństwie i Obronności*, no. 1 (5), 2019, pp. 155–167.

¹⁶ The "blue line" is the line demarcating the area of the temporary withdrawal of Israeli troops, constituting a negotiated border between Lebanon and Israel.

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with the Lebanese army that the zone between the blue line and the Litani River is free from armaments and troops outside the control of the LAF and UNIFIL. In addition, UNIFIL is to provide civilians with access to humanitarian aid, enable safe return of displaced persons to the south of Lebanon, and support the Lebanese authorities in preventing unauthorised persons from crossing the state borders.¹⁷ Currently, the mission employs around 10,000 personnel (military and civilian), and its annual budget is about \$500 million.

In order to fulfil the assumptions of the resolution, UNIFIL soldiers perform 30% of patrols together with LAF soldiers, carry out joint exercises, and organise training for the Lebanese army. To support the deployment of LAF troops, UNIFIL transferred some of its positions to them. Liaison officers successfully mediate between Israeli and Lebanese forces when they are put on alert following a firefight between militias in Lebanon and the Israeli army. They also disarm explosives and monitor areas that were likely used by Lebanese militias to mount attacks on Israeli territory. Since 2006, UNIFIL has cleared nearly 5 km² of 47,221 explosives and unexploded bombs.¹⁸

An important part of UNIFIL's activities is building relations with the inhabitants of southern Lebanon, which has a positive effect on the image of the UN (accused by Lebanese Shi'ites of pro-Israel policy). This is the responsibility of the Civil-Military Cooperation Team (CIMIC). It carries out tasks in the field of development and humanitarian aid, education (e.g., technical and medical) and participates in meetings of UNIFIL representatives and local authorities. These activities are also intended to improve the security and economic situation in the region, encouraging the return of displaced people (according to the Lebanese authorities, all those displaced as a result of the 2006 war have already returned to the south of the country).¹⁹

Poland in UNIFIL

Poland became involved in the UNIFIL mission in 1992. At that time, a Polish medical company consisting of 86 soldiers joined UNIFIL, which took over the field hospital in An-Naqura and created the Polish Military Medical Unit (PolMedCoy), focusing primarily on the evacuation of victims of the hostilities. By the end of 1996, three more units had joined it (the Logistics Battalion in Naqura, the Group of Engineering Sub-Units in Jwayya, and the Repair Sub-Units Group in Tybnin). In 2000, 629 Polish soldiers and civilian military personnel participated in the mission.²⁰

A change in this approach to involvement in UN peacekeeping activities was brought about by Poland's plans to apply for membership in UN bodies.

As a consequence of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, the size of the Polish contingent in Lebanon began to decline. In early 2006, the number of troops dropped to 205, only to increase slightly again in the same year following Israel's third attack against Lebanon.

The new government strategy of 2009 regarding the participation of the Polish military in foreign missions gave priority to the involvement of NATO and the EU. Increasing the participation of Poles in the NATO mission in Afghanistan and its high costs led to a reduction in the presence of Poles in UN missions.²¹ In the same year, Polish soldiers withdrew from the UNDOF mission in Syria, MINURCAT in Chad, and UNIFIL in Lebanon.

¹⁷ A. Olender, "Znaczenie udziału ...," *op. cit.*

¹⁸ "People for Peace: Dreaming of a mine-free Lebanon," United Nations Peacekeeping, 31 May 2022, <https://peacekeeping.un.org>.

¹⁹ Reliefweb, "No new displacement but causes of past conflicts unresolved," 30 December 2010, <https://reliefweb.int>.

²⁰ K. Korzeniewski, *Liban*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie DIALOG, 2004.

²¹ A. Olender, "Znaczenie udziału ...," *op. cit.*

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A change in this approach to involvement in UN peacekeeping activities was brought about by Poland's plans to apply for membership in UN bodies. In 2015, the Polish authorities again started seeking participation in peacekeeping missions. As a consequence, in 2019 the Polish contingent returned to UNIFIL. Its core consists of soldiers from the 12th Mechanised Brigade in Szczecin. The country forming the core of the battalion joined by the Poles is Ireland (where most of the soldiers and the battalion's command come from), and additionally a small group of Hungarian soldiers under the Polish command. The PLMC has more than 230 people, and in addition to soldiers, the Polish contribution to the mission also includes Rosomak wheeled armoured personnel carriers, HMMWV (Humvee) vehicles, and medical evacuation vehicles.²² Soldiers are stationed at Camp Shamrock on the blue line in the southeast of Lebanon.

In addition to participating in daily patrols and preventing arms smuggling and escalating tensions, the PLMC supports the regional authorities through aid projects, the scale of which depends on the annual budget allocated by the Polish government. The permanent presence in the region and especially contacts between Polish CIMIC employees and local mayors allows for the implementation of projects that are a direct response to the needs reported by local governments. They are a key form of building trust and improving the image of the UN in southern Lebanon, as well as positive recognition of Poland's role in the region. For example, a project was launched in 2021 in cooperation between the PLMC and the Polish Centre for International Aid (PCPM, the main Polish non-governmental organisation operating in Lebanon). Soldiers and PCPM employees installed solar lamps to increase safety on the streets after the number of hours of electricity supplied by the state dropped to around 2–3 per day as a result of the financial crisis.

UNIFIL: The Most Important Challenges

Hezbollah's Role

The continued presence of Hezbollah fighters and armament in southern Lebanon is the most controversial in the context of the mission's effectiveness and the main argument in the Israeli criticism. The key obstacle in this respect are the socio-political divisions in Lebanon, which different parties use to create conflict between various Lebanese religious groups to further their own interests, leading to weakness of state institutions. The people of southern Lebanon do not see the state as guarantor of their security. This role was successfully taken over by Hezbollah, whose success in the 2006 war and active resistance during the Israeli occupation in 1985–2000 legitimised the party as the most effective representative of the Shiites. Currently, Hezbollah owns approx. 45,000 fighters, and its arsenal is estimated at 130 thousand rockets and missiles.²³ Most of the weapons are stored in densely populated areas inhabited by pro-Hezbollah Lebanese, making it difficult for UNIFIL troops to control and dismantle.

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Hezbollah views the United Nations as a tool of "Western imperialism," which translates into the attitude of some in the southern community to the presence of UNIFIL soldiers. There are attacks on UN soldiers, hampering of their movement and work. Residents block patrols, claiming, for example, that the roads UNIFIL is trying to enter are private, as well as preventing them from taking photos as part of the documentation of all UN peacekeeping missions, accusing the soldiers of violating cultural

²² M. Górka, "Żołnierze w drodze na misję w Libanie," *Polska Zbrojna*, 21 October 2019, <http://polska-zbrojna.pl>.

²³ A. Orion, "Hiding in Plain Sight. Hezbollah's Campaign Against UNIFIL," *Policy Notes*, November 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org.

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norms. The activities of some NGOs, such as Green Without Borders, are an additional obstacle. This Hezbollah-linked institution operates on the pretext of re-forestation of southern Lebanon and plants trees in border territories, which makes it difficult to monitor activities such as arms smuggling and provokes the Israeli military.

Hezbollah regularly violates UN Resolution 1701 by organising attacks on Israel, cooperating with other paramilitary organisations, and by smuggling weapons into and out of southern Lebanon. In 2019, the Israeli army discovered a tunnel leading from the village of Ramja to the north of Israel. There have also been attacks by Hezbollah militants on UN soldiers. Between 2006 and 2019, the UNSC recorded at least 114 incidents of violent behaviour, including 34 hand-to-hand attacks, five attacks by melee weapons, four exchanges of fire, and eight involving explosives.²⁴ Hezbollah's main goal is to demotivate the UN soldiers and discourage Western countries from participating in the mission. In 2007, seven soldiers were killed in an attack with an explosive device planted in a car in al-Khaim (one of Hezbollah's most important towns). The killed soldiers were part of the Spanish battalion, famous for its strong involvement in UNIFIL operations, especially just after the war in 2006. After the attack, the Spanish battalion limited its field operations. A similar situation occurred in 2011 when French, Italian, and Irish soldiers suffered four attacks with explosives. A year later, the governments of these countries reduced the size of their contingents.²⁵

Israel

Israel's actions towards Lebanon also hinder the success of the UNIFIL mission. From 1978 to 2006, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon five times, and the restrictive and brutal policies applied by Israel during the occupation additionally contributed to the radicalisation of the society. At the same time, Israel's unjust and brutal policy towards the Palestinians resonates in the south of Lebanon. The escalation of disputes between the Arab and Israeli communities in Israel and Palestine translates into attacks by the Palestinian militias still present in southern Lebanon on Israel (the last one took place in April this year). Israel, in responding to gunfire, often destroys civilian infrastructure, and as a result there were also deaths of civilians and a UNIFIL soldier in 2015.

From 1978 to 2006, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon five times, and the restrictive and brutal policies applied by Israel during the occupation additionally contributed to the radicalisation of the society.

Israel is also violating UN Resolution 1701 in its actions against Hezbollah in Syria. The involvement of the Shi'ite militia on the side of Bashar al-Assad increased the threat perception of Hezbollah given its presence at the Israeli-Syrian border, which resulted in an Israeli agreement with Russia that allows Israel to carry out attacks on Hezbollah facilities in Syria. These attacks involve violations of Lebanon's airspace by the Israeli air force.²⁶

Israel is also involved in building infrastructure that hinders UNIFIL's operations. These are primarily the so-called T-walls (wall made of concrete blocks).²⁷ Some of these structures, due to their location near UNIFIL positions, make it difficult for soldiers to monitor the area south of the blue line, although they are located in key locations to control illegal crossings to Israel.

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ "United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. Report of the Secretary-General," UNSC, 1 June 2020, <https://unifil.unmissions.org>.

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Economic and Political Situation

Currently, one of the key challenges for the UNIFIL mission is the deepening financial and political crisis in Lebanon. The drastically shrinking foreign currency reserves have had a negative impact on

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the wages of the Lebanese military. Before the crisis, high-ranking generals earned around \$5,000 a month (in the local currency), and lowest-ranking soldiers about \$900. Now, though, these amounts have fallen to the equivalent of about \$350 and \$50, respectively. At the same time, a Hezbollah rank-and-file fighter receives about \$500 per month.²⁸ The Lebanese authorities have increased the number of days off

work for soldiers to allow them to take up additional paid employment. In turn, in order to avoid recruitment of Lebanese soldiers to Hezbollah militias in the south, the military mainly directs inhabitants of northern regions to operations in the South. So, they are usually either Christians or Sunni Muslims outside of Hezbollah's target group. Due to the difficult financial situation, the size of the Lebanese army fell in 2019 for the first time in 12 years. In 2018, the military numbered 81,000 soldiers, while in 2019 it was 78,800. The employees of the Polish contingent also confirm a decline in the morale of the Lebanese military and their increasingly limited logistical capabilities.²⁹ This affects the efficiency of operations related to the deployment of LAF troops in the south and their ability to resist Hezbollah's actions.

From the perspective of some countries in the region and Western countries, the LAF is key to maintaining stability in the country, especially as the military is the only institution that enjoys a relatively high level of public trust.³⁰ For this reason, the U.S. in 2021 increased support for the Lebanese army by about 12%,³¹ Qatar started transferring 70 tonnes of food for soldiers in Lebanon in the same year, and UNIFIL increased material aid to the army in the form of vehicles and IT equipment.³²

The financial crisis also has allowed Hezbollah to strengthen its image as an effective force in the country. Its ties with Iran are key as it is the main source of fuel, and the party issues special cards for petrol purchases in its chain stores. Inhabitants of the south, regardless of religion, also declare that they are more willing to use medical services in hospitals owned by Hezbollah because their quality and price are better than those offered by the state.³³

Opportunities and Challenges for Poland

The announcement of Poland's return to peacekeeping missions helped the country succeed in its application for membership in UN bodies and confirmed its commitment to co-creating the international security system. Moreover, the involvement in UNIFIL strengthens the image of Poland as a country supporting security and maintaining peace in the Global South. This may constitute an argument against the rhetoric of Russia and its partners that Western states limit their interests to their immediate environment in discussions in international organisations in the context of the war in Ukraine. This would be favoured by the greater visibility of Poland's participation in peacekeeping missions in the Global South, including Lebanon.

²⁸ J. Ghossaini, "Force for funds: saving Lebanon's army from financial collapse," *Policy Paper*, December 2021, www.thinktriangle.net.

²⁹ Author's conversations with PLMC UNIFIL, April 2022.

³⁰ "Arab Barometer VI," *op. cit.*

³¹ A. Iskandarani, "US to grant \$120m to the Lebanese Army," *The National*, 21 May 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com>.

³² UNIFIL, "UNIFIL gifts vehicles to Lebanese security entities," 11 February 2022, <https://unifil.unmissions.org>.

³³ Author's conversations with PLMC UNIFIL, *op. cit.*

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So far, however, Poland has used the potential of sending the PLMC to Lebanon to influence its interests in the Middle East only to a limited extent. The goals of the mission regarding the

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prevention of the proliferation of weapons and militia fighters in southern Lebanon are in line with the current priority assumptions of Polish foreign policy concerning reducing Russia's negative influence in the world, in this case due to its cooperation with Hezbollah. The organisation supports Russia's destabilising military actions in Syria, thereby strengthening the Russian position in the region. The electorate of Hezbollah and its coalition partners has become a platform for amplifying Russian propaganda in the context of

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not only in Lebanon and Syria but also in other Arab states. In this context, Polish soldiers have faced accusations from the inhabitants of southern Lebanon that Poland is "too committed" to supporting the Ukrainian defence.³⁴

Hezbollah's rhetoric, though, is supported by its social legitimacy, which the party maintains by successfully replacing the state in the provision of health and educational services and by countering the most important threats from the local Shi'ite perspective, namely Israeli actions. This provides the organisation with the ability to hide weapons in residential buildings, attack Israel, and to maintain impunity for actions contrary to the position of the state authorities (such as involvement in Syria). For this reason, UNIFIL is regularly criticised by Israel (and especially by right-wing politicians there), which called for a reduction in the mission during the work on the resolution extending its mandate in 2019. At the same time, both Lebanon and Israel appreciate UNIFIL as an intermediary in talks between the two countries. In addition, the much smaller scale of Hezbollah attacks on Israel from Lebanon compared to those from Syria indicates that the presence of the mission limits the capabilities of the militia in this regard. Poland's joining UNIFIL may therefore constitute an important point of reference in relations with Israel as an active measure that increases its security and the possibility of dialogue with its northern neighbour.

The involvement of Hezbollah and Russia in Syria has also contributed to the intensification of Israeli-Russian relations, despite their conflicting interests in the region, especially those concerning Iran, Russia's ally and Israel's most significant opponent.³⁵ An agreement with Russia was crucial for Israel to be able to respond to Hezbollah air strikes launched from Russian-controlled territories. This cooperation translates into Israel maintaining a generally neutral position towards the war in Ukraine, despite its close relations with the Western world.³⁶

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It is therefore in the interest of Poland to be as effective as possible in UNIFIL by strengthening the structures that counterbalance the Lebanese militia. This can be supported by intensified efforts to improve the living conditions of the Lebanese and the capacity of the LAF. In the next budget for the PLMC, Poland could include more funds for the construction of renewable energy installations in southern Lebanon. The continuation of support and increasing it in this area will not only be a direct response to the most important needs reported by the Lebanese but also will to some extent limit the importance of potential energy supplies from Iran. The support of the Lebanese army also is

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ M. Wojnarowicz, "Israeli-Russian Relations in the Context of the Syrian Civil War," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 48 (1490), 17 May 2017, www.pism.pl.

³⁶ M. Wojnarowicz, "The Price of Neutrality—Israel's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 47, 8 March 2022, www.pism.pl.

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important for weakening Hezbollah's position. Poland could provide the army with material aid especially targeted at its needs in terms of transport, food security for its forces, and access to electricity.

Polish authorities could also consider supporting Polish international aid organisations in the employment of specialists from Ukraine.

The Polish government can also initiate efforts to include Poles in the UNIFIL general staff. This would enable direct participation in the talks of UNIFIL representatives with Lebanese decision-makers, which would allow more effective communication of the Polish perspective on the situation in the Middle East, as well as in the immediate vicinity of Poland. Polish authorities could also consider supporting Polish international aid organisations in the employment of specialists from Ukraine. Their presence, for example, in the south of Lebanon during the implementation of projects in cooperation with UNIFIL, along with increased diplomatic activities in this area, could be a starting point for combating Russian disinformation in Lebanon.