

Destiny of Irish peacekeepers in Lebanon rests on Trump's unpredictable decisions

● The UN Security Council is set to debate whether to renew Unifil's mandate



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The fate of the Irish Defence Forces serving in Lebanon may be hanging in the balance. Later this month the UN Security Council will debate whether to renew Unifil's mandate. This debate will take place in the context of a radically changed geopolitical situation in the Middle East since the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023.

Ever since the UN mission began in 1978, Irish Defence Forces personnel have served in Lebanon.

That 47-year stint is a source of pride but it has not been without its costs. Forty-eight members of the Irish Defence Forces have died while serving in Lebanon, one of the most sustained sacrifices by any national contingent and the highest per capita loss of life of the mission.

The most recent fatality was 24-year-old Private Seán Rooney, who was shot in the head in December 2022 by a Hezbollah mob in south Lebanon.

The man accused of his murder, Mohammad Ayyad, was sentenced to death in absentia by a Lebanese military tribunal last month. Pte Rooney's mother, Natasha, has criticised the expedited nature of these proceedings which she described as a "sham".

Having had three major wars break out under its watch and with an annual cost of half a billion dollars, the Trump administration is asking serious questions about continuing with Unifil's mandate.

In April, Reuters reported: "The White House budget office has proposed eliminating funding for United Nations peacekeeping missions, citing failures by operations in Mali, Lebanon and Democratic Republic of Congo."

Lebanese media report that the US envoy to Syria told Beirut officials that the US would continue the mandate, while some Israeli media say that Washington has already decided to end it.

There is nothing more that Benjamin Netanyahu would like than to exploit the free rein that America has already accorded him in Lebanon, without the burden of international oversight through Unifil.

For the renewal to happen, the UN Security Council's five permanent members — China, France, Russia, UK and the US — must vote in favour. This means Donald Trump has a de facto veto. With the US footing up to 30pc of the annual Unifil bill of \$500,000,000, US support for renewal is far from certain.

The crucial vote comes as Lebanon finds itself once again at a crossroads. Enfeebled previously by extended periods of foreign occupation, its current difficulties stem principally from the activities of a malign internal actor — the Iranian-backed Shia terrorist group Hezbollah.

However, things are beginning to change. Last week the government took a major step in its efforts to re-establish its authority. It ordered its armed forces to establish a state monopoly on arms by the end of this year. Rejecting the call to disarm, Hezbollah denounced the decision as a "major sin".

For over two decades Hezbollah had sufficient votes in the Lebanese cabinet to veto such proposals. However, its political power is waning. Its current five votes in the government were not enough to either delay or veto the disarmament order.

Israel's 20-month war with Hezbollah

had decapitated its leadership and severely degraded the terror group's capabilities.

This was exemplified by Mossad's "exploding pagers" attack in September 2024, in which up to 3,000 of Hezbollah's senior echelon were either killed or seriously injured.

With Hezbollah fatally weakened, under the tutelage of the Biden administration, Israel and Lebanon agreed to a ceasefire in November 2024. Then in early 2025, a long period of political instability and stalemate ended when a majority in parliament elected veteran army commander Joseph Aoun as president, and Nawaf Salam, a prominent lawyer and diplomat, as prime minister.

Lebanon is a rare thing in the Middle East. It is a democracy albeit a dysfunctional one because of its structure, in which key political and institutional positions are allocated according to a strict religious pecking order. Power must be shared between up to 18 different sects.

The political system that was designed to accommodate its complicated religious structure led, in practice, to sectarian competition, chronic instability, government paralysis and systemic elite

corruption. Even the recent massive popular protests against this corruption have served to undermine the state's legitimacy. All of which has opened the door to constant foreign meddling in Lebanon's affairs. Unifil was created to help re-establish peace in 1978 after the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) attacked Israel from Lebanon and Israel invaded south Lebanon in response.

In 2006, following another raid on Israel, this time by Hezbollah, Israel again invaded Lebanon in what is called the Second Lebanon War. The ceasefire established by UN resolution 1701 expanded Unifil's mandate to include overseeing the evacuation of Israeli forces and the withdrawal of Hezbollah to north of the Litani River, about 20km from the Israeli border.

Although Israeli forces withdrew, not only did Hezbollah not budge, but with massive Iranian financial and military assistance it turned south Lebanon into a fortified military zone with tunnel networks and an array of rocket launch sites directed at Israel. All done under the noses of Unifil.

In simple terms, there are three options open to the Trump administration: renew, cancel, or modify the Unifil mandate.

Among the welter of inconsistent decisions that are a defining feature of President Trump, there is one thing about which he has been pretty much steadfast: he has shown a pathological fear of getting dragged into foreign conflicts over which he can exercise little or no control.

To avoid such an eventuality in Lebanon, he may be amenable to a compromise that involves renewing the mandate on condition that Unifil's spending be cut, and that it is given a refocused mission. On the basis of currently available information, that seems the most likely scenario. To be any more definitive than that at this stage would involve reading Donald Trump's mind.

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