

Susann Kassem  
Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies  
PhD Candidate, Anthropology and Sociology, Fourth Year  
September 30, 2015

## **Sylff Research Abroad Final Report**

### **The United Nations Peacekeeping Practice in Southern Lebanon: “The International Community” and Local Autonomy**

#### **Introduction**

This research looks at United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), a peace-keeping force deployed in southern Lebanon since Israel’s invasion of 1978, and subsequently greatly expanded in the wake of its 2006 war on Lebanon. Since its implementation UNIFIL has attempted to serve as a buffer between Israel and Lebanon. Initially UNIFIL was meant to be, as its name reads, an *interim* force; today, thirty-seven years after its first deployment, this research looks at how peace is implemented, interpreted and created in south Lebanon.

In order to understand how “peace” is employed in southern Lebanon, we have to look at how various actors in southern Lebanon interpret and attempt to implement peace. The aim of my research is to understand the definitions of and projects for peace from the perspectives of the major actors in southern Lebanon: UNIFIL, Hizballah, and the local population.

UNIFIL currently operates under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, with the main task to “prevent the presumption of hostilities” and to ensure the establishment “of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the size of the mission was greatly expanded, from 2,000 soldiers on the eve of the 2006 war to a maximum of 15,000 troops, notably containing large European contingents from Spain, Italy, and France. UNIFIL’s goal of establishing an arms free zone in south Lebanon targets the disarmament of Hizballah, a political party, a military organization, a provider of social services, and prominent member of the US Department of State’s list of “Foreign Terrorist Organizations.” Born out of a opposition to Israeli military occupation and repeated invasions of southern Lebanon, Hizballah and its supporters have their own understanding of peace in the region. In the south especially, Hizballah enjoys overwhelming support among the local population. The two oppositional tendencies between UNIFIL and Hizballah create a very interesting dynamic which is unfolding in south Lebanon, on which my research will shed more light.

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Security Council (UNSC), “Resolution 1701” (New York: Official Record S/RES/1701, August 11, 2006), 2-3.

## **My Research**

The Sylff Research Abroad program enabled me to conduct qualitative research on UNIFIL in south Lebanon, Beirut and other cities, from September 1, 2014- August 31, 2015. During this time I was affiliated with the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, which allowed me to discuss my research with Arab, European and American scholars and practitioners. My institutional affiliation also helped me to meet with UNIFIL officials, Lebanese members of parliament and Lebanese Army officials.

Part of my ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in southeastern Lebanese villages in which UNIFIL operates. Another part was conducted in major coastal cities in UNIFIL's area of operation, which host the headquarters and a large UNIFIL population. I observed crucial meetings, inaugurations of projects, and gatherings between municipalities in the south and UNIFIL's Civilian Military Coordination Units. I further observed both UNIFIL Civilian-Military Coordination units and Lebanese civil society in their everyday activities independently from each other. I participated in several social events, festivities and meetings organized by both UNIFIL and local parties and actors. Among these were inauguration ceremonies organized by UNIFIL, local celebrations on occasions such as the liberation day and religious holidays, the provision of development and social/medical assistance. Furthermore I observed and analyzed the media representations of each of the involved political actors.

I conducted interviews with previous and current officials of the Political and Civil Affairs division at UNIFIL, national and international Civil Affairs Officers, Civilian Military Coordination Units of troop contributing countries from Germany, Italy, Spain and Malaysia, local authorities, Lebanese government officials, civil society organizations, local population and members of political parties.

## **Preliminary Research Results**

While much of my data is still being analyzed, my preliminary findings show that there are several political projects for peace competing for influence in south Lebanon. While UNIFIL is supposed to act as a buffer and neutral peacekeeping force between the two warring states, it has not been able to convince the local population of its objectives, which hinders the implementation and sustainability of the mission. Considering UNIFIL's position on only the Lebanese side of the border, its neutrality is frequently called into question by local residents. The absence of the mission's presence on the Israeli side was even a central point in the internal strategic review of UNIFIL, which was pursued at the end of 2011. The review underlines that the establishment of a UNIFIL office in Tel Aviv "remains of critical importance for UNIFIL, to enhance the current level of liaison and allow for a strategic dialogue with the Israel Defense Forces and other Israeli authorities on UNIFIL-related issues." According to the report the Government of Israel agreed

already in February 2007 to the establishment of an office, however there is no comment on why this has not yet occurred.<sup>2</sup> This imbalance creates mistrust among the local population, keeping in mind the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon has an authorization of a maximum of 15,000 soldiers in Lebanon, while there is no presence on the Israeli side.

The inability to implement a more evenhanded approach between the two warring parties prevents the southern Lebanese from supporting UNIFIL's project for peace. The southern Lebanese population often feels threatened by UNIFIL's practices that are aimed to contain their movements and political activities in the area while no similar restraint is placed upon Israel. UNIFIL's inability to prevent daily violations of Lebanese airspace and land incursions further lead the local population to question UNIFIL's capacity to keep the peace in southern Lebanon.

On the other hand, the south houses strong support to Hizballah—one of the leading political forces in Lebanon at the moment. In UNIFIL's area of operation, Hizballah and its allies earn upwards of 70% of the votes in parliamentary elections, and in many areas this majority increases to upwards of 90% of the votes.<sup>3</sup> Due to the long-term Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, Hizballah has become a respected and entrenched authority in the south, precisely due to its military resistance—the very activity UNIFIL's mission calls into question.

Both UNIFIL and Hizballah link their patronage of development projects to their own political ambitions for this region. For both entities, the provision of social services is connected to gaining more access, support and trust from the local population. Hizballah's assistance is openly welcomed but is often exclusive to its own supporters and members. Unlike Hizballah's activities, UNIFIL's political engagement is mostly rejected. While local authorities and the local population willingly accept aid from UNIFIL, they clearly reject political cooperation with UNIFIL, especially when it comes to issues such as disarmament, local surveillance and direct interaction with the local population.

UNIFIL's Civil Affairs and Civilian Military Coordination teams do not directly address the causes and experiences of the conflict during their provision of development projects and social assistance to the local population. This absence is often noted and resisted by the local population, whose experiences of the Israeli occupation and invasions of the past—as well as the constant fear of renewed hostilities—are clearly foundational. For UNIFIL, avoiding direct discussion of the conflict in its civilian activities is a way to express their neutral stand in the conflict. However it is this notion of neutrality that the local population views with suspicion.

---

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Security Council (UNSC), "Letter dated 12 March 2012 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council," (New York: Official Record S/2012/151, March 12, 2012), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Chambers, "Lebanon's 7 June Elections: The Results," *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*, June 9, 2009.

This contradiction lies at the heart of why UNIFIL's force is often rejected while Hizballah and other political parties and local organizations are preferred. This divergence in popular support can be observed especially through local events and gatherings organized by the competing forces, but also through everyday life in southern Lebanon. While events organized by UNIFIL often lack participation, events organized by Hizballah are very well attended by a very large part of the local population.

An enduring peace in southern Lebanon is yet to be realized. In order to understand why peace has not been able to be achieved we have to look at the underlying circumstances and at the process and practices of peace implementation.

The Sylff Research Abroad program enabled me to conduct primary research on the practices of UNIFIL in Lebanon. My research speaks to larger debates on the practice of peacekeeping in various disciplines such as anthropology, political science and international affairs. I am back at my home institution, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies where I will spend the coming months analyzing and writing up my research and completing my PhD dissertation.

Thank you for your support.