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Why International Peacekeepers Cannot Replace the IDF in the Defense of Israel

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's strong statement in June 2013 ruling out proposals for the deployment of international forces to defend Israel was completely understandable given recent events. In light of the deterioration of security in Syria, Austria had just withdrawn its peacekeeping troops, who make up more than a third of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights.

Two other states that had dispatched forces to UNDOF, Japan and Croatia, had already pulled out. Members of the UNDOF contingent from the Philippines had been kidnapped by Syrian Islamists this year, raising question of whether they would continue with their Golan deployment. Netanyahu concluded at his weekly cabinet meeting: "The disintegration of the UN force in the Golan makes trenchant the fact that Israel cannot lean on international forces for its security."[1]

The weakening of UNDOF comes at a time when the U.S. has sought to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. One of the ideas that have been apparently under consideration is for Israel to withdraw its forces from strategic areas in the West Bank like the Jordan Valley and to accept the deployment of international forces instead of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Netanyahu spoke of this scenario when he commented on a future Israeli-Palestinian agreement in light of the collapse of UNDOF: "This agreement will be based on a demilitarized Palestinian state that recognizes the Jewish State and firm security arrangements that will be based on the IDF." [2]

In order to understand the Israeli position on international forces as part of a peace settlement, the following analysis will focus on three dimensions of the issue. First, it will examine traditional Israeli policy towards international peacekeeping forces, given the fact that Israel has had a long experience with this subject which has molded Israeli attitudes in the past about peacekeeping. Second, it is important to understand how the security environment has changed in the Middle East and its implications for peacekeeping operations. Third, it will look at the unique challenges that would emerge if a peacekeeping force was nonetheless deployed instead of the IDF as part of an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement.

Israelis have already formulated their views when asked about the extent to which they are ready to rely on international forces. In a poll conducted during December 2012 by the Dahaf Institute, headed by Mina Tzemach, an Israeli sample was asked whether one can rely on foreign forces to preserve Israeli security after a withdrawal from the Jordan Valley. The poll was ordered by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Only 26 per cent said that Israel could rely on foreign forces, while 68 per cent said that security would only be preserved if it is in the hands of the IDF. Thus there is a strong predisposition in Israeli public opinion against relying on international forces for protecting Israeli security. [3]

True, any analysis of peacekeeping forces should distinguish between several different kinds of peacekeeping missions. Experts draw a fundamental distinction between peacekeeping and peace enforcement. Peacekeeping forces are normally just monitoring units that report to both parties in a conflict that the agreement they signed is being upheld by the other side. In contrast, peace enforcement operations can be empowered to fight against one of the parties. Regardless of these professional distinctions, Israeli public opinion has been molded out of an expectation that peacekeeping forces will stand their ground and fight against an aggressive force seeking to attack Israel.

The Past Record of International Peacekeeping along Arab-Israeli Frontiers

The seminal event that has molded Israeli attitudes to peacekeeping forces was the withdrawal of the United National Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Egyptian-Israeli border on May 18, 1967 on the eve of the Six Day War. After the 1956 Suez Campaign, Israel withdrew its forces from Egyptian Sinai with the assurance that UNEF would be deployed along the border with Egypt. UNEF served as an informal buffer force, which was supposed to observe and report any violations of the cease-fire line.

On the ground, UNEF manned 72 observation posts along the Egyptian-Israeli border. It also was tasked to prevent infiltrations into Israel. As a result, it was authorized to apprehend infiltrators. But UNEF forces were only permitted to use force in self-defense. UNEF could only operate with Egypt's consent, so once President Gamal Abdel Nasser demanded its withdrawal from UN Secretary-General U Thant, the UN felt that it had no choice but

to withdraw from the border area, leaving the Egyptian Army and the IDF facing each other.[4]

When UNEF was formed, the UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold reached an understanding with Nasser that Egypt had a right to ask for the removal of UNEF from its territory, but only after the UN General Assembly considered the question of whether UNEF had completed its mission. Now Nasser was removing UNEF without consulting the UN General Assembly. For Israelis, who did not get into these details in any case, the withdrawal of UNEF was one of the main acts that precipitated the Six-Day War. Rather than prevent a conflict, in Israeli memory, peacekeepers had caused a conflict. At the moment of truth, when the efficacy of international peacekeepers was tested, they completed failed.

Another test for international peacekeepers was the deployment of UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which was created in 1978 to confirm Israel's withdrawal from Lebanese territory, restoring international peace and security, as well as restoring the effective authority of the Lebanese government in the area. UNIFIL did not prevent the increase of the number of Palestinian armed elements in Southern Lebanon nor the border tensions that followed, setting the stage for the 1982 Lebanon War. In the years that followed when the threat of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was replaced by the forces of the Iranian-backed Hizbullah, UNIFIL proved to be ineffective.[5]

Israel completely withdrew unilaterally from Southern Lebanon on May 24, 2000, relying on UNIFIL as one of the components of security along the Israeli-Lebanese border. Five months after the Israeli withdrawal, on October 7, 2000, Hizbullah fired mortar shells and wire-guided missiles on Israeli positions and crossed the fence to abduct three Israeli soldiers. UNIFIL witnessed the Hizbullah ambush and the capture of the Israeli troops; it even had a videotape of the Hizbullah operation.

But UNIFIL did nothing to stop the attack. For a time, UN officials even denied the videotape existed. UNIFIL could have thrown up roadblocks and intercepted the Hizbullah vehicles carrying the Israeli soldiers. Israel hoped the soldiers were still alive, but they had been killed. On January 29, 2004, Hizbullah returned their bodies to Israel in exchange for the release of prisoners. UNIFIL's operations in South Lebanon joined the panalopy of failed UN peacekeeping efforts along Israel's borders.[6]

UNIFIL was supposed to be enhanced and strengthened in the aftermath of the 2006 Second Lebanon War. The UN expanded its mandate. The UN Security Council allowed for its troop strength to increase from 2,000, on the eve of the war, to 15,000. Battalions from France, Italy, and Spain joined UNIFIL and were deployed. According to UN Security Council Resolution 1701, the new UNIFIL was supposed to assist in the establishment of "an area free of armed personnel" in Southern Lebanon between the Israeli-Lebanese border and Litani River. In other words, Hizbullah was supposed to be kept out of the area south of the Litani River.

Unfortunately, Hizbullah has penetrated this zone and stored rockets and other munitions in civilian homes within Lebanese Shiite villages. UNIFIL has not entered these villages to collect these firearms, whose pre-positioning in the area is a blatant violation of Resolution 1701. The presence of these weapons sometimes became known after accidents involving the stored Hizbullah munitions. Arms depots exploded in the village of Khirbit Silim on July 14, 2009 and in the village of Tair Filsay on October 12, 2009. The latter was a private home that served as a weapons warehouse.[7]

UNIFIL's failure to deal with this problem creates a hard dilemma for the IDF in the event of renewed conflict between Israel and Hizbullah. Israel can destroy these rockets that are stored in Lebanese homes which become legitimate military targets under international law the moment they become storehouses of weaponry. But in destroying Hizbullah's weaponry in these villages, the IDF will be putting Lebanese civilians at risk. Israel can also decide to do nothing about the weapons in this zone and thus put Israeli civilians at risk. If UNIFIL would do its job then, Israel will not face this dilemma and civilian lives on both sides of the border can be saved.

The image of international peacekeepers was further damaged in Israel with another deployment in yet another sector. After Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip, the U.S. and its European allies took an interest in safeguarding the border crossing point between Egypt and Gaza, by deploying border monitors. They created the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in November 2005 for that purpose. But the moment the security situation deteriorated after the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June, 2007, the head of EUBAM suspended operations at the Rafah crossing point. Again international monitors were seen fleeing from a critical Arab-Israeli frontier because of rising tensions.

The Evolving Security Environment in the Middle East and its Implications for Peacekeeping

In the aftermath of the August 2003 terrorist attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad, which left 22 dead including UN Envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello, the UN conducted a review of the growing risks to UN personnel in light of the changing global strategic environment. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who emerged as the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, took credit for the attack. The UN panel investigating this question decided that there were new risk factors for UN personnel that included: operations in fragmented and failed states, the blurring of the distinction between civilians and combatants, the fragmentation of armed forces and their weaponry, and finally the rise of religious ideologies which had contempt for the UN. This might have been a description of the situation in Iraq in 2003, but it sounded like Syria, Libya, or many of the states in the Middle East in 2013.[8]

When UN blue helmeted peacekeepers were deployed in the past between two armies, they had a large degree of immunity from armed attack. They were present usually with the consent of the countries whose forces they separated. But in an era in which terrorist organizations were replacing conventional armies as the primary security threat, these groups certainly did not give their consent to the UN presence on the ground. Many Islamist organizations viewed the UN forces as heretical armies that should be forcibly removed from the Middle East. And they included virtually all UN missions, including those bringing humanitarian aid, as a legitimate target.

A member state of the UN will be careful not to cause injury to UN forces, for any attack against them can be expected to lead to a reprisal by the UN Security Council. Terrorist groups plainly do not have such considerations. In fact, they are opponents of the main elements of the current international order; in a 2004 audiotape, Zarqawi explained that he wanted to kill Sergio Viera de Mello because of his past role in the independence of East Timor from Indonesia, which in his words, removed Islamic territory from the future Caliphate that he wanted established.[9]

There remained a constant interest in attacking UN forces, and virtually any form of UN presence, deployed in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia that became evident over time, for attacks on UN personnel continued during the following decade after the attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad:

a month later, in September 2003 another bomb attack in Baghdad against the UN had definite strategic results for the UN subsequently withdrew all its staff from Iraq. The vulnerability of international forces and missions appeared to grow and become more frequent in the new security environment.

For example, in December 2007, the UNDP (UN Development Program) offices in Algiers were struck by a car bomb, in October 2008, a suicide bomber hit a UNDP office in Somaliland, in October, 2009, the Taliban carried out a suicide attack in Islamabad, Pakistan, UN staff were killed in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan in October, 2009 and April, 2011, in August 2011, Boko Haram, an African Islamist movement, was responsible for an attack on UN headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria, in April 2013, UN forces and personnel were ambushed by an anti-regime group in South Sudan, finally, UN peacekeepers serving in the western part of Darfur region in Sudan were ambushed and killed in July 2013. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates do not view the UN as a neutral party in various conflicts but rather as a body that has authorized the use of force against their jihadist allies, like in the recent case of Mali.[10]

What about non-U.S. forces in the Middle East? After the Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, a western Multinational Force was established to help the Lebanese government spread its authority in and around Beirut. Yet in 1983, a Shiite militia that would eventually evolve into Hizbullah staged bomb attacks against the headquarters of French paratroopers and the headquarters of the US Marines. Subsequent analysis signals intelligence from U.S. National Security Agency intercepts showed that the attacks were ordered by the Iranian government. Their apparent purpose was to push the Western powers out of Lebanon, and the rest of the Middle East, so that Iran could establish it hegemony over the region.

Implications of the Deployment of International Forces in the West Bank

Since Israel captured the West Bank from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in the 1967 Six Day War, the area has served as the front line for Israel's defense against threats emanating from the East – ¬not just Jordan, but Syria, Iraq, and other states that might attack Israel from that direction. Israel is its pre-1967 lines is only 14 kilometers (8.7 miles) wide

at the Mediterranean city of Netanya; the average width of the West Bank is 40 kilometers (25 miles), which becomes significant for Israel's defense because of the unique topography in this territory.

The focus of Israel's security interest in this territory has been the Jordan Valley, an arid and sparsely populated zone that provides a natural barrier protecting the Israeli coastal plain: for the Jordan River is 417 meters (1,368 feet) below sea level at its lowest point, yet it is adjacent to a steep mountain ridge that rises to maximum height of 1,011 meters (3,318 feet), producing a virtual wall that in some places is over 1,371 meters (4,500 feet) high. At the highest points along the mountain ridge, Israel has placed its most critical early-warning facilities.

It is in this area that Israel has envisioned protecting itself from armed attack and consequently deployed, along the eastern slopes of the ridge descending to the valley, active service troops in the past as well as equipment depots for reserve forces should they be needed. The security concept for the Jordan Valley was based on the idea that small standing forces would exploit its advantageous terrain to hold off any attack, while the reserve formations of the IDF would be mobilized in order to reinforce them. Though at present there is no near-term conventional military threat along Israel's eastern front, especially after the defeat of Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003, nonetheless responsible strategic planning must take into account the recovery of hostile armies in this sector. With Iran converting Iraq into a satellite state, its future emergence as a staging area for armies seeking to attack Israel is the years ahead cannot be ruled out.

The Jordan Valley area also serves as a zone in which Israel could thwart infiltration attempts from the East, like the forces Iran has recruited for operations in Syria against the anti-Assad Sunni militias. Thus the Jordan Valley has been viewed as a vital defense line in the event of conventional warfare, as well as for dealing with terrorist challenges and efforts to launch an insurgency campaign against Israel.

It is no wonder that former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin declared on October 5, 1995, during a speech in the Knesset in which he sought approval for the Oslo II Interim Agreement, that "the security border of the State of Israel will be located in the Jordan Valley, in the broadest meaning of that term." So how would international forces be used if they were deployed in the Jordan Valley instead of the IDF?

International forces along Israel's other borders had a minimalistic mission--to observe and report whether the military clauses of bilateral agreements between Israel and its neighbors were being upheld. They were essentially monitors. Thus the Multinational forces and Observers (MFO) in Sinai only reported whether the Egyptians deployed the number of tanks they were allotted in their limited forces zones or if they reached a number beyond what their treaty permitted. But the MFO was not deployed in Sinai in order to stop Egyptian tanks from invading Israel should such a scenario ever become relevant again. Peacekeepers were not deployed for war fighting scenarios.

But in the Jordan Valley, international forces would have a completely different role. They would need to be prepared to enter into combat against any emerging threat. Contributing states would have to be prepared that they are sending their forces into an area that could become dangerous. In the immediate term, their main effort would be against terrorist organizations. The threat environment that they would face would not be static, but rather can be expected to be evolving in several possible directions.

For example, when Israel withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip in 2005, the number of al-Qaeda affiliates in Sinai grew.[11] This trend became more pronounced after Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip in 2007. More recently the Egyptians reported that one leading jihadi commander came to Sinai from Yemen. Many weapons have also streamed in from Libya.[12] There were also thousands of Egyptian Bedouin who chose to become involved in the lucrative arms smuggling trade through the underground tunnels along the Egyptian-Gaza border.

Generally, the emergence of a new security vacuum in the Jordan Valley would serve as a magnet for terrorist groups from surrounding states to enter Jordan, with the aim of infiltrating the West Bank and joining like-minded Jihadist groups. This was the pattern that was witnessed in Iraq, after the Iraq War, and in Syria, in light of "the Arab Spring." Jordan would, as a consequence, face a growing terrorist problem of its own, which it would have a strong interest in combatting.

True, the Jordanian armed forces would undoubtedly be ordered to fight against this sort of activity should it spring up inside of Jordan, after any Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan Valley. But their actual success would be a function of the scale of the new terrorist challenge. Moreover should a substantial smuggling industry arise, as in Sinai after the Gaza withdrawal,

strong economic forces would develop that would be difficult for any regime to counter.

Thus the circumstances on the ground in the Jordan Valley could be difficult for any international peacekeeping force. As in cases of other international peacekeeping deployments, an international force in the Jordan Valley could be a direct target for jihadi groups operating in the area. Should a future Palestinian government – especially if it had a Hamas component – seek to accelerate the departure of any international presence, because it is viewed as an infringement on the Palestinians' newly-won sovereignty, it might turn a blind eye away from the security risks that presence could easily face.

This scenario would become more likely if the Palestinian government came under the influence of any hostile regional power like Iran (which sought to rid Lebanon of the U.S. Marines in 1983). Al-Qaeda followed this strategy in Iraq, when it attacked coalition forces with the intent of weakening their resolve to stay in order to stabilize the country.

By agreeing to the deployment of international peacekeepers instead of the IDF in the Jordan Valley, Israel would be placing its security in the hands of a force that might be easily removed, leaving Israel completely exposed in the future. Recognizing that no foreign forces can realistically be expected to risk their lives for the defense of Israel, the national security doctrine of the Jewish state has been that Israel must defend itself by itself.

There will be those who will ask what if Israel will accept U.S. troops in the Jordan Valley instead of the IDF. Wouldn't they be more reliable than an international force under the UN? The problem with the deployment of U.S. troops for the defense of Israel would be very different but no less significant. Part of the reason why the U.S. and Israel have had such a unique security relationship emanates from the fact that unlike West Germany, during the Cold War, or South Korea, today, Israel never asked U.S. forces to risk their lives for its defense.

Should Israel agree to accept an American force on the ground, it would qualitatively change the bilateral relationship between the two countries, as well as Israel's standing in American public opinion over time. U.S. forces in the Jordan Valley would be a "lightening rod" for al-Qaeda affiliates in the region who made the removal of U.S. forces from the Arabian Peninsula,

and later Iraq, into their rallying cry. While Western diplomats will seek to persuade Israel to withdraw from the strategic Jordan Valley, Israel would be well advised to not put its security into foreign hands and continue to be responsible for its own defense.

Notes

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