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## Unrealistic Expectations: Examining the Failures in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict

### Introduction

The United Nations (UN) has long been involved in peacekeeping efforts around the world, aiming to mediate conflicts, maintain ceasefires, and protect civilians in war-torn regions (United Nations Peacekeeping *What Is Peacekeeping*). One such example is the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, where the UN has deployed peacekeepers under the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) since 1978 (United Nations Peacekeeping *UNIFIL Fact Sheet*). Despite these efforts, the Israel-Hezbollah wars, especially within the last two decades, have exposed significant limitations in the UN's ability to effectively maintain peace and credibly enforce resolutions. UN peacekeeping missions often face extreme challenges, including insufficient resources, a lack of enforcement power, and the complex political dynamics of the Middle East. These issues highlight the unrealistic expectations placed on peacekeepers and the inherent inefficiencies of the UN peacekeeping model. The Israel-Hezbollah conflicts serve as a prime example of how the UN's peacekeeping efforts in the region fail to address the underlying causes of conflict, making it clear that these missions struggle to achieve lasting peace. Ultimately, the Israel-Hezbollah wars exemplify the unrealistic expectations and systemic inefficiencies and challenges of UN peacekeeping, revealing broader challenges in managing conflict in the Middle East.

## Background

To understand why UN peacekeeping efforts in the Israel-Hezbollah conflicts fall short, it is crucial to examine the key challenges that undermine their effectiveness. These conflicts are deeply rooted in a long history of territorial disputes, religious tensions, and geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East. The creation of Israel in 1948 (Myers and Dorn 5) and the subsequent displacement of Palestinian populations fueled decades of animosity between Israel and its neighboring states. Hezbollah, a Shiite militant group and political party based in Lebanon (Robinson 2024), emerged in the 1980s with the backing of Iran and Syria, positioning itself as a resistance movement against Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon. Today, the conflict in the Middle East region of the world is as contentious and war-torn as any other in the world. The entanglement of historical grievances, ideological divides, and external interference from regional and world powers has made it nearly impossible to achieve lasting peace, posing immense challenges for UN peacekeeping missions.

## Expectations

To set the stage for a deeper exploration of the limitations of UN peacekeeping efforts, it is essential to consider the expectations placed on peacekeepers and how these expectations often diverge from reality. In response to recent raging conflicts in the Middle East region, the UN has issued this statement on their official United Nations Peacekeeping website; “UN peacekeepers provide security and the political and peacebuilding support to help countries make the difficult, early transition from conflict to peace” (United Nations Peacekeeping *What Is Peacekeeping*), which they then report is guided by three principles which include: “consent of the parties, impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defense and defense of the mandate” (United Nations Peacekeeping *What Is Peacekeeping*).

These factors underscore a key issue with peacekeeping missions: the gap between idealized peace efforts and their on-the-ground impact. In an official UN press conference held on October 10, 2024, the UN Peace Operations Chief stated that “Our collective inability to stop the violence and stem the bloodshed is damning” (United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases 9746). Her statement hints at the overall inability of peacekeeping efforts to meet expectations set by the overarching international institution. With more than 10,000 peacekeeping personnel (AP News 2024) on the Israeli-Lebanon border, one might question how success can even be clearly defined in a war-torn situation such as this one.

The inability to achieve decisive outcomes may stem from the inherent limitations in the structure and mandate of UN peacekeeping missions, which leads to the examination of why success remains elusive. One such reason success is difficult to measure might have to deal with the fact that the UN peacekeepers lack the enforcement power needed to demand results of peace. During the first Lebanese War, also known as the Lebanon Civil War, the UN previously tried to make amends to this issue of enforcement power. Under the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1701, issued in 2006, the UN released a statement to end violence in the state of Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah with a seven-point plan that would withdraw Israeli forces, deploy UNIFIL, respect country territorial lines, disarm armed groups such as Hezbollah, and ultimately create peace between the two actors (United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 2006). This plan strives to solve the credible commitment problem between Israel and Hezbollah, which, under the bargaining theory, would be a short-term fix to a long-term conflict.

## **Challenges**

While these expectations set the stage for peacekeeping missions, the challenges on the ground often render them unattainable, like the countless challenges to achieving a global community of peace, especially within the region of the Holy Land. In this search for a world with peace, November 27, 2024, marked an important day as leaders from Israel and Lebanon reached a ceasefire agreement after 14 months of conflict (Marx 2024). According to an international politics class taught at Brigham Young University, there are three main challenges under the bargaining theory in international relations: credible commitment problems, the indivisibility of issues, and information asymmetry. All three challenges will be discussed through the lens of the different schools of thought.

These challenges the prominent challenge that the UN faces as it tries to be a third party in this two-state conflict comes at the expense of credibility. In fact, on December 2, 2024, days after the ceasefire agreement was signed between the two parties, “Israel killed eleven people in Lebanon, and Hezbollah attacked an Israeli site” (Al Jazeera 2024). With no real enforcing power to stop the violations of the ceasefire, how is the UN supposed to be viewed as a credible organization to bring about peace? To further this point, the Center for Strategic and International Studies published an article on March 21, 2024, where they analyzed more than “4,400 violent incidents concentrated around the Blue Line and the Golan Heights involving Israel and Hezbollah” (Jones et al. 2024). Further reports by the Arab Center Washington DC released an article analyzing “at least 4,000 Lebanese were killed in Israeli attacks since October 2024 and close to 17,000 were injured” (Harb 2024). To add to this number, 337 UN peacekeepers have died on duty as well (United Nations *Fatalities*). These statistics are heartbreaking considering that the UN was created to bring about peace in war-torn regions of the world. The UN’s frequent failures undermine its credibility.

Another challenge faced by the UN peacekeepers in blue helmets can be described under the bargaining module of the indivisibility of issues. The number one fact that makes this conflict even more controversial is that the Holy Land is sought after by all nations in the Middle East. This honestly can be described by constructivism as many religious and non-state actors in the area feel it is their right to possess the Holy Land where their prophets walked and preached about Deity. In a liberalistic world, these ideologies that can seem so indivisible can be resolved with the establishment of norms and institutions into issues that are indeed negotiable. However, the deeply entrenched ideological and religious beliefs surrounding the Holy Land make these issues appear indivisible, rendering attempts at negotiation and compromise exceedingly difficult. As such, despite liberal principles that advocate for institutionalized solutions, the idea that the UN can and will provide a short-term fix to a long-term issue seems superficial. The thousands of years of history of war within the bounds of the Holy Land prove that on occasion, conflicts are much more complex and ideological than either liberals or realists can admit.

Information asymmetry is the last challenge under the bargaining method that the UN faces in the Israel-Hezbollah conflicts. In a perfect liberalist world, the UN would highlight transparency between Israel and Hezbollah as a centralized form of international government which these two states could reach agreements upon. In practice, this is far more complex, as many wars happen because of a misunderstanding of information. This demonstrates an inequality of perception of whether information asymmetry plays a determinant role in the fight between Israel and Hezbollah. For example, the Congressional Research Service alludes to the concept of “Shi’a triumphalism” (Blanchard 7), and Hezbollah’s perceived role in preventing a crisis in Gaza highlights how each party’s self-interest and ideological convictions influence their actions and the information they are willing to disclose. Without clear, reliable, and shared

information, efforts to reach a comprehensive peace agreement falter, which is exactly what the UN does not want to happen, although it is complicated to pinpoint if the UN is helping or hurting this cause.

### **Successes**

On the other hand, despite the different unrealistic expectations and challenges posed by the Israel-Hezbollah conflicts on the UN peacekeepers, their efforts do not have to be in vain. In an academic article from the Strategic Studies Institute, a US Army War College, the author reports that “UNIFIL has successfully preserved peace in South Lebanon compared to other peacekeeping operations on average” (Samaan 50). This shows the overall international commitment to peace in the Middle East. He continues, saying that “the number of troops (11,000) and the number of contributing nations (38)” (Samaan 50) reflect this statement. In another academic article by the Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis, they report “a number of Hezbollah’s weapon consignments were seized by the UNIFIL” (Pradhan 135).

Another UN success in the cause for peace in the Middle East can be perfectly embodied by the picture of a UN peacekeeper saving the life of a little child. In a hypothetical world, even if the UN were to only save one person in the conflicts on the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon, it would still be a successful mission for that person. It is quite easy to get caught up in the numbers of their current operations that as humans, we forget that saving a portion of a people is better than nothing. As of October 1, 2024, the UN News reports that “UN humanitarian launched a \$426 million appeal for Lebanon to support more than one million people uprooted by widespread Israeli shelling” (United Nations News *Global Perspective Human Stories*), which is an astounding amount to think of a humanitarian relief and aid package from the United Nations to help support these war-torn countries and their citizens. This will

help countless people living in poverty, which Human Rights Watch reports “over 80% of the population in Lebanon is in poverty” (Human Rights Watch 2022) as of 2022.

The United Nations has many unrealistic expectations as well as challenges in efforts to promote peace between actors that cannot seem to agree to anything peaceful. Perhaps the biggest accomplishment derived from UNIFIL is the creation of UNSC Resolution 2433, issued in 2018, which “urges further international support for the Lebanese Armed Forces and all state security institutions” (United Nations Security Council Resolution 2433 2018). This was issued because of a weakening Lebanon government, and a growing militant group in Hezbollah. Amid these issues arises a great opportunity for the UN to temporarily make an impact through different organizations, such as UNIFIL, that provide peacekeeping and humanitarian relief/aid.

### **Broader Implications**

With challenges and successes in mind, it is important to broaden the perspective on the Israel-Hezbollah conflicts. The ineffectiveness that the UN peacekeeping efforts have thus shown could underscore broader implications as to the limitations of the current international system. Proxy wars, such as those involving Hezbollah as an extension of Iranian influence (Haq 2024), which is recorded to receive more than “US \$700 million annually” (Pradhan 131), complicate the peacekeeping process because they embed regional rivalries within localized conflicts. There is so much history and context to take into consideration when trying to bring peace to a region with thousands of years’ worth of conflict and wars. This dynamic creates layers of competing interests that are nearly impossible for the UN to untangle. At the root of this lies the fact that the lack of enforcement power exacerbates the issues at hand, as the UN massively struggles to hold external actors accountable for their roles amid conflict and war. This idea proves that the traditional frameworks of peacekeeping might not be fit for modern

geopolitical conflicts, where state and non-state actors blur the lines of accountability and sovereignty. In other words, UN efforts often resemble temporary fixes to systemic issues that require comprehensive structural reforms.

## **Conclusion**

The Israel-Hezbollah conflicts reveal the inherent limitations of UN peacekeeping efforts in resolving deeply entrenched and multi-faceted conflicts. As illustrated, unrealistic expectations, challenges rooted in credible commitment problems, the indivisibility of issues, and information asymmetry hinder the UN's ability to mediate and enforce peace effectively. While peacekeepers provide valuable humanitarian relief and a stabilizing presence, their efforts often fail to address the structural and ideological factors that perpetuate violence in the Middle East region.

These shortcomings underscore the need for a fundamental rethinking of the UN peacekeeping model. Greater enforcement capabilities enhanced regional cooperation, and individualized strategies that acknowledge the complex realities of modern geopolitical wars must be prioritized. The Israel-Hezbollah wars are a microcosm of the broader challenges facing international peacekeeping in an era of fragmented geopolitics.

Looking forward, the international community must engage with these lessons and push for reforms that empower the UN to act decisively in complex conflicts. This includes leveraging diplomacy, fostering inclusive negotiations, and holding all parties – state and non-state alike – accountable for their actions. By addressing its systemic inefficiencies, the UN can take the necessary steps toward fulfilling its mission of maintaining peace, ensuring security, and protecting vulnerable populations in even the most challenging circumstances.



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