

Tug of war over Lebanon intervention force

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23 August 2006

The dispatch of a United Nations military contingent to Lebanon is meeting obstacles. France, which was originally supposed to form the “backbone” of the force and provide its leadership, has unexpectedly turned down such a role. Now, urged by Israel and the US, Italy has indicated it is willing to lead the force and supply its biggest contingent.

Resolution 1701, passed by the United Nations Security Council on August 11, which forms the basis for the unstable armistice in Lebanon, envisages the speedy deployment of a 15,000-strong UN force. Final agreement on the resolution had been preceded by protracted wrangling between the US and France.

Israel and the US wanted the international force to complete the task which the Israeli army failed to achieve during its 33-day attack on the neighboring country: the liquidation of Hezbollah and the conversion of Lebanon into a powerless protectorate of the great powers. Originally, Israel and the US sought to assign the mission to a NATO force with a so-called “robust” mandate, which would give it the authority to disarm Hezbollah by force.

France, which worked closely with the Lebanese as well as with other Arab and European governments, was also seeking the disarmament of Hezbollah. In contrast to the US, however, it sought to do this primarily through political means. According to French plans, the disarmament was to take place with the mutual agreement and under the auspices of the Lebanese government, and secured by the presence of the international force.

When, after a month of aggression, it became clear that the Israeli army had failed to defeat Hezbollah militarily, the US finally accepted a compromise in the form of UN Resolution 1701. Washington dropped its demand for a NATO force and agreed instead to an expansion of the United Nations Interim Force (UNIFIL) from its current size of 2,000 troops to 15,000 soldiers.

A strengthened UNIFIL force would have the job of preventing the supply of weapons to Hezbollah, but not its forcible disarmament. It is to be deployed not under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, but under the less coercive terms of Chapter 6.

The unanimous vote in the Security Council for resolution 1701 masked over the underlying differences, but did not resolve them.

Israel and the US are continuing to insist on the complete

disarming of Hezbollah. The American ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, is seeking to introduce a new resolution to this effect, while Israel is contemptuously ignoring provisions of the cease-fire that stand in its way.

Five days after the start of the armistice it carried out a provocative commando action in the Bekaa Valley. Moreover, it openly vows to murder Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and has rejected any UN soldiers on its borders from Muslim countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh and Malaysia.

France, on the other hand, concluded that any attempt to disarm Hezbollah through political means was doomed to failure.

Even prior to the recent war, Hezbollah had struck deep roots in the Shia population of Lebanon. After resisting the US-equipped Israeli army for 33 days, its popularity grew across religious and ethnic divides.

Demonstrations took place in numerous cities throughout the Middle East in which protesters carried portraits of Nasrallah side by side with images of former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and Sultan Saladdin, the twelfth century Muslim ruler who led the victory over the Crusaders in Jerusalem.

Millions of Arabs regard every action against Hezbollah as an attack on their own interests and a blow for Israel and the US. This is a major reason why France has retreated on its role in the UN force.

As the former colonial power, France saw the war as a chance to reestablish its influence in Lebanon. Resolution 1701 was largely a result of an initiative by the government in Paris and was celebrated by the French press as a major success for French diplomacy. It was always assumed that France would constitute the backbone of the UN force.

But at the so-called “troop deployment” conference which took place on August 17 in New York, France offered to increase its existing UNIFIL contingent of 200 to just 400 soldiers, instead of the anticipated 3,000. The turnabout was officially justified with the argument that the tasks and powers of the mission had not been sufficiently defined. Behind this was France’s fear that its troops would be trapped between opposing sides and become embroiled in a military adventure with no clear end in sight.

The French newspaper *Libération* declared: “The problem is that the Lebanese government has neither the military nor the political means to achieve from Hezbollah what Washington

and Paris demand, i.e., the handing over of its weapons... Beirut's hands are tied because of the popularity of the Shia party and the differences of opinion over this sensitive question in the Lebanese political elite."

As before the war, the disarmament of Shia militias remains at the heart of the crisis, *Libération* continued, "with one major difference: what reason is there for Hezbollah to give up its weapons when it is able to revel in its 'victory over the Zionist enemy' and its close ties to a layer of the population to which it is now delivering immediate assistance?"

In particular, the French military command is warning against any rash deployment in Lebanon and argues that there should be no French blue helmets without a clear mandate. "It is not a question of how many [soldiers] and when," defense minister Michèle Alliot-Marie said, "but what they should do and how. An ill-defined mission could turn into a disaster."

The French army is still suffering from the trauma of an earlier Lebanon deployment, when, in 1983, 58 paratroopers lost their lives in the Beirut barracks of Drakkar in a suicide attack by a Shia rebel. France traditionally enjoys close relations to the Christian Maronite elite in Lebanon and could hardly play the role of disinterested mediator should war break out again. It would inevitably find itself caught in the middle of the warring parties.

Others have also cited the UN deployment in Bosnia, in which half of the 167 fatalities were French soldiers.

An additional factor in France's reluctance to get involved is the stance adopted by Arab regimes, which have increasingly dissociated themselves from the UN force. Most Arab governments merely looked on and did not lift a finger as Israel bombarded Lebanon, killed over 1,000 civilians and forced one million to flee their homes. Now, however, they are afraid that widespread anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments could threaten their own rule if they identify themselves too closely with activities directed against Hezbollah.

This was especially clear in the case of Syria, with which France, along with the US, has no diplomatic relations. It was left to German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to fly to Damascus to win the support of Syria. However, he was rudely rebuffed.

Before Steinmeier boarded his flight to Damascus, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gave a speech in which he sharply attacked Israel and praised Hezbollah. Steinmeier abruptly cancelled his trip.

France's retreat has created considerable problems for Israel and the US. Following the failure of its offensive in Lebanon, the Israeli government is in deep crisis and needs the support of UN troops on its border. Both Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and US President George W. Bush have turned to the Italian prime minister, Romano Prodi, to take over the leadership of the UN force instead of France.

Prodi immediately indicated his willingness to comply. Last weekend, he spoke by telephone with leaders in Germany,

France and Turkey to request their assistance in setting up a joint UN force. On Monday, he informed UN General Secretary Kofi Annan that Italy was ready to take over leadership of the force and provide up to 3,000 troops. The basic condition was "a clear mandate with precise parameters." He maintains that the UN force should not be responsible for disarming Hezbollah, but merely supervise a political solution of the conflict.

With Prodi making demands similar to those made by France, it is possible that the French government will now seek to increase its contingent, or even revive its bid to assume overall leadership of the force.

Italy traditionally maintains good relations with most Arab governments. It was only under Prodi's predecessor, Silvio Berlusconi, that Italian foreign policy sought closer alignment with the US. Prodi's declared aim is to correct this course and turn Italy into a regional power in the Mediterranean.

His government has been keen to intervene in Lebanon for some time. Already at the St. Petersburg G8 summit in July, Prodi had offered to send Italian soldiers to Lebanon. Shortly after the new UN resolution had been agreed, he sought to make good his promise, committing his government and the Italian parliament to his course. He told a press conference last Friday that Italy was beginning "a new phase in Italian foreign policy, a phase of credibility and responsibility."

At the same time Prodi made clear on what side Italy would stand. "The war was begun by Hezbollah, which attacked Israeli territory," he said.

Prodi's left-center coalition won Italy's parliamentary elections last April, not least because of its promise to withdraw Italian troops from Iraq. Now his government is intent on undertaking a new and risky mission in the Middle East aimed at increasing Italian influence in the Mediterranean.

Italy's foreign minister, Massimo D'Alema, a member of the Left Democrats (the successor organization to Italy's Communist Party) has played a leading role in Italy's new foreign policy. Prodi has also been able to rely on support from the Refounded Communists (Rifondazione Comunista), which played an active role in mass demonstrations against the Iraq war, but now supports Italy's intervention in Lebanon in both government and parliament.



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