

5th International Seminar on Security and Defence in the Mediterranean

Multi-Dimensional Security

The practise of cooperation in security and defence issues.

UNIFIL 2.

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As you well know, I am here to try to transmit my feelings to you about the wonderful experience of having had the opportunity to contribute my grain of sand to the pacification of an area which, due to circumstances of fate, has been in an unstable situation for many years. In the last fifty years innumerable war operations have taken place in this region which have caused suffering to many people. I firmly believe that the so-called “Western” countries have a pending debt with Lebanon.

The objective of this article is to present the tasks of our troops in the mission of the UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon). This mission, stemming from the mandate included in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, consisted, basically, in supporting the Lebanese army in its deployment toward the south (occupying the strip between the Litani River and the border with Israel, better known as the “Blue Line”) as well as preventing the presence of armed elements in this zone. Nevertheless, these were not the only tasks deriving from this resolution; there were others related to assistance in the return of the displaced civilian personnel of the zone and to the protection of United Nations interests, in terms of personnel and material.

I will briefly explain the reason for choosing the Marine Infantry for this mission. The foremost characteristic of our Corps is the high degree of readiness always associated with the amphibious ships of the fleet’s Battle Group. One of the demands of Resolution 1701 was to have, by the 15th of September, at least 5.000 soldiers deployed as an unavoidable condition for the Israeli army to leave the occupied zone in the south of the Lebanon. The high readiness maintained by the Marine Infantry allowed us to get equipped, embark, disembark and begin to operate in the zone in less than fifteen days. However, this same readiness which demands, among other conditioning factors, having a small logistic burden, also forces it not to remain deployed in the area of operations for too long, which is why we were relieved by another unit before completing the regular deployment times, which are four or six months.

I would like to stress that the experiences and conclusions that I am presenting here are taken from direct contact with Lebanese army personnel and the civilian population in the zone. It is natural that

someone may doubt the consistency of opinions based solely on the experience of a month and a half. Perhaps they are right, but I insist that they are based on direct contact, which on occasion was even deep, and I can tell you, in confidence, that in my heart I carry friendships and memories that I will never forget.

Relationships in peacekeeping missions are not easy, especially when they develop in countries with a culture and customs that are very different from our own. Moreover, there are other factors that influence human relationships and co-operation in an important way, which we must not forget in our analysis, such as language or religion. In peacekeeping missions, human relationships usually follow three main paths. In the first place, we find relationships with the civilian population of the zone, which tend to be the most complicated ones, but which also turn out to be the most appreciated ones in the end. The second path corresponds to the relationships that must be maintained with the parts in conflict. Normally, these parts are regular armies, with which the relations could be easier; however, if it is an army and a guerrilla movement, these relations can become complicated. Finally, we emphasise relationships with the rest of the international forces integrated into the multinational force. However, because of time constraints, I will not be able to deal with this last type of relations, in spite of its interest. Let us begin, then, by presenting the conclusions drawn from our relationship with the civilian population and, afterwards, that corresponding to our collaboration with the Lebanese army.

I will not blush in recognising my superficial knowledge about the area in question at the time I received the news that we could be designated to participate in the aforementioned mission, in spite of its having been an object of study in most of the military courses I have attended. We have always heard about the conflicts in the region, and some of us, owing to our ages, still remember when Lebanon was known as the Switzerland of the Mediterranean. If we take into account the frequent changes and intense combat activity, invasions and withdrawals in the zone, one almost has to be an expert to understand the situation in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and similar places.

The first news we had about the area in which we would operate was that it was populated mainly by Shiite Muslims. It is an area in which, moreover, the influence of Hezbollah was significant and which, as a result of this, had been one of the most hardest hit ones during the conflict. It could seem, in principle, that this would complicate our mission, but as we shall see, it was almost the opposite. Upon our arrival, we were received in a way that could be described as expectant and distrustful. This was an understandable distrust if one bears in mind the punishment that had been received and the initial idea, very widespread among the population that the objective of the arrival of the Western forces was to defend and support Israel. We could clearly see this latter view in our first approach to the civil population, consisting of a visit to the mayors of the main municipalities in our area, accompanying the Ambassador of Spain in Lebanon. During this visit, we could see that what the majority were demanding from us was precisely that we help them against their enemy, Israel, in particular that we defend them from any future attacks. Here begins the complicated

work, typical of this type of mission: to try to maintain a clear, determined impartiality. In fact, if impartiality is lost, it could jeopardise the fulfilment of our mission; although, if impartiality is maintained, it could considerably worsen relations with the population. This is the complicated game. On this visit, the Ambassador laid out the collaboration and investment plans that the Spanish government anticipated carrying out in the zone actions mainly oriented toward reconstruction and activities of a cultural nature. Without a doubt, these plans had a clear impact in the positive perception towards us.

Another very prominent aspect was the recognition and gratitude that the authorities in the area showed for the international position, maintained by Spain from the beginning of the conflict, of demanding the cessation of hostilities the whole time. It must be emphasised that this fact did not favour the hoped-for impartiality, but it clearly had a great influence on the acceptance of the Spanish troops on the part of the local people.

It is necessary to stress the importance of knowledge of and respect for the habits and customs of the people of the area, whenever this is compatible with the fulfilment of our mission. The following anecdote is a good demonstration of it. Despite the improvement we had experienced in our relations with the civilian population of the zone thanks to the promises of the Spanish government, our perception continued to be that we were being treated coldly, since our patrols were not waved at by people in the streets when they passed through towns. This began to change when we learned, through our Civilian-Military Co-operation cell, that it was necessary for us to wave at them first so that they could answer our greeting.

Another fundamental aspect to emphasise due to its influence on human relations is knowledge of the Arabic language. Despite eight centuries of coexistence and our proximity and relationship with countries in our surroundings, which we almost called brothers, it is striking how little knowledge the Spanish people, and therefore our Corps, have of the Arabic. In sum, for contact with the civilian population we had to resort to the use of interpreters, who sometimes had an ample knowledge of Spanish, but sometimes did not. The truth is that, in general, their contribution was good, and to a great extent they contributed to improving our relations with the population.

Our humanitarian aid activities had a favourable influence among the civilians of the zone. As you know, this area was, and is, inundated with large amounts of unexploded munitions and mines. Concretely, they affected the olive groves, the main source of funding for the local people. Harvest time was beginning, and the fields were not clean. Immediately, in collaboration with the city councils of the zone, we started to detonate as much materiel as came within our reach. These actions were complemented with diverse medical services rendered by our medical team in these same towns. The assistance given could only be that relating to basic medicine (common illnesses) and eminently oriented to children and the elderly. At first, the same thing happened as with our presence in the area: the people's use of our doctor's surgeries was scant until the population was convinced of the effectiveness of our aid, when the number of users increased exponentially.

Finally, I cannot leave aside the religious aspect, due to the implications that it could have had in our relations with the civilian population. At first, the decision was to establish a relationship of courtesy with the representatives of all the religions existing in the area. However, the orders received from UNIFIL Headquarters were to not establish these kinds of relations, or at least to not participate in activities of this nature. This decision probably was based on the complexity of the mixture of religions in the area and the influence that they have on their followers. Any participation in activities of this type could be misinterpreted by any of the parts. Nevertheless, in my opinion, establishing such relations would have improved the perception the people of the area had of us even more.

To round off, I would like to highlight the fact that our month-and-a-half stay coincided with the month of the Ramadan, and the implications that this month has in Muslim customs are well known. On the part of UNIFIL we were recommended not to eat off base during daylight hours, and if this were the case, it was to be done out of sight of the people so as not to offend them. We were even told that their mood gradually changed as the day wore on, motivated by hunger. At the outset, maximum precautions were taken, but, as the days went by, we realised that the mood of people was not affected as much as we had been told, and the month passed without any incident worthy of mention. On the other hand, it was observed that there were fewer people in the streets during the daylight hours.

In sum, it can be said that we developed our work in a cordial atmosphere where, as we were told on some occasions, we had been welcomed as brothers, our work had been facilitated at all times and we had been treated much better than what was to be expected at first. Perhaps, as I already said at the beginning of my presentation, the position maintained by our government from the beginning of the conflict could have had a key influence. Thus, I would like to again emphasise the importance of knowledge of and respect for the habits and customs of the country with which one is to collaborate, the positive influence of humanitarian aid activities and the importance of subsequent investments in the area.

Now let us see how our relations with the army of Lebanon were, which one of our fundamental missions was. From the first moments of the mission, the Commander of the UNIFIL established as one of his main objectives that of maintaining excellent relations with them, expressing it in his Operating Orders. From our point of view, I can attest that our relations with the Lebanese armed forces did not differ very much from those we had with the civilian population. In the first place, I would like to say that they were always excellent, or rather, correct. From the first moment, liaison officers were exchanged between units, with the objective of co-ordinating all joint activities. The Lebanese army always showed interest in maintaining good relations. One example of this was their concern that their liaison officers know Spanish to a high degree, contributing thus to maintaining fluid relations with them.

As happened with the civilian population, we had the impression that the Lebanese army received us expectantly and with some distrust. However, after some time, we realised that this sense of expectancy and

distrust was not the case, but rather it hid a feeling of responsibility in relation to the mandate of Resolution 1701. It could even be said that they did not want or need our support. I firmly believe that they thought that, as the army of a sovereign country, they were the ones who were commissioned with carrying out the mandate. As a detail, it is necessary to mention that at no time was it ever revealed to us, even though we asked them on repeated occasions, what their deployment intentions were in the area. Another aspect that can demonstrate this perception is the fact that at the moment of our departure from the area, no agreement on the protocol for joint action between the UNIFIL forces and the Lebanese army had yet been reached. Such a protocol, of utmost importance, had to clarify what the possible assistance of the multinational force to the Lebanese army would consist of.

Lastly, it would be good to highlight the fact that UNIFIL's intentions to collaborate with the Lebanese army included aspects that went beyond those merely related to Resolution 1701. For example, the planning of activities for the joint training of units was anticipated, among which there was the exchange of knowledge about tactics and techniques as well as firing exercises. Regrettably, before our departure from the area, we could not carry out any of these activities.

As a conclusion, it can be said that our relations with the representatives of the Lebanese army were always correct and that the latter always showed an apparent desire to collaborate with UNIFIL.