

Lebanon, UNIFIL Deaths, and Ireland's Diplomatic Machinations

by Robert Harris

Between 1978 and 2001, Ireland contributed significant personnel to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which were mandated to assist an orderly withdrawal of Israeli forces, and keep the peace in the border area of Southern Lebanon neighbouring Israel, after the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) repeatedly attacked the Jewish State. Irish troops returned in 2011, to assist with a modified UNIFIL mandate, in the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon War.

Lebanon's tragedy



The Damour Massacre, 1976 (Source: Speedy Media Access)

During the 1960s, the PLO used Jordan as a base to attack Israel, whilst attempting to [terrorise and destabilise the Arab nation](#) toward the goal of regime change. King Hussein expelled the PLO in 1971. The terrorist group would take up

residence in Lebanon, to disastrous effect. The PLO was pivotal in instigating a particularly bloody civil war in the small nation-state, in which approximately a quarter of a million people [would die](#) between 1975 and 1990.

The mandate territories in the Middle East included the region of Syria, awarded to France by the League of Nations. Due to a concentrated Christian presence, Lebanon was split from the Greater Syrian region, and was formed as a primarily Christian nation. Lebanon was an unstable factionalised mix, with weak governance and a resentful Islamic minority. A succession of [massacres and ethnic cleansing](#) since the PLO invasion, forced much of the Christian populace to flee West, such as the United States, where a great deal of its middle-eastern populace is of Lebanese Christian origin. The continuing instability of Lebanon, and the surging power of Hizbullah, maintained pressure on the largely Maronite Catholic populace, which ceased to represent a majority by the 1990s. Today, Lebanese Christians are thought to only represent [30% of the populace](#) although estimates vary.

Iran became closely involved in Lebanese affairs, circa 1980, giving considerable support to the 'Amal Movement', a [terrorist Shi'ite group](#), and especially Hizbullah, which the Shi'ite State founded and developed, in the name of resisting an Israeli presence. Islamist Hizbullah is oft seen in the Arab world as a [proxy of Iran](#), rather than authentically Lebanese. Some smaller Sunni factions also received support from [several Sunni-Arab nations](#) but they tended to possess a pan-Arab or nationalistic orientation rather than a strong religiously sectarian identity.

Iran, and especially Syria, [would maintain influences](#) in the territory, which ultimately broke Lebanese Christian power. Syria would finally withdraw its presence in 2005, only for Hizbullah to tighten its military and political grip on the country.

The Civil War ended with Lebanon becoming a [stricter] kind of consociational (bi-national) state, where a new constitution dictated a strictly apportioned Islamic-Christian rule but Hizbullah effectively hold the reigns of power. Shia groups [weakened](#) rival Sunni militias and built up their forces in Southern Lebanon, pushing the Lebanese army aside. Hizbullah was the [sole militia](#) allowed to continue its activities after the end of the Lebanese Civil War. It brought chaos to the region, with continued strikes on Israel, and has effectively created a state within a state, with the [capacity to collect taxes locally, whilst fuelling the international drugs trade](#).

Lebanon can be regarded as a stark precursor of the conflicted Middle East seen today, where Sunni and Shia openly challenge each other, while the ancient Christian communities of the Middle East face extinction in the short to medium term. Lebanon's history, where Muslim rulers persecuted Christian minorities for more than a millennia, guided one community leader in 1947, Archbishop Ignace Moubarac of Beirut, to illustrate the region's simmering [religious sectarianism](#) for Western leaders, in which he paralleled the fate of Christians and Jewish people in the Middle East, when at the mercy of Islam. It is perhaps a message that many leaders in the West have yet to comprehend, or prefer to ignore.

Enter war and UNIFIL

Israel invaded Southern Lebanon in March 1978, [in response to a succession of PLO terrorist attacks](#) from the mid-to-late 1970s. One attack by the PLO, dubbed the 'Coastal Road Massacre', resulted in the murder of 38 Israeli citizens, including 13 children, and the wounding of 76 others. Israel made an alliance with Major Saad Haddad's 'South Lebanon Army' (SLA), which developed in Lebanon several years earlier (initially known as the 'Free Lebanon Army'), to combat the instability caused by the PLO's actions. The Christian militia

was aided by Israel, since both had a mutual interest in opposing the PLO.

Israel achieved a rapid military success, driving the PLO away from the nation's border. UNIFIL forces stepped in to facilitate an orderly withdrawal, and maintain a peaceable border area. Israel would withdraw in late 1978, and pass control to the quasi-official 'South Lebanon Army', which was [established](#) by a commander of the Lebanese Army, Major Saad Haddad, after the failure of the national army in the region. Haddad would be dismissed from the Lebanese Army the following year for proclaiming control of South Lebanon.

However, both UNIFIL and the SLA would fail to control South Lebanon. The PLO would reassert a capacity to assault Israel. In 1979 the PLO started shelling Northern Israel indiscriminately. In the summer of 1981, the PLO furthered its indiscriminate artillery barrages, which caused sustained harm to Northern Israel. A ceasefire was agreed but the PLO violated it repeatedly. The PLO also attacked Israel from Jordan, and targeted Israeli diplomats in Europe. This violence would ultimately instigate the 1982 Lebanon War, in which Israel sought to permanently expel the terror group.

Ireland's UNIFIL troops were harassed by the SLA, which deemed UNIFIL to be interlopers, but would nonetheless co-operate much of the time. Combat fatalities would not occur until April 1980, when relations with Israel declined in a dramatic fashion, after the SLA killed two UNIFIL troops, in the aftermath of a battle that had led to fatalities on both sides.



Brian Lenihan, Snr, (1930-95), Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs

(held the ministerial office in 1973, 1979-81, and 1987-89)

The Bahrain Declaration

The then president of Ireland, Dr. Patrick Hillery, visited Bahrain in February 1980. Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Lenihan, Senior (1930-95) held talks with his Bahraini ministerial equivalent, on February 10th, where they drafted a joint communiqué, which principally dealt with the Arab-Palestinian concern, as well as other diplomatic and economic issues. Lenihan also delivered a speech in Bahrain severely criticising Israel. The two would effectively become known as the 'Bahrain Declaration', and would set a sort of precedent in Western politics, with Ireland becoming the first EEC member-state to advocate for the inclusion of the PLO in a peace process toward statehood.

Lenihan called for the establishment of a Palestinian State, and called for Israel's withdrawal from all territory captured in 1967. The Declaration cited "relevant" Security Council resolutions to support the stance, which misrepresented the substance of territorial issues appertaining to UN [Security Council Resolution 242](#). The Declaration asserted that the PLO are the legitimate representatives of the Arab-Palestinian people toward the formation of a State, but it did not make any reference to terrorism or Israel's security needs. At the time, this was an unusually hard-line stance for a Western state, which more closely followed the views of the Soviet and Islamic blocks at the United Nations. The Bahrain Declaration was the forerunner of the EEC's 'Vienna Declaration' of 1981,

which also reiterated the PLO's legitimacy, despite its continued belligerence. Shortly before the Venice Conference, Arafat reiterated that PLO/Fatah's "aim is to liberate Palestine completely and to liquidate the Zionist entity politically, economically, militarily, culturally and ideologically." The terminology suggested an intent toward ethnic cleansing and perhaps genocide.

Controversially, Lenihan asserted that the PLO was no longer a terrorist organisation, describing Yasser Arafat as a "moderate", for which the Irish minister saw a "full role" in negotiations. Lenihan's announcement that the PLO had become a legitimate organisation occurred just with the close of a decade in which a vast number of infamous attacks on Israeli citizens occurred. Lenihan made these prognostications at a time when Irish UNIFIL troops were dealing with the effects of the PLO violence in Lebanon. Yet this notion of a supposed moderation was very much in evidence in Lenihan's speech.

Lenihan also claimed that the Irish Republican Army had no involvement with the PLO. The [proposition is clearly false](#). At a time when the Northern Irish Troubles was of supreme import to the Irish State, it is extremely improbable that the advance of this denial was anything other than a knowing untruth furthered by the Foreign Affairs Minister. In an era of many IRA terrorist attacks on the Island of Ireland, it may be assumed that the denial had the intent of lessening the PLO's image, as a terrorist entity, with the FM's Irish audience.

Lenihan's assertions were so out of kilter with the observed reality of the time that they came across as an absurdity. The speech caused considerable anger in Israel, and at home in Ireland, where Dr. David Rosen, Ireland's Chief Rabbi, voiced criticism. Dr. Rosen stated that Ireland's stance may increase the already volatile tensions in Lebanon, and was critical of what he saw as the motivations of the Irish government, which he believed was driven by a need for oil. This was not an

unreasonable assumption in the aftermath of the 1973 OPEC Oil Crisis, which attempted to punish the West, after Arab forces failed to defeat Israel. Frank McClusky, leader of the Labour Party, was of the same belief. However, Senator Noel Mulcahy suggested the Rabbi was threatening Irish UNIFIL troops posted in Lebanon.

When the pro-Palestinianism of Lenihan's 'Bahrain Declaration' was challenged, the minister stated that the PLO would not be recognised by Ireland until they recognised Israel's right to exist. However, Lenihan had already recognised the PLO as legitimate representatives. In 1993, a consular Fatah (PLO) Arab-Palestinian Delegation would be given permission to establish in Ireland. Yasser Arafat (the PLO chairman) recognised Israel in an official letter to then prime-minister, Yitzhak Rabin, that same year. However, the PLO Charter continues to call for Israel's destruction through armed struggle. The process of updating the Charter was deliberately fudged by Yasser Arafat during the latter part of the Oslo talks process. It is telling, perhaps, that the Declaration was made in Bahrain, a state that does not recognise Israel's right to exist.

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4. As regards the Middle East, it was agreed that a solution to the Palestinian problem was central to any peace settlement. The two sides stressed the urgent need to reach a negotiated solution which would be comprehensive, just and lasting.

5. The two sides agreed that the Palestinian people had the right to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent State in Palestine within the framework of a negotiated peace settlement which would include the principles of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

6. The two sides stressed that all parties including the PLO should play a full role in the negotiation of a comprehensive peace settlement. In this regard, Ireland recognises the role of the PLO in representing the Palestinian people.

7. Both parties agree that an essential aspect of a solution to the Palestinian problem was the withdrawal of Israel from all territory occupied since the 1967 conflict, including Jerusalem, in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions.

8. It was agreed that the Euro-Arab dialogue has the potential for substantial mutual benefit and that the dialogue should be resumed as soon as possible. The question of closer cooperation between the countries of the Gulf and the European Communities was discussed.

9. The two sides reviewed the situation in the Arabian Gulf and its strategic importance and affirmed that this region must remain a zone of peace and stability and should not be involved in the rivalry of the great powers.

10. Both parties condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which they considered as a blatant interference in the affairs of a state that belongs to the Islamic world. They stated that the invasion was contrary to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and constituted a threat to world peace and security.

11. Both sides expressed their faith in the principles of the United Nations. They affirmed their adherence to the principles of peaceful co-existence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states.

An extract of the Bahrain Declaration – Palestine & Mid-East
Section

(Source: 'Eurabia', a pan-Arab European lobby group, Dublin
branch)

Irish support for Palestinianism, including Arafat's PLO, would remain considerable. Brian Lenihan himself told Arafat, during a visit in 1993, of the "genuine warmth in Ireland for you and your cause" [[Ireland-Palestine lecture](#)] which points to Lenihan's own approach during the fraught UNIFIL years, and rather unashamed support for a particularly virulent terror movement.

By contrast, formal Irish relations with Israel would remain non-existent, for a protracted period of time. Ireland only recognised Israel in 1975, being the last state in the EEC to do so, and was the sole country in the European Union without an Israeli embassy until 1996. Ireland is not only supportive of the Palestinianism but has displayed a distinct hostility toward Israel with respect to other matters. A year after Bahrain, Ireland strongly condemned the Israeli bombing of Iraq's nuclear weapons facilities.

UNIFIL killings

Ironically perhaps, the presence of Irish troops at the Lebanese border caused new and substantive diplomatic tensions. The soldiers were placed in the midst of a civil war, where the pressures from warring sides can lead peace-keepers to pick one side over another, potentially ending in disaster.

Something of a diplomatic crisis would ensue two months after the Declaration. On April 7th, the SLA shot an Irish soldier during a protracted gun battle near At Tiri. The soldier would die from his injuries on the 16th of April. The Irish State would lambast Israel for the death because Israel had an

allegiance with the group. The Irish authorities were concerned that their diplomatic machinations had greatly increased tensions with the SLA, and would apply substantive diplomatic pressure upon Israel in the following weeks. The following day, the Israeli government would assert that Ireland's foreign policy stance on the Arab-Palestinian/PLO issue was distinct to its role in UNIFIL – the former would not prejudice the latter.

However, Major Haddad publicly demanded financial compensation, or the bodies of two Irish soldiers, for [the death of an SLA member](#), the 19 year old brother of one Mahmoud Bazzi, who was killed by UNIFIL during the clash. On the 18th, three Irish soldiers were abducted, two of which were murdered by Bazzi (Privates Thomas Barrett and Derek Smallhorne – John O'Mahoney survived). There was much speculation that the recent killings were a response to the Bahrain Declaration. Menachem Begin, Israel's prime-minister, condemned the killing of the troops. Sholmo Agrov, Israeli Ambassador to the UK, forcefully denied that the killings had any relation to the Declaration, during an interview on RTE radio, several days afterward. Ireland would also obtain a European Council statement of condemnation, in response to the killings.

There are varying beliefs on whether the Bahrain Declaration was a causal factor in the killing of Irish troops. It has been noted that Haddad's troops were involved in significant conflict with UNIFIL prior to the Declaration. Before 1980, Ireland had a reputation as a nation unusually sympathetic to the PLO. In 1979, at the UN General Assembly, Michael O'Kennedy, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, called for a comprehensive solution of the Arab-Palestinian issue, involving the PLO. Yet the violence in April 1980 represented something of an escalation. It is difficult to lay blame for the killings at Israel's door, because the murder of Barrett and Smallhorne was motivated by a personal grudge, as demonstrated in a confessional interview and Bazzi's

subsequent trial – of note, John O'Mahony, the sole survivor, stated that at one point an Israeli intelligence officer attempted to dissuade Bazzi from either continuing the abduction, or killing the soldiers, before giving up and leaving. However, it is quite likely that the sharp diplomatic impact of the Bahrain Declaration would have had some bearing on Haddad's harsher treatment of Irish forces. In 1980, the Irish would have more comprehensively resembled enemies, rather than mere impediments.

Dr. Rory Miller, a senior lecturer at King's College, who authored several books on the Middle East, [notes](#) that Irish troops were thought to be prejudicial:

"Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Irish regularly called in the Israelis to threaten them and discipline them over the treatment of Irish UNIFIL troops... There was a lot of animosity, as would happen on any tense border. There are two sides to this story. The Irish troops were no less guilty of turning a blind eye to Arab violence than any other UN troops. On the other hand, I have spoken with a number of IDF liaison officers who worked with UNIFIL and they all praise the professionalism of their Irish counterparts."

The view that some or many Irish UNIFIL troops did not maintain the highest standards of neutrality, which their role would require to minimise tensions, and the potential for clashes with local factions, was a belief also expressed in the Irish media and within the Irish Parliament. It has been claimed that some Irish forces went as far as to assist the PLO in efforts to cross the border into Israel. Whether or not such claims are valid, and while the generalised criticism expressed in some quarters may be an inequitable representation of the conduct of many UNIFIL soldiers, the notable Palestinianism of successive Irish governments, not least with the issuance of the 'Bahrain Declaration', would have contributed to the notion that a favouritism for the PLO

was prevalent amongst the Irish contingents in Lebanon. Chief Rabbi Dr. David Rosen was perhaps correct in stating that Irish foreign policy manoeuvres placed UNIFIL soldiers at undue risk, in a time of bitter civil war within Lebanon.

Some have asserted that belief in a culture of anti-Israel bias at Ireland's UNIFIL troop is reinforced by the fact that a notable number of former troops went on to become anti-Israel activists, for example [Dr. Ray Murphy](#), a former army captain and NUI Galway law lecturer at the 'Irish centre for human rights' which has presented lectures by [PFLP terrorist Shawan Jabarin](#), who currently leads anti-Israel lawfare NGO al-Haq. Another former UNIFIL officer, journalist [Tom Clonan](#), has repeatedly accused Israel of 'massacre' and 'war crimes', while being aware of the chaos of war causing harmful effects to civilian populaces, without the necessary cause of intent being present.

Colonel Desmond Travers, one of the four members of the UN Goldstone Commission, [displays an attitude toward Israel](#) that disconnects from very basic reality. Travers denied that Israel acted in self-defence, with respect to the 2008-09 Gaza War, stating that Hamas had maintained a ceasefire! He also stated "so many Irish soldiers had been killed by Israelis... a significant number who were taken out deliberately and shot." He may be referring to the claim that an Israeli intelligence officer was present shortly before Mahmoud Bazzi killed two UNIFIL soldiers, on April 18th 1980. One of the victims, John O'Mahoney [stated \(14:11 mins\) in the documentary 'Peacekeepers: The Irish In South Lebanon'](#) (critiqued in another section below):

"Shouting in Arabic, my brother, my brother, and he [Bazzi] was wearing a black vest. Now Tom Barrett said to me, he said you know, black vests it means death. He [Bazzi] took the three of us out, and he took us up the steps and across the veranda, and an Israeli Intelligence Officer was trying to negotiate with him but next thing he just walked away, he

walked away Bazzi opened fire."

O'Mahoney affirms that the Israeli officer attempted to dissuade Bazzi from the killings, but appears to have possessed no authority to compel the militiaman, in a building housing other members of the SLA. Travers served in Lebanon so must be intimately acquainted with the events of that day. It appears that Israel is only directly implicated in the death of one Irish UNIFIL soldier throughout the entire mission, one Corporal. Dermot McLoughlin, killed in 1987 due to the effects of a tank shell.

Moral culpability

The question of these deaths, and several others in the intervening years, would worsen Ireland's near non-existent diplomatic relations with Israel. Yet Ireland's reaction was not remotely as trenchant toward Arab-Palestinian and Islamist groups, when found blameworthy of the killing of Irish UNIFIL forces. In April 1981, the PLO [killed two Irish solders](#). Private Hugh Doherty was killed, and Private Kevin Joyce was taken prisoner, to be murdered subsequently. The Irish State was substantively more reticent in dealing with this situation, even though Arab-Palestinian sources appear to have cynically used Private Joyce's death as a source of propaganda, perhaps holding onto his corpse to prevent his burial. Joyce's body was [never to be found](#).

If anything, the attitude that Israel was necessarily responsible for the actions of Major Haddad, and the South Lebanon army, and the intensity of Ireland's criticism, merely reinforced the view that the Irish authorities possessed a strong bias. Israel and Haddad were allies, operating in a not-dissimilar way to that of Syria which was allied to the PLO, and Iran being allied at the time to Amal. Yet there was no substantive condemnation of Syria for the actions of the

PLO at the time, nor subsequently toward Iran.

Whilst a given party can rightly be criticised for its allegiances, it is a step too far to hold them directly responsible for the actions of the aligned party, unless they were complicit in directing such a policy. There may still be some level of indirect responsibility, if the actions of one party to an alliance knows the other party will use their assistance for ill. From a moral perspective, where one party aligns with a more destructive party, blameworthiness toward the former party must ultimately apply if their alliance is intended to mount acts of territorial aggression, or if it is an alliance is entirely voluntary (not strictly necessary) in nature. Israel needed allies in South Lebanon because UNIFIL were not fulfilling their obligations to bring conditions of peace. Otherwise it would be nigh-on impossible to protect civilians at its border. Thus, the alliance was justified. By contrast, early Syrian and later Iranian alliances were entirely voluntary, and largely intended to aggress against Israel, regardless of its presence in Lebanon.

The route Ireland took with its diplomatic conduct toward Israel, reduced the idea of the SLA, fighting a civil war against the PLO and other Islamists, to that of mere puppets. The stance was not factually valid. It is possible that Ireland did so to further distance themselves from Israel at a diplomatic level.

Economically informed diplomacy

The weak diplomatic response by successive Irish governments, to the PLO's numerous attacks on Irish troops serving in Lebanon, during the early to mid 1980s, was especially puzzling because it was widely known that the PLO had interacted substantially with the Provisional IRA since the late 1960s, helping turn the republican terror group into an efficient killing force, which also posed a threat in Southern

Ireland. Since the mid-1970s, Irish governments had taken substantive measures to suppress the republican group's activities, e.g. the formation of a closed criminal court to prevent intimidation.

The answer may have some relation to the fact that the PLO, and its related groups, were sponsored by numerous Arab nations, and it would be diplomatically inopportune to cause upset to a group of notoriously sensitive despots, over a matter so close to the greatest Arabist cause of the era, particularly when attempting to enter their national markets, with agricultural produce (Ireland became a significant supplier of beef), etc. There is some justification in concluding that the Irish State paid little heed in its diplomacy, in the pursuit of narrow economic interests, with regard to the safety of the UNIFIL troops.

Ireland's trade with the Middle-East multiplied in the 1970's, and by the early 80's it was rated at sixty-fold that of Israel, while the security of oil supplies was a major preoccupation (Keatings, Patrick. 'European foreign policy-making and the Arab-Israeli conflict: Ireland'. 1984. Martinus Hijhoff. Page 20) for the Irish State, in the aftermath of the 1973 OPEC Oil Crisis. Trade issues was detailed when foreign affairs minister, Brian Lenihan visited Bahrain, an issue of particular import when Ireland was going through an economic crisis that would lead to substantive political instability through the early 1980s. There was even an [openness to the establishment of an Iranian embassy](#), in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian hostage crisis. It was also argued at the time that Taoiseach (prime-minister) Charles Haughey had developed a taste for political activism, arguably to improve Ireland's standing on the international stage.

The more things change, the more they stay the same

The issue of bias, across the UNIFIL contingents, does seem to

have been a reality. For example, in 2000, UNIFIL was complicit in Hizbullah's [fatal abduction of three IDF soldiers](#). UNIFIL obstructed the IDF investigation, by denying the existence of security tapes which could have helped discover the abductors. UNIFIL later acknowledged the [existence of the tapes](#) but refused to supply them for several months. The cars are believed to [have been turned over to Hizbullah](#). In 2010, it was reported that the Norwegian contingent actually broke [two Lebanese terrorists](#) out of an Israeli jail, and disguised them in UNIFIL uniforms. During the 2006 Israel-Hizbullah conflict, UNIFIL broadcast detailed reports of Israeli troop movements, numbers, and positions on their website, while not reporting similar details concerning Hizbullah.

The 2006 Lebanon War, began in the aftermath of Hizbullah kidnapping Israeli troops, and launched indiscriminate rocket strikes against Israel's civilian population centres. Approximately 300,000 to 500,000 Israeli civilians [fled Northern Israel](#) due to Hizbullah's attacks. UNIFIL MKII was instituted after the war, to [disarm Hizbullah](#), and form a twenty kilometre [buffer zone](#) at Israel's border. UNIFIL failed to do so on both counts. The Iranian proxy has in fact dramatically enhanced its weapons arsenal, with a reported missile armanent approaching 100,000, which may include [chemical and biological weaponry](#). Senator Francesco Cossiga, a former Italian president, asserted that Italy's UNIFIL force [arranged to ignore](#) Hizbullah's procurement of weaponry, as long as the terror group desisted from attacking the UN 'peace-keepers'.

Unfortunately, even in the post-9/11 world, Ireland's [soft approach to Islamo-terrorist groups](#) would remain. Hizbullah [continues to harass](#) UNIFIL troops, but Ireland, and the EU, have not remonstrated with Iran. Some speculate that the increased harassment, directed at particular UNIFIL national groupings, coincides with their [respective nation states](#)

criticising Iran.

Ireland was a leading force in the diplomatic opposition to Hizbullah being