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By: TA | AP Brief

Will the UN peacekeepers remain in southern Lebanon after their mandate expires?



Lebanon's prime minister said Friday that a new proposal is in the works that could have the U.N. Security Council allow the peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon to continue working after its nearly 50-year mandate expires at the end of the year.

Prime Minister Nawaf Salam told The Associated Press that the plan would see the peacekeeping force known as UNIFIL continuing some of its tasks after Dec. 31 and as the Security Council debates what should replace it.

France is preparing to introduce a resolution, Salam said, which would allow UNIFIL to continue some of its functions — such as clearing mines, escorting humanitarian convoys, and monitoring violations — in southern Lebanon during a drawdown period after the peacekeepers' mandate ends.

U.S. officials have indicated that Washington could be "open to considering" such an arrangement, he said.

"This would not resolve the problem of so-called post-UNIFIL, but it will give us some extra time to agree on a new architecture in southern Lebanon," Salam said in an exclusive interview with the AP at the government palace in Beirut.

No plan in place for what comes next

The U.N. Security Council voted last year to terminate UNIFIL's mandate at the end of 2026, bowing to demands from the United States and its close ally Israel, which argued that the force had failed to stop Hezbollah's buildup in southern Lebanon.

UNIFIL officials say they were never charged with disarming Hezbollah and that the force helped to preserve calm in the border region for 17 years before Hamas' 2023 attack on southern Israel ignited a regional war.

The 7,500 peacekeepers currently stationed in southern Lebanon are expected to gradually withdraw over about six months after their mandate expires. The force has a year to fully end its operations.

Much of southern Lebanon, meanwhile, is occupied by Israeli forces after a war broke out in March between Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, linked to the wider Iran war.

Hezbollah has refused to give up its weapons, and Israel says it will not withdraw before the group is disarmed.

France has not publicly commented on the proposal that Salam cited.

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However, a Western diplomat with knowledge of the matter said one option under discussion is to slow down the withdrawal process and "maintain certain UNIFIL missions" to avoid a power vacuum. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the matter.

Lebanese officials have called for an extension of UNIFIL's mandate or, failing that, for a new U.N.-mandated force to be formed.

U.S. officials have expressed willingness for some sort of international force to remain, but not in its current form.

They have suggested that it could be a civilian force or private defense contractor.

Salam said that "any force to be deployed will have to be endorsed by the Security Council."

"I was very clear about it," he said. Any presence of forces "in the south will have to be endorsed by the Security Council."