

CHAPTER 8

FIRST UNITED NATIONS EMERGENCY FORCE (UNEF I)

PAUL F. DIEHL

INTRODUCTION

THE origins of the first United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF I) can be traced to the 1948 Arab–Israeli war and the subsequent conflict between Israel and its neighbors. The UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO—see chapter 6) was put in place as a result of the 1948 war, but this observation mission proved to be progressively less effective in preserving a ceasefire as well as inadequate to meet the challenges occasioned by the Suez Crisis in 1956. At the same time, the lack of necessary political consensus in the UN Security Council made a large-scale military action in the form of a collective security mission impossible. In between observation and collective security came UNEF I, which some have labeled as the full-fledged peacekeeping operation, as previous missions involved only unarmed observers that did not form a buffer between opposing military forces.

Stability in the Arab–Israeli conflict began to break down as tensions built in the early 1950s and UNTSO was neither equipped nor positioned to prevent the numerous clashes between Israel, Palestinians, and the surrounding Arab states. In August 1955, there was a serious engagement between Israeli and Egyptian troops in the Gaza Strip. Three months later, Israel attacked Syrian positions near the border of the two countries. With the risk of full-scale war apparent, the Security Council (UN Security Council Resolution 113) authorized UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, on 4 April 1956 to investigate the situation. The hope was that his efforts would lead to tension reduction and perhaps would generate some new ideas on how the United Nations and its member states might defuse the escalating violence. In particular, Secretary-General Hammarskjöld sought to find some way of supplementing the

efforts of UNTSO. His mission was a temporary success, as a ceasefire was arranged between Israel and Egypt, reinforcing the terms of the Armistice Agreement that followed the 1948 war.

UNTSO, having difficulty even in meeting its limited mandate, was not suited to handle the Suez Crisis in 1956. In June of that year, the British handed over control of the Suez Canal to Egypt. A little more than a month later Egyptian President Nasser nationalized the canal after the United States and UK refused to fund the Aswan Dam Project. Egypt planned to use revenues from the canal to pay for that project. In addition, these events occurred as closer ties were being forged between Egypt and the Soviet Union and its allies. Oil supplies to Western Europe, which traveled through the canal, were put at risk. Efforts by the UN and others failed to resolve differences among Israel, Egypt, Britain, and France. The UN Security Council was able to pass a resolution (UN Security Council Resolution 118) on 13 October; this resolution laid a number of principles for settlement of the Suez question, among them “free and open transit through the Canal without discrimination ...” and that the “sovereignty of Egypt should be respected.”

France, Israel, and Britain struck a secret agreement whereby Israel would initiate an attack on Egypt and France and Britain would “intervene,” return the canal to European control, undermine Nasser’s rule, and restore Israeli access to the Straits of Tiran. Israel duly invaded Egypt on 29 October 1956, setting off the second Arab–Israeli war in a decade. Britain and France issued an ultimatum to Egypt and Israel demanding that forces be moved away from the canal and that British and French troops fill the void to ensure free passage. Egypt rejected this ultimatum.

On 30 October, Britain and France vetoed two Security Council resolutions (S/3710 introduced by the United States and S/3713/Rev.1 introduced by the Soviet Union) that asked all parties to refrain from the use of military force, again demonstrating the weakness of the Council and its capacity for collective action. British and French air strikes against Cairo and the area surrounding the Suez Canal followed shortly thereafter.

The United Nations could not rely on collective military action to address this situation. First, any meaningful response had to occur outside the confines of the Security Council. Britain and France would veto any action they deemed inimical to their interests. On the other hand, the Soviet Union would cast a negative vote when presented with a proposal that threatened the interests of its ally Egypt. The United States, caught in the middle, might align itself with either side depending on the proposed action. Second, a peace observation mission was not a viable option. UNTSO was already in the region and had failed to prevent the war. Furthermore, a small number of unarmed personnel would be unable to act as an interposition force once the various military forces were separated. It was against this background that the United Nations created UNEF I, a departure from past international operations and one not envisioned in the UN Charter.

MANDATE AND KEY FACTS

Operation Mandate: First, supervise the withdrawal of French, Israeli and the United Kingdom forces from Egyptian territory after the establishment of a ceasefire. Second, following the withdrawal, serve as a buffer force between the Egyptian and Israeli forces and monitor the ceasefire. Third, supervise Suez Canal cleaning operations. Fourth, secure cooperation from the parties in implementing the armistice agreement.

UN resolutions:

General Assembly Resolutions 997 (1956), 998 (1956), 1000 (1956), 1001 (1956), and 1125 (1957)
Security Council Resolutions 113 (1956), 114 (1956), 118 (1956), and 119 (1956)

Location: Suez Canal and Sinai areas at the outset, and subsequently along the ceasefire lines and international boundary on the Egyptian side in the Sinai.

Duration: November 1956–June 1967

Strength: no precise number authorized, determined by the force commander with target of 6,000, 6,073 Deployed (maximum), 3,378 at Withdrawal.

Fatalities: 110 (109 military personnel, 1 civilian staff)

Personnel: (personnel maximum for each state; type of contributions): Brazil (545; infantry), Canada (1,172; medical, engineering, and transport units), Colombia (522; infantry), Denmark (424; infantry), Finland (255; infantry), India (957; infantry, supply, signal, and transport units), Indonesia (582; infantry), Norway (498; infantry and medical unit), Sweden (349; infantry), and Yugoslavia (673; infantry).¹

Finance: US\$214.2 million²

COURSE OF THE OPERATION

The General Assembly dealt with the Suez Crisis by adopting the procedures followed at the outset of the Korean War; these were outlined in Resolution 377 (UN General Assembly Resolution 377), also known as the “Uniting for Peace” Resolution, which was adopted six years earlier on 3 November 1950. These procedures provided for an emergency session of the General Assembly in the event of a stalemate in the Security Council and permitted the Assembly to make “appropriate recommendations to Members for collective measures, including in the case of a breach of the peace or act of aggression the use of armed force when necessary, to maintain or restore international peace and security.” The Security Council recognized this situation and adopted a resolution (UN Security Council Resolution 119) on 31 October that called for an emergency meeting of the UN General Assembly to address the Suez Crisis.

The UN General Assembly faced the circumstances that peace observation was inadequate to the task, but collective enforcement was politically impossible. Addressing this dilemma, the General Assembly initially passed Resolution 997 (UN General Assembly Resolution 997) on 2 November 1956, which called for a ceasefire, withdrawal of forces, and the reopening of the Suez Canal. Yet the UK and France insisted on some sort of

international police force before they withdrew their troops from the Suez Canal area. How to facilitate these goals was still unresolved in the minds of UN diplomats and Secretary-General Hammarskjöld. On 4 November 1956, the General Assembly passed the landmark Resolution 998 (UN General Assembly Resolution 998), which authorized the Secretary-General to set up "an emergency international United Nations Force to secure and supervise the cessation of hostilities." Support for the force in the General Assembly was not universal. Although none of the member states opposed the resolution, 19 of the 76 voting members abstained. The support of those countries for the operation was contingent upon the force's makeup and its mission.

General Assembly Resolution 998 did not make clear what kind of force was envisioned, spelling out neither a fully articulated strategy nor guidelines for its operation. Because of the wide latitude given to the Secretary-General, it was largely Hammarskjöld who defined this new strategy.³ Yet one should not underestimate the contribution of the Canadian foreign minister, Lester Pearson, who developed many of the ideas behind UN peacekeeping and designed the framework adopted for the force.⁴ What made UNEF I different was not so much that all its components were new, but that the combination of the components was unprecedented. Various aspects of prior observation missions were combined with new principles to form a new strategy, later what became known as "peacekeeping."

Various reports by UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld early on laid out the basic principles of the UNEF I, and indeed traditional peacekeeping forces for decades to come. Notably, "there was no intent in the establishment of the Force to influence the military balance in the current conflict."⁵ Furthermore, the force would be "in no way a military force temporarily controlling the territory on which it was stationed; nor should the Force have functions exceeding those necessary to secure peaceful conditions."⁶ This established the principle of neutrality; unlike collective security actions, no side in the conflict was labeled an aggressor and UN actions were not designed to favor or defeat any protagonist. UNEF I was also designed to "be of a temporary nature,"⁷ suggesting that peacekeepers would be responsible for immediate tasks of ensuring the ceasefire in anticipation of longer-term peacemaking concerns.

The size of the force was left to the discretion of the force commander in consultation with the Secretary-General, with the initial target of 6,000. In practice, the actual number varied somewhat over the course of the deployment, peaking at just over 6,000 personnel. These were drawn from a number of different states, none of which was geographically proximate to the area of conflict or closely associated with any of the principal disputants. Indeed, there was an explicit stipulation to recruit personnel from member states "other than those having permanent membership in the Security Council" (UNGA Resolution 1000), thereby reinforcing the principle of neutrality but also reflecting the particular concerns of this crisis in which four of the five Permanent Members had close ties to the conflict principals, and indeed two were disputants themselves.

Furthermore, deployment was confined entirely to Egyptian territory with the consent of the host government. These facts would play an important role in the precedent

set for future peacekeeping operations as well as for the fate of the operation itself. The area of deployment was extensive and the force was responsible for monitoring almost 500 sq. km. utilizing seventy-two permanent observation posts. Nevertheless, much of the monitoring area was sparsely populated, making the detection of improper activities easier than other peacekeeping operations deployed in urban areas or with responsibility for the entire geographic area of a state.

UNEF went through several stages in its mission. The first General Assembly resolution (UN General Assembly Resolution 997) laid out the general parameters of what the UN wanted to achieve, among these were "an immediate ceasefire and, as part thereof, halt the movement of military forces and arms into the area [and] parties to the armistice agreements promptly ... withdraw all forces behind the armistice lines, ... desist from raids across the armistice lines into neighbouring territory, and ... observe scrupulously the provisions of the armistice agreements." The specific charge given the UNEF I force and the details would be laid out in a series of reports by Secretary-General Hammarskjöld. In line with subsequent "traditional" peacekeeping missions, a ceasefire was established prior to the deployment of the force. The first task of the force thereafter involved supervising the withdrawal of opposing forces, a prerequisite for maintaining the ceasefire and promoting stability. Britain and France were initially reluctant to withdraw their forces from the Suez Canal area before UNEF was fully operational, but with the gradual deployment of the peacekeepers, British and French forces had pulled back by end of 1956 and UNEF had assumed control of Port Said at the northern end of the canal. UN forces secured the area and were responsible for monitoring the ceasefire and maintaining order there. UNEF also engaged in some mine-clearing and facilitated some prisoner exchanges in the earliest phase of the operation.

The withdrawal of Israeli troops proved more problematic, although eventually they too were removed from the area. Israel denounced the demarcation line dating from a 1949 armistice agreement and would not permit any UN peacekeepers to be stationed on its side of the line. The Israeli withdrawal occurred in several phases and was not completed until March 1957. In the interim, UNEF monitored the ceasefire, interposing itself between Israeli and Egyptian military forces and carried out various minor tasks in the areas vacated by the Israelis. The Suez Canal was reopened in April 1957, under Egyptian control, to international traffic.

Following troop withdrawal UNEF settled into its ceasefire monitoring role for the next decade. Deployed along the armistice line on the Egyptian side, it acted as a buffer between Israeli and Egyptian forces. With various patrols and other monitoring techniques, UNEF sought to detect any infiltration of the surrounding area and any acts of violence that would constitute a violation of the ceasefire.

Although the situation around the deployment area in the Sinai was relatively stable, relations between Israel and Egypt were interwoven with the Arab-Israeli conflict more broadly. Armed raids by Palestinian forces against Israel became common in the 1960s as did Israeli retaliatory strikes. These generally occurred along the borders of Syria and Jordan, whereas the Sinai border remained relatively quiet. These incidents therefore

did not affect the ceasefire in the area of peacekeeping deployment. That would change with serious military encounters between Israel and Syria in the spring of 1967.

A number of clashes between Syria and Israel commenced at this time and full-scale war seemed imminent. Egypt, for its part, began massing troops near the Sinai. The Egyptian government requested on 16 May 1967 that UNEF troops be withdrawn. Because peacekeeping operations were based on the principle of host-state consent, the UN eventually complied, with all personnel withdrawn by the end of the day on 17 June, and the organization was unsuccessful in persuading Israel to permit the redeployment of the peacekeepers on its side of the demarcation line. An alliance between Egypt and Jordan further heightened tensions and, with war on the horizon, Israel launched on a preemptive strike on 5 June against Egyptian positions. In what became known as the Six-Day War, Israeli forces achieved a dramatic victory and seized a series of territories (including the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza strip) that remain at the center of the Arab–Israeli dispute. Israel also captured parts of the Sinai—land that would not be returned until after the Camp David Accords. Not all peacekeepers were able to evacuate the area during the Six-Day War and fifteen UN soldiers, awaiting withdrawal were unintentionally killed in the fighting. The mission ended with the withdrawal of the last UN personnel several days after the end of the war.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

There are several standards on which to evaluate the UNEF I operation. One might first look at the tasks specified in its mandate. With some minor glitches, UNEF I achieved the orderly withdrawal of Israeli, British, and French forces from the area and facilitated the reopening of the Suez Canal. If one takes British and French statements at face value, then perhaps such withdrawal, and therefore avoidance of a longer and potentially wider war, might not have been possible without the deployment of a force such as UNEF. Demining and other roles involving interactions with the local population also appeared to be successful.

Beyond these immediate tasks, UNEF can be evaluated on the core goals—violence abatement, conflict containment, and conflict settlement—common to peace operations of all varieties.⁸ The first, violence abatement, was the central mission of UNEF as it was assigned to separate Egyptian and Israeli forces and monitor the ceasefire.

The period from 1957 to the withdrawal of the force in 1967 was relatively quiet. No major incidents threatened the operation of the force. There were many technical violations of the ceasefire agreement, however, especially in the form of incursions of the Israeli air force into prohibited air space. Nevertheless, these violations were minor and did not prompt any dramatic responses from the parties. There were few violent incidents in the deployment area, and the loss of life by UNEF I personnel was minimal, at least until the outbreak of the Six-Day War. There were, however, sixteen militarized disputes (threats, displays, or use of military force) between Israel and Egypt in the period

between the Suez Crisis and the Six-Day War; most of these were bilateral confrontations although several also involved Syria.⁹ This is a higher frequency than in earlier or subsequent periods in the region. Nevertheless, the positive impact of the peacekeeping force might be found in several facts. First, incidents of violence or threatened violence were generally unrelated to the Sinai and the broader area of peacekeeping deployment. UNEF I therefore can probably not be held responsible for failures to prevent or deter such threats and confrontations. Second, in all of these disputes, there were no fatalities.

In addition, Egyptian–Israeli relations were comparatively less hostile and their incidents less violent than those between Israel and her other neighbors. Many instances of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) infiltration and Israeli retaliation occurred along the borders of other Arab states not supervised by UN peacekeeping forces. Similarly, Israel clashed repeatedly with Syria and Jordan, and these militarized disputes often involved the reciprocal use of military force rather than just the threats that characterized the Israeli–Egyptian hostilities. One might also look to the frequency and severity of Israeli–Egyptian confrontations after the withdrawal of UNEF I. Following the Six-Day War, there was a period of over six years in which there was no peacekeeping force in place between Israel and Egypt. In the first part of that period, roughly from 1957 to 1970, the so-called “War of Attrition” occurred. This was not a continuous military engagement but persistent, sporadic fighting between the two sides that resulted in significant loss of life. Israeli troops were situated on the east bank of the Suez Canal, the canal was closed to shipping, and Israel occupied a large piece of Egyptian territory after the 1967 war. President Nasser responded by maintaining military activities along the canal. The Israeli government, now led by Golda Meir, pursued a policy of “asymmetrical response”—retaliation on a scale far exceeding any individual attack. Had peacekeepers still been in place, this would have been unlikely to have occurred. Furthermore, the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, came only six years after the last full-scale war between Israel and Egypt, an interlude half as long as previously under the watchful eyes of UNEF I.

The Six-Day War in 1967 might be regarded as *prima facie* strong evidence that UNEF I was unable to stop serious armed conflict. Nevertheless, such a conclusion is somewhat misleading. The war occurred only after UNEF I was asked to withdraw, suggesting that the presence of the peacekeeping force exercised some restraint on President Nasser. Why else would he want it withdrawn, when he could have easily overrun UNEF I positions and gained the advantage of surprise?

UNEF’s record on conflict containment is limited. There was minimal conflict within the zone of deployment and therefore little that could spread to surrounding areas. One might argue that the presence of UNEF merely diffused the Arab–Israeli conflict to other parts of the region. Certainly there was a spate of violent incidents around the Syrian and Jordanian borders with Israel during the deployment period of UNEF I. Whether such incidents increased or not as a result of the stability in the Sinai provided by UNEF I cannot be determined.

The record of UNEF I on the conflict settlement is also somewhat ambiguous. That the Six-Day War occurred, followed by another war in 1973 (not to mention the continuing

lower-level animosities between Israel and its neighbors), demonstrates that the underlying dispute was not solved by the time of UNEF I's departure. There were no significant negotiations and certainly no formal agreements during the period of peacekeeping deployment. One might credibly argue that just before (and certainly after) the 1967 war the protagonists were further from achieving a resolution than they had been in 1956. The creation of the PLO, the emergence of Nasser as a Pan-Arab leader, and numerous terrorist incidents seemed to poison the environment for reconciliation provided by the peacekeeping force. Nevertheless, conflict resolution activities were not formally part of UNEF I's mandate and it might be unrealistic to expect a peace operation to facilitate the end of an intractable conflict prior to a peace agreement between the disputants.

In summary, UNEF I can be judged a relative success in limiting armed conflict, but less successful in containing the broader conflict in the region and assisting in its peaceful resolution, although it was neither assigned nor equipped to perform those duties.

CONCLUSION

If judged on its specific merits, UNEF I was a seminal operation for UN peacekeeping. Over the following forty years it provided precedents for traditional peacekeeping missions and set the general benchmarks for operations until at least the end of the Cold War.¹⁰

First, UNEF I helped define the so-called "holy trinity" of traditional peacekeeping: consent, neutrality, and minimum use of force. Consent signifies that peacekeepers can only be deployed on the territory of a host state with the permission of that state's government. The withdrawal of UNEF I at Egypt's request in 1967 is indicative of that principle in action. Neutrality signifies that the operation was not designed to affect the military balance between the protagonists.¹¹ Minimum use of force meant that peacekeepers were lightly armed and could only use military force in self-defense. In addition, the size of peacekeeping operations henceforward was relatively modest in terms of the standing armies of nation-states. Beyond these three components, UNEF I was deployed only after a ceasefire but prior to any peace agreement signifying conflict resolution. This also would be the norm for traditional peacekeeping operations for decades to come.

Second, structurally UNEF I was quite different from its observation mission predecessors. It was under the direction of the Secretary-General and under the field command of a neutral officer appointed by the UN executive head. This was a significant step forward from any previous peace observation missions, although national commanders were still in charge of their units. In addition, UNEF I troops did not include any force contributions from the major powers—and in particular the permanent five members of the Security Council, a prohibition used in a few observation missions in the past that subsequently became a guiding principle for peacekeeping operations. Peacekeepers also carried weapons, unlike observers in previous missions. Finally, and perhaps most

importantly, UNEF I acted as an interposition force between the protagonists. This represented a qualitative difference from any peace observation forces before which had neither the personnel numbers nor the mandate to serve as a physical barrier between hostile parties. The UNEF I formula would be replicated by almost every subsequent peacekeeping operation during the Cold War and its model still influences some traditional missions in contemporary times, even as peace operations have assumed a wider range of missions and the standards of the “holy trinity” have been considerably relaxed.

NOTES

1. In addition, Canada, Italy, Switzerland, and the United States made voluntary airlift contributions. A number of other states offered troop contributions but did not end up supplying troops.
2. UN expenditures for the mission were reduced, and therefore do not reflect the full cost of the mission, by some troop contributing states absorbing their costs.
3. Many of the basic precepts were outlined in the Secretary-General’s report in the early days of the crisis—UN General Assembly, A/3302, 6 November 1956. These were subsequently formalized by a report of the Secretary-General two years later based on the UNEF I experience; such guidelines expanded on the original principles and included additional elements related to financing and administration of the peacekeeping force. See UN General Assembly, A/3943, 9 October 1958.
4. Pearson’s role in originating many of the ideas behind the peace force and his role in influencing Secretary-General Hammarskjöld are detailed in Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972), 175ff.
5. A/3302, 4.
6. A/3302, 5–6.
7. A/3302, 4.
8. For a detailed analysis of UNEF I success, see Paul F. Diehl, *International Peacekeeping*, 2nd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). See also chapter 7 on evaluation criteria and in more detail Paul F. Diehl and Daniel Druckman, *Evaluating Peace Operations* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010).
9. Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) Data Set (www.correlatesofwar.org/).
10. See A/3943 and compare UNEF I operations with subsequent UN peacekeeping operations that occurred during the Cold War.
11. Later, this was redefined as “impartiality.” Impartiality signifies that the operation’s mandate was carried out in an even-handed fashion and not designed to favor any one party. Yet the mandate of some operations, such as the protection of threatened populations or the maintenance of a ceasefire in a civil war, might privilege the interests of one or more protagonists even it was fairly carried out with respect to all parties.

