

## Israel should back extending UNIFIL presence in Lebanon, defense officials say

Contributed by Barak Ravid, Haaretz Correspondent  
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Despite the harsh criticism Defense Minister Ehud Barak has voiced over the past few weeks about UN Resolution 1701, the defense establishment recommended last week that Israel support extending the mandate of the enlarged international force deployed in southern Lebanon.

The UN Security Council is expected to extend the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for another year on August 27, UN chief Ban Ki-moon announced last week. The force consists of 12,000 troops from various nations.

On Friday, Ban sent a letter to Belgian UN envoy Jan Grauls, this month's Council chair, recommending extending UNIFIL's mandate until August 31, 2009, at the Lebanese government's request.

Once UNIFIL's mandate has been extended, the Defense Ministry recommends that Israel campaign to expand the troops' power to engage hostile forces on the ground. Defense officials have often complained that UNIFIL forces are not determined enough to block an armed Hezbollah presence in South Lebanon.

Barak has been campaigning strongly against Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the Second Lebanon War, repeatedly calling it a failure and a serious miscalculation by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Barak says Resolution 1701 has collapsed and UNIFIL has failed to prevent Hezbollah from accumulating more power.

In an interview with Army Radio last week, Barak said that Kadima front-runner, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, was unfit to make decisions about Israel's security and that the pride she takes in contributing to the passing of Resolution 1701 casts serious doubt on her judgment.

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