



Security Council

Distr.: General
22 March 2021

Original: English

United Nations Disengagement Observer Force

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report provides an account of the activities of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) for the period from 20 November 2020 to 20 February 2021, pursuant to the mandate set out in Security Council resolution [350 \(1974\)](#) and extended in subsequent Council resolutions, most recently resolution [2555 \(2020\)](#).

II. Situation in the area of operations and activities of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force

2. During the reporting period, the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic was generally maintained, despite several violations of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces of 1974. The overall security situation in the UNDOF area of operations was volatile, with continued military activity in the areas of separation and limitation, in violation of relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolution [2555 \(2020\)](#).

3. In employing its best efforts to maintain the ceasefire and ensure that it is scrupulously observed, as prescribed in the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, UNDOF reports all breaches of the ceasefire line that it observes. All incidents of firing across the ceasefire line as well as the crossing of the ceasefire line by individuals, aircraft and drones constitute violations of the Agreement. In its regular interactions with both sides, the leadership of UNDOF continued to call upon the parties to exercise restraint and avoid any activities that might lead to an escalation of the situation between the parties.

4. Late on 24 November, personnel at United Nations position 68 observed an explosion in the vicinity of the village of Ruhinah, approximately 1,000 metres north-west of the position, causing the United Nations personnel to take shelter in the bunker for approximately 90 minutes. The explosion was also heard by personnel at United Nations positions 27, 32, 60 and observation posts 51 and 72. The Israel Defense Forces subsequently informed UNDOF that “the activities of Iran and its proxies in the area of south-west Syria and specifically in the area of separation are violations ... and pose a threat to the State of Israel. In light of this, Israel has acted accurately in a precision strike against infrastructures that are used by them”. The



Israel Defense Forces also stated “we demand that Syria takes responsibilities for the activities that occur in its territory, to prevent violations of agreements and to take action in removing all of Iran and its proxies’ forces and weaponry from the area”. UNDOF deployed patrols in efforts to ascertain the location of the strike, but the patrols were unable to identify the point of impact.

5. In the early hours of 25 November, personnel at observation post 51 and the United Nations Charlie gate reported observing six explosions on the eastern horizon. Open sources reported airstrikes were carried out on the same day in southern Damascus and in the vicinity of Kiswah.

6. Late on 6 January, United Nations personnel at observation post 73 observed five tracer rounds of unknown calibre being fired from a location in the area of limitation north-east of their position, across the area of separation in a south-easterly direction, with two of them exploding mid-air. The Israel Defense Forces subsequently informed UNDOF that “the activities of Iran and its proxies in the area southwest of the Syrian Arab Republic and specifically within the AOS [area of separation] are violations of the Disengagement Agreement”. Open sources reported on 6 January Israel Defense Forces airstrikes targeting locations in Kiswah, Sahnaya and Dimas.

7. Late on 3 February, United Nations personnel at positions 10A, 27, 60, 68 and observation post 51 and Camp Faouar observed flares, anti-aircraft fire and two explosions in the area of limitation. Early on 4 February, the Israel Defense Forces informed UNDOF that “Israel has carried out a precision strike against infrastructure that are being utilized by proxies for transfers of weaponry and mobilization against the state of Israel in Damascus International Airport ... Israel is interested in quiet and regional stability and warns that it will respond severely against all action from Syrian territory against Israel”.

8. In letters addressed to the President of the Security Council and myself, the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic conveyed information from his Government according to which Israel had launched attacks on locations in the Syrian Arab Republic in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. In a letter dated 7 January (S/2021/23), the Permanent Representative relayed the information that Israel had launched, on that same day, successive rocket bursts at the southern part of the Israeli-occupied Golan. On 13 January, the Permanent Representative conveyed his Government’s understanding that, early on that day, Israel had carried out airstrikes on the cities of Dayr al-Zawr and Albu Kamal in the Syrian Arab Republic (see S/2021/46). On 22 January, the Permanent Representative reported that on that same day, an attack by Israel in the vicinity of Hama had resulted in eight civilian casualties, including the death of four members of one family (see S/2021/73). In addition, in a letter dated 4 February (S/2021/111), the Permanent Representative conveyed his Government’s position that Israel had launched, on 3 February, successive rocket bursts from the Israeli-occupied Golan towards the southern zone of the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic.

9. On 15 December, United Nations personnel at observation post 73 observed two individuals, one in a vehicle and the other armed with an assault rifle outside the vehicle, in the area of separation. Around the same time, an Israel Defense Forces patrol was observed on the Alpha side (Israeli-occupied Golan) approximately 800 metres from the armed individual. UNDOF engaged the Syrian authorities and the Israel Defense Forces during this observation owing to the potential confrontation that could have resulted from the presence of the armed individual in the vicinity of the Israel Defense Forces patrol. Both the individuals and the Israel Defense Forces subsequently departed the area.

10. Military violations on the Alpha side included the presence of Iron Dome systems, artillery systems and a multi-launch rocket system within the area of limitation, which are considered unauthorized military equipment in the area of limitation, pursuant to the terms of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. On 31 December, United Nations personnel at Camp Ziouani heard 49 heavy explosions within a two-hour period, which UNDOF assessed as having been part of training exercises conducted by the Israel Defense Forces on the Alpha side.

11. UNDOF continued to observe daily crossings of the ceasefire line by unidentified individuals from the Bravo side. UNDOF assessed that these individuals were shepherds and farmers from the surrounding areas tending livestock and hunters carrying hunting weapons. The Israel Defense Forces continued to express deep concern about these crossings, which they stated were a threat to the safety and security of Israel Defense Forces personnel operating in proximity of the ceasefire line. The Israel Defense Forces personnel increased their operations in response to these crossings, including by firing warning shots on 11 occasions to discourage individuals from the Bravo side from approaching the Israeli technical fence.

12. On 2 February, the Syrian authorities informed UNDOF that a Syrian national had been apprehended by the Israel Defense Forces, who later informed UNDOF that the individual was detained and apprehended after crossing the ceasefire line south of Burayqah. On 3 February, UNDOF, in consultation with the parties, assisted the International Committee of the Red Cross in facilitating the return of the Syrian national to the Bravo side through the Qunaytirah crossing. On 7 February, the Syrian authorities informed UNDOF that the Israel Defense Forces had apprehended and detained another Syrian civilian. The Israel Defense Forces subsequently confirmed to UNDOF that they had apprehended a “suspicious” Syrian national who had crossed the ceasefire line and had taken him into custody for questioning. On 18 February, UNDOF, in consultation with the parties and in coordination with the International Committee of the Red Cross, facilitated the return of two civilians, including the individual apprehended and detained by the Israel Defense Forces on 7 February, from the Alpha side to the Bravo side through the Qunaytirah crossing. The other individual had reportedly been apprehended and detained by the Israel Defense Forces on 13 February for also allegedly crossing the ceasefire line.

13. Sporadic heavy explosions, bursts of heavy machine gun and small arms fire persisted throughout the reporting period in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side. UNDOF assessed this military activity as related to the controlled detonations of unexploded ordnance as part of clearance and training by the Syrian armed forces. UNDOF observed an increase in the presence of Syrian armed forces personnel, some of whom were armed, staffing a number of checkpoints within the area of separation in violation of the Agreement on Disengagement. UNDOF also observed, on several occasions, the presence of Syrian anti-aircraft guns within the area of limitation.

14. On 12 occasions during the reporting period, UNDOF observed drones flying in the area of separation. UNDOF was not in a position to determine the points of origin of the drones or to attribute responsibility for them to either party.

15. UNDOF protested to the parties all violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement that it had observed, including the firing into and across the area of separation as well as across the ceasefire line, the presence of unauthorized equipment and personnel in the areas of separation and limitation and the crossings of the ceasefire line by civilians from the Bravo side. UNDOF closely liaised with the parties, including during periods of heightened tension, to de-escalate the situation.

16. During the reporting period, the security situation on the Bravo side deteriorated, with open sources reporting increased attacks by unknown armed

elements involving the use of improvised explosive devices or small arms fire targeting Syrian security forces on or close to UNDOF patrol routes in the area of operations. In the southern part of the area of operations, the security situation continued to be volatile, with open sources reporting several attacks, including improvised explosive devices and assassinations targeting Syrian security forces checkpoints and convoys, other government authorities and former members of armed opposition groups. Such security incidents continued to reportedly occur closer to the UNDOF area of operations, namely in Jasim, Nawa, Saham al-Jawlan, Tasil and Tafas, including in the vicinity of UNDOF patrol routes.

17. Recent activity linked to ongoing tensions in Tafas has led to an increased risk of collateral damage to UNDOF in the short term. On 24 January, open sources reported Syrian armed forces launching a large-scale operation in the vicinity of Tafas, resulting in the deterioration for a short period in the security situation in the area of limitation on the Bravo side. This operation was reportedly followed by at least eight coordinated armed attacks on Syrian security forces checkpoints by unknown armed elements, which intensified on 28 January, including close to an UNDOF patrol route in the vicinity of Mughr al-Mir. An improvised explosive device attack in Sayda was reported on 29 January, as were separate armed attacks on Syrian security forces checkpoints in Jaba and Qahtaniyah, close to UNDOF patrol routes, in the area of separation on 30 January. In response to the deterioration in the security situation, Syrian armed forces reportedly deployed reinforcements to areas around Tafas, Muzayrib and Yadudah. In addition, low-intensity violence in Dar‘a Governorate, which periodically escalated into larger armed clashes, continued to be reported. Although UNDOF personnel were not directly threatened, the risk of collateral damage cannot be ruled out.

18. UNDOF continues to implement its mandate in the context of the measures adopted by the authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic and Israel to control the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak. These measures include limitations on the movement of United Nations personnel and their mandatory testing and quarantine after any cross-border movement. Since early March 2020, the Alpha side has continued to restrict the movement of UNDOF and Observer Group Golan personnel through the Qunaytirah crossing, which it opens only on a case-by-case basis, affecting the operational and administrative activities of UNDOF. UNDOF has continued to liaise with the Israel Defense Forces with regard to their facilitation of the crossing of UNDOF and Observer Group Golan personnel at the Qunaytirah crossing, in particular the need for United Nations personnel to cross using only documents issued by UNDOF at the Alpha gate and to return to the established crossing procedures.

19. On 8 January, four UNDOF personnel tested positive for COVID-19. Contact tracing was conducted, resulting in a number of personnel being placed in quarantine and movement out of the two affected United Nations positions being restricted. Between 9 and 23 January, 28 UNDOF military personnel and five civilian staff (one national and four international) tested positive for COVID-19. As at 20 February, all UNDOF personnel who had tested positive for COVID-19 had recovered.

20. UNDOF continued to implement the necessary measures aimed at maintaining operational capability and limiting the potential spread of COVID-19 in the Force. These measures included telecommuting arrangements for national and international civilian personnel as well as the disinfection of offices and common spaces and vehicles entering the camps.

21. Both parties continued to suspend inspections conducted by Observer Group Golan in the areas of limitation, citing COVID-19 as the reason for the suspension.

Neither party agreed to the inspection mechanisms, including social distancing, that UNDOF recommended to them, in order to resume inspections.

22. As part of the return to full mandate implementation, UNDOF had resumed the restoration, including repainting and refurbishment, of the barrels marking the ceasefire line, which had ceased for security reasons and continues to be temporarily suspended owing to COVID-19 restrictions.

23. Progress in the incremental return of UNDOF to the Bravo side continued despite being slowed by the restrictions on construction due to COVID-19 control measures. Additional work to extend position 60 continued. The reconstruction of observation post 71 continued, albeit at a slower pace owing to inclement weather conditions, and is estimated to be completed in June 2021.

24. UNDOF operations continued to be supported by the military observers of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Observer Group Golan, who are under the operational control of UNDOF and maintain seven fixed observation posts and one temporary observation post along the ceasefire line. The focus of Observer Group Golan remains on continuous static observation and situational awareness.

25. UNDOF monthly operational patrols continued on routes in the areas of separation and limitation, with 1,317 operational activities carried out in November 2020, 1,559 completed in December 2020 and 1,166 completed in January 2021. UNDOF patrol routes covered approximately 97 per cent of the area of separation and some 55 per cent of the area of limitation.

26. The movement of UNDOF personnel through Lebanon continued to be restricted owing to measures related to COVID-19 and Lebanese administrative requirements. The route between Beirut and Damascus, via the Judaydah and Masna' border crossing, which is a primary resupply route for UNDOF, remained open for the commercial movement of goods.

27. The UNDOF assessment was that there continued to be a significant threat to United Nations personnel in the UNDOF area of operations from explosive remnants of war, including unexploded ordnance and mines, as well as a probable threat from the possible presence of sleeper cells of armed groups. In addition, the deterioration in the security situation in the central part of the area of operations and the continued volatile security situation in the southern part have slowed the progress in the opening of new patrol routes.

28. UNDOF continued to conduct and update its contingency planning for the reinforcement and evacuation of positions and observation posts on both the Alpha and Bravo sides, in addition to regular rehearsals, exercises and training for identified contingencies. Risk mitigation measures, including force protection measures, continued to be developed at positions and observation posts and at the operational base at Camp Ziouani and headquarters at Camp Faouar.

29. As at 20 February, UNDOF comprised 1,091 troops, including 60 women peacekeepers. Troops are deployed from Bhutan (2), Czechia (4), Fiji (135), Ghana (3), India (198), Ireland (132), Nepal (403) and Uruguay (214). In addition, 75 military observers from Observer Group Golan, including 13 women military observers, assisted UNDOF in carrying out its tasks.

III. Implementation of Security Council resolution 338 (1973)

30. In its resolution 2555 (2020), the Security Council called upon the parties concerned to immediately implement its resolution 338 (1973). It decided to renew the mandate of UNDOF for a period of six months, until 30 June 2021, and requested

the Secretary-General to report every 90 days on developments in the situation and the measures taken to implement resolution 338 (1973). The search for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in the Middle East, in particular the efforts made at various levels to implement resolution 338 (1973), was addressed in my report on the situation in the Middle East (A/75/297), submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 74/14, entitled “The Syrian Golan”.

31. Since the discontinuation of indirect peace talks in December 2008, there have been no negotiations between the parties. The Syrian conflict further reduces the prospects for their resumption and for progress towards peace between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. I look forward to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and the resumption of efforts towards a comprehensive, just and durable peace settlement, as called for by the Security Council in its resolution 338 (1973) and other relevant resolutions.

IV. Observations

32. I am concerned about the continued violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement during the reporting period, in a particularly volatile time for the region, including the breach of the ceasefire that occurred on 24 November and 3 February, which also posed a significant risk to UNDOF personnel. The Israel Defense Forces should refrain from firing across the ceasefire line. I remain concerned by the continued presence of the Syrian armed forces in the area of separation. There should be no military forces in the area of separation other than those of UNDOF. The continued presence of unauthorized weapons and equipment in the area of limitation on both the Alpha and the Bravo sides are also of concern. These developments are in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. I urge the parties to the Agreement to exercise utmost restraint and comply with the Agreement. I continue to encourage members of the Security Council to support efforts to sensitize both parties to the risk of escalation and the need to preserve the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic.

33. It remains critical that the parties maintain their liaison with UNDOF. All violations of the ceasefire line increase tensions between the signatories to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and contribute to undermining stability in the area. The continued liaison by UNDOF with the parties has contributed to de-escalation during times of heightened tension.

34. The continued commitment of both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and support for the presence of UNDOF remain essential. The full return of UNDOF to the area of separation continues to be a priority for the Force. I count on the continued cooperation of both parties to facilitate the advancement of the Force’s plans for an incremental return to operations and positions in the area of separation and to ensure that the Force can implement its mandate fully, including inspections on both sides. At the same time, the parties must continue to support the enhancement of the liaison function of UNDOF.

35. Given the worrying trend of continued violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, the safety and security of military and civilian personnel in UNDOF and Observer Group Golan are of particular concern. It is therefore of particular importance that the Security Council continue to bring its influence to bear on the parties concerned to ensure that UNDOF is accorded the ability to operate in a safe and secure manner and is allowed to operate freely in accordance with the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. It remains important that the parties also continue to facilitate the deployment of all personnel to UNDOF for effective mandate implementation.

36. The continued support of Member States, and in particular the confidence and commitment of troop-contributing countries in UNDOF, remain key factors in the Force's ability to carry out its mandate. I am grateful to the Governments of Bhutan, Czechia, Fiji, Ghana, India, Ireland, Nepal and Uruguay for their contributions and the commitment, resolve and consummate professionalism of their military personnel in UNDOF. I am also thankful to the Member States that have contributed military observers to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization.

37. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the Head of Mission and Force Commander, Lieutenant General Ishwar Hamal, and to the military and civilian personnel serving under his leadership in UNDOF and the military observers in Observer Group Golan, who continue to perform the important tasks assigned to them by the Security Council with efficiency and commitment, under extremely challenging circumstances.

