The end of 2010 was marked by paralysis across the Middle East, with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict at an impasse over the decision to lift the partial settlement freeze and an uneasy calm prevailing in Gaza, political progress in Lebanon mired in factional disputes, and very little anticipation for major shifts in the region, where regimes, positions and interests seemed solidly entrenched in the status quo.

In this context, the two UN political missions, the UN Special Coordinator Office for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) and the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL), continued to operate in a constrictive and highly regulated space in which they struggled to revive dialogue and promote alternatives. Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559 in Lebanon, and the “Roadmap” for the occupied Palestinian territory saw little overall progress, despite marginal improvements on some issues, including reconstruction in Gaza and the Israeli announcement to withdraw from the northern part of Ghajar at the Lebanese border.

This stalemate now stands in stark contrast to the first half of 2011, marked by the “Arab Spring.” While the dynamics between the regional upheaval and the mandated areas of UNSCO and UNSCOL are difficult to assess, the impact of the unfolding crisis in Egypt and Syria in particular on the various political actors’ calculations and positioning is indubitable. Significant shifts and political realignments are underway in Lebanon and Gaza: the fall of the Hariri government was followed by the establishment of a Hezbollah-controlled government in Lebanon, while the Palestinian reconciliation agreement is accompanied by increasingly assertive claims for statehood.

While those changes directly challenge traditional paradigms and political reflexes, they also offer opportunities for the UN to increase its good offices role and assert its positioning by leveraging its distinct political comparative advantages, including its presence on the ground, its links with the programmatic work of UN agencies, and its normative framework and principles, which the “Arab Spring” seems to have vindicated across the region.
Established in 1994, the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) combines a political mandate, including mediation and participation in the Middle East Quartet, and a coordination mandate, in the mobilization of technical, financial and other assistance to the Palestinian people.

In light of growing demands on both dimensions of its work, UNSCO has 64 international and national civilian staff located in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Gaza. The key functions include good office interventions, mediation between parties, advocacy, political and socio-economic reporting and coordination of the strategies, programs and messaging of the UN Country Team consisting of agencies, funds and programmes on the ground. The mission does not include specific programmatic components as found in a number of other political missions. Rather, its functions include those of a convener, a reporter, a mediator and an advocate across a range of political, economic and humanitarian issues that affect prospects for peace, requiring a cross cutting modus operandi of analysis, coordination and leadership.

In the highly volatile and politically regulated context of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), the tensions as well as the opportunities inherent in such a profile often come into sharp focus.

Key Developments

The launch on 2 September 2010 of direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) came after intense diplomatic
pressure from the international community, including months of “proximity talks” designed to lay the groundwork for bilateral engagement. Mounting frustration over the lack of results in the peace process, exacerbated by the Gaza flotilla incident of 31 May 2010, increased the risks on both sides of continued stalemate. Over the summer of 2010, UNSCO repeatedly highlighted such risks and actively promoted, both within the Quartet and through bilateral talks with the parties, a swift transition to direct negotiations as the only solution to address a range of pressure points in the region.

However, the direct talks came to an abrupt end when Israel refused to extend the partial moratorium on settlements, which expired on 26 September 2010, despite numerous international diplomatic efforts and proposals to revive the peace process. Calls for Israel to renew the moratorium, expand it to East Jerusalem and prevent settler violence have since become a mainstay of UNSCO’s advocacy and reporting efforts, including in Security Council briefings. At the same time, UNSCO has continued to encourage the Palestinian leadership – to which it enjoys greater access than on the Israeli side – to return to the negotiation table. Such bilateral efforts were reinforced by the 5 February 2011 Quartet meeting in Munich, during which Quartet members agreed to conduct a series of discussions with the parties aimed at bringing about resumed negotiations on all core issues, including borders and security.

While UNSCO’s capacity to exert pressure on the parties to the conflict faces a number of constraints, including the historical weight of bilateral diplomatic channels and restrictions on engagement with Hamas, the mission has nonetheless begun articulating a specific voice within the Quartet, leveraging in particular the advantage of the Special Coordinator being the only Quartet Envoy permanently based in the Middle East. By the end of 2010, UNSCO was calling for a new strategy, with a focus on a substantive third party role in mediation, acknowledging the challenges posed by opposing pre-conditions on both sides, while alerting its partners to the growing threat to the Quartet’s legitimacy and credibility as the impasse of the formal peace process becomes ever more entrenched. Repeated postponement of a meeting of the Quartet during March or April 2011 only sharpened the relevance of such cautions.

Quartet discussions took place on 11 July in Washington in an effort to urge the parties to return to the table. However, the Quartet did not agree on a statement on that occasion, underscoring difficulties in reaching a precise international consensus on what should be put forward for the parties to return to talks. At the time of writing, momentum is growing for the Palestinians to seek decisions from the UN Security Council or General Assembly in September to advance goals of UN membership or recognition for a State of Palestine. UNSCO has been cautious in its public messaging on this issue, signaling its support for a return to negotiations while not taking a public position for or against Palestinian approaches to the UN, underlining that this is ultimately a matter for UN member states.

Taking advantage of its extended field presence and contacts, including in Gaza, UNSCO continued to play an active role in defusing tensions between various parties. The last 12 months saw a number of violent escalations, notably between Israel and Gaza from January to April 2011, and during the so-called “Nakba Day” demonstrations in May and June that took place across the occupied territory, along the Blue Line with Lebanon and in the Syrian Golan. In each of these cases, UNSCO activated a range of bilateral channels to urge all actors to exercise maximum restraint. This “firefighter” role has taken on added relevance and necessity in the absence of meaningful political progress. The mission reports on and denounces violations of
international obligations and standards from both sides alike, including incidents of demolitions, evictions and settler violence committed by Israelis, as well as Palestinian attacks on Israelis, illustrated in a strongly worded denunciation by the Special Coordinator of the 11 March 2011 murder of a family of settlers in the West Bank. UNSCO also continues to call for the release of Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit, and is in behind-the-scenes contact with all players to support the stop and go negotiation efforts for his release, within the broader context of advocacy efforts for meaningful prisoner exchanges.

On 4 May 2011, the Fatah and Hamas factions of the Palestinian leadership signed a reconciliation deal, designed to pave the way for a formation of new transitional unity government of independent technocrats to prepare for new Palestinian elections. This process was more the result of regional shifts and pressures, including changes in Egypt’s governing structure and instability in Syria than the result of direct UNSCO engagement. Nevertheless, ever since tensions between Hamas and Fatah led to the establishment of two parallel Palestinian governments in June 2007, UNSCO consistently called for efforts of Palestinian unity. 1 The mission is also an important player in keeping open channels of communication among the Palestinians. UN Special Coordinator Robert H. Serry was the only Quartet envoy to attend the 4 May signing ceremony of the unity accord. Since then, UNSCO has repeatedly called for reconciliation not just as a fundamental dimension of the peace process, but also as a necessary component of the Palestinian statebuilding vision. Since the 4 May accord between the Palestinian factions, UNSCO has urged all parties, including the international community to “give the process a chance,” contributing thereby to a much more cautious, and nuanced, international reaction than what greeted the announcement of the Palestinian unity government in early 2007. 2 Constant dialogue has continued with Israel on this matter, but genuine differences of perspective remain.

UNSCO has been a key agent in promoting international support, both political and financial, for the statebuilding effort led by the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Salam Fayyad. Marked by the launch in August 2010 of the PA governmental program entitled “Homestretch to Freedom,” which outlines priorities for establishing statehood functions by September 2011, the agenda received continuous praise and political support from the international community. In this context, UNSCO maintained vocal and public support for statebuilding efforts, expressed in Security Council briefings as well as in the April 2011 report of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) 3 for aid to the Palestinian Authority. In the report the Special Coordinator affirms that, in a range of areas, the PA “government functions are now sufficient for a functioning government of a state.” In addition, UNSCO regularly urged donors to provide adequate budgetary assistance to the PA’s treasury in order to sustain the reform drive. The mission also increased coordination with partners such as the Office of the Quartet Representative (OQR) to share analysis and harmonize messages, notably on Israeli measures to ease access and movement constraints across the West Bank and roll back its blockade on Gaza.

In parallel, UNSCO continued to coordinate the programmatic assistance to the statebuilding agenda provided by the various UN agencies, funds and programmes. Such support has long been uneven across sectors, depending on internal capacity and the role of other actors. It did however gain in transparency and coherence in 2010, through the consolidation of efforts into a unified framework, the Medium Term Response Plan (MTRP) for 2009-2010, which articulated the key recovery and development areas throughout the oPt in which the UN is best positioned to offer assistance. To ensure more effective implementation of the MTRP and improve collaboration with PA ministries, UNSCO designed in the summer of 2010 a joint PA-UN trust fund. The fund remained dormant however, due to donor constraints and concerns over competition with the PA’s own financial needs. The experience with the MTRP and the Trust Fund revealed both the potential for greater alignment of UN work with Palestinian priorities, including reduced transaction costs for the PA, and the outstanding, albeit diminishing, gap between the UN’s political rhetoric and its programmatic practices.

One of the main foci of assistance to the Palestinian people residing in Gaza, were the efforts to address needs arising from the blockade in place since 2007, which were further compounded by the 2008/2009 Israeli “Cast Lead” operation. The situation in Gaza received renewed international attention in the wake of the 31 May 2010 flotilla
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highly regulated normative framework under which the UN system operates in the oPt and for common positions on a range of policy and operational challenges within this context. It also calls for greater engagement and public communication with a range of stakeholders, notably on the Israeli side, for which UNSCO increased its capacity.

Designed to inform programmatic interventions at the strategic level on basis of agreed rules of engagement, the ISF brings together the political, humanitarian, human rights and development work of the UN into a coherent strategy and a coherent message, less vulnerable to external pressures. As such, it also provides, through the establishment and the convening by UNSCO of a senior leadership ISF Task Force, for greater anticipatory approaches to potential challenges. This mechanism was particularly active, in late 2010, in identifying and proactively responding to planned Israeli restrictions on UN access into East Jerusalem. Since then, however, the ISF has been used somewhat inconsistently by the senior leadership but efforts are underway to revive it as a strategic tool.

CONCLUSION

The mission’s ability to anticipate potential challenges and react quickly will be of increasing importance in the coming months, as the PA deadline for completion of the statebuilding agenda is reached, the PLO pushes for recognition of statehood and the crisis in neighboring countries, Syria in particular, reaches an unpredictable denouement. With the US reassessing its strategy for the Middle East peace process and the ripple effects of the “Arab Spring” breaking down old paradigms, UNSCO may be asked to confront a series of challenges, including the revitalization of the Quartet as an effective mechanism for pushing the peace process forward. If the current impasse continues, the mission will have to find ways to carve out its own space in order to contribute constructively to the peace process. It will also have to decide on how to deal with increasing Palestinian assertiveness on statehood and how to position its political messaging once the statebuilding agenda completion date comes and goes.

In such a highly scrutinized and regulated context, UNSCO’s challenge has always been to identify, maintain and exploit the limited entry
points it can use to fulfill its mandated tasks. Its functions and approaches are, by nature, contested from within and beyond. With the momentous changes underway in the oPt and in the region, it is highly unlikely that such sources of contestation will abate. Yet, those changes may just provide the extra space and opportunities that UNSCO needs to advance the objectives that have proven so elusive since its establishment.

UNSCOL

Background

The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL), established in the aftermath of the July 2006 war with Israel as an expansion of a previous political office, has a three-pronged mandate of overseeing and reporting on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701, providing good offices on behalf of the Secretary-General in support of domestic political processes, and coordination the integration of UN work in Lebanon. Adopted in 2006, Resolution 1701 aims to secure a cessation of hostilities and chart progress towards a permanent ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon primarily through the extension of Lebanese government authority to all Lebanese territory, the delineation of the international borders of Lebanon, the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon and the respect of Lebanon’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. To fulfill its mandate, UNSCOL engages with a wide range of actors, including: Lebanese political parties and factions; regional powers; the UN Country Team in Lebanon; the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the mandate of which covers the military component of Resolution 1701; Terje Roed-Larsen, the Special Envoy for the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1559, which aims to strengthen Lebanon’s sovereignty and political independence; and the Office of the Special Coordinator for the Middle Peace Process (UNSCO) in Jerusalem.

Key Developments

In January 2011, the resignation of 11 ministers from Hezbollah and allied parties brought down the one-year old unity government headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri of the pro-Western “14 March” coalition. The crisis was sparked by the dispute over the prime minister’s support of the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). At that time, it was thought that the STL was within days of releasing its first indictments over the assassination of ex-Prime Minister (and Saad Hariri’s father) Rafik Hariri in 2005, which potentially included Hezbollah members. President Suleiman then nominated Najib Mikati as prime minister designate, who struggled until June 2011 to form a government in which the 14 March coalition refused to participate. UNSCOL joined the international community in urging the new government, in which Hezbollah and its allies control 18 of 30 portfolios, to abide by Lebanon’s obligations under international law, and commit in particular to the implementation of Resolutions 1701 and 1559 and Lebanon’s obligations regarding the STL. Many observers expected that the government’s cohesion and longevity would be determined by its reaction to the STL indictments and by the fortunes of neighboring Syria, its longstanding patron.

The prolonged paralysis over key issues such as disarmament of armed groups, border delineation and governance reform, the regional upheavals, and the formation of a new government have given renewed impetus to UNSCOL’s role in providing good offices. At a time of relative disengagement by other bilateral actors, tending to more pressing issues in the region, the Special Coordinator has maintained continuous contacts with the president,
the prime minister designate, the parliament speaker, Hezbollah and other political actors, to assess their interests and provide advice aimed at guaranteeing Lebanon’s long-term stability. The Special Coordinator has also advocated for a resumption of the National Dialogue Committee that disbanded in November 2010, which remains an important mechanism for the stability of the country, besides being the forum chosen by Lebanese leaders to reach agreement on the national defense strategy that must take into account the disarmament of armed groups. Amid widespread fears that the government’s collapse would spark an outbreak of violence, UNSCOL has also repeatedly initiated or joined international calls for restraint and peaceful dialogue.

A key challenge to the mission’s mediation role and its ability to reach out to all actors has been its perceived link with the STL. Establishing a clear distinction between its functions and modus operandi and the Tribunal’s genesis and mandates has been a constant undertaking for UNSCOL, one that will gain added significance in the coming months following the STL’s issuance of indictments and arrest warrants on 30 June 2011 for four members of Hezbollah.

The political stalemate and the lack of functioning national institutions, particularly the National Dialogue, have also left a number of outstanding obstacles to full compliance with Resolution 1701 unaddressed. In particular, very little progress was achieved in the area of disarmament of armed groups, which UNSCOL, on behalf of the Secretary-General, has repeatedly called for within the framework of domestic processes of dialogue.

UNSCOL continued to monitor other aspects of Resolution 1701, including the cessation of hostilities between Lebanon and Israel, in coordination with UNIFIL. Despite occasional incidents, the front line remained relatively calm, with both UNSCOL and UNIFIL joining efforts through a combined diplomatic and security engagement to defuse tensions.

In November 2010, the Government of Israel announced its intention to withdraw from the northern half of Ghajar, a village straddling the border between Lebanon and Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, controlled by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) since the 2006 war. The decision by the Israeli Cabinet came after intense international
pressure, including significant UNSCOL and UNIFIL involvement, combining technical engagement with political advocacy. Actual withdrawal of the IDF has since stalled, and Israel, whose original decision may have been linked to the need for a diplomatic victory in the wake of the its decision to lift the partial moratorium on settlement in the West Bank, may now wait to see how Lebanon's domestic situation evolves and what the strategic repercussions of the crisis in Syria may be. While the outcome of both processes may significantly increase the political price for Israel, the UN has consistently emphasized Israel’s obligation to redeploy its troops out of the area, and UNSCOL and UNIFIL are now working with both parties to define the necessary arrangements for withdrawal.

UNSCOL also closely monitors other situations that could give rise to tensions between Lebanon and Israel. In recent months, the office has been monitoring the evolution of a dispute over maritime zones, calling on both parties to ensure that this issue does not escalate and that the exploration and exploitation of offshore resources does not give rise to tensions. UNSCOL has offered its support to the parties on this issue and has provided assistance wherever possible.

The last 12 months also witnessed an increased partnership between UNSCOL and the UN Country Team through the implementation of the Integrated Strategic Framework (ISF) approved in May 2011. The collaboration is further captured through the work of four joint thematic groups, focused on the promotion of human rights, coordinated assistance to Palestinian refugees, including the on-going rehabilitation of the Nahr El Bared camp, support to democratic governance, and responses to regional disparities and border management challenges. In these areas, UNSCOL has continued to support and complement agency programmatic work, such as livelihoods development in border areas, by engaging with key political actors and undertaking sustained advocacy on those issues.

In many of these areas, the domestic political stalemate impeded substantive progress, notably in the area of implementing the 2009 labor laws for Palestinian refugees. Nonetheless, the finalization of the ISF and the work of the thematic groups have created a new dynamic for UN system coherence in the Lebanon, and thus marks a positive change after years of sub-optimal interaction.

**CONCLUSION**

In a region marked by momentous and unforeseen changes, Lebanon has in fact been mired in paralysis, with political progress predictably stalled by the country’s confessional make-up. Nonetheless, the on-going crisis in Syria has most likely further exacerbated the risks associated with Lebanon's unresolved challenges, such as weapons smuggling into the country.

If violence has been eschewed for now, the impression of calm is deceiving, compounded by the events in neighboring countries. Very little progress on the major political and security challenges has been achieved and future developments with the STL and the outcome of the Syrian crisis may provide the spark that triggers large scale convulsions. The government headed by Mikati is likely to come under severe stress, including from internal sources, with risks of fragmentation over the STL indictments, governance and economic reforms, and Syria’s potential disintegration. In particular, the extent to which the government’s relationship with Syria shifts in nature and depth as a result of the current uprisings will significantly impact its ability to ward-off pressure from the March 14 opposition and the international community.

In this context, UNSCOL has leveraged its in-country presence and contacts for renewed good office interventions. An immediate challenge is to ensure that the internal and external shocks, which the country will inevitably face in the coming months, can be absorbed peacefully. The resumption of the national dialogue, interrupted since November 2010, will be a necessary, albeit not sufficient, component of this effort. UNSCOL will also need its strategic partners to re-engage in Lebanon, most likely within a larger regional strategy, for any lasting and structural resolution of the crisis.
NOTES

1 UNCSO’s calls for unity are in line with Security Council resolutions 1850 and 1860, the framework of the positions of the Quartet, the commitments of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Arab Peace Initiative.


3 The AHLC was established in 1993 in the context of the Washington Conference to provide international policy coordination development assistance to the Palestinian people. It is chaired by Norway and co-sponsored by the US and the EU. Members include the PA, Israel, the UN, the IMF, Canada, Egypt, Japan, Jordan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.

4 S/RES/1701 (11 August 2006).