

Chapter 8

UN Observer Group in Lebanon: Aerial Surveillance During a Civil War, 1958

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The perpetually unstable Middle East was especially chaotic and conflict-ridden in the 1950s. The presence of Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of the union of Egypt and Syria in the short-lived United Arab Republic (UAR), assured that armed force was used both overtly and covertly in the region. To deal with allegations that Nasser was fomenting rebellion in Lebanon – Syria’s small western neighbour – the United Nations created a peacekeeping operation in that country.¹

During its relatively brief six-month existence the United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL) made significant efforts to deploy aerial assets. Its successes and failures in observation provide some valuable lessons, especially as the United Nations still tries to break the “night barrier” and peer into the world of illicit arms transfers conducted under cover of darkness. Since sanctions-monitoring is frequently mandated by the UN Security Council in modern multidimensional missions, the early mission’s aerial monitoring experience is especially worth exploring. Reports and cables obtained from UN archives provide valuable excerpts and insights for a case study.

The trigger for the 1958 Lebanese civil war was the announcement made by Lebanese President Camille Chamoun, a Maronite Christian in Muslim-majority Lebanon, that he intended to amend Lebanon’s constitution to permit himself re-election for a second term. Disturbances quickly erupted, spreading to assume the proportions of a rebellion. Chamoun accused the UAR of fomenting this rebellion by supplying large quantities of arms to subversive forces, infiltrating armed personnel from Syria into Lebanon, and conducting a violent press and radio campaign against the Lebanese government. On 22 May 1958, Chamoun’s government brought the situation to the attention of the UN Security Council “as a threat to international peace and security”. To some UN members, it was a case of

1 The term “peacekeeping” was not yet in widespread or official use by the United Nations. The previous missions had been called “observer”, “observation”, or “supervision operations/organizations”, with the exception of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), a “peace and police force” in the words of the proposer, Lester B. Pearson of Canada. UNEF had been created in response to the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Israel, France, and the UK had invaded Nasser’s Egypt to seize and secure the Suez Canal. UNEF was established by the UN General Assembly with Nasser’s permission to allow those nations to withdraw from Egyptian territory. The term peacekeeping became common only at the turn of the decade.

alarmism from a weak and desperate government. To others, including the United States, it reflected a genuine threat emanating from Nasser and the militarist pan-Arab republican movement.

The Early Mission

Pursuant to Lebanon's request, UNOGIL was created on 11 June 1958 by Security Council Resolution 128 "to ensure that there is no illegal infiltration of personnel or supply of arms or other *matériel* across the Lebanese borders".² Despite the ambitious mandate, the mission was strictly limited to an observation role (as opposed to enforcement) to determine whether the alleged infiltration was, in fact, taking place from UAR into Lebanon – and hence to deter such infiltration.

Already on 12 June, the first UN observers arrived, having transferred from another peacekeeping operation (the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization) but they found their freedom of movement was very restricted. UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld himself flew to Beirut and on 19 June he chaired a meeting exploring the methods of observation to be employed by UNOGIL. To supplement military observers in observation posts and jeeps, aerial reconnaissance was to be conducted by light planes and helicopters, the former being equipped for aerial photography.³ The observers were to be headed by Major General Odd Bull of the Royal Norwegian Air Force. Hammarskjöld's home country, Sweden, was to play a major role in UNOGIL's aviation service.⁴

The leaders of the mission understood that there were many sensitivities and potential problems with aerial reconnaissance. UNOGIL identified one of them in a cable to New York headquarters on 22 June:

There are, of course, psychological problems in using aerial observation. This kind of activity must be carried out in such a way as to be and appear to be concerned with infiltration at frontier and not military movement within Lebanon as such. Misunderstanding by insurgents as to real purpose of aerial reconnaissance could create additional obstacle for our penetration [of] insurgent areas.⁵

The mission's efforts to determine the extent of UAR material support to rebels in Lebanon was immediately hampered by a number of practical factors, both ground-

2 United Nations, Security Council Resolution 128 (1958) of 11 June 1958. Available at: [http://undocs.org/S/RES/128\(1958\)](http://undocs.org/S/RES/128(1958)) [accessed 7 May 2014].

3 United Nations. *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peacekeeping*, 2nd edition (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1990), 177.

4 Forsgren, J. "Keeping the Peace: The United Nations in Lebanon, 1958", *The Aviation Historian* 4 (2013), 68–81.

5 Cable from UNOGIL's secretariat head David Blickenstaff (Beirut) to UN Under-Secretary-General Ralph Bunche (New York), 22 June 1958, UNOGIL 90. UN Archives.

and air-based. UNOGIL's first report to the Security Council, dated 3 July 1958, pointed to difficulties in gaining access to the eastern and northern frontiers held by opposition forces, who (at least initially) resisted a UN presence. These areas could only be patrolled by aircraft. At this point, two UNOGIL helicopters were carrying out aerial reconnaissance, four light planes had just arrived and another four were expected soon with an aerial photography capability.⁶ The United Nations had asked Sweden, if possible not to send Harvards since these were also in the Lebanese Air Force, but the Swedish Air Force had no other suitable aircraft to provide.⁷ The United States provided the majority of other aircraft, though they were flown and maintained by personnel from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Italy, Burma, Canada, and a few other states. Apparently, the United States charged the United Nations only US\$17.25 per flying hour for loan of the aircraft.⁸

The initial mission was for day and night flights over the border areas, observing with binoculars and taking photos with handheld Hasselblad cameras. It was soon clear that the group had too little personnel and too little equipment to carry out its intended duties.

Based on the target areas that could be monitored, the mission could provide no substantiated or conclusive evidence of major infiltration at that point. The Lebanese government immediately criticized these "inconclusive, misleading or unwarranted"⁹ conclusions, particularly in view of the inability of the observers to monitor the entire frontier. The Lebanese letter complained that:

with a view to patrolling the border areas, [aerial reconnaissance] has not yet really begun so far as this Report is concerned ... Thus, whatever information can be gathered by this device has not yet been gathered. But even if this aerial reconnaissance were fully operative, it would still have two limitations: it cannot

6 United Nations Security Council, UN Doc. S/4040, 3 July 1958, "First Report of the United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon", 6. The two helicopters were Bell H-13 E helicopters provided by the United States, transported on a US cargo plane to Beirut on 22 June. US technicians instructed Norwegian pilots on the operation of the aircraft. The four Harvard (Sk 16) reconnaissance planes were provided by Sweden and flown from that country. The Cessna L-19 reconnaissance planes were loaned by the United States. Later the United States provided more Cessnas to replace and augment the aircraft already in the fleet. The UNOGIL aircraft were provided with K-24 cameras by the United States. The deployment of night cameras is denied in the source. Source: Wainhouse, D.W. "The United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL, 1958)", in *International Peacekeeping at the Crossroads: National Support – Experience and Prospects* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 116–17.

7 Blickenstaff early on noted (25 June 1958, UNOGIL 110) that since Harvards were used by Lebanese Air Force in military operations "this creates psychological and perhaps security problems if we use the same type of plane. It is important that our operations have outward appearance of peaceful character corresponding to their true nature".

8 Wainhouse, "The United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon", 122.

9 United Nations, *The Blue Helmets*, 178.

spot out all infiltration during the day, and it can hardly spot out anything during the night.¹⁰

Despite its problems, the mission was having a salutary effect. US intelligence agreed with UNOGIL's assessment that infiltration from Syria was not as great as Lebanese President Chamoun was claiming. Furthermore, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told Lebanese Foreign Minister Charles Malik on 30 June that "[t]he activities of the UN and Hammarskjöld have brought about a large cessation of infiltration".¹¹

Still, UNOGIL sought to get a clearer picture, despite the problems of ground accessibility. On 13 July 1958, Major General Odd Bull cabled the Secretary-General that:

efforts are hampered by persistent refusals to let Observers enter Northern districts at night in a normal manner ... even day patrols in area had to be severely curtailed due to opposition's resistance.¹²

The Group decided it was too dangerous to send out regular ground patrols at night to check possible infiltration routes. Even when an arrangement was concluded with local commanders, a lighted UN jeep "came under heavy fire and was hit several times".¹³

Aircraft were hit by bullets on many occasions, twice with non-fatal injuries to Swedish personnel aboard.¹⁴ Already on the second day, a bullet badly damaged the engine of a Swedish Harvard. Due to this risk of rifle fire from the ground, the pilots were later ordered not to fly below 600 ft.

Despite the hazard, General Bull outlined the results of aerial reconnaissance that covered nearly all hours of darkness from 6–12 July and involved 21 UNOGIL flights for 47 hours of flying time in total. The aerial monitors examined motorized traffic along three roads, all of which led from Syria into Lebanon across the latter's northern border. General Bull provided valuable insights, but without full proof of infiltration:

10 United Nations Security Council S/4043, 8 July 1958, "Letter dated 8 July 1958 from the Permanent Representative of Lebanon Addressed to the Secretary-General", 6.

11 After UNOGIL started reporting, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told Lebanese Foreign Minister Charles Malik on 30 June that US intelligence shared UNOGIL's assessment that infiltration from Syria was not as great as Lebanese President Chamoun was claiming. Furthermore, he pointed to a "considerable reduction or termination of infiltrations across the border. ... The activities of the UN and Hammarskjöld have brought about a large cessation of infiltration" (Dulles-Malik meeting, 30 June 1958, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, XI ("Lebanon and Jordan"), document 111), 185–90.

12 Incoming Code Cable to Secretary-General from Bull, Beirut, 13 July 1958, 2115 hours, Number: UNOGIL 359.

13 UN Document S/4069, 30 July 1958, 114.

14 Forsgren, "Keeping the Peace", especially 79–80.

A considerable amount of south going night traffic has been observed every night. They creep along at slow speed, as if vehicles were heavily loaded ... The first night more than 50 vehicles were observed here [on the Braghite—Halba Road] and on subsequent nights aircraft discovered with certainty convoys of at least 20, 10, 25, and 25 vehicles respectively. All this traffic can only have come from Syria. It seems to branch off from the Homs—Lattakia road, which is located inside Syria ...

The traffic along same three roads has proved to be very much heavier at night than during daytime, and large majority of vehicles observed were moving south. Only some very few have been seen going back and north at night ...

In spite of the almost permanent aerial observation of area during hours of darkness, it cannot be assumed that all existing traffic has been seen. The reason for this is that convoys move with great care and precaution. They apparently switch off lights before entering Lebanon, and turn them on – if at all – well inside the border. Unlighted vehicles cannot be spotted by aircraft at night from heights of 1,000 to 3,000 meters at which they usually are patrolling. Furthermore convoys are now employing an alarm system with flashlights on hilltops, to warn vehicles to switch off lights when aircraft are approaching. Planes have also been under light machine gun fire in this rebel-held territory at least two times.¹⁵

The spotting of illicit convoys was made more difficult by the UN's own sense of duty to inform Syria and other neighbouring countries when the flights were made in proximity to their borders.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the challenges, a subsequent cable concluded that aerial reconnaissance is “a most valuable adjunct to the group's ground observation”.¹⁷

US Invasion

Over time, accessibility improved. UNOGIL's Interim Report of 15 July stated that the mission had obtained full freedom of access to all sections of the Lebanese

15 Incoming Code Cable to Secretary-General from Bull, Beirut, 13 July 1958, 2145 and 2242 hours, Number UNOGIL 358 and 359, 1–2.

16 Notification of neighbouring states about flights near their borders was made “as a matter of prudence and courtesy”. Higgins, R. “Part 3: United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL), 1958”, in *United Nations Peacekeeping, 1946–1967: Documents and Commentary, Vol. 1: The Middle East*, 565 (Oxford: Issued under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs by Oxford University Press, 1969).

17 Code Cable, UNOGIL 401, 2, UN Archives.

frontier, a breakthrough in relations with the rebels.¹⁸ UNOGIL proposed to expand the cadre of unarmed observers to 200, along with additional aircraft and crews.¹⁹

The US government was not pleased, however, that UNOGIL could not offer conclusive proof of the UARs infiltration of men and materiel, especially weapons. It complained that UNOGIL did not have sufficient night coverage. The US ambassador to the United Nations and the Central Intelligence Agency directly criticized the mission.

The geostrategic environment changed drastically in mid-July. The 14 July Revolution in Iraq overthrew that country's Hashemite monarchy. The United States saw again the hidden hand of Nasser, as well as that of Soviet communism more generally. President Chamoun called for a US intervention to save his government from a similar fate. President Dwight Eisenhower ordered 14,000 US marines into Lebanon for the "preservation of Lebanon's territorial integrity and independence". Most of the forces were concentrated in and near the capital, Beirut. In his message to the US Congress on July 15, Eisenhower stated:

It was our belief that the efforts of the Secretary-General and of the United Nations observers were helpful in reducing further aid in terms of personnel and military equipment from across the frontiers of Lebanon. There was a basis for hope that the situation might be moving toward a peaceful solution, consonant with the continuing integrity of Lebanon, and that the aspect of indirect aggression from without was being brought under control.²⁰

For the United States, the situation following the Iraqi coup now meant that the measures in Lebanon "so far taken by the United Nations Security Council are not sufficient". The landing of US marines was obviously resented by the rebel forces; however, they could not militarily challenge such a strong force.

The US invasion caused problems for UNOGIL. Rebels feared that UN airfields would be used by US "invaders". Sections of the airfield at Akkar Plain in northern Lebanon were blown up and mined to render it unusable.²¹ It would take the United Nations over a week to re-establish the air station and even longer to rebuild the trust of locals.

18 United Nations, *The Blue Helmets*, 179.

19 Ibid.

20 Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Special Message to the Congress on the Sending of United States Forces to Lebanon", 15 July 1958. Available at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=11132&st=&st1=> [accessed 7 May 2014].

21 Curtis, G.L. "The United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon", *International Organization* 18(4) (Autumn 1964), 757.

Sustaining a System

UNOGIL's second report to the Security Council, dated 30 July 1958, shows that UNOGIL had weathered the storm. The mission stayed impartial, not associating directly with the intervening US military forces. It also could not confirm the Lebanese government allegations of infiltrations, even urgent ones said to be occurring at the time. "Air patrols were dispatched as soon as possible, but when they arrived on the scene they found nothing to observe". Suspicious night convoys seemed to take measures to avoid detection by UN aircraft.²² The report proposed a bold plan for a constant aerial watch to cover Lebanon's eastern border with Syria. It also sought occasional air patrols along the Mediterranean to guard against possible infiltration from the sea.²³

Due to pressure from the United States and negotiations with the United Nations, President Chamoun agreed to new elections in which he stated he would not run. Just prior to the election of the new President, General Fuad Chehab, UNOGIL reported on 14 August a noticeable reduction of tension and clashes throughout the country, including between government and opposition forces. After two months, the mission was moving into full swing and air operations were expanding: flight personnel increased from 20 to 24; a further eight L-19 Cessna ("Bird Dog") observation aircraft arrived; and six additional Bell OH-47 observation helicopters were expected soon. With the new aircraft, UNOGIL envisioned air patrols on a 24-hour basis.²⁴ The new report added that UN aircraft had frequently been fired upon and were hit on four occasions, fortunately without injury to the crew.²⁵ Additionally:

coordination between air and ground observation has been further intensified and improved. Air patrols have been closely checking the results of ground observation and vice-versa, and direct radio contact between air patrols and stations has greatly increased the effectiveness of the combined operations.²⁶

22 United Nations Security Council, "Second Report of the United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon", UN Doc. S/4069, 30 July 1958, 7–8. Earlier that month UNOGIL requested the "dispatch of an aircraft with night photographic capability of Douglas RB26 type. If possible, plane should be equipped for infra-red photography". Code Cable Blickenstaff to Bunch, 11 July 1958, UN Archives.

23 Ibid, 19.

24 United Nations Security Council, "Third Report of the United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon", UN Doc. S/4085, 14 August 1958, 4.

25 After the mission, the military Commander, Major General Odd Bull, wrote in his memoirs: "planes had been fired on 59 times and nine hits registered; in two of these cases the pilot was injured, though not seriously". Bull, O. "Lebanese Overture", in *War and Peace in the Middle East: The Experiences and Views of a UN Observer* (London: Leo Cooper, 1976), 19.

26 Ibid.

Finally, there was no further evidence of the flashing (signal) lights mentioned in the second report or of trucks dimming or extinguishing their lights on the approach of aircraft.²⁷

In its fourth report, UNOGIL stated that its air personnel had further increased from 24 to 73, of whom 37 were maintenance personnel. According to Everstål, the strength increased to nearly 100 at the peak. At the same time, the whole setup and coordination between air and ground became much more efficient:

The pilots were now assisted by special observers. The crews were given much better intelligence before each mission and had the opportunity to themselves give more detailed reports. The reports could be collated and edited. It became possible to keep aircraft in the air around the clock. A special operations center was always manned and was in radio contact with the airborne aircraft and with the radio equipped jeeps of the ground observers, who were now present in all parts of the country. A radio direction finder in the aircraft made it possible for the pilots to locate a particular jeep, whenever needed.²⁸

The number of aircraft in use was 12 Cessnas, with six additional aircraft with night photographic equipment planned. The force's original complement of four Harvards and two helicopters was kept in reserve but these aircraft were soon phased out.²⁹ Apart from the political issues of resembling Lebanese aircraft, the Harvards were simply not very suited to observation flights since they were low-wing.

These resources permitted a continuous 24-hour aerial watch over the entire area with cooperation between air and ground affected by planning and radio communications. It was possible for stations and ground patrols to contact aircraft in flight in their vicinity, and thus to direct each other in their search for information.³⁰ Finally, the number of fixed-wing and heliborne sorties was tripling or quadrupling over this time.³¹ This greater frequency of patrols on a continuous basis enabled UNOGIL to state with greater confidence that there was little traffic near the frontier which had not been reported to it by its previous observation. A Swedish analysis showed that:

The pilots soon learned to recognize the villages and the activities in them. What were initially perhaps reported as recurring supply caravans, which might be transporting weapons across the borders, they soon learned to report as daily water collection caravans from some village to a well 10 to 20 km distant!

27 Ibid, 8.

28 Everstål, S.E. "Svenskt flyg i FN-tjänst", *Ett år i luften 1959–1960* (Malmö, Allhelms Förlag 1959), 163.

29 United Nations Security Council S/4100, 29 September 1958, "Fourth Report of the United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon", 4.

30 Ibid, 5.

31 Ibid, 6.

They also learned to recognize different vehicles and could therefore easily establish when some village was visited by strangers. With the aid of binoculars, it was even possible to recognize the appearance of some of the people on the ground.

Roads and caravan trails in the mountains became so familiar that it was possible to follow them from the air even in the dark, and establish if there was any traffic on them.³²

It seems that Nasser had decided to end his campaign against the Lebanese government and abide by the Security Council resolution. The UN peacekeeping mission with its aerial observation capacity seemed to have served a deterrent after all, though the presence of US troops near Beirut had likely made a more forceful impact. Later the mission helped facilitate the withdrawal of US forces from Lebanon by providing airlift in October. It also assisted the withdrawal from Jordan of British forces, which had also intervened in that Middle East country during the July turmoil.

UNOGIL was beefed up in preparedness for possible unrest once the US troops left 25 October but things remained quiet. UNOGIL could therefore be wound down and was officially terminated 26 November. Its total cost was only US\$3.7 million.

Lessons and Conclusion

There are many useful lessons, both positive and negative, from the UNOGIL aviation experience that are worth appreciating and preserving for modern peacekeeping operations.

The UNOGIL mission reinforced an important right, pioneered two years earlier with UNEF, that was to become key in future peace operations: freedom of movement for UN personnel within their area of operation “as necessary for successful completion of the task”. This included the “right of over-flight over the territory of the host country”.³³

Overflights were considered a necessary part of the toolkit of the operation. UNOGIL was from the start strongly reliant on observation aircraft. Before ground observers were deployed, aircraft could reconnoitre the situation, particularly in areas hard to reach. UNOGIL acquired a fleet of twelve reconnaissance planes

32 Everstål, “Svenskt flyg i FN-tjänst”, 160.

33 United Nations Secretary-General. “Summary Study of the Experience Derived from the Establishment and Operation of the [UN Emergency] Force: Report of the Secretary-General”, in “Report of the Secretary-General to the United Nations General Assembly”, UN Doc. A/3943 of 9 October 1958. Available via the United Nations Official Document System at: <http://undocs.org/A/3943> [accessed 16 May 2013].

Table 8.1 Military personnel in the UN Observer Group in Lebanon

	26 June (S/4038)	3 July (S/4040)	17 July (S/4052)	14 Aug. (S/4085)	29 Sept. (S/4100)	17 Nov. (S/4113)
Ground observers	94	(no info)	113	166	214	501
Air observers	—	—	20	24	73	90
Manned outstations	6	8	150	22	34	49

Source: UN Security Council documents (numbers provided).

and six observation helicopters.³⁴ This complemented fixed observation posts, checkpoints and ground patrols by jeep, foot, horse, and even mule. Of the 591 military personnel in the mission at one point, 90 individuals, or 15 percent of total personnel, were part of the air section.³⁵ UNOGIL's personnel strength, for ground and air, grew as the mission went from initial to final operating capability, peaking in October, as shown in Table 8.1 above.

Aerial missions also increased from 160 sorties and 360 flying hours in July to 305 sorties and 767 flying hours in October. A typical flight lasted two hours. In total, the mission chalked up 2,850 operational flying hours.³⁶

The air component proved to be a "valuable adjunct" to the ground mission. Air and ground observers were able to synergize through direct, real-time communication links that were established after the first month. Early on, the mission was able to raise suspicions about cross-border road traffic observed from above, but without ground units or stations to check more closely, those suspicions could not be confirmed. Even so, the early aerial reconnaissance proved useful, being quickly implemented before the ground observation posts were established, thanks to the loan of US helicopters. The aircrews flying over new territory did not need to find local accommodation, meet with local leaders, establish supply routes and arrange for logistics in the area, as ground observers would have to. Also the mountainous terrain typical of much of Lebanon meant that ground travel was difficult and that observation posts would have a limited view.

To back up the information gained by air and ground observers, including air photo imagery, it was necessary to have an interpretation/intelligence centre. The mission secretariat cabled Under-Secretary-General Ralph Bunche in New York on 23 July to say that "Intelligence, which here means collation and evaluation, is the weakest point in present military establishment".³⁷ At the suggestion of General

34 Bull, "Lebanese Overture", 17.

35 Wainhouse, D.W. "The 1958 Middle East Crisis: United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon", in *International Peace Observation: A History and Forecast* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 377.

36 Bull, "Lebanese Overture", 19.

37 United Nations, Code Cable from Blickenstaff to Bunche, UNOGIL 460, 23 July 1958, UN Archives.

Bull, Lieutenant-Colonel Bjorn Egge of Norway was assigned to UNOGIL as an “Intelligence Officer” to set up the system (later to do the same for the mission in the Congo). The Beirut headquarters soon developed an “Evaluation Branch”, so named to avoid the word “intelligence” but which was nevertheless called “G2” in regular military fashion. It was assigned the task of collection, collation, evaluation, and dissemination of information from all sources, ground and air, mission, and non-mission.

During its half-year existence, the UNOGIL mission proved to be an important and impartial observer to the Lebanese conflict, helping to sort out deadly claims and counter-claims. The mission was able to throw doubt on the extravagant allegations made by the Lebanese government of massive foreign (Nasserite) importation of men, arms and materiel, as well as to question the absolute denials made by the opposing forces. The United States also had to readjust its view on infiltration in the region after UNOGIL started reporting. Furthermore, the mission probably caused a reduction in arms/material importation as UNOGIL became more capable of detecting the illicit movements.

In the UNOGIL detection effort, air power proved essential to detecting cross-border convoys and keeping watch along the 300-km border with Syria. As the United Nations continues to be involved in multidimensional conflict and ceasefire monitoring in the twenty-first century in this region of the world, it would be wise to take note of the aerial experiences from this important use of air power in the Lebanese mission of 1958.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Ryan W. Cross, Leif Hellström, and Robert Pauk for their inputs and feedback during the drafting of this chapter.

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