United Nations S/2023/699

Security Council

Distr.: General
26 September 2023

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) from 21 May 2023 to 20 August 2023, pursuant to the mandate set out in Security Council resolution 350 (1974) and extended in subsequent Council resolutions, most recently resolution 2689 (2023).

II. Situation in the area of operations and activities of the Force

2. The ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic was generally maintained, notwithstanding several violations of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces of 1974. The overall security situation in the UNDOF area of operations remained volatile, with continued military activity in the areas of separation and limitation in violation of the relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolution 2689 (2023).

3. In employing its best efforts to maintain the ceasefire and see that it is scrupulously observed, as prescribed in the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, UNDOF reports all breaches of the agreement that it observes. All incidents of firing across the ceasefire line, as well as the crossing of the ceasefire line by aircraft, drones, military vehicles and personnel, as well as other individuals, 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.

4. On several occasions, during the reporting period, United Nations personnel observed the Israel Defense Forces firing small arms shots across the ceasefire line into the area of separation. On 24 May, United Nations personnel at position 22 observed Israel Defense Forces personnel in a main battle tank on the Alpha side (Israeli-occupied Golan), fired approximately 30 machine gun rounds into the area of separation. The Israel Defense Forces later informed UNDOF that the firing had been in response to alleged firing at an Israel Defense Forces drone by the Syrian armed forces. UNDOF did not observe the Syrian armed forces firing at a drone. On 25 and 27 May, United Nations personnel observed Israel Defense Forces soldiers firing multiple machine gun rounds from a main battle tank into the area of separation. On 19 July, United Nations personnel at position 37 observed the Israel Defense Forces

Please recycle

firing from a main battle tank approximately 25 machine gun rounds, which impacted about 25 metres from an UNDOF patrol in the area of separation. There was no injury to UNDOF personnel or damage to equipment.

5. Early on 24 July, United Nations personnel at observation post 51 observed Israel Defense Forces personnel in two main battle tanks on the Alpha side firing seven tank rounds and approximately 300 machine gun rounds across the ceasefire line. The Israel Defense Forces informed UNDOF that they had fired at an alleged Syrian military position in the area of separation, resulting in significant material damage. United Nations personnel visited the alleged Syrian position later that day to investigate the incident. The Syrian authorities informed UNDOF that the position had been occupied by Syrian police personnel tasked to observe the area and monitor movement of civilians close to the ceasefire line. From its investigation, UNDOF was not in a position to confirm that the location targeted by the Israel Defense Forces fire had been a Syrian armed forces position. UNDOF liaised with the parties to de-escalate the situation.

6. On six occasions during the reporting period, Israel Defense Forces soldiers denied UNDOF patrols access through Israeli technical fence gates. On all occasions, the UNDOF patrols left the area and UNDOF protested to the Israel Defense Forces.

7. United Nations personnel at various positions observed, on several occasions, drones flying from the Alpha side across the ceasefire line and over the area of separation.

8. On 23 June, United Nations personnel heard several bursts of small arms fire in the vicinity of the village of Hadar on the Bravo side. On the same day, United Nations personnel at observation post 71 observed individuals in approximately 25 vehicles and 33 motorcycles moving from the direction of Hadar towards the vicinity of the ceasefire line in close proximity to United Nations observation post 71. On 29 June, an UNDOF patrol observed approximately 153 individuals, including 50 armed Syrian armed forces personnel and 15 armed individuals, along with three reporter vehicles with cameras in Al-Qunaytirah in the area of separation.

9. Sporadic heavy explosions and bursts of heavy machine gun and small arms fire persisted in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side. UNDOF assessed that the military activity was the result of the controlled detonation of unexploded ordnance as part of clearance and operations by the Syrian armed forces. UNDOF observed the continued presence of Syrian armed forces personnel, some of whom were armed, staffing several checkpoints within the area of separation, in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement.

10. The continued presence of Iron Dome systems, armoured vehicles, artillery systems and multiple rocket launcher systems in the area of limitation on the Alpha side also constituted violations in each case. Pursuant to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, the presence of any unauthorized military equipment or personnel in the areas of separation and limitation is a violation.

11. UNDOF protested to the parties with regard to 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 the Israel Defense Forces personnel and by drones and aircraft, as well as by civilians from the Bravo side. UNDOF liaised closely with the parties to de-escalate the situation, including during periods of heightened tension.

12. The Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations addressed several letters to the President of the Security Council and me. In

a letter dated 14 June (A/77/921-S/2023/437), he relayed that "on Wednesday, 14 June 2023, Israeli occupying forces carried out an aerial attack from the occupied Syrian Golan against areas to the south-west of Damascus, seriously injuring a Syrian soldier and causing material losses." The Permanent Representative, in a letter dated 19 July (A/77/976-S/2023/538), conveyed that "On 19 July 2023 at 1225 hours, the Israeli occupation forces carried out an air attack, firing missile bursts from the direction of the northern occupied Syrian Arab Golan at certain points in the area around Damascus, resulting in injury to two military personnel and material losses." In addition, in a letter dated 27 July (A/77/986-S/2023/561), the Chargé d'affaires a.i. stated that "the Israeli occupation forces launched an attack against certain points belonging to the internal security forces in the town of Qahtaniyah in Al-Qunaytirah, resulting in material damage", and, in a letter dated 7 August (A/77/999-S/2023/585) that "the Israeli occupation forces carried out an air attack from the direction of the occupied Syrian Arab Golan targeting certain points in the area around Damascus, leading to the deaths of four Syrian military personnel, injury to four others, and material losses."

13. In identical letters dated 13 June (S/2023/434) and 28 July (S/2023/565) addressed to the President of the Security Council and me, the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations relayed information regarding "Syrian violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement and breaches of Israeli sovereignty" from January to March 2023 and from April to June 2023, respectively. He stated in both letters that "Syrian violations of the Alpha line and armed presence in the area of separation occur daily".

14. UNDOF continued to observe daily crossings of the ceasefire line by unidentified individuals from the Bravo side. It assessed that the individuals were shepherds and farmers from the surrounding areas tending livestock, as well as hunters carrying weapons. The Israel Defense Forces continued to express deep concern about the crossings, which they stated constituted a threat to the safety and security of their personnel operating in proximity to the ceasefire line. On a number of occasions, the Israel Defense Forces fired shots to discourage individuals from approaching the Israeli technical fence. UNDOF continued to coordinate with both parties regarding the distribution by the Syrian authorities of identity cards to the shepherds in the local community in the area of separation in order to enable them to move within the vicinity of the ceasefire line and to prevent the recurrence of incidents involving the firing of warning shots.

15. UNDOF assessed that the security situation in the northern and central parts of its area of operations on the Bravo side had generally remained calm but continued to be volatile in the southern part, with security incidents reportedly occurring in locations within the area of limitation, including along UNDOF patrol routes in Dara'a Governorate. Open sources reported security incidents in Jasim, Nawa, Tafas and Muzayrib towns in the southern part of the area of limitation involving armed attacks targeting checkpoints and convoys of the Syrian security forces, other government authorities and former members of armed opposition groups.

16. Since early March 2020, the Israel Defense Forces have restricted the movement of UNDOF and Observer Group Golan personnel through the Alpha gate at the Qunaytirah crossing, requiring advance notice of the movement, which has continued to affect the operational and administrative activities of the mission. UNDOF continued to liaise with the Israel Defense Forces on their facilitation of the crossing of UNDOF and Observer Group Golan personnel at the Qunaytirah crossing, and in particular on 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. The Syrian authorities returned to the procedures established to facilitate

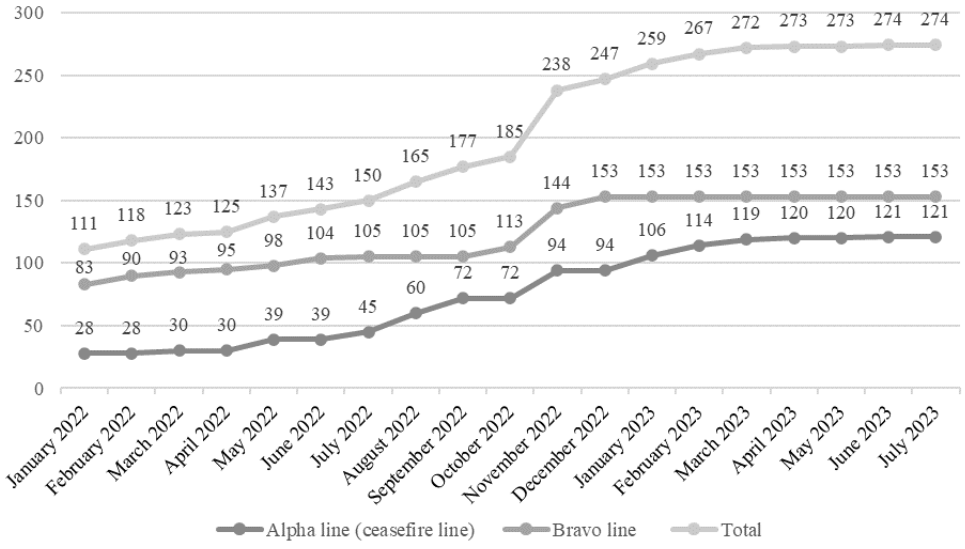
the movement of UNDOF and Observer Group Golan personnel and supplies through the Bravo gate at the Qunaytirah crossing.

17. UNDOF continued to engage with the Israel Defense Forces with a view to addressing restrictions on the movement and access of United Nations personnel from the Alpha side, through the Israeli technical fence, to United Nations observation posts in the area of separation.

18. UNDOF, with the facilitation of the Israel Defense Forces and the Syrian authorities, continued to carry out, through Observer Group Golan, fortnightly inspections of the military positions of the Israel Defense Forces and the Syrian armed forces in select parts of the respective areas of limitation. On 14 August, the Syrian armed forces denied United Nations personnel access to carry out mandated inspections in one of its positions in the area of limitation on the Bravo side. UNDOF continued to engage with both parties to facilitate the extension of the inspections in their respective positions in the various parts of the areas of limitation.

19. As part of the return to full mandate implementation, UNDOF continued with the restoration, repainting and refurbishment of the barrels marking the ceasefire line and the Bravo line, which delineate the area of separation, with 129 barrels restored along the ceasefire line and 153 barrels along the Bravo line (see figure I). UNDOF continued to consult the parties on the barrel restoration activity.

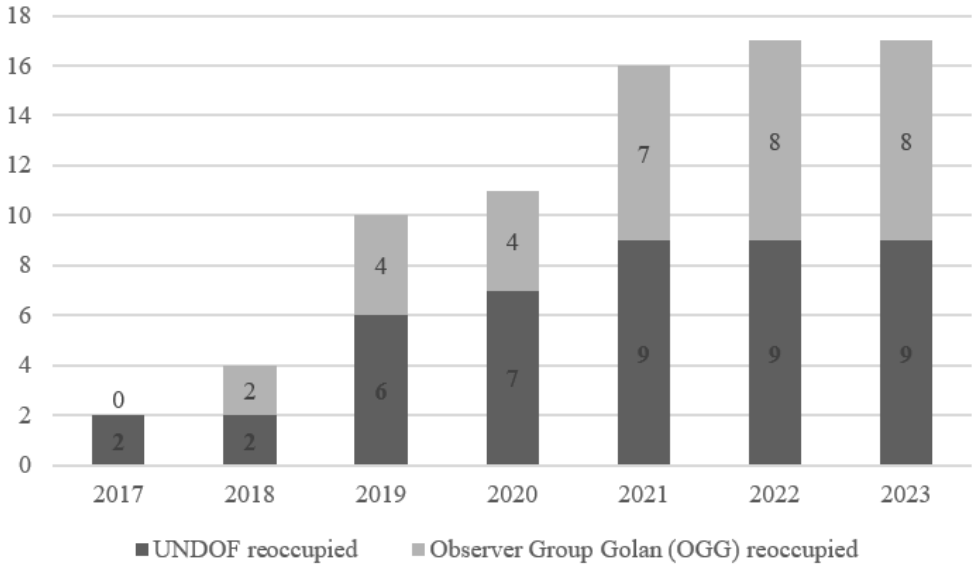
Figure I
Number of ceasefire line and Bravo line barrels restored, repainted and refurbished by the Force



20. As part of its gradual return to the Bravo side, UNDOF commenced the ground work for the construction of the new United Nations position 17A, in the northern part of the area of separation. Preparations for the reconstruction of observation post 52 are ongoing. The reoccupation of the observation post will complete the return of Observer Group Golan to all observation posts, which the military observers vacated temporarily in 2014 owing to the deterioration in the security situation (see figure II).

Figure II

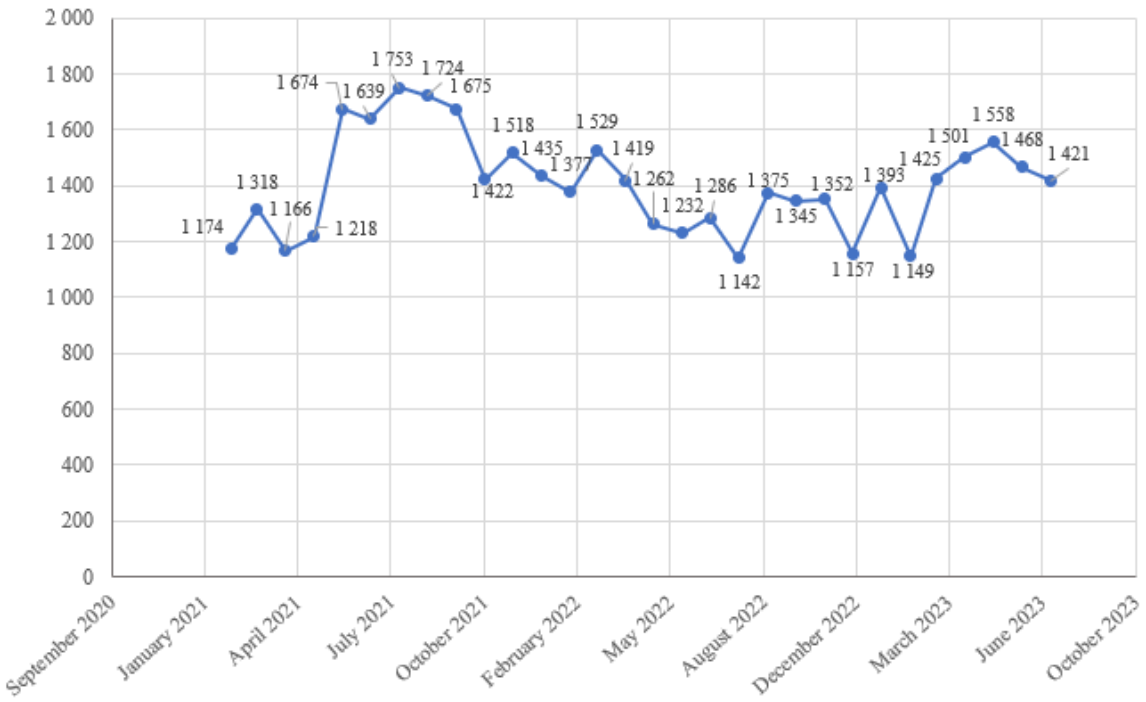
Number of reoccupied UNDOF positions and United Nations Truce Supervision Organization military observers in Observer Group Golan positions on the Bravo side since 2017 (cumulative over time)



21. 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 the Force Commander of UNDOF and maintain 10 fixed observation posts within the UNDOF area of operations and one temporary observation post along the ceasefire line. The focus of Observer Group Golan remained on continuous static observation, situational awareness and fortnightly inspections. In addition, the military observers are tasked with carrying out investigations of incidents within the UNDOF area of operations.

22. UNDOF monthly operational patrols continued in the areas of separation and limitation, with 1,558 operational activities carried out in May, 1,468 in June and 1,421 in July 2023 (see figure III). UNDOF patrol routes cover the full breadth of the area of separation and 70 per cent of the area of limitation. The volatile security situation in the southern part continued to slow progress in opening new patrol routes in the area of limitation on the Bravo side.

Figure III
Number of UNDOF patrols carried out per month



23. The movement of UNDOF personnel has been restricted by Lebanese administrative requirements. The route between Beirut and Damascus, through the Judaydah and Masna'a border crossing, which is a primary resupply route for UNDOF, remained open for the commercial movement of goods and personnel during the period. It is also the main route for UNDOF troops rotating through Beirut.

24. UNDOF continued to assess that there remained a significant threat to United Nations personnel in its 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.

25. 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 observation posts and the operational base at Camp Ziouani and headquarters at Camp Faouar.

26. UNDOF reported no cases of misconduct. The mission continued to implement activities, including the regular training of personnel related to prevention, enforcement and remedial actions regarding misconduct.

27. As at 20 August 2023, UNDOF comprised 1,131 troops, including 84 women peacekeepers. Troops are deployed from Argentina (1), Australia (1), Bhutan (3), Czechia (4), Fiji (150), Ghana (5), India (202), Ireland (136), Nepal (415), the Netherlands (Kingdom of the) (1), Uruguay (210) and Zambia (3). In addition, 81 military observers from Observer Group Golan, including 20 women, assisted UNDOF in carrying out its tasks.

III. Implementation of Security Council resolution 338 (1973)

28. In its resolution 2689 (2023), 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 31 December 2023, 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/77/298), submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 76/11 entitled “The Syrian Golan”.

29. Since the discontinuation of indirect peace talks in December 2008, there have been no negotiations between the parties. I look forward to a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Israel and 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

30. At a time that continues to be particularly volatile for the region, I remain concerned about the continued violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, including the breaches of the ceasefire on 24 May and 19 and 24 July. The Israel Defense Forces should refrain from firing into the area of separation and across the ceasefire line, as well as crossing the ceasefire line. I also remain concerned by the continued presence of the Syrian Armed Forces in the area of separation. There should be no military forces or activities in the area of separation other than those of UNDOF. The continued presence of unauthorized weapons and equipment in the areas of limitation on both the Alpha and the Bravo sides, as well as the flying of drones across the ceasefire line, is 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 raise the awareness of both parties of the risk of escalation and the need to preserve the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic.

31. 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 undermine stability in the area. The continued liaison by UNDOF with the parties has contributed to de-escalation during times of heightened tensions.

32. 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 facilitation of the movement of UNDOF and the extension of inspections on both sides. At the same time, the parties must continue to support the enhancement of the liaison function of UNDOF.

33. Given the worrying trend of continued violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, and the relatively tense and volatile security situation in the southern part of the area of limitation on the Bravo side, the safety and security of military and civilian personnel in UNDOF and Observer Group Golan are of particular concern. The parties must refrain from any activity that may risk the safety

of the peacekeepers. It is therefore of particular importance that the Security Council continue to bring to bear its influence on the parties concerned to ensure that UNDOF is accorded the ability to operate safely and securely 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.

34. The continued support of Member States, and in particular the confidence of troop-contributing countries in UNDOF and their commitment to it, remain key factors in the Force's ability to carry out its mandate. I am grateful to the Governments of Argentina, Australia, Bhutan, Czechia, Fiji, Ghana, India, Ireland, Nepal, the Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Uruguay and Zambia 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.

35. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the Head of Mission and Force Commander, Major General Nirmal Kumar Thapa, and 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.

Map


UNDOF
AUGUST 2023
UNITED NATIONS
Geospatial
LEBANON
SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
GOLAN
Trans-Arabian Pipeline
Line "Alpha"
Line "Bravo"
Line "Alpha 1"
Camp Faouar
Camp Ziouani
NEPAL (-)
NEPAL (+)
NEPAL
FIJI (-)
FIJI
INDIA (-)
INDIA / NEPAL
URUGUAY
URUGUAY (-)
IRELAND
INDIA
UNDOF HQ
OGG HQ (CF)
UNDOF Components
OGG observation post
OGG unoccupied observation post
OGG temporary observation post
UNDOF position
UNDOF unoccupied position
Administrative capital
Town, village
International boundary
Special boundary line
Railway
Highway
Main road
Secondary road
PALESTINE BELT GRID
Shaba
Majdal Chams
Mas'adah
Buq'ātā
Baath City
Mansoura
Al Qunaytirah
'Ayn Ziwan
Kafr Naffākh
Fazarah
Al Khushniyah
Al Asbah
Ar Rafid
Butmiyah
Jūkhadār
Khisfīn
Kefar el Ma
Al 'Al
Fiq
Umm Sharq
Ash Sajarah
Saḥam al Jawlan
Dā'il
Izra'
Nawá
Tasīl
Qāsim
An Nakhl
Aş Şanamayn
Kafr Shams
'Aqrabā
Al Ḥarrah
Kafr Nāij
Sa'sa'
Arṭūz
Al Kiswah
Baytīmā
'Amah
Ḥīnah
Ḥaḍar
Taranjah
Jubāta al Khashab
Ufānīyah
Khān Arnabah
Jabā
Hamidiyah
Masḥarah
Umm Bāṭinah
Umm Tinah
Ar Ruwayhīnah
Nab aş Şakhr
Bi'r al 'Ajam
Burayqah
Harfā
Mazra'at Bayt Jinn
Bayt Jinn
'Arnah
Ḥīnah
TOP 206
TOP 108
TOP 102A
TOP 105
TOP 127
TOP 303
TOP 302
TOP 301
TOP 3
TOP 2
TOP 1
Map No. 2916 Rev. 128
August 2023
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.