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Israel's Future in Lebanon

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Elias Khoury and Nubar Hovsepian

# Israel's Future in Lebanon

## What are Israel's war aims?

**NH:** First and foremost, the Israelis attempted to destroy the military capabilities of the Palestinian movement and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), and to exploit that strike to eliminate the political presence of the Palestinian movement as well. Second, the Israelis attempted to take Lebanon out of the Syrian sphere of influence and put it squarely within the Israeli sphere of influence. They want to create a buffer state out of all of Lebanon. They want to establish a puppet regime, in a literal sense, with Bashir Gemayel's leadership. Third, the Israelis want to eliminate the Palestinian national presence in the West Bank and Gaza.

**SR:** The Israeli destruction of the camps in southern Lebanon is a very ominous sign of their political goal in Lebanon. Those camps were just wiped out. What

they're really aiming at is not the dismantling of Palestinian artillery but taking apart *Samed*, the Red Crescent, and every other Palestinian social institution that existed.

## To what extent have the Israelis been successful?

**SR:** When we speak of negative factors for Israel, we're looking at potential that may develop in the coming months. So far, Israel has accomplished a distressing proportion of its aims in Lebanon. To complete the task that it set for itself is highly problematic, and could certainly run into all kinds of trouble. But it would really be skewing reality to say that the negative consequences have dominated in the Israeli experience to date. The US has imposed no restraint on Israel, which is always a major factor in the timing and the extent of Israeli operations in Lebanon. We should not exaggerate Israel's military successes, but we must recognize that they are considerable.

## But victory and defeat are not purely military matters.

**NH:** They have made tremendous mil-

itary gains, but when it comes to the actual extraction of political gains, they fall short.

**EK:** What was the military situation before the invasion? What were the military aims of the invasion? In the south, on a military level, there had been a vacuum. The number of PLO troops were 10,000 at most.

## That many?

**EK:** I don't think there were that many. But let's suppose there were 10,000. The Syrians pulled out from the south years ago, and were not ready to enter this battle. The Israelis pushed them to battle. From the beginning it was obvious that nothing would happen to the Syrian part of Lebanon, the Beka'a. Nothing did happen, except for the Beirut-Damascus highway, which was necessary to encircle Beirut.

The Israelis came and occupied all this region—between 100,000 and 120,000 soldiers and 1,500 tanks to occupy a region 60 kilometers deep, with only 10,000 fighters in it. The first objective, they said, was to create this zone of 40 kilometers. This zone had already exist-

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ed, thanks to the July 1981 ceasefire. The first time Israel attacked, near Damur, in April 1982, the PLO did not respond. The second time, in May, they gave a token response. This time, the third time, the PLO responded because everybody knew that the invasion was on the way, and they had to be able to say that they had responded.

I don't think the 40 kilometers was the aim of the war. The aim of the war was to finish the PLO. To finish the PLO you have to go to Beirut. The PLO cannot be finished if you do not enter Beirut and destroy its presence in Beirut. Since June 13, the Israelis have encircled Beirut but have not entered. I'm not underestimating the Israelis—the Israelis are the mightiest force in the region. It has been clear that they can do whatever they want on a military level. But they wanted to use their military superiority, coming out of Camp David, to become the major political power in the Arab east. They can enter Damascus any time. How much time does it take an Israeli tank to go from the border to Damascus? Three hours? So say they need five hours to enter Damascus. The Syrian army has been totally occupied in killing the Syrian people. It's not an army which will fight. The Israelis want to determine the political future within and among Lebanon and Syria, Palestine and Jordan. This is the aim of this war. Nasser was not able to do this. I think the Israelis are not able to do this.

In Lebanon the Israelis are becoming entangled in the whole confessional dynamic. They are more powerful than the Syrians, who tried to finish off the Palestinians in 1976. The Israelis have come closer, but to finish the PLO means to finish off an important Arab coalition. It's not only a Palestinian coalition. It's a political microcosm of the Arab world. To finish off the PLO and to dictate your policy in Lebanon and Syria, means to take on Saudi Arabia as well.

**Israel is being drawn into Lebanon's confessional politics, and it may debilitate them over the long term. But what has the invasion done to transform the process of political decay in Lebanon? To what extent do we have a new situation?**

**EK:** Before the war, the political situation was one of total chaos. There was very heavy fighting between the Leba-

nese National Movement and *Amal*, the Shi'i movement, in the south. Car bombs were everywhere in west Beirut. All the signs were that we were caught in a decaying situation. With the invasion, the Israelis are now explicitly participating in the Lebanese crisis. The Israelis are playing with the classic communal problems, especially the Maronites and the Druze. They argue that a kind of Druze autonomy can take place in the Shouf region if the Druze remain under Israeli control. The Israelis are trying to push the contradictions between the different communities so that they can control all of the communities separately. They are the most powerful element on the battlefield, but the Israelis are trapped inside the internal dynamics of the Lebanese civil war. They are not outside it, as they assume. The Syrians played with the Lebanese confessional problem, and it spread to Syria. It's not a small thing to play with the Lebanese confessional problem.

The PLO, as a political organization, and as the representative of the Palestinians, is much stronger than just before the beginning of the war. Of course, the PLO lost its so-called "strongholds" in the south, but everybody knew that this was nothing militarily, and was only an expression of their political presence.

The big loss is what happened in camps in the south, and if this is not compensated by a big political victory, it will be catastrophic for the PLO.

### **What is the impact on the Lebanese National Movement?**

**EK:** The LNM was nearly destroyed when Kamal Jumblatt was assassinated in 1978. It lost its potential among the Lebanese population. It lost its power in the Shi'i community in the southern suburbs of Beirut, to the gain of *Amal*. In this sense, the LNM was more an historic than a real factor in the political equation. Here we have to consider separately one component of the LNM, the Lebanese Communist Party (CP), which continues to exist at the grass-roots level. The militants of the CP played a very substantial role during this invasion in the fighting against the Israelis.

With the complete defeat of the LNM after the Syrian invasion, the Lebanese left and Lebanese Muslim society was in total chaos, with no political options, no possibility of a Lebanese democratic revolution. Confessional politics became more influential and central. The bourgeoisie of these confessional groups considered the Pales-

Family picking through the ruins of their shelter in Ain al-Hilweh.

George Nehmeh/UNRWA





tinians to be another confession like the Shi'i, the Sunnis, the Druze, and so on. The leadership of the PLO was very clear from the beginning that it was completely uninterested in revolution anywhere in the Arab world. The alliance between the LNM and the PLO before the Syrian invasion was not a real alliance. It was a kind of coordination that they benefited from, but they did not develop a real united front. What happened in 1982 proves once again that the PLO is something more than a confessional group in Lebanon. And this restored its moral and political authority.

**But there was quite a lot of tension between the Shi'i community in the south and the PLO.**

**EK:** Not only in the south. In the suburbs of Beirut there were big clashes between the Shi'i *Amal* movement and the PLO and the LNM. These battles were a new expression of confessionalism. The Shi'is never had political representation in Lebanese society. Their representatives were feudal leaders who were very marginal in the Lebanese political system. This new force faced mainly the left because the left, especially the communists, had done grassroots work in the Shi'i communities. Clashes between *Amal* and the CP and the Iraqi Ba'th led to clashes with the PLO.

*Amal*, which represents a confessional community led by big bourgeoisie and the clergy, saw the Palestinians as another confession, and the PLO as a rival group for control of the south. The PLO itself did not follow a strategy of integration with the population. The ideology of refugees is dominant in the PLO, that there is no place where you belong except Palestine, so you are ready any time to leave Lebanon, and there is no problem if we do leave. In this sense, the infrastructure which the PLO built in the south and in Beirut was not an infrastructure to withstand the assaults that came.

Another aspect of this was in the Shouf region, where Kamal Jumblatt and then his son Walid refused to accept any Palestinian fighters. This is why the Shouf region was not hurt. The Israelis entered the Shouf without a shot. A third aspect is that the PLO deserted the LNM in 1976, when it came under the heavy Syrian attack. It left the LNM to its destiny and continued its work. There

was no construction of a unified front which could transform the Lebanese situation.

**NH:** The articulation of political cleavages along confessional lines was broken in the 1975-76 period, based on the democratic secular idea that Jumblatt put forth. The idea that this was Lebanon's 1789, its bourgeois revolution. When the Syrians entered Beirut, the sectarian dimension reasserted itself. The sectarian system had been directly challenged, and in 1976 the possibility of creating a new republic was there. But both the Palestinian movement and the Syrians opposed it.

**EK:** No, the Palestinians never directly opposed it . . .

**NH:** But their strategy was to view Lebanon as a battleground, rather than to understand its internal dynamics. As the civil war continued between 1976 and 1978, the south of Lebanon was brought squarely into the battle. The Shi'is were paying the price in the south. They had to consolidate themselves within a confessional formation. The old guard tried once again to control the Shi'is as a community. *Amal* became a rallying point of opposition. The Israelis were trying to create a similar formation among the Shi'is as they had with Haddad among the Christians. They definitely did not succeed. In this invasion, *Amal* fought on the side of the LNM and the Palestinian movement. That is a significant development. It might break the confessional cleavages once again.

**How were the Shi'is represented within the National Movement?**

**EK:** Before *Amal* became a popular force, the Shi'i youth had been organized mainly by the Lebanese CP and the Communist Action Organization. Then two crises came, very close to each other. The first was the defeat of the LNM, which posed a crisis for the whole ideology of the national movement. It displayed the impossibility of creating a Lebanese secular democratic socialism without taking into account the Arab environment, especially the Syrians. The second crisis was the emergence of Islam as a revolutionary force, especially with the Iranian revolution. It began with the Shi'i intellectuals in Lebanon. After the 1976 defeat, every community

was trying to survive. After the death of Kamal Jumblatt, Walid Jumblatt reunified the Druze community. He was not interested in the National Movement or in its program; he was mainly interested in the Druze community. There was a great fear that something would happen to the Druze similar to what happened in 1860, after the first Lebanese civil war, when thousands of them were kicked out of Lebanon into Syria. In this same period, the Phalange Party became the major factor inside the Maronite community, and destroyed the rival Christian militias. This is the context in which *Amal* emerged so quickly.

The Iraq-Iran war affected the clashes between *Amal* and the LNM, which began between *Amal* and the pro-Iraqi Ba'thists. The LNM was getting most of its funding from Iraq, because they were fighting Syria. For the Shi'is, that made the LNM an Iraqi agent. This was a threat to the Palestinians because the LNM was their first line of defense. So they backed the LNM in the fighting. This created the misunderstanding between *Amal* and the PLO.

**To what extent is the current invasion related to the timing of the Lebanese elections?**

**EK:** In Lebanon, the presidential elections historically represent a point of equilibrium between the dominant Western force and the dominant Arab force in the region. This became very clear in 1958, after the second Lebanese civil war and the invasion of the American marines. The president was nominated and elected by a combined American-Egyptian accord. The president in Lebanon controls the administration and the political life of the country. Between 1958 and 1967, Egypt and the US were the dominant factors. After the June 1967 defeat of Egypt, Lebanon entered a political vacuum. The first president elected without any consensus of foreign forces was Sulaiman Franjiya, in 1970. But his election signified that the country was on the verge of a civil war. Armed militia men surrounded the parliament while it was electing the president. The election of Elias Sarkis in 1976 represented an accord between Syria, the Phalange and the US.

Before the Israeli invasion, it was very clear that the political life in Lebanon





Palestinian woman in west Beirut, June 1982

James Jennings

was at a total impasse. The only candidate for president was Bashir Gemayel. There was another compromise candidate, Gabi al-Houd, who had been the head of military intelligence under the presidency of Shehab [1958-64]. But no compromise was on the horizon. The Israelis are trying what the Syrians did in 1976: to elect the president under their direct control. But in 1976 there was a real compromise. It eliminated the Palestinians and the Lebanese left, but all the other sectors of Lebanese political life were included—the Maronites, with all their components, the Sunni oligarchy represented by Rashid Karamah, the Syrians, the Americans. A presidential election under Israeli control will mean partition of the country. Otherwise, the Israelis have to occupy the whole country. I don't think this is an immediate prospect.

There is a consensus in Lebanese political circles against the candidacy of Bashir Gemayel. The only ones with Bashir Gemayel are those of his party. As Walid Jumblatt declared, it's better to have Sharon decree Bashir Gemayel as governor of Lebanon without going through presidential elections. The Israelis are trying to oblige the Lebanese members of the parliament in the occupied south to elect Bashir Gemayel. I cannot imagine that the election of a president is acceptable, under Israeli occupation. Even Elias Sarkis was elected under Syrian control, but there was the classic Lebanese consensus around him.

The Syrian invasion took place, remember, by a formal request from the Lebanese government for the Syrian troops to enter. Then the Arab League legitimized the Syrian entrance, in Riyadh in 1976. Sarkis was there. The Syrian troops were, from the point of view of the Lebanese left, an invasion. But from the point of view of the Lebanese establishment, it was a legal entrance of friendly forces.

**NH:** The complexities of internal Lebanese politics necessitate an Israeli presence in Lebanon for at least another year. To establish the kind of Lebanese and Palestinian leadership they want would necessitate the indefinite presence of the Israeli army. This would exacerbate internal strains in Israel. A lot of people, even the French who historically had ties with the Phalange, realize that one sect cannot control the Lebanese polity. What's being cooked up now is something that the Lebanese polity cannot tolerate or survive. A Lebanese political solution cannot be imposed by the Israelis or the US alone. It will have to be a product of regional and international factors.

**The domination of the Maronites has never been exclusively military, nor has it been one of complete monopolization. It always involved an important role for the Muslim notables like Sa'ib Salam. Isn't that being cultivated again?**

**EK:** To reconstruct Lebanon, you have to

take into consideration many elements. Every sect except the Maronites, even the other Christians, have a presence elsewhere in the Arab world as well: the Sunnis, the Shi'is, the Greek Orthodox and the Greek Catholics, and the Druze. These sects cannot cooperate solely on the Lebanese level. The non-Maronite Lebanese Christians are much more numerous in Syria, for example, than in Lebanon. Their political stance in Lebanon must take into consideration their Arab dimension. The same is true for the Sunnis and the other sects. So you can never make a Lebanese coalition if it is not an Arab coalition. The Israelis, to impose Bashir Gemayel, should have occupied all of Lebanon. This did not happen. It's increasingly unlikely that they will occupy the Beka'a or the north. A unified Lebanon under a total domination of the Phalange is not possible at all. What the Saudis tried to do when they asked Gemayel to come to Taif, was to signal the Arab states' acceptance of him as a possible president of Lebanon. They asked him for the expected concessions to the Arabs so that Lebanon can be rebuilt. He refused to give them any concessions. The Gemayel option, as I see it, is not working.

The other Israeli option is a permanent occupation: They will create a zone ruled by Bashir Gemayel or Saad Haddad. There is a big difference between the two men. The Israelis are threatening Bashir Gemayel with Saad Haddad, But Saad Haddad is not Maronite: he's Greek Catholic. So they are threatening the whole Maronite community. With a permanent Israeli existence in the south, in Junieh and in the mountains, and a permanent Syrian existence in the Beka'a and in the north, I don't think there is a possibility of reunifying Lebanon. Reunification, moreover, requires a solution of the Israeli/Palestinian/Syrian conflict. There are no prefabricated solutions to be imposed on Lebanon. The Syrian role reached its height in 1976-77, when Kamal Jumblatt was killed. Now the Israeli role has reached its height and has not solved the problem.

**Why didn't the Israelis go into Beirut in June?**

**EK:** They'd have to pay a lot for Beirut. *Al-Hamishmar* estimates that they have lost 1,200 soldiers so far. This is based on



newspaper death notices, and is quite a bit higher than the figures released by the military. But I don't think the high price in lives is the reason. These elements are important to Israel, but we shouldn't exaggerate them. The Lebanese have paid with more than 10,000 killed; they are still paying. The Israelis can pay 3,000, as in 1973. No, the obstacle is that taking Beirut means that Lebanon is finished. This, for the Americans, is a big thing. The Israelis can occupy Beirut, but they can't recreate a Lebanese state. It will create big problems for the Arab friends of the US, especially the Saudis. With their Gulf problems, their credibility will be lost totally. Of course, the element which must always be considered and respected is the Palestinian decision to fight to the end. The Palestinian and Lebanese National Movement decision to resist played a big role.

**NH:** There is a tremendous reluctance on the part of Israeli soldiers to fight such a battle. Increasingly, you hear that this is "Sharon's war." In addition, they fear that they are fighting a battle that the Phalangists should be fighting. "Why should we do the dirty work for the Phalangists?" they ask.

**EK:** The Phalangist military capacity is very limited. The largest estimate is that they have 10,000 men, I think they have only about 5,000. If they wanted to enter Beirut, they would be destroyed. Even with Israeli bombardment, the soldiers must enter. Bashir Gemayel will expend his so-called military superiority if he enters west Beirut.

The Israeli army is, for the first time, fighting the Arabs where they live. Before they fought Arab armies very far from the Arab cities. Now, they are entering and destroying the cities and villages and the refugee camps. [Israeli ambassador to the US] Moshe Arens gave the example of Hama to argue that the Arabs are a savage society, willing to kill their own people. But this notion of Israel as a superior moral state is now part of the rubble of the refugee camps. They are no better, maybe worse, than the Arab states, because they are more powerful. They are becoming a part of this "savage" society. They are its most fanatic minority—even compared to the Maronites, or the Alawites.

**To what extent is the Litani River an important goal for Israel? The first Israeli**

**bombing of Lebanon, in 1965, targetted the Litani River Project. One interpretation is that this was a warning that the Lebanese should not go ahead with the project to exploit the Litani waters.**

**EK:** Since 1978, Israel has not made any move to control the Litani, but they made it the border of the Haddad territory. I don't think they will withdraw from the Litani, even if they withdraw from elsewhere in the country. At a minimum, they'll want to revive the 1953 proposal to "share" the Litani. They are now taking the water sources in the West Bank and directing them to Israel. Sixty percent of the water of the West Bank is used by Israelis directly. So you can assume that the water of the Litani will have the same destiny.

**Would you say that this question of water is enormously important for the Israelis?**

**EK:** It's one of the major war aims, but their project now encompasses the whole country. Their aim is to destroy Beirut, and transfer Beirut's functions to Israel itself—banking, transit trade, and everything else. The Israelis are no longer seeking small territorial advantages. They are seeking big political and economic advantages. I don't think they will withdraw from the south. I'm not sure that they will withdraw from Tyre itself. It's very problematic now, their existence in the south. They want to control Lebanon, and controlling Lebanon is not only a political issue: it's an economic issue. When Beirut is destroyed, there's only one place which is available with the infrastructure to replace it—Israel itself.

Why is Beirut a target? First, Beirut is the only Arab area where there was any sort of democracy. It had a kind of social equilibrium in which all parts of society could express themselves. As such, it was the only place which endorsed and fought with the Palestinians. Any Arab country which has democracy will fight with the Palestinians. For the Israelis, this is also to show that anyone who works with the Palestinians will have to share their destiny of destruction and total ruin.

Second, Beirut is the center of the modern Arab culture. It is the only place in the Arab world where Arab culture—journalism, literature, theater, publishing—was working, and working well. To destroy this place means that you are also destroying a large cultural dimension of the Arab world.

Third, the Israeli strategy in Beirut is not to arrive at a deal that the Palestinians can agree with. They want to destroy them, and they want to destroy the city where they live. If they can destroy Beirut, then they will destroy the center of political life in Lebanon. That will make it possible for their fascist allies to take over. By making Beirut a small village, then the Phalange can claim that east Beirut, which is only one-fifth of the city and which is only a residential place, is the capital of the country.

Of all these factors, the most important is that they want to make Beirut a lesson to the Arab world. This is what will happen to any other country that endorses the Palestinians, is anti-imperialist, or fights Israel. This is the destiny of Damascus and Amman and Cairo. ■

Al-Dustur (Jordan)

