

The Israeli Arabs and Lebanon:

A New Phase?

Jun 19, 2000



Brief Analysis

The sudden death of Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad on June 10 added confusion and uncertainty to the relations among Syria, Israel, and Lebanon--relations that were already in flux after Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. One unexpected result may be increased politicization of the Israeli Arabs in northern Israel.

Northern Israel and Southern Lebanon Northern Israel is populated by about half of Israel's Arab citizens, and in some areas they are the majority. It is a heterogeneous area, as there are Muslims, Druze, and Christians of various denominations. All of them have--on the family, village, or religious sect levels--traditional links to Lebanon. Furthermore, most of the approximately 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon come from northern Israel and have close relatives in Israel. As a result of the Ottoman administrative dividing lines that prevailed until the 1920s, many of the Arab villages in the Galilee had close relations with southern Lebanon, and those were maintained during the 26 years of British Mandate in Palestine. Until the early 1970s, most of the Israeli-Lebanese border was open and family ties were surreptitiously maintained, as was smuggling and terrorism. The developments in southern Lebanon are therefore of great interest to Israeli Arabs.

Another significant similarity, aside from the common family ties across the border, is that both the Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon appear to feel neglected by both Israel and the Palestinian leadership. There has been essentially no progress or interim step on the right of return, which is the most important issue not only to the Palestinian refugees but also to their Israeli Arab relatives. The right of return has not been as prominent an issue on the agenda of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations as they would like to see. To many, it seems that the Palestinian side has refrained from emphasizing it so as to achieve more concessions from Israel on issues of greater concern to the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

Several signs indicate how Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon has affected the Israeli Arab community. Following the withdrawal, the Committee of Arab Mayors in Israel hurried to declare its strong opposition to the settlement of South Lebanon Army members and families in Israeli Arab villages. The editorial articles of the Israeli Arab publications *al-Sinarah* and *Kul al-'Arab*, not to mention the organ of the Islamic movement in Israel, joined the Arab "festival" of glorifying the Lebanese resistance and Israeli weakness, in a tone of jubilation. In the weeks since the withdrawal, hundreds of Israeli Arabs have gone across the border to meet their relatives from Lebanon. In several cases they were confronted by Israeli soldiers trying to keep the groups separated by the fence. At the Israeli-Lebanese border in Metulla, delegations of Israeli Arabs on the southern side of the fence have joined Lebanese villagers and supporters of Hizballah demonstrating against Israel on the northern side of the fence. In sum, it seems that the events on the Lebanese scene have had a strong influence on Israeli Arab citizens. Several Israeli Arab leaders and members of Knesset, such as Talib al-Sana' of the Democratic Arab Party, sent public greetings to Hizballah and the Lebanese people congratulating them on their victory.

Dangers in Influences across the Border Every religious and ethnic sect among Israeli Arabs has links to a brother sect in Lebanon. Should the links between Lebanon and Israeli Arabs become tighter, internal tensions and rivalries

in the Lebanese arena could affect relations among the various parts of the Israeli Arab community. That could add internal problems in the community, which has already seen tensions in the 1980s between Christians and Druze, and in the 1990s between Christians and Muslims in Nazareth.

The Israeli Arabs did not pay much attention to Israeli combat in southern Lebanon, because Israel's confrontation was focused on the Shi'is, not on the Palestinians. For more than a decade, there were few Israeli moves against the Palestinian refugee camps, other than bombarding the training camps of Ahmad Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC)--a group that has no popular support among the Israeli Arabs. The danger is that a Palestinian renewal of terrorism across the Lebanese border could influence northern Israeli Arabs because of family ties and the sense of mutual fate. For more than a year, the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon have been marked by unrest, with a significant decline of support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and increased support for Palestinian opposition groups, mainly Islamic ones.

As it stands now, there is scant danger of a wave of Israeli Arab terrorism. The participation by Israeli Arab citizens in Palestinian terrorism has been very small. To be sure, since 1991, there have been about twenty-five Israeli Arabs involved in terrorism, most of them supporters of the Islamic movement in Israel. In 1991 members of the movement killed three Israeli soldiers. In September 1999, Israeli Arabs were involved in two operations in Haifa and Tiberias, and in February 2000 others provided the logistical support for a Hamas terrorist group in the Israeli Arab village of Taibeh.

But unrest, more alienation toward the Israeli state, support for Syria, and even expressions of political subversion and violence might follow the currently unstable and unexpected situation in southern Lebanon, especially if the Palestinian refugees renew their terrorist activity across the Israeli-Lebanese border. So far, the Israeli Arab leadership is not attempting to calm the atmosphere. Steps by all sides are needed to reduce tension in the relations between the Arab Israeli sector and Israel's government and broader public.

Israeli Arabs, Palestinians, and Syria The Israeli Arab reaction to the withdrawal from Lebanon is preliminary but bears watching. It stands in contrast to a history of limited impact on Israeli Arabs of developments on the general Palestinian scene, from the intifada through the Oslo accords to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). During the past two decades, the demonstrations and riots in Israeli Arab villages--such as protests against the destruction of illegally built houses--were primarily part of the Israeli Arab fight for equality within Israel. To be sure, there were violent demonstrations after the 1982 massacre in the Lebanese refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila as well as during the early days of the Palestinian intifada in 1988. But on the whole during the intifada, Israeli Arabs limited their assistance to the Palestinian public in the territories to sending money and food and lending moral support.

Whereas the Israeli Arabs' relationship to the PA is less close than outside observers might expect, their interest in Syria may be greater than the casual onlooker realizes. The 1990s saw regular visits by Israeli Arab politicians to Syria. In 1994, a large Israeli Arab delegation visited Syria to give its condolences to Hafiz al-Asad upon the death of his eldest son, Basil. Other smaller delegations and individuals, mainly Knesset member Azmi Bishara, made frequent visits to Syria and met senior Syrian officials. Last week, a large delegation attended Asad's funeral and for the first time crossed the border through the Golan Heights. In some cases, it seems that the Israeli Arab leadership feels more warmly toward the Syrian regime than toward the PA. Part of the reason is the continuing effect of pan-Arabism (as compared to Palestinian nationalism); another part is the desire of the Israeli Arab leadership to limit any assertion by PA president Yasir Arafat to speak for, or to exercise influence over, Israeli Arabs.

Reuven Paz is the academic director of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Israel.

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



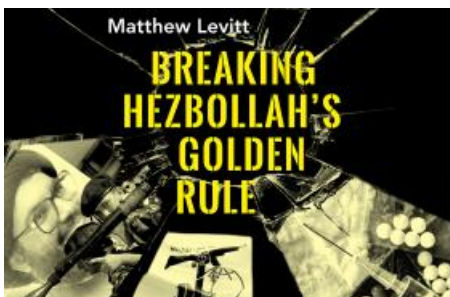
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](/policy-analysis/lebanon)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)