

Syria-Lebanon-Israel Triangle:

The End of the Status Quo?

May 25, 2000



Brief Analysis

On May 19, 2000, Patrick Seale, biographer of Hafiz al-Asad; Daniel Pipes, editor of Middle East Quarterly; Uri Lubrani, Israel's coordinator of activities in southern Lebanon; and Raghida Dergham, senior diplomatic correspondent for al-Hayat, jointly addressed The Washington Institute's Fifteenth Annual Soref Symposium. The discussion took place just days before the Israel Defense Forces withdrew from Lebanon. The following are excerpts from the discussion. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=29\)](#)

IMPLICATIONS OF ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM LEBANON

Patrick Seale: "The Syrians and the Lebanese have no intention of going in there and taking the blame for any cross-border incidents. It only requires one or two people [to provoke a crisis], and the border there is a very difficult one. Israel has built right up on the border. It would be very easy for someone, a sniper, to shoot a couple of farmers across the border--what will Israel then do? . . .

"We've had hints of what Israel's policy would be: a policy of massive retaliation. This means that the agreements of the past--that is to say, the 1976 Red Line agreements and the 1996 understandings about hitting civilian targets on our side--these go by the board, [replaced by] a policy of massive retaliation. This is a recipe for escalation and eventually perhaps for war. The Syrians suspect--perhaps wrongly--but they suspect that there are hawks in Israel who wouldn't mind an escalation which could lead to a military showdown in Syria. . . .

"I think everybody agrees that Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon robs Syria of a card, robs it of some leverage in the situation. So Syria would be very anxious, I think, to contain the political damage. And I think it has managed to do so. It's now pretty clear that the withdrawal cannot lead to a separate peace between Israel and Lebanon. . . . I think it's also true that the withdrawal will not lead to significant pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops or its presence from Lebanon. . . .

"I think the Syrians have two options: either to lie low and keep quiet and accept that Israel is leaving Lebanon but temporarily staying on the Golan--and I think that is the most likely option in terms of Syrian policy. . . . The second possibility is they may tolerate a certain amount of low-intensity and low-caliber activity on the frontier just to keep the pot boiling and to remind the Israelis that until there is peace with Syria, they won't have a particularly quiet life. But that's extremely difficult to control, because what the Syrians fear as much as the Israelis is escalation."

Uri Lubrani: "If we have a lively situation on the northern border--and it doesn't take a lot for this to happen--Israel will have to retaliate. We don't want to go through a war of attrition while we are within our borders. It's a much more difficult proposition than having a security zone as a buffer of sorts.

"We will have to determine who is instigating this trouble. And knowing what I know about the attitude of the Lebanese government, they will not want to instigate this. So the other option is the neighbor in the North. And of course the finger will be pointed there with all of the consequences. If I have anything to say, this is what is going to happen. I don't believe that we should penalize the Lebanese for something that is happening inside Lebanon which

they don't want."

Daniel Pipes: "The Israelis are ready to destroy power stations in Beirut; they are not ready to take on the Syrians."

Uri Lubrani: "Mr. Pipes, try us." [Laughter]

HIZBALLAH

Daniel Pipes: "Mr. Seale has predicted that Hizballah will cease military operations. I know that Hizballah has in the past laid claim to nothing less than Jerusalem, and most recently has laid claim to villages in the Galilee, the Sheba Farms, and so forth. The Syrians just this week have endorsed some of these claims. I see this as laying the groundwork for future attacks. In other words, the reading I gave you before, that Israel is a weak state, is a reading that is shared for example by Hasan Nasrallah, the head of Hizballah. They see Israel on the run. Ms. Dergham's characterization of Israel having been defeated is a correct one. Israel was defeated. This fancy talk about how Israel's defeat is actually a threat to the Syrians is nonsense. They lost. They lost bad. The Syrians know it, Hizballah knows it, Iran knows it. And they are savoring their victory at this moment, and they are preparing for the next step. So we will see. You will see shortly enough whether the northern border is quiet or not--and I predict that it will not be."

Patrick Seale: "Many people suppose that Hizballah is a creature of Syria and Iran, created by them. The fact of the matter is that Hizballah represents the Shi'a population of South Lebanon who have been victimized by this policy of almost constant, daily bombing. So it is a national resistance movement to occupation. It's trying to protect the people of South Lebanon, and in the meantime, Hizballah has developed into a formidable guerrilla force, perhaps one of the finest in the world, in terms of the skill of its military operations, its equipment, its adaptability to Israeli tactics, its political leadership. It has become possibly the strongest political force in Lebanon.

"Will Syria continue to support Hizballah? . . . It depends on whether the withdrawal is total, it depends on whether Israel respects Lebanese airspace and its maritime waters. It really depends of course on whether the [South Lebanon Army] is truly disbanded or whether it continues to control this little strip and be protected by Israeli artillery and air. . . . All these things will determine how Hizballah behaves. But I believe that [even if Hizballah] ceases military operations, it will remain in arms, because no peace has yet been concluded."

THE UNITED NATIONS FORCE IN LEBANON (UNIFIL)

Patrick Seale: "People talk about UNIFIL expanding its force to seven or eight thousand, but UNIFIL has no peace enforcement mandate. And the members of UNIFIL have no intention of sending troops into a danger zone; there are too many examples from earlier, Sierra Leone and so forth. The Irish and the Finns simply want to pull out of UNIFIL, let alone contribute more forces. The French have been very, very cautious, not saying they are going to send troops in if there is going to be trouble. So forget about UNIFIL. The Israelis have ignored the United Nations for half a century, and now they want help from the UN? That is maybe a bit late."

Raghida Dergham: "Patrick said forget about UNIFIL, it is not going to be able to do the job. . . . I don't think this is acceptable. I don't think this is what Israel would like; nor is it what Syria would like. I think this is where there is a meeting of needs between the Syrians and the Lebanese. So I think that what is right now happening is clearly a way to combine the needs of the three parties. And UNIFIL is the right way for it. . . . The Israelis are the ones who are going to need the United Nations to confirm the withdrawal and to be there in that area guaranteeing that there is no more vacuum."

THE FUTURE OF THE SOUTH LEBANON ARMY (SLA)

Patrick Seale: "The fighting force of the SLA is about 2,000 or 2,500 strong. In addition to that, there are a couple of thousand people engaged in the civil administration of that area, and there are about two or three thousand

Lebanese who work in Israel mainly on agriculture. And they have dependents, families, homes, businesses. What is going to happen to all these people, perhaps 25,000 of them? Well, the Lebanese government and Hizballah have made it pretty clear that they are not intending to exact revenge on the families. The officers, if they surrender, will be put on trial. If they don't surrender, they have to seek asylum in Israel or other countries. But the families--and I spoke to Hasan Nasrallah about this myself--he said that there is nothing in Islam or in our intentions to punish innocent families. And the Lebanese government has said much the same. But collaborators--people who fought, people who killed Lebanese soldiers or indeed Hizballah members--will of course have to flee."

Uri Lubrani: "If the majority of these people will opt to stay, and something will happen to them, it will not be the Lebanese government which will cause it. They want to put them on trial. But it will not be the Lebanese government who will cause massacres. It will be Syria who will be instigating it, and we will point the finger to Syria."

Raghida Dergham: "The government of Lebanon is responsible to take care of the families, but not to listen to the Israeli demands and give them amnesty. You can't just demand that the Lebanese government will offer amnesty to those soldiers and commanders who have betrayed their country, who have worked for the occupation. That's why I still say it's an Israeli problem. The SLA is an Israeli problem above all."

WILL THERE BE CALM OR VIOLENCE AFTER WITHDRAWAL?

Daniel Pipes: "[If there is border violence, the culprits will be] the Syrians, Iranians, their friends and agents, Hizballah, Palestinian nationalists--a whole motley [array] of radical groups in Lebanon."

Patrick Seale: "The problem is that nobody knows who is going to control that region if UNIFIL is not up to the task."

Uri Lubrani: [Will there be calm?] "I have my grave doubts. . . . It will inevitably, as a major player, be Syria [that is to blame]."

Raghida Dergham: [Will there be calm?] "If [UN Resolution] 425 is implemented in full without any tricks or pockets, yes."

This Special Soref Symposium Report was prepared by Erika Reff.

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