

# The South Lebanon Army and Syria-Israel Talks

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Brief Analysis

**W**hile Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara are talking peace at Shepherdstown, the fighting in south Lebanon still goes on. Last time the two leaders met in Washington in December, the party was almost spoiled after a stray shell fired by South Lebanese Army (SLA) gunners hit an elementary school in the Lebanese village of Arab Salim, wounding twenty-four children. Residents of Israel's northern settlements anticipating Hizballah's wrath had to spend the night in their bomb shelters. Only after Israel's prompt apology, describing the incident as "an unfortunate mistake," did Hizballah, breaking with its usual pattern, agree not to retaliate by firing katyusha rockets at Israel's north.

This incident demonstrated the intricate relations that have been evolving between Israel and the SLA--a militia controlled, trained, and paid for by Israel--since Prime Minister Barak pledged to withdraw Israel Defense Forces (IDF) troops from south Lebanon by July 2000. Though small with only 2,500 fighters, the SLA's actions in the interim period before a deal is reached could have serious implications on Israel's diplomatic maneuverability as well as its ability to peacefully carry out its withdrawal plan.

**Background** The SLA's contribution to Israel's endeavor in Lebanon has, so far, been invaluable. SLA troops engage Hizballah and Shi'i AMAL guerrilla fighters on an almost daily basis and have seen many victories. Enjoying considerable support among southern Lebanon's Christian residents, the SLA has succeeded in containing the expansion of Hizballah's sphere of influence into the south. Furthermore, the SLA's presence in south Lebanon has helped Israel reduce the number of IDF troops deployed in the Security Zone, thus lowering the IDF casualty rate. Since 1985, the SLA has suffered 420 killed and more than 1,300 wounded, an extremely heavy toll for the civilian population of south Lebanon that numbers less than 100,000 people (by comparison, the IDF has suffered 325 killed and 840 wounded in attacks from Lebanon during the same period). As a reward for their loyalty, Israel allows SLA family members to work in Israel and thus enjoy a high income by Lebanese standards.

Though operationally the SLA is still effective, business within its ranks has not been entirely as usual ever since Barak was elected prime minister of Israel, given his public statements indicating that he intends to keep his election pledge to end Israel's occupation of south Lebanon. Despite Barak's repeated promises "to take the necessary measures to guarantee the future of the Lebanese security and civilian personnel who have worked alongside Israel over the years," SLA troops are skeptical that they and their families' security will in fact be guaranteed.

Recent political developments have also raised concerns in Israel about the loyalty of SLA soldiers. SLA commander General Antoine Lahad has advised Israel against unilateral withdrawal from the south, warning that SLA members feeling betrayed might turn their weapons against the IDF. Concern about the SLA has led Israel to offer new morale-boosting incentives: increased salaries, improved fighting capabilities, and protection of SLA troops by reinforcing their outposts and vehicles. Senior commanders have reportedly been given high pension benefits, and special arrangements are being made to relocate SLA veterans to an Israeli safe haven.

**SLA Operations during the Negotiations Period** On the operational level, Israeli and SLA commanders often did not

see eye-to-eye on the conduct of military operations in the Security Zone. Whereas the SLA wanted to see an overwhelming Israeli response to any Hizballah provocation, IDF commanders often preferred a more selective and cautious line of action in order to avoid escalation that might end up in katyusha attacks on northern Israel.

One example is the June 1999 flare-up which started with SLA shelling of a Shi'i village in which a local woman was wounded. A barrage of katyushas on the Galilee followed, and Israel responded with a harsh retaliatory bombing of Beirut's power stations. In another May 31, 1999 incident, reckless SLA firing hit UNIFIL's compound, killed an Irish UN peacekeeper and wounded two others. This caused an embarrassing diplomatic incident with Ireland.

In the wake of the resuscitation of Syrian-Israeli peace talks, ill-judged responses and indiscriminate firing by the SLA could tear the delicate fabric of nascent Syrian-Israeli relations. Israel will have the tricky task of simultaneously keeping the SLA tightly reined in while maintaining the force's morale and fighting strength.

Regardless of how long the negotiations with Syria and Lebanon take, Israel would certainly want the SLA to carry out its responsibilities on the ground until the last Israeli soldier has left Lebanese territory. This, however, might not correspond with the SLA's interests. SLA troops will monitor the talks closely and might decide that abandoning Israel's side now is safer than doing so later. The most problematic scenario for the IDF would be if demoralized SLA soldiers abandon their positions throughout the Security Zone prior to Israel's planned date of withdrawal. The soldiers could be influenced by a decision now being debated in the Lebanese parliament to grant immunity to SLA soldiers if they agree to cross the lines prior to a future Israeli withdrawal.

**Negotiations and the Future Status of SLA Members** The future for members of the SLA will be one of the thorny issues to be negotiated by Israel and Lebanon in their upcoming negotiations. A post-withdrawal risk facing SLA members is the charge of treason, or of other crimes, brought by the Lebanese government. Another, perhaps trickier, issue is the risk of post-withdrawal reprisals by Hizballah against SLA members and their families. Israel has several strong reasons to insist on clear understandings that SLA soldiers will be protected from reprisals:

- Israel has an interest in preserving its strategic credibility by showing that it stands by its friends. This is a particularly delicate issue in Lebanon, where some think Israel did not treat well its Lebanese allies after the 1982 Israeli invasion. Treating allies well will do much to demonstrate that Israel left Lebanon with its head held high, rather than being chased out by Hizballah. And Hizballah's claim to a victory over Israel will look less impressive if Hizballah is forced to agree to live in peace with the former SLA members.
- Most SLA members have indicated that as Lebanese patriots they wish to stay in their homes in the south rather than seek refuge. Some, however, have special reasons to seek refuge in Europe, the United States, and Israel. In December 1999, some SLA members petitioned the Israeli High Court of Justice for political asylum for SLA militiamen and their families.
- Israel wants to ensure post-peace-treaty friendly relations between the populations on both sides of the border. An unsatisfactory agreement on the SLA issue could create resentment toward Israel by the residents of south Lebanon.

The recent developments in the Israeli-Syrian track raised new hopes among SLA troops that Israel will relinquish its plan to withdraw unilaterally from south Lebanon and leave them at the mercy of Hizballah and the Lebanese government. Unlike Hizballah, which is likely to obstruct the peace negotiations by intensifying its attacks, the SLA has a strong interest in the success of the talks. By exercising restraint and by refraining from playing into Hizballah's hands, the SLA could become one of the winners in an Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement.

Gal Luft is author of *The Palestinian Security Services: Between Police and Army* in The Washington Institute's Policy Focus series.

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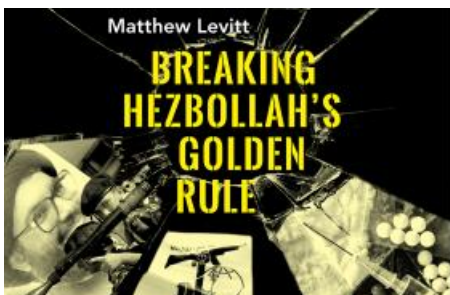
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