

# Lebanon in the Equation of Arab-Israeli Peace

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Sep 22, 1999

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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Israel has no territorial claims over Lebanon, and the two countries agreed to recognize and accept United Nations Security Council Resolution 425, which calls for an unconditional Israeli troop withdrawal. Nevertheless, the Lebanese-Israeli peace track remains challenging, primarily because--after twenty years of civil war--Lebanon lacks a strong central government. Moreover, as a result of the prolonged Israeli presence in Lebanon since 1982, an Islamic military resistance emerged that has fought the most effective Arab military campaign in recent history; this, of course, only complicates matters. Lebanon jumped to the front of the Arab-Israeli peace talks when Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak pledged an Israeli pull-out from Lebanon by July 7, 2000, following-up on his campaign pledge to be out of Lebanon within a year.

Syria is considered to be the main power in Lebanon to the degree that Lebanese officials take cues from Damascus. Given the reality of the situation and the inability of the Lebanese government to negotiate its own agreement directly with Israel, a Syrian-Israeli agreement is essential to the security of Lebanon, northern Israel, and Syria. An Israeli pull-out without an agreement with Syria would have a negative impact on Lebanon; many Lebanese fear a return to the pre-1982 situation, with chaos and cross-border attacks.

Hizballah: Hizballah's changing history suggests that it would not continue any military activity after an Israeli pull-out. During the 1980s, Hizballah launched attacks on U.S. interests on behalf of Iran, but it has now adopted a local agenda. The turning point in the group's history occurred when it participated in the 1992 parliamentary elections, campaigning under the banner of liberating the South. Hizballah has mastered Lebanese public relations and knows how to appeal to the Lebanese people. If it attacked Israel's northern border after Israel withdrew, thus instigating an Israeli bombing response on Lebanese infrastructure, Hizballah would lose credibility among the Lebanese.

The relationship between Syria and Hizballah is a tactical rather than strategic alliance. Although Hizballah is launching a military campaign to drive Israeli troops out of Lebanon and claim victory--an issue that could later be used for local gains in Lebanon's internal agenda--Syria wants to use the resistance in Lebanon as a card at the negotiating table with Israel. Hizballah has an independent agenda different from Syria's, and it is currently the only political faction with a sizable presence in the Lebanese parliament that does not owe its success to Syria. Although

Syria could make Hizballah's life more difficult in Lebanon, the group has a margin by which it can exert its independence from Syria.

**Normalization:** It is difficult to imagine normalization between Israel and Lebanon, even within the context of an Israeli peace agreement with Syria, because Israel's long presence has left deep scars on the Lebanese psyche. Many obstacles must be overcome before normalization can occur. One issue would be the strength of Hizballah, which will try to capitalize on its self-proclaimed "military success" in driving the Israelis out of Lebanon to secure gains in Lebanese politics. Because Hizballah is an ideological organization calling for the destruction of the state of Israel, it will be likely to take the lead in fighting normalization after it stops its military actions. Hizballah neither needs nor wants U.S. or Israeli recognition, and it will feel comfortable with the leading role in opposing normalization.

MARTIN KRAMER

Within Israel, the Israeli presence in Lebanon is viewed as a sustained defensive incursion designed to solve a classic security problem created by the power vacuum that opened up in the 1970s. Israeli soldiers sent to Lebanon are told their mission is to protect northern Israel and make it a safe place to live.

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** Owing to Israel's sustained incursion in Lebanon, since 1978 northern Israel has been nearly as safe as Tel Aviv. The combination of the security zone, ground patrols, retaliatory air and artillery strikes, and the South Lebanese Army (SLA) has helped make northern towns safe for the expansion of tourism and industry, has enabled them to draw and sustain a growing Jewish population, and has transformed the Galilee into the weekend playground for the rest of Israel. These changes would have all been unthinkable without Israel's presence in southern Lebanon. In short, Israel's mistakes in southern Lebanon do not outweigh the paramount achievement for the majority of Israelis.

Yet, twenty to thirty soldiers are killed in Lebanon each year, often one at a time. This has created the impression of a slow war of attrition that Israel cannot lose, but which it also cannot win. The majority of Israelis now think that the lives of Israeli soldiers are a high price to pay. In an annual survey of Israeli public opinion on national affairs conducted by Professor Asher Arian earlier this year, 55 percent of respondents favored a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, up from 44 percent in 1998 and 41 percent in 1997 (the first time this question was asked). The important element in the shift is the number of casualties that Israel has suffered: 74 percent of Israelis said the security zone is not worth the lives of Israeli soldiers.

**Syria's Role:** Syria is the effective master of Lebanon. Although Hizballah has carried most of the operational burden, the expert consensus is that it acts by virtue of a Syrian license. Syria will determine the scope of activities of all the different players in Lebanon, such as Hizballah, the Palestinians, and Iran. Without a peace agreement with Syria, there could be a real danger that Syria, in trying to preserve its last bit of leverage, may encourage Hizballah or Palestinian groups to launch destabilizing cross-border attacks on Israel.

Furthermore, the Israeli public has no faith in Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad's word. In the same annual survey in which a majority of Israelis preferred a unilateral withdrawal, 73 percent of respondents were willing to give back none or only a small part of the Golan Heights. Moreover, 70 percent of the Israeli respondents thought that it was possible for Israel to solve its Lebanon problem without an agreement with Syria. A good part of the public seems convinced that Israel would be able to deter most attacks on its north by retaliatory air strikes and artillery, rather than with a ground presence in Lebanon. This contradicts an axiom among Israeli defense experts that a withdrawal from south Lebanon will not work without an agreement with Syria.

**Barak's Options:** The Israeli prime minister understands that the majority of the public wants a change in policy with respect to Lebanon. This realization encouraged Barak to promise to get Israeli forces out of Lebanon within a year during his election campaign, which surprised many of the experts who opposed a unilateral withdrawal. Barak has

stood by his commitment even though there were many instances when he could have backed down. Theoretically speaking, the commitment does remain conditional on the resumption of talks with Syria, but Barak does not rule out a unilateral withdrawal.

**Future Israeli-Lebanese Relations:** If an Israeli withdrawal--unilateral or agreed--were to occur, there would still be many difficult issues between the two countries. Lebanese politicians have not stopped protesting against Barak's July announcement that Israel would insist on Palestinian refugee resettlement in their present lands of dispersion, which would mean Lebanon would have to absorb the refugees living there. A reservoir of distrust also exists between northern Israelis and the mostly Shi'i inhabitants of southern Lebanon. The wounds of the Israeli occupation are still fresh in the current Lebanese generation--unlike Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, where almost a generation has passed since people lived through a war or a defeat. Yet, Lebanon could resurface as an undefeated state with Hizballah claiming victory, and this could potentially move forward the relationship between the countries. Furthermore, as with other Israeli-Arab peace treaties, economic compatibility between the two countries may also help normalization.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rania al-Shirawi

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