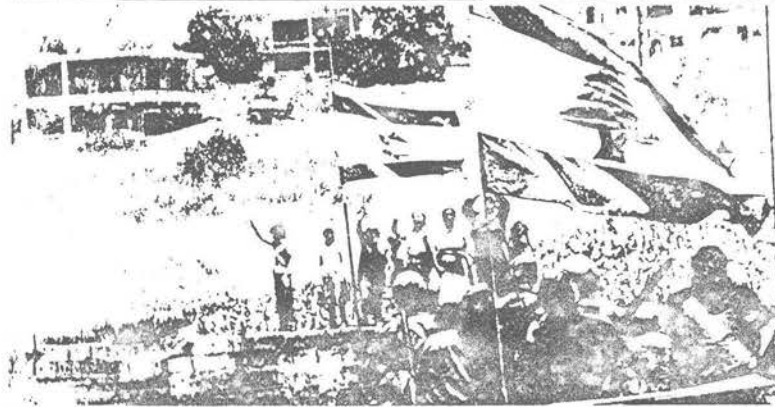


The options after Lebanon pullout

The Jerusalem Post's Mark Segal talks to Middle East expert Itamar Rabinovich about strategic realities in Lebanon.



Days of Innocence...South Lebanese villagers welcome IDF troops, June 1982.

WHAT WILL BE the strategic realities after Israel withdraws from Lebanon? Can the "red lines" - the spoken, unwritten agreement with Syria over spheres of influence in Lebanon that existed before Operation Peace for Galilee - be respected?

Itamar Rabinovich, head of the El Aviv University's Dayan Centre, leaves an understanding can be reached. With difficulty. "Perhaps from the same terms as before," he says - "but the answer might be 'yes' - we consider the idea of charting a course between a Syrian-controlled Lebanon and Israel's genuine security interests.

The underlying hypothesis is that Syria is not ready for a military confrontation with Israel at present.

Damascus will prefer to avoid anything that might spark off an untimely confrontation.

Rabinovich regards Syrian President Hafez Assad as being among Israel's most determined and dangerous enemies. "But I do recognize his ability to rein in his forces until he considers the time appropriate. Hence, my belief in the prospect of reaching a tacit, indirect understanding with Syria.

"Unfortunately, the difficulty now is that there has been so much talk about what was achieved, without publicity, in the past. It will be their difficult now for Assad to sail Egypt and Jordan for seeking accommodation with Israel while, at the same time, moving towards some kind of understanding himself."

RABINOVICH FEARS that after withdrawal from Lebanon Israel might be overcome by a sense of fatalism, that Israelis will not want to have anything to do with Lebanon.

"This," he says, "is just as dangerous as the other extreme. Lebanon is still there and we cannot afford to be indifferent to what happens there.

"Intellectually, of course, it may be argued that in order to have any influence on events in Southern Lebanon, we must have influence in Beirut. But then that's a political question, not an academic one."

It is still too early to fully assess Israel's involvement in Lebanon, says Rabinovich, as much has yet to unfold. But Lebanon has provided one potent lesson. "Israel does not possess the power to manage the affairs of other countries," he says. What must be learned by everyone concerned are the limitations of a small state like ours.

"After World War II, the Allies could restructure Germany and Japan, but that certainly cannot hold good for lesser powers.

"In Lebanon, the two regional powers - Israel and Syria - have

sought to restructure Lebanese politics over the past decade, but neither had the resources to carry out such grand designs. That is why both have come to grief in Lebanon."

Rabinovich believes that while Assad has re-established his supremacy in Lebanon, he has no wish to become too intimately involved in Lebanon's sectarian strife.

"Having already burned his fingers in the late '70s, he does not want to have to mediate between the warring factions."

IN THE MEANTIME, though, two problems have arisen: on the one hand, Assad's health has declined and there is continuing domestic uncertainty in Damascus; on the other, the focus of attention has shifted from Lebanon to the Jordan-Palestinian issue.

And while Assad remains powerful at home, his ability to affect events outside the Syria-Lebanon arena is extremely limited.

"As 1984 wore on, Assad was powerless to stop such new developments as the renewal of relations between Jordan and Egypt, the convening in Amman of the Palestine National Council, and the rapprochement between Baghdad and Cairo."

Assad's triumph peaked in the winter of 1983/84, when Lebanese President Amin Jemayel agreed to abrogate the May 17 agreement with Israel. The pact was seen as a mini-Camp David accord and stuck in Assad's throat.

By persuading Jemayel to abrogate the agreement - which had been brokered by the U.S. - Assad achieved a victory not only for him-

self but also, by extension, for the Soviet Union.

ONE QUESTION that exercises many minds in Israel concerns the future posture of the Shi'ites in South Lebanon.

In 1982, the Shi'ites welcomed the Israeli forces with open arms; today, as the IDF withdraws, those same soldiers are the principal target of Shi'ite bullets and bombs.

"None of those who welcomed our soldiers back in 1982 expected that they would still be there as an occupying force three years later," says Rabinovich.

"But what has happened to the Shi'ites has also, to a certain extent, been beyond Israel's control. The Shi'ites have been waging a number of internecine battles - for control of their community, for a chunk of the Lebanese pie. But, above all, they want the Israelis out of South Lebanon."

In Rabinovich's view, the Shi'ites are seeking an autonomous statelet, equivalent to the Christian enclave north of Beirut and the Druse stronghold in the Shouf Mountains.

Since no Lebanese state exists - what does exist is but a shell for various local autonomies - the Shi'ites realize that they must carve out a piece of territory for themselves.

Ideally, they would like an enclave stretching from the Israeli border along the coastal road up to southern Beirut, linking them to West Beirut and taking in the international airport. They would thereby enjoy powerful leverage on the power machinery in Beirut, for they would control not only southern Beirut but

have a major contiguous stretch of territory to support it.

The Shi'ites now wish to redress the situation where their large numbers had no expression in terms of political power in Beirut. The Shi'ites in the Bekaa Valley are subject to direct Syrian rule; the rank and file of Amal live in Beirut, while the bulk of the Shi'ites live in the south.

As long as Israel dominated the south, says Rabinovich, the Amal faction could not exercise any control over its community there. Hence the intensive efforts by the rivals of Amal leader Nabih Berri, especially the radicals of the Hizbollah faction, to pre-empt Amal in the south.

Another element is the presence of radical Iranians in the Bekaa Valley, where they enjoy moral and political influence among the local Shi'ites and where they inject a messianic message in propagating war for the control of Jerusalem.

Another part of the jigsaw puzzle, he notes, is the Syrian effort "to hasten our exit and to make it as humiliating as possible." In addition, there are the Palestinians who are anxious to re-establish themselves in the South.

And on top of all this have been "dollops of invective" by Lebanese politicians, such as President Amin Jemayel and Premier Rashid Karamé, both seeking to make points.

IS IT POSSIBLE, after all the bitterness, that the anger of the Shi'ites towards Israel will abate? Shi'ite fervour, says Rabinovich, is a matter of concern not only to Israel. Nor is it just a national problem of Lebanon.

The Shi'ites are a cause of anxiety to others in the Middle East - and, indeed, to the super-powers.

But from Israel's point of view, what matters is what happens in southern Lebanon and Israel can take care of that problem.

Yet the question that must ever arise is whether the Amal faction will become the effective authority in South Lebanon.

In my view, that would be highly desirable for us. It would mean that power would be in the hands of a single, effective authority that is essentially a rational force.

In the course of time, Assad may come to realize that in order to preserve its autonomy he must do his utmost to prevent attacks against Israel from across the Lebanese border.

Yet Amal may prove to be incapable of establishing its sway in the south. We may yet see several militias fighting for control of the region and such a situation would be conducive to attacks across the border by some armed groups, whether Palestinian or Shi'ite.

"For Israel's part, we should, already now, think in terms of our retaliatory-preventive policy with regard to any attacks that might come immediately after the pull-out."

Accepting such an eventuality as inevitable, Rabinovich believes it is of much importance to correctly read the trend: "Whether the attacks are of a random or systematic nature, whether Amal is taking charge, or whether the attacks originate with radicals seeking to disrupt chances of an accommodation between Israel and the Arabs."

Is Amal torn between Damascus and Teheran? "Not Amal. There is no love for Teheran. Berri is opposed by the pro-Iran Amal-Islamic movement. I regard him as a secular politician seeking for himself and his community their appropriate share of the Lebanese cake. They are first and foremost Lebanese. They think and operate within the Lebanese context."

"Those opposing Berri are Muslim revolutionaries who think in terms of an Islamic republic and derive their inspiration from Khomeini."

As to the Damascus attitude towards Amal, he regards it as rather ambivalent. On the one hand, Khomeini's Iran was Syria's ally, hence Syria's tolerance of the radical Iranian presence in the Bekaa Valley. But at the same time, says Rabinovich, Assad is primarily a rational politician and has no time for the messianic militants. The ambivalence of Syria towards Amal is out of fear that it become too independent, enabling it to dispense with Syrian patronage.

STAR WARS

(Continued from preceding page) itself shows how highly the Americans regard Israel's current technological and scientific capability. There was another implication: that we must consider Israel's lead

proposal may be at this stage, are potentially real answers to this country's economic and defence needs.

As mentioned, Israel does not have a credible nuclear option, and the fear that it will develop one is

(Continued from Page One) use of ground-to-ground missiles in the Iran-Iraq war.

"Phase I of the SDI's research," a well-informed U.S. source said, "will try to address this specific problem. Israel stands to gain enormously

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"Whatever the rationale," an Israeli official said, "we stand to gain by playing, rather than simply standing along the sidelines."

Israeli officials in Washington are

the Foreign Ministry remain deeply concerned about this virtual alliance emerging between Washington and Jerusalem. They are said to fear that it will make the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Moscow more difficult.