

# Without glory



Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the area it occupied in southern Lebanon changes the political balance in the whole region. There are pressing questions about the role of the UN and whether, in future, diplomacy rather than conflict will settle differences between Israel and her Arab neighbours.

**A** UNILATERAL ISRAELI withdrawal from southern Lebanon has been the second worst and second best option for Prime Minister Ehud Barak since he came to power in May last year. He didn't want the status quo – the worst option – and failed to achieve his preferred solution – a negotiated agreement with Syria.

For Israelis and non-Israelis alike, the status of the unilateral withdrawal was far from clear. It started as an electoral promise, intended to reassure a then slowly growing popular movement demanding just such a move. It evolved into a way of putting pressure on Syria and ended up as a full fledged decision. No wonder most Lebanese and the Syrian government took time to respond.

## RADICAL

The project has kept its dual nature. On the one hand, it is a radical change in strategy over an area Israel has consistently not sought to annex but where it has lost some twelve hundred soldiers in the past two decades. The new approach originated in political circles such as the Four Mothers movement.

Support expanded in the political establishment both among those who want their government to concentrate on the Palestinian track – such as Yossi Beilin, an early convert to the idea – and those who seek to make fruitful negotiations with Syria all but impossible – like Ariel Sharon. The military – and Barak himself – were probably among the last to consider implementing what had begun as a promise for some and a threat for others.

However the decision is marketed domestically, it inevitably includes an implicit recognition of defeat, similar to that of the US in Vietnam or the Soviet

Union in Afghanistan. After twenty-two years of occupation, Israel had been unable to stop deadly attacks on its troops, maintain the South Lebanon Army (SLA) as a supportive local militia, or negotiate a withdrawal and peace treaty with this apparently weak neighbour.

On the other hand, the unilateral withdrawal is a substitute for a peace treaty with Israel's two neighbours to the north. It therefore went completely off the agenda when Syria and Israel resumed negotiations, before so abruptly interrupting them.

While withdrawal preparations were under way, the impression remained that, despite the failure of the March Assad-Clinton presidential summit in Geneva, any breakthrough on the Syrian-Israeli track could still have halted it. Such a decision, even at a very late hour, would have been a relief to Damascus and possibly to the Israeli army.

## DISBELIEF

Prior to the Geneva debacle, Washington did not hide its opposition – clearly aware of the negative impact of a unilateral withdrawal on an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement. Damascus responded with disbelief – one Syrian official still excluded such a scenario in early April. This was followed by a mixture of private embarrassment and public confusion, ending lately with realistic resignation to the fact and attempts to make the best of it.

The withdrawal might not fatally challenge the intimate link Syria imposed between its own peace process tracks and the Lebanese

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one. But an end to the war of attrition Israel has been suffering on the Lebanese front does annul one of its primary motivations for a peace treaty with Syria.

Now Lebanese territory is liberated, Beirut would not, could not and, therefore – if it wants to keep domestic peace – should not, consider a full-fledged peace treaty with Israel independent of Syria. Lebanon cannot afford such a rude challenge to Syria's interests when Damascus feels its regional image is wounded. There is also a sense of vulnerability in Syria because of the transition its regime is going through.

Still, for many Lebanese from various sectarian groups, Syria's heavy-handed political interference and military deployment in Lebanon – although it began before the Israeli occupation – will probably look less tolerable. Damascus must take into consideration increasing discontent in Lebanon about its role there.

It is, however, highly unlikely that calls for a parallel Syrian redeployment from Lebanon would gather the kind of unanimous acceptance greeting the Israeli pull out.

Instead of peace, Syria and her local and regional allies have to face a new security equation. This will be based not on a local, substitute and generally manageable military theatre, as has been the case for decades, but on mutual state-to-state deterrence in which Syria can hardly gain the upper hand. In that way, Barak has somehow integrated southern Lebanon into the regional military equation. In that arena, Israel's formidable arsenal is a better deterrent than it has been against guerrilla warfare in southern Lebanon.

Israel keeps making threats about what might happen if its territory is attacked from Lebanon now it has gone. The aim is to reassure the Israelis themselves – especially those who live in northern Galilee – and to give muscle to a political decision that has not been wholeheartedly accepted in the army's highest ranks.

Still, Syrian forces in Lebanon could now become a target for Israeli attacks. Damascus is apparently aware of this, as a limited redeployment of its troops from Lebanon during April tends to indicate.

The Israeli withdrawal seems unlikely to lead at present to a redrawing of the infamous 'red lines'. Drawn in 1976, they prevent Syrian troops from deploying south of the Awwali river. They also stop Syria using surface to air missiles on Lebanese territory and limit access to Lebanese airspace for its Air Force. These restrictions could only be changed if Lebanon asks for it, Syria wants it and Israel is not opposed.

## IRANIAN INTERESTS

Iran, which has invested a lot in the Lebanese resistance, will also have to adjust. For three years, the various competing factions in Tehran have had few differences on policy in Lebanon. All seemed to agree that Hezbollah deserved and needed Iran's support and that the organisation has given Tehran a substantial return on its investment. It is probably the most positive foreign venture Iran has engaged in under the Islamic regime.

This investment has always had at least a dual objective: to give Iran access to the most strategically sensitive, the least ideologically disputable and the best politically rewarding regional conflict in the Muslim world. It has also legitimised Iran's support for Lebanon's Shi'a.

The first objective will probably have to be scaled back, since Iran's contribution through Hezbollah can hardly be the same after the Israeli withdrawal. Tehran has lost its struggle to be considered an interested party in the Arab-Israeli conflict and in its settlement. This is something Washington had persistently refused to grant.

The second more sectarian objective will become even more appealing. Tehran will naturally try to perpetuate its hold over Hezbollah and to expand the organisation's influence over the Shi'i community as well as overall Shi'i influence in the Lebanese system. In Tehran, such an activist strategy, based on long-term support for Lebanon's Shi'a, sounds legitimate. However, the southern Lebanon file has to be closed.

From an Iranian-Hezbollah perspective, a unilateral withdrawal underlines their role in compelling Israel to 'flee'. This is a precious opportunity for Iran and her Lebanese Shi'i allies and proxies to announce victory and to try to gain political benefit both in Lebanon and the Muslim world.

Who could claim such an undisputedly admirable outcome when it comes to 'facing up to Zionism'? Which Palestinian movement can measure up to Hezbollah whose action, more than anybody else's, has led to victory?

For two decades, Hezbollah has been able to rely upon four sources of strength for the confrontation: a readiness among its followers to die, technological inventiveness, Iranian military and financial help and, possibly more importantly, growing support from the Lebanese. This has extended from the party's own Shi'a partisans to various Muslim and Christian religious and political leaders.

Each of these sources of strength now needs re-evaluation, especially if Israel does not give her adversaries obvious reasons to continue their struggle. Young Shi'is may be less willing to risk their lives now national territory is liberated. Technological adaptability would probably become less effective if Israel builds an electronic Berlin wall along its border with Lebanon, as it apparently intends to.

Continued Iranian support would produce a strong international reaction if Israel is able to convince the world that its withdrawal was in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 425. Lebanese support for resistance would be much harder to maintain if that resolution had indeed been properly implemented.

## UN ON THE LINE

The new situation in southern Lebanon is also a tremendous challenge for the UN. Optimists will claim – not without some reason – that seeing Israel comply with resolution 425, even twenty-two years after it was adopted, can only be good news. It could possibly be a precious precedent on other fronts, such as Syria or Palestine.

It would also be a late but welcome reconciliation with the UN by Israel, which has the UN to thank for its legal existence. Despite this, Israel has spent the last half century ignoring its decisions, denying it any role in the peace process and demeaning its value in international politics.

The stakes are really high for the international body when one considers the serious risk of seeing UN troops withdrawn under fire as in Somalia (1993) or Rwanda (1994) or utterly humiliated as in Bosnia (1995) or presently challenged in Sierra Leone.

In Lebanon UNIFIL, first deployed in 1978, had to passively witness the huge Israeli invasion of 1982 before

**The southern Lebanese village of Haboosh, following an Israeli air raid in May.**





the peace and restore international law. This is probably true of southern Lebanon.

Hence the role of the UN Secretary General's envoy in bringing some consensus among the various parties before the withdrawal is definitely more crucial to UN success than the number of troops deployed afterwards.

Doubling UNIFIL numbers from four thousand to eight thousand troops is reassuring for Kofi Annan in New York as much as for the local population. It carries a vivid message of commitment for the mission's success from the international community. A redrafted UN resolution, strengthening the force mandate, would have the same moral effect.

### LETTER AND SPIRIT

A consensus cannot be reached without complete compliance with the spirit and letter of the UN resolution. This means a withdrawal to the 1923 French-British internationally recognised border, not to some line defined by Israel's military.

It also means ending the frequent Israeli violations of Lebanon's airspace and territorial waters and the dismantling of the SLA. As a sign of good faith, if not a legal obligation, it includes the freeing of Lebanese in the Khiam prison in southern Lebanon and in Israeli jails.

More importantly, although the withdrawal started before the UN had time to formulate

powerlessly suffering a direct attack on its compound in Cana in 1996. A hundred or so civilians who had taken refuge there were killed by Israeli artillery as well as dozens of members of UNIFIL.

In the neighbouring Israeli-Syrian border area, two hundred UN soldiers have operated largely peacefully within UNTSO since 1948. From 1974, a thousand or so have been deployed with UNDOF on the Golan Heights. But these forces have been observers rather than peacekeepers, and therefore have not been challenged by armed groups. In southern Lebanon, peacekeeping has been the mission and the now famous 'Chapter 6 and a half' of the UN Charter is supposedly the reference.

### AGREEMENT NEEDED

A veteran of many UN peacekeeping operations says that when the parties to a conflict have agreed, there is basically no need for soldiers; but when they have not, no amount of UN troops is enough to keep

a plan, Israel must abide by UN directives. Lebanese still remember the nightmarish effects of the sudden Israeli withdrawal from the Shuf mountains in 1984.

Of all actors involved, Lebanon is by far the most interested party and yet the least accounted for. Reactions from Beirut have been less than coherent, some leaders welcoming the anticipated event as a longed for promise at last coming true, others responding as if it were an impending threat to be thwarted. By early May, consensus had been achieved.

Not before time: the UN needed clear answers to its queries, residents of the security zone had to be urgently reassured on their future and the Lebanese people had to be told how its government was going to handle the new situation.

A clear distinction has been made between 'collaborators' and the local civilian population, which had to deal as it could with the occupying power for some twenty years. This must now be acted upon.



The Lebanese government must give a firm commitment to fairness, produce a sincere quest for reconciliation and an inclusive – rather than revenge – approach to all who have been involved in different, and not always proper, ways.

Although the predicament of south Lebanon is part of the larger Arab-Israeli conflict, some of its features reflect sectarian aspects of the Lebanese civil war. No one should be given the opportunity to present their success as a victory over other Lebanese. The Lebanese government must be the ultimate guarantor of civil peace. It should accept the UN's help in avoiding sectarian and partisan revenge and punishment. A long delay in deploying a robust official Lebanese presence in the area could have very negative effects on co-existence.

To what extent are Palestinian refugees in Lebanon directly concerned? The Beirut government is right to remind the world that the occupation was an Israeli response to Palestinian activity in southern Lebanon. It is, therefore, pushing for the repatriation of the two hundred and fifty thousand Palestinian refugees still on its territory.

A settlement of this thorny issue can only start with a recognition by Israel of the law of return for all Palestinians to an independent Palestine, if not to their homes in Israel proper, even if the right is not used by all.

## BEARING THE BRUNT

For thirty-five years, thanks to the Lebanese government's impotence and many Lebanese groups' complacency, southern Lebanon has been a substitute theatre for the Arab-Israeli conflict. There were five classic inter-state wars between 1948 and 1973 before it reverted to low-intensity, localised and more containable violence.

Starting with the deployment of the first Palestinian fedayin in 1965 and more strongly since the beginnings of Islamic resistance in 1982, southern Lebanon has born the brunt of an Arab-Israeli war. The conflict became impossible for Arabs to pursue and undesirable for Israelis.

Low-intensity warfare such as the Palestinian intifada and the Lebanese resistance, demonstrated that violence by organised groups with popular support can make a real difference. It compelled Israel to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organization as an unavoidable partner. This was the price for stopping the Palestinian uprising and withdrawing without glory from Lebanon.

This confinement of the larger conflict in a small area allowed various states to pursue it in Clausewitzian terms 'by other means'. Will diplomacy replace low-intensity warfare as it did the now unlikely inter-state wars? This will very much depend on the actors' will and pressure from international powers. But for southern Lebanon's population – an area I have visited for three decades – the end of their predicament as a substitute for a larger dispute will certainly be a source of a deserved and feverishly longed-for relief. **WT**

## IRAN

Rosemary Hollis, Edmund Herzig and Brigitte Granville

# Bumpy road

In April, Iran entered a particularly bumpy phase in the evolution of its Islamic democracy and we happened to be in Tehran to witness it. We were there along with speakers from Japan for a seminar about comparative economic and cultural responses to globalisation. It was a joint endeavour between Chatham House and the Institute of Political and International Studies in Tehran.



ALL OF US COULD NOT HELP BUT BE CAUGHT UP IN THE atmosphere of tense excitement that overtook the city as a series of events signalled the unfolding of a conservative backlash against the progress of the reformist trend. Court orders for the closure of over a dozen pro-reform newspapers, along with arrests of associated journalists and others, smacked of a deliberate attempt to provoke the reformist camp, which had won a big majority in February's first round of elections to the parliament or Majlis.

As it turned out, the reformists made another strong showing in the second round of run-off elections in May, but these might have been jeopardised had they not exercised restraint in the face of provocation. Our exposure to this volatile political interlude, with the fortunes of different factions shifting daily, taught us the need for caution in leaping to conclusions about the ultimate direction that the Islamic Republic will take.

Having surfaced with the landslide victory of President Mohammed Khatami in 1997, the reformist movement has the support of a majority of young people and women, at least according to the election returns both in 1997 and this year. Since the majority of Iranians are under the age of twenty-five, it would seem that the agenda of youth will eventually triumph. But in the short term; more conservative elements, entrenched within the system, are apparently determined to hold back the pace of change.

President Khatami came to power with a mandate to effect social reform, nurture civil society and uphold the rule of law. He is known as a cautious man, fully aware of the dangers of going too far too fast, for fear of a conservative backlash. Yet in the past year his caution has been so much in evidence that radical reformers have begun to question the strength of his commitment to major structural change.

In the middle of last year, when students demonstrated following the closure of a reformist newspaper, and violence erupted as security forces attacked the students in their dormitories, President Khatami closed ranks with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, himself identified with the conservative faction. The fear of chaos inclined all factions to prevent further trouble from spilling onto the streets, and the subsequent months saw the struggle for power contained within constitutional bounds. This in itself

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