

Routledge Studies in Modern History

1982, LEBANON AND THE ROAD TO WAR

DECISION-MAKING ON THE ROAD TO WAR
AND DURING IT

Yigal Kipnis

Translated into English by Barbara Doron



1982, Lebanon and the Road to War

On June 6, 1982, the Israeli Defense Forces entered Lebanon for what was billed as a relatively limited operation. In reality, the Lebanon War claimed many lives and undermined public trust in decision-makers. Through newly published archival documents, this book explores the events that led to the war and the actions of the people involved.

With the help of documents published in this book for the first time, historian Yigal Kipnis lays out the circumstances of the war, the preparations and discussions leading up to and during it, Israel's convoluted moves against the administration in Washington and against the Lebanese Christians, and above all – the consistent coordination between Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon. The goals of the war were derived from Begin's worldview. Sharon worked to achieve these goals in the military field while Begin operated in the Israeli political field and diplomatically with the United States. To this end, he skillfully, cleverly, and decisively maneuvered between his principles and his obligations as a leader guiding a nation to war and to the political struggle for its justice. However, he was also subject to extreme emotional changes, as revealed by the detailed reports of his behavioral transformations by representatives of the US State Department.

This book will be of interest to researchers of Middle Eastern political history, US-Israeli relations, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as political science and political history.

Yigal Kipnis is a historian who researches the political history of the State of Israel. His books include *The Mountain that was as a Monster: The Golan Between Syria and Israel* (Hebrew); *The Golan Heights: Political History, Settlement and Geography since 1949* (English); *1973: The Road to War* (Hebrew and English); and *1982, Lebanon, The Road to War* (Hebrew).

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Foreword

One morning in August 1983, Prime Minister Menachem Begin entered his office. “Have you read what Yoel Marcus wrote,” he asked government secretary Dan Meridor, who had, as usual, been waiting for him. “Yoel Marcus is right,” Begin added after Meridor had responded that he had read the column. Begin was referring to a column that Marcus had written, arguing that the Prime Minister did not know how to end the pointless fighting in Lebanon.

Begin had attentively read Marcus’s frequent columns in the Haaretz daily newspaper. On Friday, August 26, under the headline, “This government will not fall. It will continue not to exist until it fades away,” sharp criticism had been leveled against Begin and his government. Marcus repeated his appraisals: “a government without a proprietor” and “a government without a head,” and ended by saying, “Imagine how much they did not know or understand when they decided on their actions during the War in Lebanon.”

Two days later, Begin arrived at his office to conduct the weekly meeting of his cabinet. “Yehiel, today it is finished,” he said to his Chief of Staff, Yehiel Kadishai, before the meeting began. The meeting took place as scheduled in advance, but at the end of discussions, Begin surprised his ministers: “I would like to make an announcement ... The reason for my notification is completely personal but I cannot wait any longer with this announcement, and thus, I am notifying you in accordance with the law. Indeed, I request your forgiveness, your pardon and your absolution. Whether I will receive it, I do not know. My dear friends, I hereby announce to the government my intention to resign from my position as prime minister. I can no longer fulfill this position.”

On the following day, Marcus, of course, reacted to Begin’s resignation. “In my opinion, there is an exact date to the beginning of the end,” he wrote. “It began on 6 June 1982 with the start of the War in Lebanon. From week to week the deterioration progressed until it reached full maturation.” He added that

at a certain stage – unfortunately, too late – most of the ministers had understood that, under camouflage of the slogan, ‘There will be no moves that have not been approved by the government,’ they had followed blindly. We may assume that Begin had understood even before them that he had fallen into a trap, as only he really knew what had been said privately in his conversations with the Defense Minister, and what he had understood about the need for the war and its possible results. But the scenario (of the war) as it developed was certainly not the scenario that Begin had been led to believe.

Had Begin really succumbed to temptation? What did and didn't he know? These questions had already been raised during the war itself, which had first been called the "Operation Peace for the Galilee," and then, the "War in Lebanon," and finally, the "First War in Lebanon." They have been asked and investigated ever since. In the meantime, relations between Begin and his Defense Minister Ariel Sharon have been tested in a court case. "I spoke the truth," journalist Uzi Ben-Ziman could declare, after the court had ruled that his argument that "Begin was aware that Sharon tricked him during the War in Lebanon" was correct. But historical truth is much more complex than what was discussed in the legal proceedings. This book tries to reveal this complexity.

"Your book is a rare example of writing that appeared a short time after the events and is based upon reliable and comprehensive information. Would it be possible to deepen the research of these events?" I asked Ehud Yaari, who had co-authored *Israel's Lebanon War*. "There certainly is," Yaari replied without hesitation. Indeed, the 40 years that have elapsed have enabled the research appearing in this book to be based on a large quantity of documents which had still been closed to the public in Israeli and American archives and to integrate this extensive documentation with other sources. The resulting depiction, seen from the distance of time, not only reconstructs events more fully and accurately, but its conclusions also reestablish and update narratives. In this way, a broad foundation serves to investigate national decision-making and the mutual relations between decision-makers and the professional, military, and political systems, and to enable a focused examination of these issues during the war in Lebanon and of the relations between Prime Minister Begin and Defense Minister Arik Sharon. The reader is invited to conduct a personal inquiry on the basis of the findings of the book and to make use of them in the public discussion.

On Friday, June 4, 1982, during the late morning hours, a number of Air Force teams were called to report to a briefing for a routine mission of attack in Lebanon. They did not know that the heavy bombing which would be released at 3:15 pm on the stadium galleries in southern Beirut would herald the breakout of war two days later. For more than a year, Israel had been planning this war, which had been termed the Oranim Program. Every level of army command, fighters and soldiers, had been prepared for the plan and in the months that preceded its initiation, the army had been stretched to the breaking point readiness.

The scenario for the incipient war had been planned in advance. Since the ceasefire of 24 July 1981, officially agreed upon by Israel and Lebanon, but practically, between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the PLO had avoided firing on northern Israeli settlements. In Israel, it was thought that attacks on targets in Beirut would force Arafat to end his policy of restraint and would grant Israel the catalyst to activate its war plans. Thus, for a half year before being attacked, the Beirut stadium had been marked as a target that would set Israel's plan in motion.

Israeli cabinet members were aware of the scenario for the coming war. When they met on the morning of that Friday, they were informed of the significance of an attack on targets in Lebanon. Those who opposed any irregular step which was

not a direct attack on PLO forces in southern Lebanon knew that they were conducting a losing battle against Begin, Sharon, Foreign Minister Yitzchak Shamir, and the military Commander-in-Chief, Raphael (Rafal) Eitan.

The Commander-in-Chief and the Defense Minister had wanted to initiate the war much earlier, before the completion of the evacuation of Jewish settlements from Sinai. Until the end of April 1982, Begin had succeeded in standing up to the pressure imposed by the two. He had wanted to avoid endangering the peace agreement with Egypt, which had also anchored the prevention of the establishment of a Palestinian state. He knew as well that the American government would oppose any wide-ranging aggressive step by Israel in Lebanon, especially during the period when the peace treaty was being implemented. When the evacuation had been completed, the obstacles would be removed and Israel would only have to wait for a catalyst. Mid-summer 1982 was decided upon as the final point for starting the war. This was when the presidential elections in Lebanon were to take place – elections which, thanks to prior arrangement with Israel and with its help, would lead to the appointment of Bashir Gemayel as president.

Begin took care to update the American government. “We do not want to take you by surprise,” he wrote to President Reagan about two weeks before the war began, “... We do not want the United States to get involved in our decision about a military operation, which may become absolutely inevitable, lest some countries accuse you of what they usually term ‘collusion’ with Israel.” He also did not hide from the Americans, even if in convoluted terminology, that the operation would be taking place in the coming days. “Our case will be presented to you and to your advisers by our defense minister, Mr. Sharon ... I do not know what may be done by the terrorists to our people during the next three days, until he returns here, namely, on Thursday night. But surely nobody can foresee the developments during the following three weeks.” The letter reached the president on May 25. Sharon was in Washington at the time, and on that day, he was presenting the planned operation to the Secretary of State.

Upon his return to Israel, the Military Operations Branch announced urgently that the code name of the operation would be changed from Oranim to Peace for the Galilee and the army was placed on alert for 72 hours, until the outbreak of war. The Chief of Staff called for an evaluation of the situation and issued an update about the intention to carry out a series of “quiet and secret” actions which would lead the PLO to respond, and as a reaction to their reaction, “there would be massive action by the air force, not against civilians and not in Beirut. In due course – ‘Oranim.’”

The attack on Israeli Ambassador to Britain, Shlomo Argov, in London made the planned quiet and secret actions against the PLO unnecessary. Israel had its motive. But the timing of the attack against Argov preceded the schedule planned for the outbreak of war by two days. Thus, Israel attacked with improvised activity. “We had been planning Oranim for ten months and we had come to conclusions about how to do it, and in the end, we did it differently,” said Brigadier General Uri Saguy, head of the Operations Directorate, in frustration, on the morning of June 5, 1982. His role had been to translate the war objectives into a combat plan.

Begin had not given in to temptation. The four objectives of the war were congruent with his worldview. Peace for the Galilee and responding to the security threat posed by the PLO to the northern settlements was only one of his motivations. So that “there would not be a Treblinka [Concentration Camp],” he aimed to eliminate the military infrastructure of the PLO and its headquarters in Lebanon, and primarily in Beirut, which had served as a basis for terror attacks against Israel and against Jewish targets throughout the world. In order to remove the threat to Israeli control of all the territory on the West Bank, he wanted to eradicate PLO political activity, which was aimed at creating a Palestinian state. “We will reach Beirut and catch the ‘bearded one’, and his sentence will be like that of Eichmann,” as Begin explained his goal of capturing Arafat. Two additional goals were integrated: The appointment of Bashir Gemayel as a friendly president who would sign a peace agreement with Israel could not be accomplished while the Syrians were present in Lebanon and, in order to distance their forces, the Israeli Defense Force would have to reach Beirut and the Beirut-Damascus road.

Begin and Sharon were in full agreement about the objectives of the war. Begin was well aware of the shortcomings of his colleague, as well as Sharon’s virtues. He had not appointed Sharon as Defense Minister after the resignation of Ezer Weizman in May 1980, at a time when implementation of the peace agreement with Egypt was still far away, but he did not hesitate to choose Sharon when it was clear to everyone that Israel was preparing for war. In his appointment calendar of 1981, the number of personal meetings with Sharon, starting from July 1981, was striking. A few days before he had appointed him, Begin heard his position at a meeting of the cabinet: “Our objective must be the elimination of terror from Lebanon as a basis for terror activity in Israel and the destruction of the terror organizations in Lebanon, or their elimination as a political base.”

Their objectives were much more far-reaching than those that the government was willing to approve when Begin brought them up, and more extreme than the opposition, under Shimon Peres, Yitzchak Rabin, and Chaim Bar-Lev, was ready to support. Begin was surprised at the number of reservations raised when the Oranim program was presented to the ministers on December 20, 1981. A half year later, on June 5, at a special cabinet meeting, meeting at his home, Begin stated, “War – everyone knows how it begins, but no one knows how it ends. But I’m telling you that nothing will be done without a decision by the government.” He kept this promise. Perhaps Begin hoped that the war would be limited, that it would end after two days and its objectives would be fulfilled as a political process which would be conducted later. However, he also appears to have taken into account that an act that began with setting common goals for him and Sharon would end in unfolding war moves that he would have to bring for government approval, and that the members of the cabinet would find it hard to oppose. You must “be ready for the maximum,” he told them on the eve of the war.

Conducting a war as a progressive process was also necessary for political reasons. This made it possible to present the action to the American government and to international public opinion as a limited operation and to deflect pressure against

the continued fighting. It was also possible to camouflage the preparations for a conflict with Syria and, for the sake of appearances, to demonstrate that Israel was only reacting on the spot to the catalyst for which it had gone to war in the first place. Even from the beginning of the fighting, this created an obvious gap between decisions and the objectives and plans to achieve them, and the way these were carried out. The discontent and criticism of this went beyond the political system.

We may agree with Begin about his aims for the war or criticize them. His conduct during different periods may also be examined and criticized. However, from new and fascinating archival documentation, it becomes clear that Begin well knew how to maneuver between his principles and his devotion to due process in decision-making and had the measure of sophistication demanded from a leader directing the nation into military and political action. He overcame obstacles and those who caused them and stood in his way, in order to implement the peace agreement with Egypt, and completed that objective before going to war in Lebanon. Begin was attentive to others but was alone in his perspective of the decisive and complete picture. He valued the highest echelons of the army but did not hesitate to act in contradiction to their positions or to their advice. He created a “kitchen cabinet” for decision-making, including Arik Sharon, Yitzchak Shamir, and the army Chief of Staff, but made decisions alone, and knew how to obtain approval for them from his government.

With the decision to initiate the Peace for the Galilee operation, the Israeli government tasked the army with “removing all of the Galilee settlements from the range of terrorists whose military headquarters and bases were concentrated in southern Lebanon.” In a short time, this decision led to the approval of an “addition decision” – for steps required to fulfill that government objective, including the possibility to achieve supplementary objectives. The government approved the continuing advance of the army in the direction of the Beirut-Damascus road, the encounter with the Syrians, and the attack on their missile batteries in the Beqaa Valley. It approved the proclamation of a ceasefire on June 11 and then, a continuation of the fighting – completing the “crawl” toward the Beirut-Damascus road, reaching Beirut, encircling the west of the city, and crushing the area under PLO control. After the murder of Bashir Gemayel, it approved, although retroactively, Begin’s and Sharon’s directive to conquer all of Beirut, and even approved the entry of the Christian militia into the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila.

Begin was also adept in his conduct toward the American government. He succeeded in supplying the Israeli army with the necessary time to achieve their military objectives: control of the Beirut-Damascus road, preventing the Syrians from moving into the “forty kilometer” range from the Israeli border, occupying eastern Beirut, and encircling the west of the city, and later – ejecting the PLO from Lebanon.

“The story of Lebanon is not the Mossad. The ones who pushed for it were Rafal and me. For good and for bad.” That’s what I was told by Avigdor (Yanush) Ben Gal, head of Northern Command from 1978 to 1981. He was repudiating the claim that it was the Mossad that had led the country into the War in Lebanon. Yanush was right. The Mossad did not encourage cooperation with the Christians.

The army Chief of Staff and Ben-Gal viewed a wide-ranging operation in Lebanon against the PLO as the solution to a security problem that had to be dealt with. They considered the Christians as “an asset,” as explained by Yanush. More than wanting to aid the Christians, they wanted to take advantage of their assistance as an excuse to initiate a military step that would enable the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to operate.

Like the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, the head of the Mossad, Yitzchak (Haka) Hofi, consistently opposed these measures. His deputy, Nahum Admoni, supported the relationship with the Christians, and the lower officers were likewise split. In practice, the Mossad fulfilled the role of maintaining the relationship. It appears that, to a great extent, the narrative asserting that “the story of Lebanon belongs to the Mossad” took hold due to the activity of David (Dave) Kimchi, the head of the *Tevel* division of the Mossad, who was a central figure in the establishing and continuing relations between Israel and the Lebanese Christians. Due to his activity in this context, Hofi distanced Dave from the Mossad about two years before the war. Kimchi was immediately “adopted” Foreign Minister Yitzchak Shamir, who appointed him director-general of his office, and he continued to influence the relationship between Israel and the Christians. Begin and Haka were aware that, at time, messages were passed on to the Christians not as Begin had requested, but rather, in “the English of the Mossad,” as Begin termed it.

Begin also had twilight moments. The Americans were aware of the fluctuations in his mood, and American Ambassador Sam Lewis, who frequently met and spoke with the Prime Minister, often referred to this in his reports. Lewis updated information about whether Begin was despondent and apathetic, or alternatively, was in good “psychosomatic health,” and then he is “... working 19 hour days without interruption. At political gatherings Begin exhibit[s] all of his old renowned talent for heavy-handed sarcastic humor and political theater,” or in other words, “he is without equal as a political polemicist.”

Begin’s handling of the events in the spring of 1981 – the Zahleh Crisis and the Missile Crisis – confirms and illustrates Lewis’s impression. Begin, then also the Minister of Defense, was first required to decide whether to keep his promise to aid the Christians and activate the air force in Zahleh against the Syrians and later – whether to attack the missile batteries the Syrians had placed in the Bekaa Valley. Here again Begin had to maneuver, this time between the calls of the Christians for help, and support for them voiced by Yanosh and Raful, the army Chief of Staff, and the opposition of the heads of military intelligence and the Mossad. Although he felt empathy for the cries of distress from Israel’s allies, Begin chose to exercise restraint. Maintaining the peace agreement with Egypt was only one reason for this. The other reason was more important and secret: He feared that an attack on the Syrians in Lebanon would not enable Israel to carry out its incipient operation to destroy the nuclear reactor in Iraq.

The pressure exerted by the American administration to prevent escalation aided Begin. He could present his restraint as a gesture to the United States and he made sure to maximize the credit he was given. Thus, taking advantage of American special envoy Philip Habib's mission, he could justify the continuation of restraint against the Syrians, first until the destruction of the reactor on June 7, 1981, and then until implementation of the peace agreement with Egypt.

The story of the road to war in war in Lebanon was meant to end on the day it began. However, the documentation regarding political conduct and subsequent decision-making has provided clear answers to questions that had remained not completely resolved. Thus, the third part of the book focuses on political events and decisions in the period from the beginning of the war until mid-September 1982, with the completion of the occupation of Beirut. Sharon and Begin led the IDF to Beirut to eliminate Arafat, to severely damage the military infrastructure of the PLO, to distance the Syrians from Lebanon, and to crown Bashir Gemayel as a president who would collaborate with the Israelis. After 11 weeks of battle, PLO fighters, led by Arafat, were evacuated from Lebanon in accord with an agreement that was formulated by Philip Habib.

On August 23, 1982, a week before the evacuation had been completed, Bashir Gemayel was appointed president of Lebanon, under the protection of IDF soldiers. He was slated to begin his term of office a month later. Begin and Sharon informed him of two tasks they wished to be carried out immediately: signing a peace agreement with Israel and completing the Israeli military plan to occupy western Beirut. The first of Begin's demands was utterly rejected by Bashir at first. The second was agreed to after Sharon, with the acquiescence of Begin and the support of Shamir, promised to broaden IDF action against the Syrians and to enable the new government to control the entire state, including Southern Lebanon and the area then under control of the Syrians. It was then agreed to appoint a team including both sides to discuss a peace agreement.

On September 14, less than 40 hours after this agreement, Bashir was murdered by the Syrians. Begin and Sharon were left with no partner for understandings, and the Israeli army was immediately commanded, without the approval of the government, to gain control of Western Beirut. On the following day, Begin updated the Americans about this move. "We never said we wouldn't go in even if Bashir was assassinated and whole situation in Lebanon was changed." Ambassador Arens was responding to the complaint that Israel had led the Americans astray, according to the protocol of the discussion, written by envoy Benjamin Netanyahu.

Entry into the refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, by the Phalange was permitted by the Israel Defense Forces with the approval of the Minister of Defense. The government was informed but did not see fit to put a halt to the move. The massacre of camp residents, most of them women and children, horrified the world as well as Israeli society. A State Commission of Inquiry was demanded to investigate the circumstances of the slaughter. Sharon was removed from his post in accord with

commission's recommendations. Begin remained in place. A state commission to examine Israel's conduct throughout the war in Lebanon was never established.

From the beginning, Begin had never ignored what was going on throughout the war. "It is clear to me that there will be loss of life," he admitted to government ministers the night before the invasion of Lebanon and even displayed awareness of the price and the reason that it had to be paid: "More homes, heaven forbid, will be in mourning. However, we belong to a generation that has also proven its readiness for self-sacrifice. When we must defend the nation of Israel, there is no other way." Afterwards, he added, "I assume that I do not have to educate the Chief of Staff that we must hope that these [losses] will be minimal." On the other hand, it appears that he did not take into account the extent to which the events of the war and how it was viewed would affect him, Israeli society, and international public opinion.

The war had no end. For 18 years, Israel soldiers remained in Lebanon to maintain "peace in Galilee." In time, this turned into battling the Shiites of the Hezbollah organization, which was operating with Syrian support and the increasing intervention of Iran. The price of this war was paid by many. And by its leaders, as well.

Dramatis Personae

Israel

Menachem Begin	Prime Minister of Israel
Ariel Sharon	Defense Minister starting from August 1981
Yitzchak Shamir	Foreign Minister starting from March 1980
Rafael Eitan (Raful)	Army Chief of Staff
Yehoshua Sagi	Head of Military Intelligence
David Ivry	Commander of the Air Force
Avigdor Ben-Gal (Yanush)	Head of Northern Command until September 1981, Commander of Battalion 446 during the war
Yitzhak Hofi (Haka)	Head of the Mossad until September 1982
Nahum Admoni	Deputy Head of the Mossad until September 1982
Dave Kimchi	Head of the Tevel Branch of the Mossad until the spring of 1981 Director-General of the Foreign Ministry from summer 1981
Nahik Navot	Head of the Tevel Branch of the Mossad from spring 1981
Hanan Bar-On	Deputy Director-General of the Foreign Ministry
Oded Shamir	Adjutant to Defense Minister Sharon
Efraim Poran	Prime Minister's military secretary until October 1981
Azriel Nevo	Prime Minister's military secretary from October 1981

The United States

Ronald Reagan	President of the United States from January 1981
Alexander Haig	Secretary of State from January 1981 to June 1982
George Shultz	Secretary of State from July 1982
Sam Lewis	United States Ambassador to Israel 1977–1983
Philip Habib	Special envoy to the Middle East from may 1981
Morris Draper	Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East and Habib's right-hand man
Nick Veliotis	Assistant Secretary of State for Middle Eastern Affairs
William Brown	Deputy Chief of Mission to Israel 1979–1982
Gunther Dean	United States Ambassador to Lebanon until June 1981
Robert Dillon	United States Ambassador to Lebanon from June 1981
William Seelye	United States Ambassador to Syria until August 1981
Robert Paganelli	United States Ambassador to Syria from September 1981

Lebanon

Camille Chamoun	Christian	President of Lebanon 1952–1958, Head of the National Liberal Party
Dany Chamoun	Christian	Camille Chamoun's son and Commander of the Tigers militia
Pierre Gemayel	Christian	Leader of the Kataeb Party
Bashir Gemayel	Christian	Pierre's son, leader of the Phalanges
Amine Gemayel	Christian	Pierre's son, President of Lebanon from October 1982
Fadi Frem	Christian	Assistant to Bashir, replaced him as leader of the Phalanges
Suleiman Frangieh	Christian	President of Lebanon 1970–1976, head of the Maronite militia, the Marada Brigade
Tony Frangieh	Christian	Suleiman's son, assassinated, summer 1979
Elias Sarkis	Christian	President of Lebanon from 1976 until October 1982
Karim Pakradouni	Christian	President Sarkis's advisor
Fouad Boutros	Christian	Foreign Minister during Sarkis's term of office
Shafik Wazzan	Muslim	Prime Minister during Sarkis's term of office
Johnny Abdo	Christian	Head of Intelligence
Walid Jumblatt	Druze	Leader of the Druze and head of the Progressive Party. Inherited the position of his father, Kamal Jumblatt, who was assassinated by the Syrians in 1977
Saad Hadad	Christian	Head of the Christian militia in South Lebanon

Palestinians

Yasir Arafat	Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)
Faruq Qaddumi	Spokesman for the PLO
Ahmed Jibril	Head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command
George Habash	Head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
Abu Nidal	Head of the organization that bears his name.

Syria

Hafez al-Assad	President of Syria
Mustafa Tlass	Syrian Minister of Defense
Rifaat al-Assad	Brother and right-hand man of the President
Abdul Halim Khaddam	Syrian Foreign Minister
Hikmat Shihabi	Army Chief of Staff
Nasser Qaddour	Deputy Foreign Minister

Egypt

Anwar Sadat
Husni Mubarak
Boutros Ghali

President of Egypt until October 1981
President of Egypt from October 1981
Egyptian Foreign Minister



Division of Control Areas in Lebanon, 1982

Source: The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Box 37.



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Introduction

The Roots of the War in Lebanon

Why did Israel attack Lebanon in June, 1982 and occupy the southern half of the country as well as the capital, Beirut? Why act against a state which had distanced itself from the war in May 1948, had not taken part in the Six-Day War, and had not participated in the Yom Kippur War? The answer is complex, but most, if not all of the reason, can be attributed to Lebanon's weakness.

In 1922, France was awarded the mandate to control Syria and Lebanon by the League of Nations, and "Greater Lebanon" was established. The state was composed of regions that, except for the geographical proximity between them, differed greatly. By separating Lebanon from Syria, France established a political entity that was loosely filled with religious, ethnic, and later also various ideological and political groups, which created a constant threat to its social fabric and to the central government's ability to function and to rule. This weakness invited external intervention in Lebanese affairs and turned the state into a scene of clashes between foreign forces and conflict between superpowers. Syrian intervention was most prominent, but, through the years, Israel has also played its part.

In 1932, after conflicts between the various groups in the country, the French High Commissioner was forced to dissolve the parliament. Years later, in March 1943, parliamentary activity was renewed on the basis of a National Pact, which divided political power between Christians and Muslims. The pact determined that seats in the new National Assembly would be divided on the basis of a ratio of 5:6. In other words, out of every 11 seats, 6 would go to Christians and 5 to Muslims and Druze. The president of the state would always be Christian, and the Prime Minister would be a Sunni Muslim. The speaker of the National Assembly would be a Shiite Muslim, the defense minister would be Druze, and the commander of the army would be Christian.¹ A few months later, on 22 November 1943, Lebanon became an independent state which was defined in the National Pact as part of the Arab world.

In 1948 Palestinian refugees were added to the fragile sectarian mosaic of Lebanon, which intensified its complexity and the internal Lebanese political disputes. A decade later, in March 1958, a civil war erupted between the Christians, supporters of President Camille Chamoun, and the Muslims. The United States viewed the war as an extension of the superpower conflict and sent a contingent of marines to Lebanon. This intervention led to the end of the war in September 1958.

2 1982, Lebanon and the Road to War

The failure of the military struggle by the Arab states against Israel in June 1967 intensified the force of the popular struggle against the Jewish state. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) fulfilled a central role and exploited Lebanon to conduct terror activity against Israel and Israeli and Jewish targets throughout the world. In 1969, the Arab League imposed the Cairo Agreement on Lebanon, forcing the country to give the Palestinians freedom of organization, and civil and military freedom of action. Under this agreement, the PLO established a “state within a state,” a legitimate basis in the struggle against Israel, thus severely damaging Lebanon’s sovereignty.

The events of 1970 in Jordan – “Black September” – led to the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan, and left Lebanon as the most important and almost exclusive location for the national, military, and political struggle of the Palestinians. Most of the PLO members moved to Lebanon, settled in the refugee camps in Beirut and south of it and took control of the area in the southeast – which earned the nickname “Fatahland.” PLO headquarters in Beirut initiated attacks on Israeli territory and around the world. Passenger planes were hijacked with the demand to release Palestinian prisoners. Israel reacted with military attacks on Lebanese soil as punishment, intimidation, and deterrence.

In April 1975, the spark of another civil war was ignited in Beirut, this time between the Christians and the Palestinians, along with leftwing groups allied with the PLO. This war was characterized by massacres of civilian populations on both sides. It led to the disintegration of Lebanese society, dismantling the central government and exposing the country to even more intervention of external parties.

The plight of the Christians caused them to request help from Israel. The first to contact Israel were supporters of the former president, Camille Chamoun, in June 1975. In March 1976, two more groups turned to Israel: the Christian population in southern Lebanon and the militia of the Gemayel family – the Phalange. Israel supplied the Christians in Southern Lebanon with economic aid and help with civil services as well as initiating military cooperation with Christian forces of the South Lebanon Army, commanded by Saad Haddad. Aid to the Christians in the north was more limited, considering the decision by Prime Minister Rabin that Israel would help the Christians to help themselves. So Israeli assistance was limited to war materials rather than aid with the actual fighting. Yigal Allon, Rabin’s deputy and Foreign Minister, clarified Israeli considerations as follows.

“Israel will not intervene in Lebanon I have no doubt that if they (the Christians) assumed that in a certain situation we would come to their aid, they would have created such a situation on purpose and would have wished to drag us into war ... And I have no doubt that if anything like this had developed, we would have found ourselves stuck in some kind of Vietnam, and perhaps even provoked a total war.”²

Added to the difficulties faced by the Christians was the US fear of victory by the PLO and the leftwing camp, due to their links to the Soviet Union. Syria took advantage of all aspects of the situation. In response to the request by the Christians, Syrian forces entered Lebanon to protect them. This military aid was later taken under the aegis of the Arab League as an “Arab deterrent force,” which was

actually almost entirely a Syrian force. The Syrians also responded to the request of the United States and through its mediation reached an understanding with Israel on a “red line” that would demarcate and define the control of each of the two countries in Lebanon. These two moves led to the end of the civil war in Lebanon in October 1976, but soon tensions arose between the Christians and their Syrian saviors. This was the situation faced by Elias Sarkis, who was beginning his term as president, a position he held until October 1982.

In May 1977, parallel to the period of Christian unrest against the Syrians, a political upheaval took place in Israel and the rightwing Begin government replaced the Rabin government. From the beginning of his career as Prime Minister, Begin presented dissimilar conceptions and viewpoints and thus took a different line of action vis-à-vis the Syrian presence in Lebanon. On July 8, 1977, immediately after the establishment of the new government, he told the US ambassador in Israel: “I understand that the United States supports President Sarkis and the Syrian presence in Lebanon. Israel also supports Sarkis, but the Syrian presence in Lebanon is another matter.”³ However, as a result of Egyptian President Sadat’s dramatic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the beginning of the peace process between Israel and Egypt, Israel’s assistance to the Christians against the Syrians was affected by the aspiration not to harm the historical developments that were taking place.

The PLO had the opposite goal. The organization tried to harm the peace process in any way possible and increased its operations from Lebanon against Israel. Israel was quick to respond to one harrowing event, a terrorist hijacking of a bus traveling on the coastal road in March 1978, during which its occupants, 38 Israelis, including 13 children, were murdered. Israel hurried to react. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched Operation Litani, occupied an area in Southern Lebanon up to the Litani River, and held it for about three months during which it destroyed the PLO military infrastructure. Syria complied with the Memorandum of Understanding with Israel and did not intervene in the fighting in Southern Lebanon.

During those months, disputes between the Christian groups in Lebanon increased and escalated into severe violence. During the conflicts Bashir Gemayel solidified his status as the top Christian leader in the country. He and Israel shared the same interests: the elimination of the Syrians and the PLO from Lebanon. As a result, the cooperation between the parties grew stronger and became integrated into Israel’s path to war.

Notes

- 1 For details: Zisser, also Rabinovich & Zamir. Regarding the division of representation: It was based on the results of the population census of 1932 which found that Christians made up a small majority of the population of “Greater Lebanon.” In 1989, according to the Taif Agreement, there were changes made in the governmental division. Most importantly, the Prime Minister was to be appointed by the parliament.
- 2 ISA, Aleph-5001/21.
- 3 Telegram from Ambassador Lewis to the Secretary of State regarding Prime Minister Begin’s views on Lebanon, Tel Aviv 4995, July 9, 1977; also US State Department 160080, NA, July 9, 1977.



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Part I

August 1978–July 1981

Crises



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1 Israel's Master Plan and Bashir's Master Plan

In the early evening hours of August 22, 1978, an Israeli Air Force Ch-53 helicopter landed in Jounieh, a Christian port town north of Beirut. The rear door of the helicopter opened and Camille Chamoun, a former president of Lebanon and one of the important Lebanese Christians leaders, was swallowed up into the belly of the helicopter. His destination was Jerusalem, where Chamoun was set to meet with Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, Defense Minister Ezer Weizman, and the new Army Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan. Until then, communication between Israel and Chamoun and his colleagues had been arranged by sea. Now, for the first time, Chamoun was being transported by air.

Chamoun had good reason to come to Jerusalem. Two years after the Christians had invited the Syrians to enter the country to assist them in fighting the Palestinians and help to end the civil war, the Christians were now waging fierce battles against the “Syrian guests” in Beirut, attempting to expel them. When Chamoun returned, the 78-year-old politician summarized the meeting in his diary: “In a challenge to the warnings of the Americans and their threats [to Israel, not to help the Christians]¹, Begin and his associates have decided to support us as much as they can without limits, and with no addition of political or other conditions.”²

Begin had actually promised that the air force would help the Christians in Lebanon if they were attacked by the Syrian Air Force, but he had chosen not to reveal this decision.³ At that time, the peace process between Israel and Egypt was entering a crucial stage, and the Prime Minister did not want to endanger negotiations. Therefore, he avoided confrontation and chose rather to threaten: He provided a leak to the media. “Urgent night consultation at Begin’s home about the situation in Lebanon. Fear of a Syrian attack.” In addition, based on a news item in a foreign newspaper: “The mysterious guest – Camille Chamoun.”⁴ Although ultimately Israel did not act, Begin’s commitment remained in effect and marked a turning point in Israel’s path to the Lebanon War. This commitment changed the previous Rabin government’s policy toward aid to the Christians in Lebanon, which had been based on helping the Christians act on their own against the Palestinians and the Syrians, assisting with weapons and training, but avoiding intervention by Israeli military forces.

Begin's Troubles

On March 26, 1979, the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt was signed in Washington and changed political realities in the Middle East. These new circumstances did not please Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), two central players in what was occurring in the region in general and in Lebanon in particular. "We should expect an increase in terrorist activity against Israel following the signing of the peace treaty,"⁵ the Chief of Staff shared the assessments of the security establishment with the public.

The assessments were accurate. About three weeks later, a PLO band of terrorists landed on a beach in Nahariya, a city ten kilometers south of the Israel-Lebanon border. They murdered police officer Eliyahu Shahar, and Danny Haran and his daughter, while Haran's younger daughter was killed while hiding with her mother. Israel responded the following day. "In an extensive IDF operation at sea and in the air ... terrorist networks in Lebanon were hit. [In addition,] Israeli divers sank a weapons ship in Sidon."⁶ Army Chief of Staff Eitan and the head of Northern Command, Avigdor (Yanush) Ben Gal, sought to establish a policy of deterrence and prevention by attacking PLO targets, rather than just responding to every terrorist act. As a result, air force planes attacked southern Lebanon again and again, sometimes day after day. The inhabitants reacted by fleeing north, to the Beirut area.⁷ "Israel is determined to strike the PLO murderers anytime, anywhere, with all [of] Israel's power,"⁸ Begin explained the change of policy to American ambassador, Sam Lewis.

A few months later, the Chief of Staff, in a holiday interview for Rosh Hashana, the new year according to the Jewish calendar, reported that "the IDF had conducted more than 1,000 preventive operations against terrorists in the Lebanon sector alone."⁹ Israel had also hit the PLO indirectly, with the support of the Christian militia active in southern Lebanon, under the command of Saad Hadad.

At the same time, in discussions at the headquarters of the Minister of Defense and the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), a policy began to take shape determining that the response to PLO threats and its military and political activities would be carried out in an extensive military operation in Lebanon. Four goals were defined for the operation:

- Crushing the political infrastructure of the PLO
- Crushing the organization's military infrastructure
- Ejecting the Syrians from Lebanon
- Establishing a Lebanese government sympathetic to Israel

The main objective, as Defense Minister Weizman expressed Israeli priorities, "should be crushing the existence of the terrorists in southern Lebanon and its coastal area by a military operation along the coast, in the area between Ras Beida, a town near the Israel-Lebanon border, and Beirut." The secondary goals were: "We must attempt to connect the northern Christian enclave (from Beirut and to the north) with the southern region along the coast and to try to bring about the

establishment of a government favorable to Israel.”¹⁰ And what about the Syrians? At this stage we should accept their presence in Lebanon until a more wide-ranging operation can be carried out.

American Ambassador Lewis viewed things differently. “Over the course of the late spring and summer, a generally accepted – although in many ways imperfect and undesirable – status quo has come into existence,” he wrote to Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance. He added that the situation was not, of course, what they had hoped would take shape in the aftermath of Operation Litani. It was, however, a reality and provided a tenuously stable base point from which their efforts could proceed to help Lebanon achieve a better solution. Only on the margins of his report did the ambassador indicate that considering the main problem, the continued expansion of PLO power in UNIFIL territory, Israel would not be able to accept this situation for long.¹¹

In order to “proceed with their efforts,” veteran diplomat Philip Habib was called to Washington. “The former senior American Undersecretary of State until his retirement a year ago for health reasons, has been sent on a mission by the American Secretary of State to attempt to achieve a permanent ceasefire in Lebanon,” reported the top headline in the daily *Davar* on October 17, 1979. “In addition to his visits to Lebanon, Syria and Saudi Arabia, he will apparently also visit Israel.”¹² Before leaving for the region, Habib met with Israel’s ambassador in Washington, Ephraim Evron, and with the assistance of the heads of the State Department, he prepared Israel for the fact that the purpose of his mission was to establish a ceasefire in Lebanon.¹³ A few days later, Habib met in Washington with one of the Lebanese Christian leaders.¹⁴ On October 24, he landed in Beirut, where he explained to President Elias Sarkis that he had come to listen and learn, not to make proposals.¹⁵

The Americans did not have any real proposals. What was termed “an initiative” was nothing more than an attempt to convince the parties involved in the fighting to decrease their use of heavy weaponry and enable the Lebanese army to be strengthened. “The first step will be to allow the LAF [Lebanese Armed Forces] to move into Tyre (and perhaps Nabatiyyah) and begin to establish a zone of peace,” Habib reported to Washington. “Arafat is also on record as supporting the deployment.” Begin did not hide his skepticism when meeting the American envoy in Jerusalem on October 28.¹⁶ “Wait and see” and “Go ahead and show me,” he told Habib.

Sixty-six-year-old Begin had other troubles. Three months previously, on July 19, he had suffered a stroke and had been hospitalized at Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital. For about three weeks it was difficult for him to carry out his responsibilities. “The Prime Minister has amazingly recovered and is functioning well,” his deputy, Minister Simcha Ehrlich, said¹⁷ in September, but the American ambassador felt differently. “In recent meetings, Begin has seemed depressed,” Lewis reported. “He has rarely spoken and has left it to others, and especially to Weizman, to present the Israeli arguments to his American interlocutors.”¹⁸ It may be assumed that the Prime Minister’s melancholy mood was added to by the consumer price index data for that month: An increase of 8.38 percent was recorded in the cost of living.

A few weeks later, the first fissure appeared in Begin's government. On October 21, Foreign Minister Dayan announced his resignation and it took five months for Begin to appoint Yitzhak Shamir as Dayan's replacement. At the same time, tensions between him and Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon were increasing. "Begin to Sharon: 'Shut up, now I'm talking,'" one of the newspapers announced. "You sound like like an opponent of the government."¹⁹ Added to this were frictions with the coalition partners Dash (The Democratic Movement for Change) and the Mafdal (National Religious Party), and a poll that indicated "62 mandates (Knesset seats) for the Alignment, 26 for the Likud."²⁰ On May 26, Defense Minister Weizman resigned, leading to a wave of resignation threats from other members of the government. Sharon's wish to step into Weizman's shoes engendered strong opposition from Begin and Shamir. Sharon "doesn't know how to control himself,"²¹ reasoned the Prime Minister. These political difficulties forced Begin, who lacked the necessary experience to supervise military moves, to take the position of Minister of Defense upon himself.

The reason for this turbulence lay in the discussions with Egypt about the implementation of the peace agreement – Israel's main preoccupation in the political arena at the time. Begin was a politician with a solid, orderly, and clear ideology, and he knew how to well define his goals and his priorities in order to achieve his objectives. The peace agreement with Egypt served a central objective in his worldview: Israel's continued control over the territories comprising the Land of Israel, in accord with the international border of the British Mandate. Accordingly, Begin had no ideological objection to giving up both Sinai and the Golan, one of the key components of the agreement. As long as there was no peace agreement with Egypt and Syria, these areas served Israel's security, as he saw it, while in times of peace they could be returned. But that was not the only important detail for him in the agreement.

Begin viewed the idea of autonomy for Palestinians as a way to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria or the return of these areas to Jordanian control. Like Henry Kissinger in 1973, he understood what Golda Meir had not bothered to consider – that in order to advance toward peace, Anwar Sadat would be satisfied with paying lip service to the Palestinian cause. Thus, the idea of autonomy as it appeared in the agreement was for him an important reason not to allow any party to sabotage its implementation. These included domestic groups – those who opposed the agreement in the Israeli public and the political system; and outside parties – the PLO, the Syrians, and the Soviets. Even when the talks with the Egyptians reached a stalemate on this issue in early 1980, Begin continued to implement the peace agreement and advance the withdrawal from Sinai.

Tension was in the air. On June 2, 1980, assassination attempts were made on three Arab mayors in Judea and Samaria. Two of them were seriously injured, as was the police saboteur who was trying to dismantle the explosive device in the car of the third. The exposure of the Jewish underground did not contribute to the Prime minister's health. On June 30, he was urgently taken from a Knesset meeting to Hadassah Hospital after suffering a heart attack.

Begin left the hospital two weeks later. "On the orders of his doctors," it was reported, "he will remain at home for about two weeks where he will both rest and work ... Begin added that his mood was excellent and that he was strong and able to return to his duties."²² However, people close to him indicated otherwise: "Begin has recently fallen asleep several times during security discussions. In one case, the Prime Minister's military secretary, General Ephraim Poran, had to wake him up with a light pat on his back. The participants in these discussions, some of whom mentioned Begin's naps, were never able to verify whether the Prime Minister was actually sleeping in his capacity as defense minister or whether one eye had remained open, as he had once stated not long before."²³

That summer, the Palestinians attained an achievement in the international arena. "It is appropriate to include the PLO in the negotiations if it recognizes Israel ... The proposal speaks of an actual homeland for the Palestinians," heralded a proposed resolution ahead of the meeting of the heads of the European Common Market.²⁴ At the end of the year, the organization was credited with an even greater achievement. Toward the start of the work of the new Republican administration in Washington, after the election of Ronald Reagan as president, the newly appointed Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, stated that "there are just and responsible elements in the PLO ... The United States must live with the reality of the multiple faces of the PLO and be careful not to treat the various forces in the same way."²⁵ Two weeks earlier, Farouk Kaddoumi, PLO foreign affairs spokesman, challenged Begin, or possibly threatened him, when he announced that the PLO wished for coexistence with Israel. "We are not interested in PLO recognition of the State of Israel," responded Begin. "We have not requested it."²⁶

Less than three weeks later, another significant personality joined those who had adopted a conciliatory line, with the threat of a political settlement. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad stated that he would be ready to review "a new American approach to a resolution of the conflict in the region on the basis of an Israeli withdrawal."²⁷

Meanwhile in Lebanon

For years there had been particularly dismal relations between two of the families comprising the leadership of the Christians in Lebanon. The Gemayel family – the father Pierre and his sons Bashir and Amin – and the Frangieh family, the father Suleiman, a former president of the country, and his son Tony – were fighting for foci of economic control, and there were also political divisions regarding Syrian involvement in the country. The murder of Tony Frangieh in June 1978 escalated the conflict between the two families and initiated a cycle of bloodshed. On the first anniversary of the murder, Suleiman Frangieh announced that "All those who profaned Ehdene will be killed, particularly those of the Gemayel clan, those and their descendants for generations until not a single man or woman remains."²⁸ That very day, Pierre Gemayel was driving on the main road north of Beirut and an explosive device placed in a car parked on the road was detonated remotely. Two of his bodyguards were killed, but Pierre survived, and the account was not settled.