

LEBANON: fifth war with israel?

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"Eretz Israel," the mythical state of Zionist ideology at its most extreme, extends from the Nile to the Euphrates and includes, naturally, southern Lebanon.

Since the end of the Lebanese war, the situation in the region that borders Israel has increasingly reflected the same instability which in its time and on a larger scale was true of the 19 months of combat in Beirut and the Lebanon mountains.

It is actually a return to the origins of a problem as old as the Arab-Israel conflict, once again manipulated in terms of the interests of Israel and its role in the Middle East.

Although international considerations surely deter the present leaders of Tel Aviv from any hope of adding the arid lands south of Litani to the map of Israel, other no less important objectives are now at stake along the flexible Israel-Lebanon border, scarcely an hour's walk from the Mediterranean to Mount Hermon.

THE ISRAELI CONNECTION

Around October of last year, when an Arab-sponsored peace initiated the end of the Lebanon war, a force unknown at the time, the South Lebanon Defense Army, carried out a swift military offensive from the town of Oleia, a few hundred meters from the Israeli border.

A cordon of villages, mostly Maronite, fell under its control, and the possession of two strategic points, Khiam and Taibe, allowed the establishment of a triangular enclave which today, with some variations, remains

under its power, in the key zone where the borders of Upper Galilee, Israeli territory; the lands of Lebanon; and the Golan Heights, which belong to Syria, all meet.

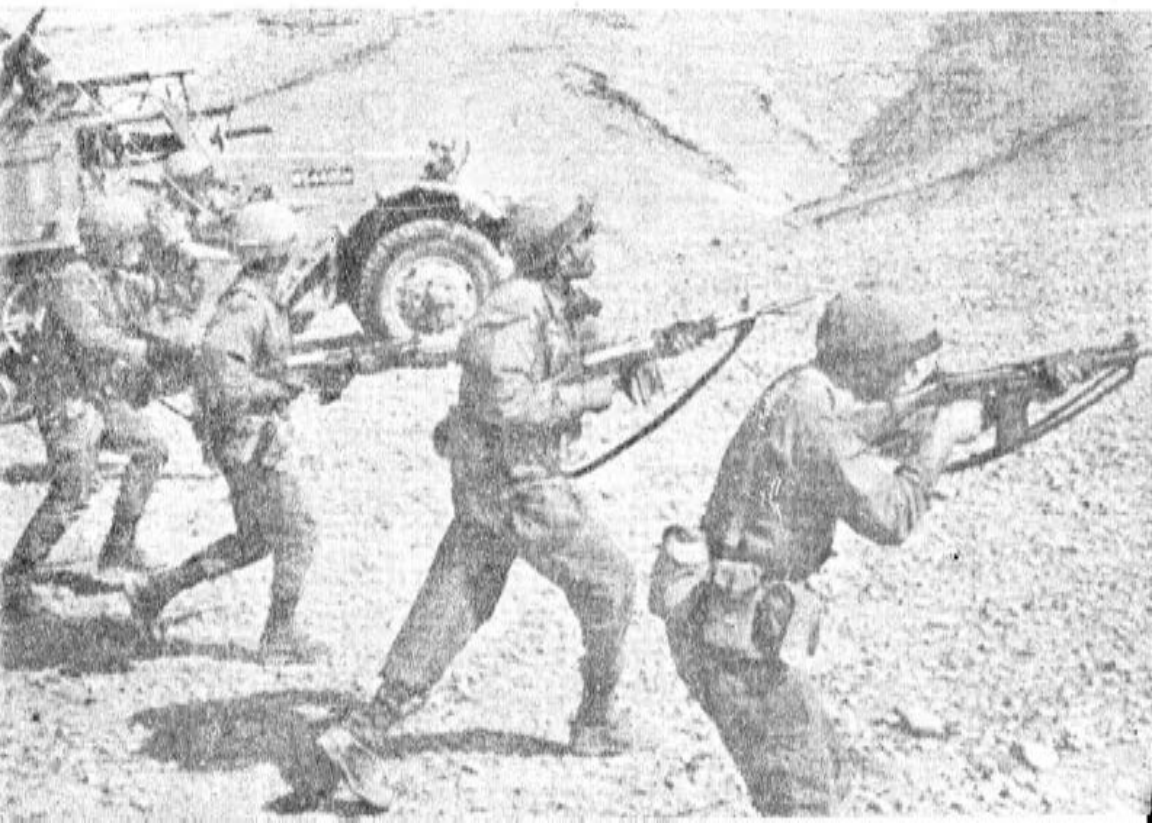
To the north, the forces of that army and those of a similar organization called Al Ansar occupied the most important town of the region, Marjeyoun, the site of the biggest Lebanese military installations near the border.

It didn't take long to establish the Israeli connection. The sudden presence in the ranks of the South Lebanon Defense Army of the right-wing paramilitary organizations predominant in Beirut, but of scant power in the south, indicated a transfer of troops possible then only through Israel.

The training of those forces and their equipping also indicated a bond with the enemy neighbor. All doubts were removed when Israeli artillery supported the actions of the local right-wing groups wherever necessary.

A little while later, the officialization of the "good border" policy — economic collaboration and Israeli proselytizing in Lebanese territory — clearly showed that the southern zone would not find the peace that Arab troops had rigorously imposed on the rest of the Lebanese nation.

The admitted objective was to then create a "security belt" to protect Israeli territory from the actions of the Palestinian resistance, which held important military positions in nearby Arqoub.



The impossibility, under these conditions, of fulfilling the Cairo Agreements which regulate the Palestinian presence in Lebanon frankly hindered the peace plans of that nation and favored the continuation of a conflict whose chief beneficiary is the Zionist state.

Through a local agent, the Tel Aviv government took advantage of a basic lesson of colonialism and also repeated it in South Lebanon.

FRENCH, ENGLISH, ISRAELIS

The presence of Maronite population groups in the middle of a predominantly Moslem Chiite community was the factor of discord manipulated by French and British when they dominated Lebanon and adjacent Palestine in their respective colonial mandates.

In southern Lebanon, the privileged relations established in the last century by France with many Christian villages contributed to the unequal economic development still existing in the region, especially in the south and in the northern mountain zone of Lebanon.

British and French worked intensely to the very end of the colonial period to come closer to these towns in the hope of winning them to the side of colonialism and expanding the undefined borders to the north of Palestine.

At the start of the century, the proclamation of a future Hebrew state extending to the shores of the Litani was very common in Zionist circles. In the Sykes-Picot Agreements of 1916, signed between France and Great Britain among other pacts to partition the former Ottoman territories, the zones of the "wilayet," or district of Saida, which historically belonged to Lebanon, were conferred to Palestine under British control.

On the other hand, the economic ties between the two regions made them scarcely distinguishable during the negotiations between the colonial powers and later would be among the most evident causes of the exodus of the Palestinian population to the southern part of Lebanon, at the start of the Zionist policy of harassment against the Arab population of Palestinian origin and the proclamation of the state of Israel in 1948. At that date, and despite the weak participation of Lebanon in the first of the Middle East wars, 19 border villages were occupied by Israel; this was used to pressure the signing of an Israeli-Lebanese armistice in 1949.

The prevailing policy in Lebanon is to keep aloof from the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the country did not participate in the last two conflicts; however, this policy has brought few dividends in the south.

Since June 14, 1968, when the first direct attack against a civilian position, the town of Meiss el Jabal, took place, the escalation has continued. There were five major aggressions in 1968; 19 the following year; and more than 3000 violations of Lebanese sovereignty between that date and 1974, when it became abundantly clear that an undeclared war was raging in southern Lebanon.



The target of those aggressions was the refugee camps around the principal towns of the south, as well as the Lebanese people, who defended themselves largely by their own means and those of the Palestinian resistance.

With the start of the conflict in 1975, a paradoxical peace reigned in the south, once again demonstrating the useful character of a war of attrition.

POLITICS AND MISERY

The impact of the Lebanese crisis, however, was economically more serious in the south than in the rest of the country. That region's economic underdevelopment could not resist 19 months of complete alteration of the mechanisms of commerce and agricultural production.

A predominantly tobacco-growing region, dominated by feudal relations of production in zones with poor farm yields or with a uniquely rocky terrain, the south is primarily a territory of the dispossessed.

The war accentuated those problems. Among the 28 000 Lebanese citizens who because of the vagaries of demographic equilibrium have no citizenship at all, more than half belong to the southern Chiite community, the poorest in the country.

The population exodus, which started with the Israeli attacks of May, 1970, has now reached alarming proportions. It is estimated that more than 125 000 inhabitants of the south left their homes between January, 1977, and this writing, and the larger number that left over the last seven



years has contributed to creating a misery belt around the Lebanese capital.

Demographic investigations by private institutions indicate an unexpected result of the economic crisis and the situation of insecurity: the Chiite community, fundamentally rural up to a decade ago, is today an essentially urban social group which supplies cheap manpower to the cities of the north and Beirut.

Before the war, 82 percent of the families of the zone — Christian or Moslem — received an average monthly income of less than \$200, according to the generous statistics, which, however, cannot conceal the disproportion with respect to the rest of the country.

The relative equality of Christians and Moslems in terms of the common poverty of the region, however, is not foreign to Israel's diversionist intentions in southern Lebanon.

The existence of population groups artificially separated from their neighboring communities for religious reasons, exacerbated by political

motives and differences in opportunities for education and employment maintained by the indolence characteristic of the Lebanese state, now allows for open cooperation between Israel and the right-wing groups, including the training of more than 500 men in Israeli territory, the linking of telephone communications between the two zones, or the innocent performance by a Lebanese folklore group in the city of Haifa, announced with approval from Tel Aviv.

THE LIKUD IN POWER

When the Likud came to political power in Tel Aviv, some aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict were altered. Among them, that of southern Lebanon. The continuing instability, marked in recent weeks by the ambiguous role of US diplomacy, which offers the Arab governments guarantees against large-scale actions in the conflictive region, nevertheless appears to be headed for direct confrontation... or at least toward the tangible threat of this possibility.

A Palestinian military leader from the southern region, while showing us the barbed wire installations which are beginning to surround the area of Marjeyoun — identical to those used by Israel — expressed to us his conviction of a conflict within the next months, perhaps with limited objectives, like all the wars in the Middle East, but capable of impeding a lasting peace.

The presence of Arab peace-keeping troops throughout Lebanese territory, with the exception of the southern zone, seems to constitute one of the embarrassing elements which the government of Menahem Begin could handle in the classical Israeli political manner of exploiting every factor of disagreement in the complex Arab world.

The destabilization objectives of the Elías Sarkis government, present in extreme right-wing Lebanese groups because of internal struggles for power, also coincide with the Israeli plan.

The dismembering of the Lebanese state, maintained principally in an undeclared form, reaches its maximum expression in the south. A frontal attack by Palestinian troops beginning with the "weakest point" of the Arab world, which would also have repercussions on the Syrian position, is not a card too unworthy to be played by a "war cabinet" like the one which Menahem Begin now heads.

If Israel does not want to face the bothersome possibility of a resumption of the Geneva Peace Conference on the Middle East, in which its intransigent position on the restitution of occupied Arab territories would also be difficult to explain to its natural ally, the United States, "the northern front" would be an excellent motive for making war before talking peace. The conditions are there.