

An Israeli perspective on war and peace in Lebanon

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***Institution in a Divided Society* (State University of New York Press, 2009).**

Contrary to the popular image of Israeli-Lebanese relations as being essentially volatile and conflict-ridden, the two states have known periods of relative stability along their mutual border. What factors contributed to the more tranquil periods in the two states' relations in the past? And what can be learnt from them regarding the present situation?

The border between Greater Lebanon and Mandatory Palestine, drawn by French and British officials in 1923, was from a local perspective somewhat arbitrary – although its delineation had been the result of serious international negotiations – as Lebanon (then under French rule) kept several villages in Western Galilee, while Palestine (ruled by Great Britain) secured greater control of Upper Jordan.

Relative calm

Lebanon and Israel largely respected the border from their independence until the late 1960s. In the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, Lebanon participated on the Arab side but its army was restricted to a largely defensive role – while Israel captured over a dozen Lebanese villages in south Lebanon in October that year. In 1949 Israel and Lebanon signed an Armistice Agreement which expressed both sides' recognition of the Mandatory border, albeit with unresolved differences between them.

Four years later, a confidential Israeli report stated: "There is nothing to say about Lebanon. The situation in the border with Lebanon is generally adequate ... relations with Lebanon are generally not our utmost concern". Indeed, relations remained stable until 1967, especially compared to Israel's dealings with Egypt, Syria and Jordan. In this period, problems were dealt with mostly by the Israeli-Lebanese Mixed Armistice Commission (ILMAC), which included representatives of both armies and a UN observer. As a result, Israel generally practised restraint towards Lebanon.

Deteriorating relations

From the mid-1960s Israeli-Lebanese relations began to deteriorate after Palestinian armed factions arrived

in southern Lebanon and launched cross-border attacks against Israel. Israel retaliated militarily, in order to try to compel Lebanon to subdue the Palestinians, and subsequently to address Israel's security concerns unilaterally – ultimately invading south Lebanon in 1978 and establishing a military buffer zone.

Lebanon's civil war (1975–90) seemed to offer Israel an opportunity to fundamentally change its relations with Lebanon. Israel collaborated with Lebanese Christian militias in the border area from the start of the war and later forged ties with other Lebanese Christian militias in the north. But Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon only managed to drive the Palestinian factions out of the country. It did not succeed in establishing a pro-Israeli government in Beirut, nor in guaranteeing the agreement signed between the two states in 1983, which collapsed a year later. Moreover, between 1982–85, the Israeli army, which occupied substantial parts of Lebanon, began to encounter guerrilla attacks, this time also by Lebanese militias, most notably Hezbollah.

In 1985, Israel decided to establish a formal 'Security Zone' in south Lebanon, regulated by a pro-Israeli militia, the South Lebanese Army. But as an Israeli military commander asserts, the result of this development was that "Hezbollah transformed from a rejected terrorist organisation, which acts against the wish of the central government in Lebanon, into a legitimate resistance movement of the Lebanese people to the Israeli occupation". Israel suffered heavy military losses in its struggle against Hezbollah, and subsequent Israeli military operations (*Accountability* in 1993 and *Grapes of Wrath* in 1996) failed to tilt the situation in its favour.

Only in 2000, almost a decade after the end of the Lebanese conflict, did Israel decide to cut its losses and withdraw from Lebanon. Even during the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 the Israeli army did not return.

What could Israel do now?

What can be done to stop the vicious cycle of conflict in Israeli-Lebanese relations? The comparatively tranquil period from 1949–67 suggests a number of lessons.

First, a stable Lebanese state that can restrain armed non-state actors operating from the Lebanese-Israeli border area is in Israel's best interest. Therefore, Israel should respect Lebanon's sovereignty, including by refraining from violating its airspace – which it does today on an almost daily basis.

Second, Israel must try to find a solution to contentious border issues such as the Chebaa Farms – a small area that was part of Lebanon – that was under de facto Syrian control until the 1967 war, after which it was occupied by Israel. Non-state actors such as Hezbollah use this to justify their 'Resistance'.

Third, Israel should build a barrier on the 'Blue Line', the post-2000 border with Lebanon marked by the UN after Israel's withdrawal. This barrier will signal to both states where the current border lies and make cross-border infiltration more difficult. Both Israel and Lebanon have reservations about the demarcation of the Blue Line, but

both have confirmed they will respect it until a permanent border is agreed.

Finally, Israel and Lebanon would benefit from renewing the activities of ILMAC, which has thus far been the most effective way to bring about quiet and stability on the Israeli-Lebanese border and in Israeli-Lebanese relations generally, even in the absence of a peace process between the two states. It does, however, seem worthwhile to keep UNIFIL (which was enlarged and strengthened in 2006) in the Israeli-Lebanese border area, in view of its stabilising role there.



A man inspects the damage to his apartment in Kiryat Shmona, Israel, after it was hit by a Katyusha rocket fired by Hezbollah // © Ahikam Seri/Panos