

Israel and peace in Lebanon

A Lebanese perspective

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Beginning with the 1948 war in Palestine, Lebanon has suffered from the repercussions of Arab-Israeli wars as well as Israeli attacks and occupation of Lebanese territory. Lebanon did not participate in either the 1967 or 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, but its attempt to avoid the conflict was doomed to failure after 1970 when it became a battleground for Israeli military forces and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was one of the longest and most destructive episodes of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict. The Israeli army occupied the Lebanese capital after a long blockade and bombings.

Lebanon's room for decision-making is limited both by the presence of Palestinian refugees, whose destiny remains undetermined, and its entrenchment in the strategic Israel–Lebanon–Syria triangle. These constraints affect the domestic political scene, and create divisions between those who favour ending hostilities with Israel, and the allies of Syria and Iran. Those same constraints prevent Lebanon from securing peace and progress through the delimitation of its frontiers to the south and the use of its water resources, despite the active intervention of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Arab solidarity and Palestinian refugees

Lebanon has avoided direct political or diplomatic contact with Israel. Any departure from this rule is not only opposed by neighbouring Arab countries but is also seen as a national betrayal by Lebanese of all religious affiliations. This has been demonstrated on several occasions, including in response to the contacts made by President Émile Eddé with Israel in the 1940s, to the collaboration of the Christian militia, the Lebanese Forces, with Israeli Defence Forces between 1976 and 1985, as well as the stillborn bilateral treaty signed by President Amin Gemayel

on 17 May 1983. Even today, the Lebanese abide by the boycott set by the Arab League more than other Arab states.

Another reason that Lebanon has rejected negotiations with Israel is to avoid turning Palestinian refugees in Lebanon into permanent settlers. If these refugees became permanent residents in Lebanon, Lebanon's demographic balance would tip in favour of the Sunnis. The official position of Lebanon is therefore the same as that of the PLO: there should be no agreement with Israel that would consecrate the settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

The civil war was fought between those who showed solidarity with the armed Palestinian organisations that found refuge in Lebanon after they were expelled from Jordan, and those who saw their presence as a demographic threat, a violation of sovereignty and an obstacle to the rebirth of the state. Israel's interventions in 1978 and 1982 only reinforced these differences. Further, since the PLO left Lebanon in August 1982 after its defeat by the Israeli army, no solution has been found for the humanitarian, social, political or security-related problems of refugees living in impoverished camps.

Israel-Syria-Lebanon: a strategic triangle

Lebanon's dependence on the regional context is particularly strong with regard to its larger neighbour Syria, which has presented itself as the spearhead of resistance to Israel ever since the latter's signing of peace agreements with Egypt, Jordan and the PLO. Hafez al-Assad (Syrian President from 1970–2000) continuously subjugated Lebanon and the PLO in order to dominate the northern part of the Arab-Israeli front. Between 1976, when its troops entered Lebanon, and 2005, when they left, Syria



A badly damaged building in Dhahiyye, the southern suburb of Beirut. The area was largely destroyed by Israeli bombings during the 2006 conflict // © Sabrina Mervin, 2006

controlled nine-tenths of the country while Israel occupied the south.

Instead of fighting in the Golan Heights, seized by Israel from Syria in 1967, Damascus and Tel Aviv have waged their wars in Lebanon through the various Lebanese parties. During the long and burdensome years of Syrian tutelage in Lebanon, the mere mention of a 'peace treaty with the Zionist enemy' was taboo. When Lebanon participated in the peace process in Madrid in 1991–94, it was under the suspicious eye of Damascus, and only as long as the Syrian file was moving forward.

Syrian tutelage became formal when the Taif Agreement was signed in 1989, and lasted until the aftermath of the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. However, Lebanon's subservience to Damascus has not diminished and is now combined with having to heed Iran's strategic interests in the Levant. By helping to found Hezbollah in the 1980s and supporting it militarily and financially, especially in its 2006 war against Israel, Iran has become a Mediterranean power.

Syrian tutelage and Iranian interests have weighed heavily in Lebanon's decision not to negotiate peace with Israel. Israel itself has done little to foster trust, having imposed *faits accomplis* following military victories over its Arab neighbours in 1967. Its refusal to withdraw from occupied Palestinian territories and comply with UN resolutions weakens the position of the 'moderate' Arabs who favour negotiations.

Lebanese reconciliation

Lebanon, torn by internal divisions, is unable to make the important choice of signing a bilateral peace treaty with Israel. Nor could it bear the repercussions if it did so.

Since independence, Lebanon's political history has consisted of a succession of crises and a devastating civil war. Irrespective of the 1943 National Pact between Christian and Muslim elites, the inherent tension between Arab solidarity and Western protection endures.

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri reignited the country's divisions, creating two camps: the 14 March Alliance backed by the West and 'moderate' Arab states on the one hand, and the 8 March Alliance aligned with the Iranian–Syrian axis on the other. The latter relies on the military power of Hezbollah, which has several thousand trained fighters equipped with advanced military equipment. Hezbollah and its allies are opposed to any kind of negotiations or peace treaty with Israel. The July 2006 war where they confronted the Israeli army, which withdrew from Lebanon without achieving any of its core objectives, is a source of pride for Hezbollah. On the 14 March side there is no clearly stated position in favour of negotiating a peace treaty, but it can be assumed that its pro-American stance would imply favouring negotiations.

In the meantime, any Prime Minister from either alliance feels compelled to pay tribute to the famous triad of State–Resistance–People, which legitimises, if unwillingly, the refusal of any peace negotiations with Israel.

Land, water and border demarcation

There can be no peace between Lebanon and Israel without an agreement on border demarcation and water sharing. Lebanese people, regardless of affiliation, see Israel as a military power with designs on Lebanese land and water.

It was not until 2000 that the Israelis abided by Security Council Resolution 425 of 1978, which called for their withdrawal from Lebanese territory, when the military struggle waged by Hezbollah had become too costly for them. The Blue Line, a temporary demarcation border defined by the UN, allows them to retain control over territorial enclaves claimed by Lebanon: the Chebaa Farms, the hamlets of Kfar-Shuba and half the village of Ghajar. For Israel, these occupied territories of 1967 belong to Syria, but Syria has declared them Lebanese. It is noteworthy that Damascus has consistently refused to provide the UN with documentation that the territories are Lebanese. It is in Syria's interest to entertain this ambiguity in order to keep the tension on the border between Lebanon and Israel alive and to prevent bilateral negotiations. This occupation also serves as an excuse for Hezbollah, supported by Syria and Iran, to claim that Lebanon has not been liberated in its entirety and that armed struggle must continue.

Lebanon and Israel's differences over border delineation also reflect a bitter struggle for control of river water (the Hasbani and Wazzani rivers) and subterranean water (the Chebaa aquifer) from Mount Hermon, which overlooks Israel, Lebanon and Syria. The battle for water that started in 1923 when the mandated powers drew the borders continues to sharpen with increasing drought problems and demographic pressure.

While the 14 March Alliance has no formal declared position on potential negotiations, it believes that Lebanon's fate should not be dependent on these territories and that diplomacy rather than weapons will ensure their liberation. It accuses Hezbollah of serving foreign interests, namely Iran's and Syria's, and putting the country at risk.

The 8 March Alliance's response is to argue that diplomacy has never helped liberate an occupied territory. With its 'victory' over Israel in July 2006, Hezbollah was able to convince many Lebanese of the indispensability of its weapons in stopping Israel from attacking Lebanon with impunity, although Israeli flights over Lebanon continued after the passing of Security Council Resolution 1701

(2006). Hezbollah refuses to disarm as long as Lebanese territories remain occupied and no agreement has been reached between the Lebanese over a defence strategy capable of safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country.

An Israeli withdrawal to the armistice lines of 1949 accompanied by a proposal on equitable sharing of waters in accordance with international law, however, could deprive Hezbollah of its pretext and strengthen the position of those calling for Lebanon's neutrality vis-à-vis the regional conflict.

UNIFIL has managed to defuse border tensions, including very serious ones; without UNIFIL, there would be no security on the Lebanese-Israeli border. But its action is limited to writing reports and taking account of violations of Lebanon's maritime, airspace, and territorial sovereignty. UNIFIL's first intervention in southern Lebanon in March 1978 helped ensure a minimum level of security in its areas of deployment, but it could not stop Israel from invading again in 1982. The second UNIFIL, which deployed in 2006 pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1701, has encouraged the deployment of the Lebanese army in the south for the first time since the 1970s.

Conclusion

The Lebanese population is weary of conflict and ideological rhetoric and slogans. Civil society is concerned with addressing issues related to domestic, political and social life (such as the fight for secularism) rather than promoting a possible peace with Israel. Today, more than at any other time, Lebanon is unable to negotiate (let alone sign) a peace treaty with Israel without Syria's consent.

With the Arab Spring we can expect a disruption of the regional strategic landscape. The Syrian crisis may either strengthen the advocates of peace negotiations or set Lebanon ablaze. Either way, Lebanon will not be able to move towards a just and lasting peace with Israel unless the latter shows, through its acts and deeds, its commitment to real peace and complies with UN resolutions and international law.

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