

# EVIDENCE OF LONG LEBANON STAY

## Israel may dig in

By ERIC MARGOLIS

Mounting evidence strongly suggests that Israel may not be planning a total withdrawal from Lebanon. In spite of PM Shimon Peres' commitment to removing Israeli troops once border security can be assured, it now appears that Israel is quietly planning for an indefinite stay in southern Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

Israel's Engineer Corps Senior Officer, Brig. General Yuhuda Cohen, is quoted in a recent radio interview as saying that his country would spend between 5 and 6 billion shekels — or up to \$14 million — on improving fortifications in southern Lebanon.

These improvements, including new access roads, anti-tank ditches, field works and camps, are to be made in positions facing Syrian deployments in the strategic Bekaa Valley.

Israel's financially besieged government would not likely be spending money on fortifications in southern Lebanon unless it planned a long stay in the region.

It appears that Israel is not planning a gradual withdrawal south from the Litani river but, instead, east away from the coast. Israel, it seems, will give up the heavily populated areas around Sidon, Tyre and Nabatiyah where it is under constant attack from Shi'ite Muslims.

It will, however, probably retain a long, triangular portion of Lebanese territory, extending northward from the Israeli border at Metulla, and up the Bekaa Valley to Mt. Baruk. Control of the Bekaa puts Israeli armor and artillery only 20 miles from Syria's capital, Damascus.

Mt. Baruk, the highest point in southern Lebanon, contains an extensive array of sensors and electronic intelligence systems that peer deep into Syria. Control of Mt. Baruk allows Israeli artillery to accurately spot any target within a radius of 35 miles.

Israel's military planners are thus loath to give up the Bekaa Valley and may well not, according to these recent reports. Withdrawal may only come when Syria pulls its forces out of Lebanon, an event considered to be highly unlikely.

Withdrawal talks now underway between Israel and the Lebanese government are described by opposition MPs as a "smokescreen" aimed at masking Israel's deepening entrenchment in the Bekaa Valley. At best, say these sources, the talks will produce only a limited withdrawal: 20 kilometres back to the Zaharani River or to a "security strip" north of the Israeli border. The Bekaa will remain firmly in Israeli hands.

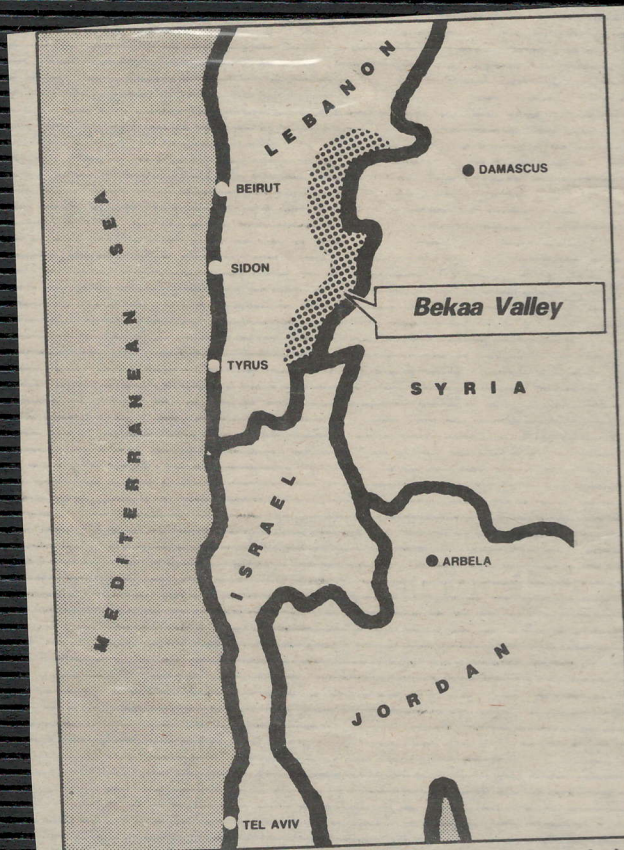
Further evidence of Israel's intention to remain in

### SUN EXCLUSIVE

part of Lebanon is provided by a steady pattern of all-weather road building northward from the Israeli border. Millions are being spent to drive tank-capable roads across the southern Lebanese mountains, an investment unlikely to be made if total withdrawal were planned.

As a final confusing note, Israel, according to retired General and MP Mattityahu Peled, a peace activist, is constructing a new prison outside of Tyre — in precisely the area from which Israel plans to retire.

Israeli government and military officials deny any intention to remain in Lebanon. They describe their road-building in southern Lebanon as being done for the benefit of the Lebanese government. Improved field fortifications in the south are explained as "temporary security measures."



The Bekaa Valley, which is located in southern Lebanon, is strategically important to Israel.