

Israeli withdrawal pains

Now that Israel is beginning a partial withdrawal from southern Lebanon's populous coastal areas, many Israelis are trying to decide if the war was worth its high price. A lot of them think it was not.

Israel's grand strategy in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon has by now been well documented. Entitled "Operation Peace in Galilee" for the sake of the Western media, the campaign was billed as a minor incursion aimed at rooting out PLO units that had shelled Israeli border settlements.

In reality, Operation Big Pines, as it was known inside Israel, was designed by Gen. Ariel Sharon to permanently eradicate the PLO's military and political infrastructure; to set up an Israeli-dominated Christian Phalange government and break Lebanon away from the Arab World. Syria was to be driven out of Lebanon and have its nose bloodied. Finally, it was hoped, the destruction of the PLO in Lebanon would cement Israel's rule on the occupied West Bank.

This plan did not originate with Sharon. The creation of a Christian-run Lebanon allied to Israel had been a goal of Jewish leaders even before the founding of the Israeli state. In 1954-55, Israel's former prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, again proposed the idea.

At the time, Israel's prime minister was Moshe Sharett, an erudite, thoughtful leader who is almost totally forgotten today. Replying to Ben-Gurion, Sharett made a chilling prediction: Ben-Gurion's proposal was "disastrous for it is liable to rend . . . the fabric of Christian-Muslim co-operation . . . to throw Lebanon's Muslims into the arms of Syria and to bring on Christian Lebanon the historic catastrophe of annexation by Syria."

Sharett went on to prophesize that any Israeli attempt to "reshape" Lebanon to suit its needs, "means not just a surgical operation but a crushing of organs such as Lebanon would not survive." He could not have been more correct.

Two and a half years after invading Lebanon, Israel has lost 607 dead, 3,500 wounded and spent \$2.5 billion (U.S.) Since 1982, some 20,000 Lebanese and Palestinians have died; at least 400,000 of them remain homeless. Large parts of Lebanon are in ruins.

Add to this butcher's bill the additional mayhem of the 10-year-old Lebanese civil war and the tragedy takes on epic proportions. Daily, Lebanon sinks deeper into mindless barbarism and violence. Anyone who wants the stark truth about this miserable war should read a brilliant new book by two Israeli journalists, Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War*. It will shatter a lot of illusions.

Israel's hopes to install a Phalangist regime have failed. Lebanon's Christians are now feuding among themselves and flirting with Syria. The deaths of Pierre and Bashir Gemayel have left a leadership vacuum that has not been filled.

Israel's military intelligence service hoped to make conservative Druzes into new, more acceptable allies to replace the atrocity-prone and militarily ineffective Phalangists. The Druze flirted with the Israelis but then turned against them last

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year when Israeli civilian intelligence — the Mossad — encouraged its Phalangist clients to invade Druze areas of the Shouf mountains.

The result was bitter fighting between two Israeli-armed and supported groups. As if this were not bad enough, the Israelis managed to turn nearly all of southern Lebanon's Shi'ites against them after 2½ years of occupation.

In a great irony, Israel invaded Lebanon ostensibly to oust the PLO, which was militarily ineffective. The PLO was kicked out, only to be replaced by Shi'ite guerrillas who, unlike the PLO, were willing to die for their cause. These Shi'ites proved vastly more effective than the PLO and may force Israel out of southern Lebanon.

This point is very significant. No Arab armies have been able to defeat Israel. Its only major military reverse to date comes at the hands of Shi'ite villagers and townspeople — a people's war in the truest sense of the word. This is the example taught to the Arabs by Iran — one fighter willing to die is worth five soldiers who are only willing to fight.

Israel's only major accomplishment in Lebanon was to evict the PLO and kill a few thousand of its guerrillas. The PLO is now split into hostile factions and in turmoil. Yet nothing will prevent the PLO from slipping back into southern Lebanon or into Beirut. If this occurs, and if PLO rockets again flash into northern Israel, the entire war will have been for nothing.

No one is yet sure how such an event can be prevented — or even if the PLO is still the real enemy. As one Israeli general said, "we have simply replaced one inefficient enemy with a deadly one, and for an added cost of \$500 million U.S. per year."

Lebanon is like the proverbial tar baby — once you touch it, you get stuck. Most Israelis, save the Likud faction and some senior officers, can't wait to get out of the Lebanese morass and never again hear of this place. The Americans were so badly burned by their own bungling in Lebanon that no one in Washington will even mention the country.

The Syrians, who had designs on Lebanon, are reportedly sick and tired of Lebanese tribalism. Even a lot of unfortunate Lebanese just can't stand it anymore and have left for good. Who can blame them. Even Montreal in January is better than Beirut.

In fact, the only major Middle Eastern player that managed to avoid direct involvement in the Lebanese morass has been the Soviet Union. Moscow has shown more common sense than anyone else.

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