

## ERIC MARGOLIS



# Journey into sad Lebanon

Crossing the Israeli border into the barren hills of southern Lebanon, you could tell at once that this was no ordinary press trip. Our Israeli civilian guides suddenly produced Uzi sub-machine-guns and military radios. Four heavily armed Israeli soldiers joined us. Completing this martial transformation, our press group all donned thick, olive-drab flak jackets.

This was our first trip into the Israeli-occupied southern third of war-ravaged Lebanon. The first stop was on the outskirts of Nabatiyeh, a sizable Shiite Muslim town. Our escort avoided the downtown area where, a week earlier, an enraged crowd had stoned and attacked Israeli soldiers. At least two Lebanese Muslims had been killed and tension was running high.

Descending from the rolling hills, we entered Sidon, southern Lebanon's largest city and the scene of some ferocious fighting during the 1982 war. Standing in front of the shattered wreckage of the former PLO headquarters in Sidon's main square, the heavy atmosphere of tension was clearly evident.

Our Israeli military escort formed a semi-circle around us, their eyes scanning the windows and rooftops of the nearby buildings, automatic weapons at the ready. Forty-eight hours earlier, two Israeli elite border policemen had been ambushed and killed only 150 yards from where we were taking pictures.

The Israeli-occupied portion of Lebanon may be calmer than the areas around Beirut or Tripoli, but there was no doubt that we were in a zone of high military tension. Though the Israelis have been endeavoring to keep a low military profile in the south, their armed presence was manifest.

### Life goes on

In spite of the large number of Israeli soldiers in evidence, Lebanese civilian life in Sidon had apparently returned to its normal state of hectic commercial activity. Many Lebanese, after suffering through eight years of war and living in what was a virtual PLO mini-state, were evidently relieved by the Israeli military presence. For them, almost any government was preferable to the chaos of the past eight years.

For the Israeli occupation troops, many of whom are reservists in their late 30s or early 40s, garrison duty in southern Lebanon is an unwelcome ordeal that shows no sign of ending. While it is hard to find any Israelis who want to prolong their military rule in Lebanon, they are also painfully aware that withdrawal, in the absence of a stable, effective government in Beirut, will only recreate the same conditions prevalent before the 1982 invasion.

In fact, it now appears that Israel may well be in for an indefinite stay in southern Lebanon. Lebanese President Amin Gemayel is referred to derisively by the Israelis as "the mayor of East Beirut." His shaky regime is kept in power only by the presence of French and American troops, whose continued support is now in question after the savage bombings in Beirut last week. These twin explosions occurred only 35 miles north of where we stood.

While the Israelis deny any intent to prolong their stay in Lebanon, they are investing considerable sums of money in building a substantial military infrastructure that includes fortifications, logistics depots, airstrips and a new series of roads across the southern hills.

When questioned about these expensive roads, our Israeli hosts first claimed that they were being built by the Lebanese government. But after we saw Israeli engineer units at work on these same roads, they admitted that Israel was actually building them.

### Attacks on Israelis

Entrenched behind their new defensive lines along the Awali River, the Israelis had hoped to prevent PLO attacks on their widely dispersed units and patrols. But there has now appeared a disturbing pattern of attacks upon Israeli soldiers by Muslim Lebanese groups, an indication that the Israelis are coming to be regarded as unwelcome occupiers rather than their former hoped-for role of liberators.

If the Israelis do withdraw from Lebanon, they fear — with justification — that the PLO will simply filter back into the south and the local Lebanese will resume butchering each other. At latest count, there were 36 private armies in Lebanon, all making that lovely country, once called the Switzerland of the Middle East, a veritable hell.

We left Sidon with these sobering thoughts and drove into the southern end of the Shouf mountains to the startlingly beautiful town of Jezzine. A largely Christian community, Jezzine was to represent the peace that Israeli control had brought to at least a small part of Lebanon. But even here one member of our group strayed away 20 feet and was immediately called back by our nervous and vigilant Israeli guards. It seemed that every corner and window held the potential of a sniper.

Racing against dusk we returned to the Israeli border and to the comfort and safety of Kibbutz Kfar Giladi. There, over dinner, the kibbutzim argued about how to achieve peace with their Arab neighbors. Our bedroom window, opening onto Lebanon, brought into stark reality the need for some settlement to the endless travail of Israel and her neighbors.

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