

LEBANON AND THE PEACE PROCESS: THE CASE FOR GREATER REALISM

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The initial dismay and disappointment in Washington and a number of Arab capitals which greeted Likud's victory in the recent Israeli elections has given way to a growing sense of doom and foreboding as tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbours have increased markedly and violence has erupted in the occupied territories and areas which are controlled by the Palestinian National Authority.

In Washington, the initial reaction was back to the drawing board. But this is a presidential election year and it is an established fact that during such elections, the United States generally turns inward and reduces its international interactions by at least fifty per cent. This time, however, this fact is complicated by another: the secretary of state, Warren Christopher, Ambassador Denis Ross and Ambassador Martin Indyck are considered to be damaged goods for their involvement in the Israeli elections in open support of Labour and the then prime minister, Shimon Peres. They, in other words, have no credibility with the new order in Israel. Israel and its Arab neighbours, therefore, do not expect an American initiative to re-invigorate the peace process much before February 1997. Despite Ambassador Ross's efforts to keep the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on track, the peace process is adrift without the steady hands of the United States at the helm.

Uncertainty over the outcome of the American presidential elections, the post-election appointment of a new cabinet and foreign policy team, and over what, if anything, the current administration can do, has contributed directly to uncertainty and scepticism in Arab capitals. These have also served to undermine any and all initiatives undertaken by the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, since his confirmation. No one in the Arab world, especially in Syria and Lebanon, is prepared to take seriously Israeli initiatives not blessed by Washington. If America will not be an active player based on her interests in pursuing the peace process as it was presented to the participants prior to and at Madrid in 199—or on a reformation of the understandings that led to Madrid and takes into account Likud's hard line—then none of the regional players will pursue negotiations with the amount of commitment that will be needed to move it forward or, at least, prevent it from stalling or unravelling.

No one involved with the peace process has expressed a desire to quit. All, in their different activities and pronouncements since the Israeli elections, have given a clear indication that they want the process to continue. Prime Minister Netanyahu has stated that he was “not elected to kill the peace process.” King Hussein of Jordan has on many occasions expressed his belief that the peace process is irreversible and will continue. The Arab world reaffirmed its commitment to and support of the peace process at its summit meeting, as have Syria and Lebanon; the Palestinian National Authority continues to proclaim its adherence to the Oslo Agreements. Professed optimism, declarations of commitment, support and attachment notwithstanding, the process has cooled and could soon become frozen in time and place. Some in Israel who put emphasis on security only and not on reconciliation among peoples of the region, believe that integration is a step backward. Many Palestinians in the territories, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon feel that the process will come undone if Israel and the PNA cannot overcome the crisis over Hebron, the settlements issue, and the ‘final status’ negotiations. A majority of Jordanians are fearful of the effects on their country of a derailed Israeli-Palestinian track and the resulting turbulence

that would occur. In Syria, many predict years of fruitless discussions if the topic of the return of the Golan is not on the table. A majority of the Lebanese believe that their country will become, once again, the battlefield.

Yet, tensions in the Middle East continue to mount at an alarming rate. The area, and especially the Arab members of the American-led coalition against Iraq, have been shaken by what is seen as unilateral and unjustified American action against Iraq. They have either openly criticised the United States or have distanced themselves from US actions. Israel and Syria are about to back themselves into a major war in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon—and maybe well beyond it—that neither wants. The violence in the occupied territories over Israel's opening of the tunnel under the al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques in Jerusalem has seriously undermined the trust that had been created between the parties. This has become a major complicating factor in Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Jordanian relationships. Finally, the cold peace between Egypt and Israel threatens to become colder and icier.

When Prime Minister Netanyahu's reintroduction of two major Israeli themes into the negotiation process is taken into account, this rather long introduction is relevant to the topic of this article. The two themes are 1) absolute security for Israel is paramount in any and all negotiations, and 2) what has now been dubbed as the 'Lebanon First' option, Lebanon before and ahead of Syria and not Lebanon as the first Arab state to make peace with Israel. It is precisely these points that now threaten renewed hostilities between Lebanon and Syria on one hand and Israel on the other.

'Reintroduction' is used deliberately because the emphasis on absolute security and the 'Lebanon First' option is not new. Absolute security was pursued by Israel in its negotiations with the Lebanese government in 1982-83, and by the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, in the early stages of the bilateral talks with Lebanon after the Madrid conference. The 'Lebanon First' option was initially put on the table by Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and pursued by his successor, Peres, after Prime Minister Rabin's tragic death. While Prime Ministers Rabin and Peres did not exclude Syria and the return of the Golan as part of the equation, Prime Minister Netanyahu has, at least for the time being. And this might be the new twist in this reiteration of an old option.

The ill-fated 17 May 1983 Agreement between Israel and Lebanon was in essence a 'Lebanon First' option linked to Israel's search for absolute security. In fact, it was the embodiment of both. It never saw the light of day for reasons that are well known: opposition by Syria and its allies and supporters in Lebanon, and abandonment by the United States and by some of the United States' Arab and West European allies. More importantly, and of greater relevance today as these issues are being revisited, is the fact that it failed not because it was a 'Lebanon First' option, but (and this should have been obvious to all, especially Israel) because Lebanon could not provide Israel with the absolute security it sought since Lebanon lacked the means, national resolve and will to do so. With an army of about 40,000-60,000 soldiers that were then being retrained and re-equipped by the United States and still in the throes of an internal civil conflict, Lebanon became attached to Israel through military agreements and arrangements which in essence made the Lebanese army an extension of the Israeli Defence Force. By doing so, Lebanon unnecessarily endangered the security of Syria, a country that was still technically—and still is—at war with Israel despite the American brokered red line agreements which still govern the extent of Syrian force deployments in Lebanon. In other words, Lebanon allowed itself to be caught between Israeli and Syrian security requirements.

Lebanon's descent into hell in 1975 was the result of many factors, both internal and external. From an internal point of view, the most fateful decision was limiting the size and growth of the Lebanese army to numbers much inferior to those of both Israel and Syria. One of the unstated reasons for this decision was fear of coups d'état. Certainly this was a phenomenon that was becoming evident to political scientists and others who studied the politics of the Third World in the post-independence era that followed de-colonization, and certainly one which became evident in the region as coups d'état toppled regimes in Syria (the first in the region), Egypt, Iraq and Libya. Coups d'état were also attempted in Jordan.

The stated reason for the Lebanese decision not to build-up the level of its armed forces to those approaching the size of Israel's and Syria's is intriguing. It was based on a metaphysical belief that Lebanon's weakness (that is the small size of its armed forces) was actually its strength. The Lebanese seemed to believe that by not creating a large military which could threaten either of its two powerful neighbours, Israel and Syria would have an interest in maintaining Lebanon's security. At that time, it was thought that a build-up of the Lebanese armed forces to the requisite level necessary for deterrence would be met by similar build-ups by its neighbours. This would force Lebanon to seek alliances with its neighbours, other regional powers or one of the two superpowers to further any and all efforts by Lebanon to provide for its security. All these measures would thus undermine Lebanon's efforts to remain neutral in Arab-Arab disputes and would alter its status as a non-confrontational country in the Arab-Israeli conflict. When it became evident in the mid-1950s that Lebanon's neutrality and its non-confrontational status would not be respected, it was already too late. President Camille Chamoun's efforts to triple the size of the Lebanese Army from 6000 to about 20,000, his attempts to seek an alliance with the United States under the Eisenhower doctrine, and the secret conclusion of an anti-Syrian coalition with Jordan came to naught and sowed the seeds of an internal strife that was to begin tearing Lebanon apart in 1975.

The external factor influencing Lebanon's decision not to build-up its armed forces to a meaningful level was no less intriguing. Once more, the decision was based on some metaphysical belief that the United States would not allow the destruction of the only 'Arab democracy'. But the defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 war with Israel, and the subsequent rise of the PLO as a major player in the region at a moment of great Arab weakness and division, was to change all that. The Arab regimes, under attack by their masses for their defeat in what came to be known as the Six Day War, were no longer able to come to Lebanon's assistance because the PLO increasingly became a state within the Lebanese state. In fact, Lebanon was being asked to provide for PLO security and its own security by some of these Arab states and by a fairly large segment of the Lebanese population at a time when raids by the Palestinians on Israel were eliciting harsher and harsher Israeli responses in Lebanon. The destruction of most of Middle East Airline's fleet (the national carrier) at Beirut International Airport should have warned Lebanese officials that Israel was now demanding that Lebanon in 1968 provide for its security too, and any attempt to do so would have inevitably brought about similar Syrian demands. The rest, of course, is history. But one cannot but draw two conclusions: 1) the presence in Lebanon of Israeli and Syrian forces attempting to provide for their own security is indicative of the failure of their policies to force Lebanon to provide for their security needs when Lebanon could not do so; and 2) Lebanon is still not in a position to provide for Syria's and Israel's security needs and it will not be in a position to do so for some time, at least not until the Israeli-Syrian conflict has been resolved. Much that is good has taken place in Lebanon since the Taif Accords and the end of the internal phase of the conflict. The institutions of the state are being rebuilt, including the armed forces; and the economy is recovering, despite repeated set-

backs, and is on the verge of a take-off. But much more needs to be accomplished, especially national dialogue and reconciliation.

The national will of a country is dependent not only on cohabitation and coexistence, but also on cohesion. In the performance of assigned security tasks under any agreement with Israel, the armed forces will need sufficient manpower, military material, training and cohesion. Presently, it has none of these. Sixty thousand strong, the army lacks proper training to fight a guerrilla war while simultaneously fighting a war in urban terrain if it is to take on Hizbollah, the Palestinians and the Kurds. It lacks the necessary armour, mobility and an adequate attack helicopter component. It has no air force to speak of and only a meagre naval capability with which to patrol and defend its shoreline. Equally important to accomplish these security tasks is the full support of a majority of the Lebanese people, especially if force against segments of the Lebanese population is needed and a break-up of its armed forces along confessional lines—as was the case in 1975 and more so after 1983—is to be prevented. However, Lebanon will need more than national will if these are proxies of either Israel or Syria, or if they are unreconciled Palestinians whose futures are uncertain at this time. It will also need more than national will if it is to deal with the Kurds, Iranians and other variables.

The recently concluded Israeli military operation in southern Lebanon, the so-called 'Grapes of Wrath', is illustrative of the complexity of Lebanon's problems. First of all, it demonstrated growing Israeli impatience with the problem of Hizbollah. Secondly, statements made by Prime Minister Netanyahu before and after the election can be construed to imply Israeli readiness to resort to military means repeatedly if Lebanon fails to curb Hizbollah's activities or at least influence Hizbollah to limit its operations to the security zone where the monitoring group will attempt to referee the conflict, but certainly not resolve it. Thirdly, the military monitoring group is the best that Secretary of State Christopher, Lebanon's prime minister, Rafik Hariri, the Syrian president, Hafez al-Assad, the foreign ministers of France and Iran, the UN and a host of others could assemble under trying circumstances. Fourthly, the Lebanese army could not accomplish more than it did. It would have been suicidal to attempt more. Finally, Hizbollah's popularity was somewhat enhanced, but recrimination erupted between Prime Minister Hariri and the group.

Let us turn now to the Rabin-Peres 'Lebanon First' option and, secondly, to the Netanyahu 'Lebanon First' formula.

Under Rabin-Peres, Lebanon was seen as part and parcel of Israel's conflict with Syria. This option, therefore, sought to:

- 1) Deal with the causes of the conflict, by putting the return of the Golan to Syria on the negotiating table;
- 2) Deny Syria the ability to use Hizbollah as a weapon with which to pressure Israel into greater concessions when negotiations failed to achieve that end;
- 3) Use Lebanon as a confidence-building mechanism, whereby Rabin-Peres could sell the Israeli public on the idea that they could trust Syria to live up to its engagements in Lebanon as it had on the Golan;
- 4) Reassure Syria that it accepted the reality that Lebanon, by virtue of its security treaties with Syria, was a Syrian sphere of influence, and

5) Demand that Syria and Lebanon take responsibility for all operations launched from Lebanese territory against Israel by a host of Syrian proxies and allies.

The Rabin-Peres option failed because Israel and Syria could not come to an agreement as to what constituted 'normalisation', the extent of and timetable for Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, and the ultimate border between the two countries. It could also be argued that it failed because both President Assad and Prime Ministers Rabin and Peres could not sell it fully to their constituents. The two stumbling blocks for Syria were an entirely operational Israeli embassy in Damascus and open borders with Israel. Total withdrawal from the Golan in tandem with a quasi total withdrawal from the occupied territories was more than Labour supporters in and out of government could readily accept.

The Netanyahu formula sought to achieve the following goals:

- 1) Get Israel out of Lebanon
- 2) Remove Lebanon as the battlefield, and
- 3) Link these two developments to an eventual peace between the three countries in which no assurance was given to Syria that it would get all of the Golan back, under the Land for Peace formula.

Under this formula, the only incentive offered Syria was that it would be secure from Israeli military operations in Lebanon which could escalate into a full fledged war between them.

For Lebanon, this formula would have been disastrous. Under the Rabin-Peres option, Lebanon, with or without the support of Syria, would have had to confront a host of proxies and try to subdue them by force, if necessary; something that would have threatened the fragile peace and reconstruction efforts since some of these proxies are Lebanese nationals. More importantly, it would have made Lebanon a permanent Syrian sphere of influence, something that in the long run would be destabilizing for Lebanon, Syria and Israel.

Under the Netanyahu formula, Lebanon would not only have to confront the proxies and allies of Israel and Syria, but it would have had also to do it without Syrian support since Syria would have no incentive to do so without an a priori understanding with Israel that it would get the Golan back. Additionally, and implicitly stated in the Netanyahu formula, was the clear message that Israel would contest Syria's hegemony in Lebanon and might even seek to replace Syria and the hegemony. In other words, the Netanyahu formula would, once more, force Lebanon to provide for Israeli security by taking on and confronting Syria and its Lebanese allies and proxies. If accepted by any Lebanese government, this would be a formula for self-immolation.

What then is the ideal plan for Lebanon, one that would restore peace to that war-torn country and satisfy the security requirements of both Israel and Syria? The only successful way is by having both Israel and Syria provide Lebanon with security. It should include the following:

- 1) An agreement between Israel and Syria resolving the conflict over the Golan. This is the only point of departure, regardless of whether one accepts what is to follow, or whether the next administration attempts some variant of either the

Rabin-Peres option or the Netanyahu formula. Syria will unequivocally refuse any and all plans that do not include the return of the Golan;

2) That as part of this agreement, both Israel and Syria agree to isolate or quarantine Lebanon by;

a) disbanding their proxies and ultimately removing their own troops from Lebanon and agreeing between them to prevent outsiders who might be opposed to peace from entering Lebanon. Here I mean Iran, Libya, Iraq, the Sudan and others;

b) working with Jordan, the Palestinian National Authority and Turkey through multinational negotiations to decide the fate of the Palestinians and Kurds in Lebanon whose uncertain fate and status must be resolved if stability is to be restored in Lebanon.

3) Declaring a denouncement by both Israel and Syria to any and all attempts at hegemony by one of the countries and conclude a series of agreements between them that in essence regulate their interactions with Lebanon and vice versa. What is being suggested, in other words, is a regime for Lebanon that is not too different than that accorded Switzerland, with both Israel and Syria acting as the principal guarantors of that accord.

Now, what about the Lebanese and when can it be assumed that they would be able to take on the responsibilities associated with the above regime?

What can be suggested here is a period of time of not more than five years in which two developments must occur. The first of these developments is national reconciliation and dialogue. Lebanon has to move beyond coexistence and cohabitation. Intra- and inter-communal wounds must heal. Healing can only begin when some of the major causes of war are removed. Two communities, the Maronite and Shiite, have been most affected by the war. In many instances intra-communal fighting was more severe than inter-communal fighting. It resembled class warfare more than civil war. These 'intra-' wounds must heal before national dialogue can begin and national reconciliation is achieved.

The second necessary development is enactment of a constitution that goes well beyond the National Pact and the Taif Accords. It must be a living document that allows for constitutional change without threatening the security of each and every community. The problem with the National Pact was that it could not be changed, and every attempt at amendment was viewed by all of the religious communities as an existential threat. It is the resulting zero-sum game that brought Lebanon to 1975 via what should have been the wake-up call of the politically turbulent and violent summer of 1958. What Lebanon needs is a constitution that is open to amendment and one which, at the same time, continues to provide security for minorities, since all factions and communities in Lebanon are in essence minorities. Here, the American Constitution comes to mind, and with it, the initial federal make-up of the United States of America. All reference to federalism, confederation, devolution and decentralisation raises a red flag. But it is the only system of governance which can guarantee the security concerns of all Lebanese and bring peace to Lebanon.

Meanwhile, the Syrian army in Lebanon remains entrenched in defensive positions in the Bekaa Valley with units of the Lebanese army. The Syrian leadership continues to believe that Israel will eventually launch its army into the Bekaa in an operation not too dissimilar from that which it undertook in 1982.

One difference would be that it would have as its main target the Syrian presence in Lebanon and not necessarily the elimination of Hizbollah and other Syrian allies and proxies. The reinforced Israeli army on Israel's northern front remains on the alert, convinced that Syria will attempt to retake the Golan in an operation that differs little in its objectives from those that prompted Syria to join Egypt in the 1973 war. With winter approaching, tensions on this front might cool. But spring will bring with it new concerns and tensions if the Israeli-Syrian negotiations do not resume beforehand. As for Prime Minister Netanyahu's 'Lebanon First' formula, it remains on the table somewhere, frozen in time.