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Israel's Alternative Policy in Lebanon
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With the assertion of Islamist determination to pursue a relentless war of attrition against Israel from Lebanon, and the consolidation of a Syrian-Iranian, and possibly Iraqi “eastern front” against the Jewish State, the conditions are suitable for the development of a new Israeli policy in the security zone, impacting ultimately on the whole country of Lebanon.

The current international context, especially after the Oslo and Wye accords, is aimed at pressuring Israel to make additional concessions and surrender more land in exchange for peace treaties. The international community, led by the United States Administration – and under increasing Arab pressure – is asking Israel to engage in additional steps in the framework of “Land for Peace”. The two most immediate areas which Israel is being urged to abandon are Judea and Samaria as well as southern Lebanon. While, the “West Bank” is a “disputed territory” between two national groups, and its fate will be decided by the Jewish people’s determination and the Israeli government’s ability to resist the abandonment of additional, strategic, and historical lands, the security zone in south Lebanon seems to be the only bargaining chip in future negotiations with Damascus and Beirut.

This article aims at suggesting the following principles:

1. In the current context, the security zone’s future is indeed a political, financial, diplomatic and military burden on the Israeli State. It is crucial for Israel to find a solution to this situation; a solution which will reduce the present cost on all of the above levels and at the same time, insure the present and future national interests of the Jewish state in relation to its northern frontier.
2. The context of the security zone is much more complex than the single parameter of Hizbullah. And furthermore, the parameter of Hizbullah is much more complex than a local resistance to the presence of Israeli troops in the security zone. There are regional dimensions connected to the security zone, and there are global dimensions to its simple buffer role.

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3. The security zone, apart from its crucial role for a future renaissance of a free Lebanon, friendly, and ultimately ally to Israel, is strategically crucial in the delicate balance of power in the region between Israel and the Arab Islamic world.
4. The current status quo, maintained by Israel in the security zone cannot survive the rapid changes in the region. Israel will have either to withdraw, and therefore abandon this card, or follow an alternative policy in that area.

This article aims at re-evaluating the situation of the security zone in light of these rapid changes, explore the proposals we are putting together, and build an alternative policy vis a vis the security zone, leading eventually to a renewed strategy towards Lebanon.

Lebanon's Syndrome in Israeli Politics

There is no doubt that Israel's government and public, have had to endure a great deal of distress from the involvement in Lebanon, and are suffering from a Lebanese syndrome. We acknowledge that because of the 1982 drama, the Israeli political establishment perceives Lebanon as a politico-military quagmire where no initiative can survive nor any policy can be successful. We recognize that the Christian leadership of Lebanon, particularly those who were in charge of the East Beirut enclave between 1975 and 1990, are in part morally and politically responsible for the disaster which blew apart the historic opportunity for the two nations to build the alliance.

It is also important to note the existence of a new Lebanese Christian movement which identifies itself with the above mentioned parameters. A movement, which according to its literature and activities, is currently determined to renew a decades-old attempt to establish an alliance between the Lebanese Christians, and the Jewish people in the Middle East. Their commitment to the alliance, in contrast to the opportunist approach of previous Lebanese Christian leaders, is ideological. Their doctrine is published, their struggle and sacrifices for this alliance are recorded, and more importantly, they contend that since 1990, their organized political groups have sought to create the momentum and the structure for the renaissance of this alliance. In sum, the difference between today's pro-Israel movement among the Lebanese Christians and the leaders, who in the past worked with the Israelis, lies in the ideological background.

Had such currents of thought been pervasive in 1982's Christian Lebanon, peace and security would have reigned from Tripoli to Gaza. However, it took Lebanon's new Christian resistance many years after their 1990 demise to re-emerge from the ashes. But if history is made of surprises, geography is a constant factor. Lebanon was, is, and will always be, the northern neighbor of the State of Israel. It is therefore ineluctable for both peoples, the Jews and the Christians of these two countries to dialogue about their future in the region. It is a fact for the Lebanese Christians that Israel is the only ally they can count on and also a fact for Israel, that the only non-Arab nation, and potentially friendly state, which has common borders, is Lebanon.

We postulate that Israel's people and government need to search for the best ways to maintain peace and security across their northern border. We strongly argue that such a peace and security coupling cannot properly come into being without the existence of an independent, democratic, self sufficient, Christian Lebanese entity, in alliance with Israel. We conclude that despite the grave errors of the 1980s – most but not all of which came from the Lebanese side – Israel has no choice but to redefine a new policy vis a vis Lebanon. We believe that Jerusalem should build its future strategies in partnership with a nationalist movement among the Christians, who share similar values including Israel's western democratic ideals.

Lebanon in Regional Strategies

There are four major perceptions of Lebanon's future in the region.

1. **SYRIA**, the politico-military occupier of the country, has a clear agenda. After it slowly eradicated the Christian resistance in the center between 1975 and 1990 and controlled most of Lebanon's Moslem sectors, the Baath regime is currently moving on two axes: On one hand, it is completing a full take over of the country's constitutional, governmental, and political institutions. After the fictitious legislative elections of 1992 and the gerrymandered parliamentary elections which took place in 1996, and after the "appointment" of two consecutive pro-Syrian "Maronite" presidents, Damascus is in full control – not only of the executive, but also of the legislative branch. Lebanon's current and future legislation will be an extension of Mr. Assad's regime. With more than 14 military, security, intelligence, economic, financial, educational, and other agreements signed between the two entities, the Baath power will progressively take over not only Lebanon's geo-political assets, but its worldwide financial and economic empire.

It is true that Syria's strategic priority is to "digest" Lebanon and it is therefore willing to wait on the Golan issue. But Assad's ultimate goal is to use Lebanon against Israel, as a formidable weapon, capable not only of paralyzing Israel's north, but ultimately to force Israel to abandon the Golan, and perhaps in a context of a future Arab strategy, to defeat Israel. In this regard, Syria's top priority in today's balance of power with the Jewish State is not the diplomatic track – such as in the case of the PLO and Egypt – but to drive Israel out of the security zone in south Lebanon. The Syrians know that the Golan is their property as far as most interpretations of international law are concerned, and their strategy is to wait for better strategic circumstances. Instead, they prefer to move on the security zone for the following reasons. First, they know that this is the only non-disputed area from which any Israeli government will eventually withdraw if its conditions are met. For Israel has no land claims in south Lebanon. Second, Syria knows that in the absence of a local Lebanese resistance to its domination, Israel will ultimately be forced to pull out under international pressures, or in the context of a satisfactory peace agreement. Currently, Syria is completing its dismantling of any serious resistance in Beirut, while unleashing Hizbullah southward to keep the pressure on the SLA and Israel. Third, Assad's long term objective – a vision which unfortunately escapes the analysis of Americans, Israelis and Lebanese Christian as well – is to uproot the national claim of the only non-Arab group which is contiguous to the Jewish state. Since 1948, Israel has been perceived as the first and most powerful challenge to the "Arabity" of the region. If Lebanon's Christians follow the path of the Jewish people it will cause a chain reaction throughout the Middle East, from Algeria to Kurdistan. This is why, for the Arab nationalists, the stakes are so high in Lebanon and Syria's most intense goal is to capture the southern enclave of that country.

2. **IRAN** provides no doubt as to its strategic goals. They are well defined in its public discourse and in the rhetoric of its off-spring, Hizbullah: The establishment of a Khumainist-inspired, Islamic state in Lebanon. Operating for now under Syrian umbrella, the Islamists strategy concurs with that of Damascus. Both want to defeat Israel in south Lebanon, both want to eliminate the resurgence of a free Lebanon from the south. Hizbullah's power in Lebanon has two sources: The Syrian-Iranian alliance on the one hand, and the fundamentalist growth among the Shiites, and among many Sunnis, on the other hand. To expect Syria to move against "terrorism" in Lebanon is equivalent to a Syrian conflict with Iran, and with an increasing Islamist trend in Lebanon. However a Syrian promise to evacuate Hizbullah from the south in return for an Israeli withdrawal from the security zone, is likely. Damascus and Tehran are sophisticated enough to induce the government in Jerusalem to proceed on that path. For their ultimate joint goal is to gain control up to the international borders, with or without violence.
3. **ISRAEL**'s policy objective in Lebanon is crystal clear: Calm and peace on its northern frontier. After 1985, and because of bitter experience, an Israeli paradigm denies any government the right to intervene "in Lebanon's affairs". To the Israelis, the security zone is just that: sand bags to protect the northern Galilee from katyusha rockets. While in pure military terms, this concept is valid and legitimate, in regional terms, and in Middle Eastern realities, this concept is incomplete. While Israel

keeps the area as a buffer, for strict technical considerations, its opponents aim at invading the zone, for strategic considerations. The imbalance is clear.

- a) The security zone is not the Sinai Peninsula. Terrorist organizations have the capabilities to hit targets in Israel, despite the buffer.
- b) Israel's security claim can be easily defeated by a Lebanese sovereignty claim, along with an offer of tactical security measures. Under a Labor government, these parameters were accepted as the only alternative Israel has to obtain peace with Syria. In other words, Mr. Peres' cabinet had offered to abandon the security zone: first, as a way to stop exposing the IDF to casualties, second, to silence world opinion about the "illegitimate occupation of an Arab land", third, to induce Assad to make a deal over the Golan. The previous government dismissed all the warnings sent by Lebanese Christians about the fate of the population, and the geo-political realities which would develop as a result of the unilateral withdrawal.

The new government is confronted with the same problem. Change occurred in Jerusalem but not in south Lebanon. This is why, in the absence of serious alternatives, it is unlikely that the current government can escape the strategic choice of its predecessor. Mr. Peres was choosing between two options: keep the costly status quo in south Lebanon, or risk a withdrawal. With no new parameter, the present government will also have to choose from the same menu.

4. **THE CHRISTIANS OF LEBANON**, who were supposed to be the principal and decisive actor during the 1982 episode, are the weakest factor in Lebanon's politics. After the failure of their leadership in meeting Israel's initiative in 1982-1983, they lost two major cards. One, they gradually lost their territorial enclave -their most powerful asset- until their collapse in October 1990. Lack of unity, lack of vision, and lack of democracy were the three components of their defeat. Two, the Christian community lost the trust of the Israeli people and political establishment. Not only did the Gemayel-Chamoun team fail Israel at its most crucial moment in 1982-83, but later and despite the past lessons, both Geagea and Aoun kept their doors open to Israel's enemies, the PLO and Saddam.

Only in the security zone, did the Christians keep their commitment to their allies. From Major Saad Haddad to General Antoine Lahad, the SLA and the mostly Christian population, stood by Israel. We will not be exaggerating if we state that the only place in the world where Christian and Jewish blood is shed together for the defense of two Judeo-Christian nations, is the security zone!

However, despite the dramatic fate of Lebanon's Christians and the tremendous mistakes perpetrated by their national leadership, it is geo-politically correct to argue that no other factor in Lebanon can replace the Christian community. Ideologically, culturally, historically, strategically, and economically, no other presence, particularly Moslem, can play the unique role of the Lebanese Christians, if an alternative to their failure is found. In order to assess their possible new role one should review the main trends within the community. Politically, the Christians are divided twice; for and against the Taif agreement, which means in fact for or against Syria; and for or against Israel. These two matrices can determine who is willing to do what. Amine Gemayel, for example, is critical of Syria, and also of Israel. General Michel Aoun is opposed to Damascus but is not willing to ally himself with Jerusalem; Samir Geagea has accepted the Taif agreement, but was not accepted by Syria; Dory Chamoun rejects the Syrian influence, but is not pro-Israel. In sum, the anti-Syrian camp in Beirut did not change its methods from those of its predecessors of the 1980s. We anticipate that this group will repeat the same mistakes if the opportunity arises again. Sociologically, however, trends have dramatically changed in one decade. Because of the harsh experiences under Syro-Islamic occupation, but also because of ideological maturation, the Christian public is increasingly resentful of Syria, and the Arab world, and fearful of Islamist designs. For since the mid 1980s, a nationalist current of thought has swept within the Christian community, particularly the younger elements. Today more books, articles, seminars, discussion groups, and intellectuals than ever, reject the Arabization and Islamization of the country. Moreover, also as a result of patient groundwork by nationalist organizations, a pro-Israel movement is thriving within the community, particularly in the Diaspora.

For the first time since 1948, an organized nationalist, pro-Israel movement is in existence among the Christian people of Lebanon. It is ironic to note that while such a movement was needed in 1982, for Israel to succeed in Lebanon, the dramatic consequences of its failure triggered the spirit of such a movement. Had the Christian community not experienced defeat, and realized the mistakes of its leadership, the nationalist camp would not have had the opportunity to call for an alternative. But although the nationalists are gradually catching the attention of many Lebanese Christians, time is a dangerous factor. With its current strength and logistics, the nationalist pro-Israel camp will need another ten years naturally to replace the old guard. In contrast, if they are allowed to organize a free entity on part of the Lebanese soil, they can remobilize the entire community, and make a difference in the region's geo-politics. While we know for sure that the Assad regime is aware of this fact, and therefore is attempting to eliminate the option at its roots, the new Administration in Israel can bolster the nationalist camp of Lebanon in time, to allow the reestablishment of a non-Arab, democratic, and pro-Zionist ally to its north.

South Lebanon's Geo-Political Realities

As we know, the present shape of the security zone is the result of two factors. The first and crucial factor, or the condition *necessaire*, is the Israeli decision to establish a ten miles wide belt along its northern borders with Lebanon, to arm and train the South Lebanon Army (SLA), to maintain a military force inside the zone, and to provide social and economic assistance to the inhabitants of the area. The second factor, or the condition *suffisante*, is the determination of the local population, particularly the Christians, to support the Israeli presence, to provide soldiers and officers for the SLA, and to commit to the resistance against Hizbullah, and other terrorist organizations. Let us remember that in 1976-77, it was inhabitants from the Christian villages of Qolaia, Ain Ebel, Rmeish, and others, who came to Israel and expressed their will to resist the PLO. Let us note that in 1985, the SLA and its Christian elements decided to draw the defense lines east of Jezzine, whereas Israel's decision was to withdraw to Marjeyun. Therefore we can conclude that next to Israel's strategic decision to defend its basic security, the buffer zone embodies the space essential for the remnant of the Christian community to survive. The border zone has two functions: security to the Galilee, and survival to Israel's allies.

Since 1985, the successive Israeli governments have clearly underlined the security need of the security zone. They have also committed to defend the "future and the safety" of the SLA, after a solution is reached. After the signing of the Oslo agreements, the Labor government lowered the ceiling of commitment. The security zone became a card usable in political negotiations with Syria, while only the "safety", but not the "future" of the members of the SLA remained policy. A few months before the change in government, Mr. Peres' cabinet was ready to "risk for peace", by unilaterally withdrawing from the zone, notwithstanding the future security considerations. The issue of the SLA, and the Christian community became matters of "humanitarian assistance to refugees inside Israel". The election of Mr. Netanyahu has been perceived by many in Lebanon, the Diaspora and by the overwhelming majority of south Lebanon's population, as a benchmark in Israel's northern policies. Early signals sent by Jerusalem after May 29th demonstrated a determination not to make concessions to Hizbullah, Iran, and Syria, without clear guarantees made to Israel by these parties. Inside the security zone, a wave of optimism followed the Israeli elections. For the Lebanese military and civilians as well, felt genuinely, that the successors of Menachem Begin would not sacrifice them, nor would they risk Israel's national security.

Syria's strategy towards the security zone is complex. One, Damascus relies completely on the Syrian-controlled regime in Beirut to wage a constant international media and diplomatic campaign against Israel. While few in the West would listen to a dictatorship calling for the take-over of a buffer zone with Israel, who can reject the arguments of a Lebanese government, emerging from a long civil war, and striving for "peace and reconstruction". Besides, a Hariri cabinet, headed by the Saudi billionaire, cannot but defeat Israel in the international arena. In fact, Assad took full advantage of his overwhelming invasion of the Christian enclave in October 1990. Before the fall of the enclave, Beirut's geography and international

legitimacy were divided in two, and the issue of the south marginalized. After the Christian debacle, a “new” power emerged from the ashes in Lebanon. In a zero-sum-game context, not only did the Jewish State lose an ally, but it had to face a Lebanon it never knew before. In contrast with the weak, fragmented, and unmotivated central government which had ruled the country for the previous four decades, the current Syrian-dominated regime is far more aggressive than its predecessor. Beirut does not have the ugly face of the Damascus Baathist regime, but the ‘bigger sister’ made certain to use extensively the international image of traditional Lebanon. Syria’s march towards the security zone is slow and sophisticated. On the one hand, it deploys Beirut’s regular army against the SLA, delegitimizing the latter internationally. On the other hand, it tolerates Hizbullah’s action against Israeli forces, legitimizing the pro-Iranian terrorists. Instead of being perceived as a resistance force against the Syro-Iranian occupation and terrorism, Lahad men are branded as traitors worldwide – ironically also by some Israelis. And instead of being viewed as protectors of threatened minorities, and defenders of Israeli security, The IDF is clearly defined as an occupation force. Syria’s parameter is simple: Despite the rejection of Syria’s role by many Lebanese, and most of the Christians, the Syrians have successively managed to establish as an ally a power in Lebanon, which currently controls the government. While Israel has many friends in Lebanon, and has a natural ally – the Christian people – it failed to show the world these historic realities. Even in the security zone, there is no Israeli policy of “encouraging” the allies to remain as such. In this context, Syria is expected to defeat Israel’s role in southern Lebanon, and will therefore be omnipresent as a strategic power Rosh Hanikra to the Golan.

Hizbullah is used by Syria against Israel, but also uses Syria against Lebanon. Indeed, the Hizbullah of 1996 is much more powerful than the Hizbullah of 1984. The constant tactical victories of the pro-Iranian group were wisely utilized inside the country. While it is true that the organization started as an Iranian invention, today it has deep roots among the Shiites, and political respect within the Moslem communities. Israel’s unilateral withdrawal of 1985 played into the hands of the fundamentalists. Filling the void of the PLO, and in the absence of a Christian-Israeli joint strategy, Hizbullah took over the ex-Arafat empire from the southern suburb of Beirut to Nabatiah. After the fall of the Christian enclave in October 1990, Hizbullah increased in power and in legitimacy, for it became the sole “resistance against the external occupier”. Another concession was made to the Islamist organization in August 1993, when Mr. Rabin accepted to abide by an “agreement” with Hizbullah. Israel’s government felt it achieved a tactical victory. In fact, by Hizbullah standards, the IDF was surrendering its supremacy. The operation “Grapes of Wrath”, in 1996, repeated the mistake. Instead of a diplomatic success for Israel, Mr. Peres gave Hizbullah an international reputation, an Arab credibility and Syrian bonuses. In short, Hizbullah is expected to rule south Lebanon, either as a militia, or as a part of the central power. All scenarios which fantasize about a “Syrian elimination” of the fundamentalists are mirages. For the only context which will allow this Western fantasy to be fulfilled, is a radical change in Syria. The chain is easy to understand. Assad’s ultimate price to eliminate Hizbullah strategically, is the elimination of Israel’s supremacy over Syria, by way of the West. Such a new matrix is obviously inconceivable by a nationalist – or any reasonable – government in Israel. Therefore, we expect Syria to maintain its strategic support of Hizbullah against Israel, with or without the security zone. Meanwhile, the Lebanese Islamists are conquering the country’s political realms. Supported by Syria and Iran, in the absence of a Christian resistance, nothing can stop the ascendance of Hizbullah to national power.

To Israel, particularly the politico-military bureaucracy, the security zone is a liability which cannot be currently jettisoned. Human casualties are bleeding Israeli society, while the media blasts – the Kana affair for example – are damaging the country’s international credibility. The political climate in Israel – in its attitude towards south Lebanon – is sculpted in a way that any government which will pull out its troops from there with even a minimal guarantee of security will be rewarded locally and internationally. Beyond the region, there is a unanimous pressure by the international community for Israel to withdraw. Jerusalem’s only argument in this case is the security problem. There is no other factor than the elimination of the katyusha terror in the minds of the Israeli political establishment. The security zone as a factor in Lebanese affairs has been non-existent since 1985.

For understandable reasons, the Christians of Lebanon are perhaps a non-factor in today's Israeli strategies. But their reinstatement as factors in future policy options is unavoidable. The following intellectual exercises serve to prove it. First: If the Arab world – Syria in particular – offers to Israel to contain Hizbullah et al. in return for the absorption of the security zone, the Jewish State will not have any choice but to acquiesce. Once the IDF was evacuated, and the SLA dismantled, major changes would occur north of the border. For months, the Galilee would lack the katyushas. Such respite is not new to the Israelis, for in the past, between wars, they have enjoyed the calm which preceded the storm.

Now, instead of having an ally in the security zone, strategic opponents such as Syria, Iran, and/or other radical elements will gain a hundred kilometers of land bordering Israel. The new enemy will occupy the high ground as against the lower ground south of the Israeli border. A much more dangerous situation will replace the current status quo, where terrorist attacks will be able to hit directly the Jewish population centers. The regular armies of Syria and Iran can deploy a few kilometers from the country's furthest northerly, and northwesterly communities. More important however will be the changes which will take place in the evacuated zone. The Christians will gradually leave, and one million Shiites will move south. Instead of creating bridges and local support, future Israeli counter offensives or punitive expeditions against terrorists will hit a dense Moslem wall. Second, Israel's claim to transform the search for peace into a full-scale investigation of human rights in the region will morally collapse in the face of the abandonment of south Lebanon's Christians. How will any Israeli government be able to claim its interest in oppressed people around the Middle East, and criticize Damascus and Tehran, if its own faithful allies will have been abandoned to the ruthless regime of Assad and the pro-Iranian forces. From these two angles, we argue that not only can Israel – represented by the "nationalist Zionist" leadership – not bypass the existence of a Christian ally in Lebanon, but also nor can it simply proclaim the exclusiveness of the security dimension of the security zone. Strategically, Israel's only choice is to have a strong local ally north of the Galilee. Jerusalem's only rational and historical choice is to link up once more with the Christian community of Lebanon. This may represent a choice which might not be appreciated among many Israelis, for various reasons, but it remains one which cannot be avoided. The only military strategic option remaining to the Jewish State in the medium and long term, if it is to maintain its balance of power with the northern threat, is obviously the nuclear deterrent. But Lebanese and Israelis alike know all too well the consequences of a blast anywhere in Lebanon.

As to the Christians of Lebanon, we admit that they are not in their best condition on all levels. Ethnically cleansed from the Shuf and Aley in 1983-1985, they have lost their demographic continuum with the security zone, and through it with Israel. After the 1990 debacle, and the defeat of General Aoun, the Christian resistance lost its hold on constitutional institutions, as well as its politico-military control of the central areas of Lebanon. And with the dissolution of the Geagea-led militia, the Syrians obliterated the last ground force opposing them. Today, without an external move, a Christian intifada is unlikely to occur in the center. Back in 1982, the IDF hoped to link with the Lebanese Forces/Lebanese Front in East Beirut. The latter failed to meet Israel at the beginning of the Peace for Galilee operation, causing a disaster for the Jewish State and the Christians as well. A similar advance today will not only hit a politico-military void, but will probably flounder in a greater chaotic situation than a decade and half ago. The Christian political establishment is divided on its policy vis a vis Syria and Israel. Many Christian leaders profit from the Baathist controlled regime, while many others oppose it. But opposition to Syria does not necessarily mean friendship with Israel. Aoun, Gemayel, and Chamoun do not anticipate any public contact with Israelis. The Geagea faction is still committed to the Taif agreement, despite the indictment of their leader, and it flirts sporadically with Damascus. The Maronite Patriarch criticizes the government but cannot cross the line with the Syrians without a strong secular leadership around him. Such realities lead us to the following conclusions:

- a) At the present stage, the Christian community in central Lebanon is not ready for any strategic bridge with Israel. An ideological "intifada" must take place prior to any form of cooperation with East Beirut. New types of leadership need to replace the old, failing, "Arabized," cohorts of feudal-style power brokers.

- b) Similar to Israel's Zionist camp, the Lebanese Christians should be organized, and prepared by their nationalist camp. Such a revolution can only be led by teams with strategic vision, and ideological roots.
- c) Although 1.5 million Christians are under occupation in Lebanon, there are six to seven millions in the Diaspora, with their enormous economic, and political potential. To mobilize this powerful entity as a support base for the Christian resistance of Lebanon, and as a formidable ally to Israel worldwide, a Christian enclave is needed somewhere in Lebanon. It is not exaggerated to state that out of one free square mile of Lebanese soil, a nationalist leadership can draw the endless resources of the Lebanese Christian Diaspora. One building in Marjeyun, with faxes, computers, e-mails, and qualified teams, can send out waves reaching millions of Lebanese Christians, and Christian communities worldwide. Unfortunately, such a dimension was never considered by Israel's strategists, nor advocated by the current leadership of the SLA.
- d) The only and most logical place for such a beginning is today's security zone, where the Christian resistance is not contaminated yet by Beirut's unreliable leadership, and where the concept of alliance with Israel is the most real and solid in the entire Middle East, perhaps even in the whole world. Let us note that the security zone can become, but is not yet, the launching pad of Lebanese Christian nationalism, and of a closer alliance with Israel.

From the above, we conclude that:

1. Despite the 1982 episode, the Christians of Lebanon are the only potential ally against the advance of the northern Arabo-Islamic threat against Israel.
2. The only entity which can revive a credible Christian resistance, allied with Israel, is a nationalist group, based in the security zone.
3. The only power in the world which can allow this historic and strategic change to occur is an Israeli government with a regional vision.

Here are the options available to the Israeli government:

I – Maintaining the Status Quo

Such an option is rejected by Syria, Beirut's government, Hizbullah, and the Arab world, all of whom will resume their war on all levels to weaken the IDF and SLA and inflict maximum human casualties on these forces. Arabist circles in the United States, and Europe, in conjunction with anti-Likud factions within Israel, are on the move to bring about the end of the security zone, as a way to tighten the rope around the neck of the nationalist camp. We agree that Syria and Hizbullah will continue their war of attrition against the enclave and northern Israel at a very low cost: Shiite corpses, and Iranian paid katyushas and ammunition. The "Grapes of Wrath" operation has miserably demonstrated that not only will classic high-tech retaliation against Hizbullah targets fail to reach their goals, but they will politically backfire against Israel internationally. In fact, from a strategic perspective the current status quo is changing the balance of power on the micro-level. With the time factor, the macro-level will be dramatically altered. Let us follow the developments in this projected scenario:

The security zone and northern Israel are constantly attacked by Hizbullah. Israel retaliates with massive force, causing civilian casualties and an international outcry. The United Nations and the Arab-Islamic world criticizes Israel as an occupier, Europe joins the criticism, and the United States calls for a stabilization, and for a solution to the problem. Inside Israel, the opposition criticizes the government and calls for a unilateral withdrawal from the security zone. Under the tremendous pressures from outside and inside, the nationalist government of Israel considers two options. Either to stay in the security zone and engage in a higher level of retaliation against Hizbullah, or unilaterally to withdraw. If the latter is considered, a set of consequences will unfold. If the government decides to resist the pressures, here are the expected developments. While no

qualitative steps are taken in the security zone on the political level, precisely because Israel does not intervene in Lebanon's domestic affairs, the opponents benefit from what Israel's government consider its best argument: security. Indeed while Jerusalem argues with the world that its presence is just for security reasons, the planet's answer is logical: Pull out and you will have security.

But on the ground, anti-Israel forces will grow stronger in the south, and their presence will become more legitimate in Lebanon. Hizbullah emerges as a national hero, and its terrorists are acclaimed as "freedom fighters", (even by Israel's extreme left wing sectors). Even the American traditional enmity towards the assassins of the US Marines and the hostages in Beirut shifts. Washington pragmatists perceive the Iranian-controlled network as a "patriotic resistance against an unjustified Israeli occupation of a sovereign country". Moreover, the Taif regime welcomes more Hizbullah leaders into its parliament, and probably into its government. The Lebanese army, structured by the Syrians, is increasingly infested with fundamentalists. The SLA is demonized as a vile agent of the Israelis and its officers tried in absentia by Beirut. Gradually, Israel's government finds itself trapped with this liability. The security zone bleeds Israel's army and assaults Jerusalem's political image. Inside the security zone, sentiments of despair spread among the Christians, the backbone of the area. The mounting international pressure is harder on the Jewish State, the Lebanese government's claim is progressing internationally, and American policy in the Middle East is less likely to accept the perpetual situation in south Lebanon, "the last open Arab-Israeli front". Hence, we anticipate that the current status quo will be undermined by the time factor. Israel will be compelled to withdraw unilaterally, granting Assad and Iran, an overwhelming victory by Middle Eastern scales. Now let us examine the option of unilateral withdrawal.

II. Unilateral Withdrawal Option

This worse case scenario has two type of supporters in Israel. Departing from the axiom of "Land for Peace", the left wing/Peace Now doctrine genuinely believes that by making a concession to Syria and Hizbullah, the Jewish State can obtain a pragmatic peace to its north. This doctrine postulates that Israel should not have been there in the first place, and that the security zone, i.e., the "occupation of an Arab land", is the reason behind the increase in terrorism. Extremists among this camp do not hesitate to attack Israel's allies and paint them as "traitors to their Arab brothers". This doctrine, also practised by the previous government in other areas, stems from a post-Zionist perspective. The Oslo process, which generated the emergence of an embryo of a Palestinian state and weakened the foundation of Zionism in "Eretz Israel", also promoted the abandonment of the security zone, notwithstanding the fate of an allied nation, where soldiers and civilians fought and died with their Jewish neighbors. Had he been reelected, Mr. Peres was on the verge of ordering the evacuation of the security zone. Today, his successors, led by Mr. Yossi Beilin are conducting a similar campaign to provoke such a move.

Among the national camp and within the current government, the notion of pleasing Syria and Hizbullah is not an accepted doctrine. On the contrary, since May 29, 1996, Israel has repetitively underlined its rejection of a Golan deal, a full Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria, and a divided Jerusalem. Prime Minister Netanyahu's government advocates the idea of being the most anti-terrorist cabinet in the Jewish State's history. As far as the security zone is concerned, Israeli officials have reiterated the pre-1992 principle of combating terror, and exposing Syria's sponsorship of Hizbullah's activities from within Lebanon. However the concept of a unilateral withdrawal is not the exclusive property of Labor governments. Let us remember that in 1983-1985, due to various circumstances, the then Likud government operated a phased unilateral withdrawal from Aley, and the Shuf, Iqlim and East Sidon areas, all of which led to the perpetration of bloody massacres against the Christians. But if the unilateral pull out of the 1980s were somewhat logical, in view of the political behavior of the Christian leadership in Beirut, an unconditional withdrawal from the security zone seemed to be almost impossible under a Likud led government. But despite this paradigm, current developments indicate that such a move can – and perhaps will – be considered.

The analysis underpinning such an abandonment springs from pragmatism, and derives from the current context inherited from the Oslo process. In short, Labor governments have made dramatic concessions to the Arab side. Changes have occurred in the political balance of power. The nationalist government needs all its energies to contain the damage inflicted on Judea and Samaria, and the threats hanging over the Golan. In this new context there are priorities, and evidently the security zone is the least among them. But two other elements are pushing Israel closer to abandoning the buffer zone. On one hand, a desperate campaign by the Arabist circles in the US, echoed by the opposition inside Israel and favored by the Arab world, is pressuring the current government to relax its position on south Lebanon, as a way to counter balance its hard stand on the Palestinian and Syrian tracks. On the other hand, it is now a certainty that Syria and the Beirut regime have joined the campaign by displaying the right panoply of attitudes, which are giving immense credibility to the American-led initiative. In a nutshell, while US envoys are trying to convince Jerusalem to leave the security zone unilaterally, Damascus and Beirut are releasing the correct dose of political intoxicant. The Syrians and their allies in Lebanon are claiming that such a move will harm Assad's role in the region. Syria's media operatives in Beirut are flooding the press with distress calls for the United States not to hasten the process. Playing on what they perceive as Israeli naivete it is expected that Assad will make the Israeli government believe that he will be a loser in such a game. If a unilateral withdrawal will weaken Assad, postulate the advocates of the move in Jerusalem and Washington, then it must be the right thing to do. As usual, the master of Damascus will lead his opponents "to convince him to accept" what in fact he deeply wants to accomplish! Many advocates of a unilateral withdrawal in Israel theorize that such a move will corner Assad, while the following facts demonstrate that the implementation of this plan will bring Israel closer to a strategic imbalance in the region.

First the issue of "guarantees". Assad's infamous – but well known – record testifies to his style of guarantees. Not only do we refer to Syria's endless breaching of its commitments in Lebanon, but we also make reference to Israel's national camp criticism of Labor's blind trust of Assad. Both the Lebanese Christians and the nationalist Israelis have an expertise on the "Damascus guarantees". Foreseeing the future is not a difficult task. After hard negotiations have been required to convince Mr. Assad of this deal, Syria will make a commitment to the United States to disarm Hizbullah in return for a unilateral Israeli withdrawal. President Assad will abide by "this" agreement, but not by the expected consequences of the agreement. Indeed, under such a package deal, an Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon will not occur under a barrage of katyusha rockets, nor will the Galilee feel the heat of Islamist missiles immediately after the pull out. This scenario, embellished by the American negotiators, is perfectly possible. To the new Israeli government it is very attractive, since it will ease Washington's pressures, silence the Knesset opposition, and politically disarm Syria in Lebanon. The problem with this pseudo-guarantee is the unwarrantable aspect of the mechanism. The elements to be guaranteed are:

- a) That Hizbullah will be permanently disarmed in Lebanon, particularly in the south
- b) That katyusha rockets will not smash down on the Galilee,
- c) That the United States will guarantee Syria's commitment.

All of the above can – and will – be circumvented.

Instead of being disarmed by the authorities, Hizbullah will be acclaimed as a hero by Beirut – and Damascus – and will march victorious in the capital. Instead of the SLA, it will be Hizbullah which will be integrated into the Lebanese Army. The Mujahideen will simply change their military fatigues, and wear newer battle dress. Remember the former Palestinian terrorists becoming the Palestinian police in Judea and Samaria! Other Hizbullah forces will pull back to the northern Bekaa valley. Most of them will remain in the south, and even wander openly in the former security zone. In fact, "dismantling" Hizbullah – a la Syrian – is the dream come true of Iran.

Katyusha rockets will fall again on the Galilee after the unilateral withdrawal, for the simple reason that the Islamic resistance against Israel is not limited to Lebanon. Let us remember that before the establishment of

the security zone, katyusha rockets fell on the Kibbutzim “as a way to liberate Palestine”. Hizbullah’s role in Lebanon is expected to grow, not to diminish after the “victory over the security zone”.

America’s diplomatic guarantees concerning Syria have a tradition of failure. As long as there is no will to defeat the Assad regime in Lebanon, Washington will not use its strength to compel a Syrian commitment. Besides, it will be its proxies in Lebanon who will breach the agreement, not the “respectable” lion of Damascus. As a matter of fact, the renewed war of attrition against Israel – after the elimination of the security zone – will enable Assad to get tougher on the Golan, since his troops will be technically deployed a few kilometers from Metulla and Rosh Hanikra.

Strategically, even without a recrudescence of violence across the Lebanese border for a while, Syria would have acquired an unbeatable advantage over Israel by taking the control of the high grounds of Lebanon. A major shift is expected to take place geo-politically. In addition to a dozen military and cooperation treaties signed by the two sister governments, the new Lebanese parliament – expected to be pro-Syrian and fundamentalist more than ever – will federate – or confederate the country – with its “big sister”. The Golan, the major defensive asset of Israel, will be encircled from behind, and made harder to defend.

More important than the military end of the buffer zone, will be the demographic earthquake which will ensue. There is no doubt that as a result of the dismantling of the SLA, the Christian presence in the area will deplete at a rapid pace. It will be replaced by tens of thousands of Shiites, most of whom are mobilized by Hizbullah. Surrounded by a sea of Shiites, and other Moslems, the remnant of the Christians of the security zone (including Jezzine) will be irrelevant in any future political arrangement. Beirut and Rosh HaNikra will be separated by one million Shiites. Such a change will be the single most dramatic revolution in demographics across Israel’s borders since 1948. The vanishing of the security zone will lead to the emergence of a Gaza-like area. However the new Christian-free south Lebanon will enjoy the support of a huge hinterland from Beirut to Tehran. Such a pressure will be more powerful than in Gaza, which is abutted by the Sinai, or Judea and Samaria, which are edged round by the Jordan valley.

The most important consequence of the dismantlement of the security zone, as a result of a unilateral withdrawal, is the impossibility of reversing the process in the future. When Israel established its buffer zone in south Lebanon, it profited from immense geo-political advantages between 1975 and 1990. On one hand, the civil war was raging in Beirut. No central government was capable of opposing Israel efficiently (neither on the political, nor on the military levels). Besides, the Christian camp in East Beirut played the role of counter balance to the anti-Israel forces including Syria, the PLO, and later Hizbullah. The Christian resistance in the center was the sponge which diverted Arab activities in Lebanon, allowing Israel to secure superiority in the south. On the other hand, the Christian pockets of resistance along the border allowed the formation of an enclave, sometimes called “free Lebanon”, and sometimes “security zone”. Israel must admit that without the Christian presence in the area, it would have encountered nightmares. For no Moslem group would have accepted the start of a local paramilitary force allied to Israel, and a much more powerful resistance would have been opposed to Israel. An entirely Moslem, “Israeli-occupied”, south Lebanon, would have defeated the Israelis a long time ago. A unilateral withdrawal from the security zone, followed by the dismantlement of the SLA and the erosion of the Christian presence would deny Israel any advantage in the future. Similar to the West Bank, the issue at stake in south Lebanon, is not the military superiority of Israel in the case of conflict, but the demographic battle. Not only would the Jewish State lose its leverage north of the Galilee, but Jerusalem would waste the only opportunity it has historically to build an alliance of minorities in the region. The security zone is the only and last geo-political bridge between Israel and non-Arab, non-Moslem nationalities in the Middle East. We conclude that a unilateral withdrawal from south Lebanon is the equivalent of a strategic abortion on a national and regional scale. For far beyond any other consideration, Jerusalem cannot afford to, and should not willingly, cut off the oxygen of its young and faithful northern neighbor. Instead, and despite external and internal pressure, the nationalist government of Israel, is perhaps the only entity which can, and in our perception should, assist the local resistance to grow and develop.

If the security zone is abandoned, Israel will never be able to reverse its policies in the region. For Israel's presence in the buffer zone is not the result of a military occupation only, but the end product of a local alliance with the Jewish State. Historically, it was the people of Qolaia, Ain Ebel, Rmeich, and other Christian towns, which permitted the IDF soldiers to feel in a second home in south Lebanon. Once the SLA is eliminated from that area, the Israelis will feel the heat and their rejection by any radical Arab-Moslem society. Israel would have forever closed the door to real peace, a peace with friends.

The Alternative Option: A Self Government in South Lebanon

We strongly believe that deep down, most Israelis, particularly those identifying with Zionism, would prefer to see a friendly people living north of the Galilee. The average Israeli, before 1982, used to dream about the day when Jews and Lebanese would meet and forge a powerful economic partnership. During the war, almost all Jewish Israelis agreed on a solid commitment to the people of the security zone and the SLA. Israel's favorable attitude towards its local allies inside south Lebanon stems from the vision of IDF and SLA soldiers fighting and dying for one joint cause: security and freedom.

Ultimately, we know that the Israeli people would rather coexist with its friends and allies than with its enemies, even with a promise of peace. But the realities of the security zone, its abandonment by the Christians of the north first, than the gradual acceptance by Jerusalem of the principle of "Land for Peace", caused some damage to the initial Israeli perception of the security zone. In short, the buffer zone – as it was devised in the 1980s – became obsolete in the eyes of some Israelis. It was an absorbent sponge which was bleeding, with no hope of remedy. From "untouchable", the security zone became a "card to play on the table of negotiations with Syria". This new perception of the SLA and its supporters came as a result of deadlock. Because of the 1982 syndrome, the self defeat of the Christian camp in Lebanon in the early 1990s and the political revolution of the "Land for Peace" concept, there was no other alternative offered other than the ultimate abandonment of the security zone, in both Israeli political contexts (Labor: in order to please Assad, or, Likud: In order to embarrass Assad).

The alternative choice, though, cannot be understood nor be successful without the vision which needs to accompany it. The following are the conditions which need to precede the initiation of the alternative policy.

1. It is clear that Israel is not just facing current challenges, posed by the completion or the suspension of the Oslo Peace process, but is confronted by the whole state of political culture in the region. One aspect is rejecting the Zionist project, and aims ultimately at the destruction of the State of Israel. If the Israeli political establishment viscerally believe that the Arab-Moslem environment is ready for genuine peace, then an alternative policy for Lebanon is not necessary. Ironically, if the region's ruling elites are really heading towards peaceful resolution of conflicts, then, the Lebanese Christians do not need to advise Israel's government about a change of policy. Both Lebanese Christians, and Israelis should proceed with the "Land for Peace" doctrine. But most Mideast experts know that this is not the case.
2. That Israel must act in Lebanon -in the south first – as a way to abort future threats. If indeed Syria, Iran and their allies in Lebanon are aiming at ultimately defeating Israel, the Jewish State's only alternative is to build its strategic defenses inside Lebanon, not inside Israel.
3. That Israel must act in Lebanon with the friendship of Lebanese nationalists, who are ideologically committed to the existence of Israel as a Jewish State, and not only to tolerate it, or accept it as an overwhelming occupying power.

Departing from these premises, the State of Israel should adopt the option of helping in the establishment of an interim form of government in south Lebanon. Following are the foundations of such a project:

A. National Legitimacy

After the collapse of the Aoun constitutional government in 1990, and the eradication of the Christian militia between 1991 and 1994, the Christians lost all their representation in legal and real power. Despite the participation of Christian individuals in the pro-Syrian, Moslem-controlled, regime, the community is – as defined by most of its spiritual and political leaders – outside the system. The surge forward of any form of government on any part of the Lebanese soil will undoubtedly embody the endorsement of the overwhelming majority of the Christians, as well as many unhappy Moslems and Druze. The national “legitimacy” of a self-governing body in south Lebanon will eliminate the negative image imposed on Israel by the fact that it has created a puppet army, the SLA. Such a legitimacy should emanate from a number of steps, based on self-determination, democratization and human rights. The emergence of a popular and nationalist legitimacy on one square mile in south Lebanon will be in itself a tremendous victory over Syria, Iran and the forces of terror. Other side effects will be a process of delegitimization of Beirut's regime, a response to the Arabist circles in America, and a major credit to the nationalist government in Israel. This battle can be fought, and won, without bullets, just with ballots.

B. Legality

Although international society, including especially the United States Administration, only recognizes the Beirut government, and will continue to do so in the wake of a potential change, the emergence of such an alternative will open a breach in the credibility of the pro-Syrian regime.

A popular but illegal government has always been able, at the end of the day, to defeat an unpopular and illegitimate legal government. The most evident element of Beirut's pro-Syrian power today is the non-existence of a challenge by other Lebanese. Mr. Assad has patiently worked for fifteen years to control Lebanon's international legality. What he cannot do from Syria, a Syrian-controlled government in Beirut can do for him. Any challenge to his constitutional fortress in Beirut – even peacefully – will undermine his regional power, and international legitimacy. As accepted by the outside world, Assad's role in Lebanon is the keeper of unity. Once a democratically elected body challenges the less democratic institution of Beirut, the waves of doubt will reach Damascus. International legality is precarious. A living legitimacy in south Lebanon will eventually weaken Beirut's legality, if not totally discredit it.

C. Impact on Lebanon

The mere upsurge of a new form of government, even in its most limited, modest, and unsophisticated form in south Lebanon, will unleash an unexpected political tidal wave in Lebanon. Our expectations range from the immediate to the long-range forecast, from the security zone to Tripoli. First within the “buffer zone”. A local government will bolster popular energies and give the public a reason for which to make sacrifices. Nations have always identified themselves by means of the institutions they have been able to craft with their own hands. The Zionist movement gave the best example of self-reliance to the whole world. To the Lebanese Christians of the south, their nationalism cannot become reality short of a national institution. Instead of the 2,500 soldiers of the SLA, a national army will recruit by the thousands. Emigration from the south will slow; immigrants will come back along with their financial strength. With a seaport in Nakura, and an airfield in Marjeyun; a surplus of water and strong economic ties to the Israeli hinterland, the nucleus of a country is more than viable.

Beyond the mountains of Jezzine, the imagination of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese, imprisoned in the great Syrian jail, will be inflamed by a southern free land. The Christians of the center will morally follow Marjeyun's light, and Lebanon's resistance to Syria will become vigorous. We expect a high migration of cadres to the free zone. Thousands of disabused young men and women will join the free armed forces in the south, discharging Israel from maintaining high numbers of military personnel inside the area. Another dividend of a growing local economy, will be the financial investments by emigrants. An economically free zone will ironically attract the immense Christian capital which has escaped the Hariri designs. One free

square mile in southern Lebanon, guaranteed by a legitimate form of government will absorb, millions, if not billions of immigrant dollars. The equation is simple. The Lebanese expatriate wealth may prefer the financial institutions of a Syrian-controlled government in Beirut to a militia based economic chaos. But a Lebanese free economy in the south – linked to its credible Jewish partner – is by far more attractive than the dark prospects of becoming an oxygen for the failing socialist Syrian economy.

Finally, without a military price, the formation of self-rule in the security zone, will change the balance of power inside Lebanon. It will allow growth and freedom in the south, in contrast to the mounting fundamentalism to the north. It will only be a matter of time before a new cycle in the region will crumble the Syrian occupation into disorder. Only then Jerusalem, and eventually Washington, will fully understand the historic importance of preparing the ground for another option in Lebanon. An alternative for Israel in the security zone will ironically become an alternative for the world after Lebanon's liberation.

D. Impact on Israel

The consequences for Israel are endless. Militarily, a more combative Lebanese force north of the Galilee means more security for the Jewish people. The new armed forces under the self government are expected to be larger in size, and with higher quality. Imagine a combination of Christian units which fought the PLO in Beirut, the Syrians in Mount Lebanon, and Hizbullah everywhere. With higher motivation, the Lebanese Christian officers and soldiers should be able to handle not only the Hizbullah threat, but be a part of the Baathist containment strategy in the region, when the time comes. The past experience of the Christian enclave in the center is very satisfying. The SLA should be transformed into a national army, allied to the Jewish State, not a militia totally dependent on Israel. On the intelligence and security levels, a local government can muster enough resources to combat terrorism not only in the south, but also across Lebanon and beyond. Again, the East Beirut experience is very indicative.

Gradually the free zone will be able to carry the burden of its economic needs. Israel should be able to spend less on civilian tasks in south Lebanon. Moreover, a rejuvenated entity in that area, with a Diaspora connection, will benefit Israel's national economy. In addition to millions of Christian tourists from around the whole world, Lebanese emigrants will come by their hundreds of thousands to visit this last "Christian land" in the Middle East.

Inside Israeli society, the Lebanese syndrome will slowly disintegrate and pave the way for a renewed trust between the two nations. The entrepreneurial experiment with the free area will announce the successes to come from future peace after Lebanon's liberation. The government that will achieve this northern victory will gain immense credit as a real-peace maker. What the Begin cabinet dreamed of in the 1980s, the Netanyahu government can pragmatically achieve. How can any internal opposition criticize Israel's involvement – which will be less costly than ever – in the process of democratization and emancipation of an oppressed population?

E. Impact on the Region

It is to be expected that Syria and Iran will wage a campaign against the new local government in south Lebanon. It is also to be expected that many in the Arab world will accuse Israel of partitioning Lebanon and establishing a "Zionist" entity on its border. But have not these (and other) rogue countries accused Israel of being behind every plague in the region, anyway? Will these countries lower their level of enmity towards Israel if south Lebanon is awarded to Assad and Hizbullah? Not likely. From a crude real politik angle, the upsurge of a new player in the region will drain the energies of the Tehran-Damascus axis more than ever. Instead of focusing solely on Israel, the radical camp will have to deal with a new problem. But this time, the "entity" they will reject is not "foreign" (this does not mean to imply that Israel is foreign) nor is it a silent one.

In fact the “southern” Lebanese will have to defend their rights and counter attack the radicals in the region. With radio and TV stations, and worldwide networks, the Lebanese Christians can finally put their weight next to Israel's in the battle against terrorism and Islamic expansionism. As a side effect of the new political battleground in the region, the third component for the comprehensive peace process, as defined by Prime Minister Netanyahu, will finally be a reality. For as long as Israel is alone in challenging the human rights records of the Arab world, its position will be vulnerable. But when a second entity, as small as it is, raises the same issues in terms of democratization and human rights abuse, a break-through will be psychologically possible. Imagine a free south Lebanon echoing the calls for democratization and liberties for suppressed, repressed communities and minority groups in the region.

Another effect will be felt by Arab moderates. If another Middle Eastern group – a free south Lebanon – were to join Israel's call for societal liberation in the region, moderate Arabs might well join the coalition. Once a grassroots Lebanese movement is launched, it will be easier, and culturally possible, for Arab democratic individuals and organizations to join forces.

F. Impact on the Lebanese Diaspora

In the Diaspora, the Lebanese Christian communities will be finally able to mobilize and act on behalf of a “free land” and a nationalist cause. The endless resources of Lebanese emigrants, today targeted by the Syrians and other Arabs, can be capitalized by the new self government, operating out of Lebanese territories. Currently, not without great resistance, Beirut is gradually attempting to infiltrate the vast world of the six to seven million Lebanese Christians abroad. A cabinet formed in Marjeyun will create the necessary chock to reverse the process. Only a serious and determined government somewhere on Lebanese soil can mobilize hundreds of thousands of Lebanese Americans to overwhelm Capitol Hill and the White House with letters, faxes, and e-mails, not to mention demonstrations. Out of one building in Marjeyun, waves can reach the inner circles of the Beltway. Jerusalem has never realized the real political value of the security zone.

G. Impact on America and International Society

How can the United States criticize an open democratic process in south Lebanon, when most of America's politicians (by now) are extremely critical of Syria's suppression of liberties in the rest of the country? How can the Administration condemn Israel for allowing a segment of the Lebanese population to implement self determination and protect their basic human rights? Will the Christian majority of the American people remain silent if the US government invites Syria – and therefore Hizbullah – bloodily to abort the emergence of this young government, while Israel protects the embryo of a Christian nation in the Middle East? A local government in the security zone will have a voice, and that voice will be heard, not only inside America, but also worldwide. If the West possesses many arguments to compel Israel to pull out today, after the emergence of a southern free Lebanon, many of these arguments will become obsolete.

H. Impact on Israel's Position

Technically, Israel will maintain its security claim, as long as its northern sector is threatened. In addition to this legitimate argument, new claims will be raised by a local new player: freedom, human rights and democracy. Instead of being politically on the defensive, Israel will be on the offensive, and vice versa for Syria and its regional supporters. The emergence of a new “national cause” in the region will relieve the Jewish State from being the recipient of all political attacks. This change in the political (and media) balance of power will be mostly felt in the West, particularly in America. The prominence given to the plight of a minority, in the midst of mounting Western resentment of Islamic fundamentalism and in the wake of the contemporary doctrine emphasising Peace with Human Rights, will have an important effect in the informational arena. Instead of being constantly and solely portrayed as an occupier of Arab lands, Israel will finally be perceived – at least by the spokesmen for these minorities – as a “liberator of oppressed nations”.

I. Positive Conditions

This project is not without a solid base, nor is it strictly theoretical. We advance at least three positive conditions existing today:

1. There is no Christian leadership in the capital which may abort the initiative in the same way and circumstances of 1982. For with the fall of “East Beirut”, no Christian politician can pretend to be, or declare himself, the sole spokesman of the community, as was the case with Bashir Gemayel in 1982. The defeat of General Aoun in 1990, and the outmanoeuvring of Geagea by the Syrians in 1994, led to a vacancy in the center. Today, and furthermore when such a government will have appeared, the center of gravity of the Lebanese Christians has moved southward. In fact, because of Syria’s occupation, the security zone is the center of Christian interest, and will ultimately become the center of Christian national leadership. An Israeli agreement with a local government in Marjeyun will unlikely be thwarted by an Amine Gemayel, or demonized by a Michel Aoun. Whoever will be elected Prime Minister in South Lebanon, will lead the country’s masses.
2. This point leads us to the problem of readiness among Lebanese Christians. In contrast with the 1980s, today’s Christians in Lebanon are far more receptive to the idea. After the fall of East Beirut, the failure of their traditional leadership, and the mounting Syro-Islamic pressures, the bulk of Lebanon’s Christians will enthusiastically support a self government in south Lebanon. Let us admit first that there are more Christian individuals collaborating with the Syrians today. For since 1990, the central areas of Lebanon have fallen under Syrian occupation. The more extended the occupation, the higher is the number of collaborators. However, the heavier the Syrian domination, the more resentful the masses are. We expect open, clear, and unequivocal support by most Christians, and perhaps many Moslems, for the free southern government.
3. Finally, for the first time since 1948, Israel will deal with, and will be able to count on, an ideological ally in Lebanon, perhaps even the only one in the Middle East. The Lebanese Christian nationalists currently view Israel, not only as embodying a right for Jews to their historic homeland, but as a regional necessity to balance the Arab-Islamic domination in the region. While previous leaders (between 1976 and 1990) have failed to understand Zionism, and to work with Israel strategically, the new current of thought – which encompasses the World Lebanese Organization (WLO), various groups and activists inside and outside the country (including fragments of the Lebanese Forces, Aounists, independent Christian Democrats, various other groups, as well as large segments of the SLA supporters) – is the only intellectual and political partner of the Zionism in the Middle East.

J. Gradual Program

In order to achieve the goals mentioned above, and in view of the complex elements involved, the implementation must be achieved in a gradual program of seven steps:

1. A joint committee should be formed, including Israeli and Lebanese Christian strategists. This permanent think-tank should prepare the plans and communicate them to the Israeli government. All the aspects should be studied prior to implementation. Planners must learn from the past mistakes and prepare carefully for all options.
2. After approval, the plan should be well explained to the Israeli government, and its major points accepted by the Knesset’s leaders. Both Israeli and Lebanese Christian leaders will take part in the educational process.
3. The immediate first step which should be implemented in south Lebanon, is the restructuring of the SLA’s leadership. The new team should be ideologically compatible with the alliance, understand the plan to be implemented, believe in it, and be willing to go forward with it. The leadership should have

proven their political and military skills in the past years. They should be able to communicate with the people of south Lebanon, the Lebanese Christian Diaspora, and Israeli and Jewish Diaspora leaders. A restructured leadership in south Lebanon is crucial to a free Lebanon.

4. Parallel to restructuring the SLA, a political institution should be formed to oversee the implementation of the plan. The new command of the army should be made responsible to the political institution, and the latter will be responsible to the Lebanese Christians. A chairman for the political institution will be elected by its members. The commander of the SLA will be a member of the institution. This political body will play the role of an interim self government until the formation of a democratically elected authority.
5. The first objective of the political institution will be to build legitimacy. It will initiate activities including mass education of the people of south Lebanon and the Diaspora. The education process should lead to a gradual mobilization of the Lebanese Christians inside Lebanon and abroad.
6. A major step towards legitimization will be the organization of elections in south Lebanon and the formation of a local representative council in which representatives of the Diaspora will be included. The emergence of a local legislative and representative branch will pave the way for the formation of a legitimized executive branch.
7. A local self government will be formed in south Lebanon, with the support of the Diaspora. The new "government" will assume the political, security, and financial responsibilities in the former security zone, in conjunction with Israel's security needs in that area.

At the end of this process, which should not exceed twelve months, a new factor will emerge in the Middle East, calling for a change in policies and plans not only in the Arab world, but in the United States■

NOTE: This article was adapted from research conducted in the Middle East and the United States in 1997. An initial form of the project was presented as a memorandum to the Israeli government in the autumn of 1996.