The Syria-Israel Front in the 1990's: The Golan Heights, Lebanon and the "Peace Process"

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In geographical terms, Arab-Israeli affairs in the early 1990s involved two arenas. The first was the central front, which encompassed Israel, the Palestinians and Jordan. Here the primary issue was how to reconcile Palestinian self-determination with Israeli security, in the territories of the West Bank and Gaza, and along the Jordanian border. The second was the northern front, where the two regional powers of the Levant - Syria and Israel - faced one another, and which could not be disentangled from the intricacies of Lebanon.

Conditions on the Syria-Israel Front in the early 1990s

The northern front was peripheral to the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum, generally agreed to be the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but after 1973 it became the primary zone of military activity and confrontation. Syrian Ba'athist interests and capacities overshadowed such secondary Arab factors as the Palestinians, Lebanese and Jordanians. An Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian understanding on the central front thus could not be achieved without close attention to conditions in the north, with an eye either to incorporating the Syrians in a general settlement, or somehow circumventing them.

In its 1993 configuration, the Syria-Israel front had two components: the Golan Heights and Lebanon. On the Golan the two armies directly abutted; without general war or a formal compromise territorial rigidity prevailed. Lebanon, however, offered opportunities for Syria and Israel to tinker with the strategic balance, chiefly using local proxies in a fluid geopolitical environment.

For Israel, the forward projection on the Golan Heights and in the south Lebanon "security zone" provided defensive buffering, surveillance possibilities and a base for constraining the manoeuvrability of the other side. Occupation of the Golan plateau also covered significant water sources for the Sea of Galilee, Israel's main reserve reservoir. Most Israelis never accepted that buffers on other peoples' territory maintained rather than deterred hostility; up to the early 1990s, Syrian hostility was taken as an immutable feature of the regional landscape.

For Syria, the Israeli alignment on the Golan represented a standing threat to Damascus, only 40 km from the front, requiring huge investment in defence lines and mechanised formations in the limited intervening space. Lebanon formed the western flank of the Syrian capital - regarding Arab rivals and "allies" as well as the Israelis.

In case of war, the option of a flanking thrust up the Lebanese Biqa' valley was highly attractive to the Israelis, turning Syria's Golan defences. For a "two theatre" war Israel had by far the better technological, command and control facilities, in addition to operating on more compact internal lines. Topography would partly disconnect Syria's efforts on the Golan and in the Biqa', and it was doubtful if Syria had the command and control capability to co-ordinate the two theatres effectively.

The only Syrian option was to take advantage of its massed standing forces on the Golan for a quick push in advance of Israeli mobilisation, perhaps delaying the Israelis with a missile strike, and hoping for an imposed cease-fire. It would be a vast risk against a superior power, and almost certainly unviable after July 1992, when the return of a Labour government in Israel restored firm Israeli-US links.

Hegemony in Lebanon offered Syria disruptive possibilities, principally through radical Shi'i and Palestinian elements, in case developments between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians were not proceeding according to Syrian tastes. It also put a clamp on factors, like Palestinians or East Beirut Christians, which might embarrass Syria in the rear. However, even the degree of control of Beirut Syria acquired through the 1989 Ta'if accord, the disposal of General Michel Aoun in October 1990, and the May 1991 Brotherhood treaty, remained unstable and incomplete.

In 1991, the Soviet demise and the confirmation of Western strategic and economic supremacy profoundly affected the Syria-Israel front. Syria now had no strategic background, had no prospect of "strategic parity" with Israel and could not expect substantial replacement of weaponry in case of war. Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad squeezed what he could out of joining the Americans against Iraq, pocketing Beirut and some billions of dollars, but this did not compensate for a precarious outlook. Hence, in July 1991 Syria joined the US sponsored Middle East "peace process".

Israel also saw a diminution in its previous status as a strategic asset for the US. After the 1991 Gulf War, the US pressed for stabilisation of the Levant, to head off disturbing radical trends in the Arab hinterland of the gulf oil reservoir. Although incomparably better placed for Western linkages than Syria, Israel had no choice but to consider territorial adjustment in the north, as the US indicated to the 1992 Israeli Labour government that Syria could not be sidelined.

The requirements for a comprehensive peace in the north were unambiguous. To obtain large scale Israeli evacuation, Syria and Lebanon would have to sign full peace treaties on the Egyptian model (normalised relations), with an end of armed opposition to Israel from Lebanese territory, and of strategic challenge from Syria. To obtain full peace, Israel would have to withdraw to the international boundaries. On the Golan, imaginative devices would need to be evolved for demilitarisation, international supervision and guarantees, water security, and the Israeli settlement infrastructure. In south Lebanon, Iran, the Shi'i radical Hizballah and

rejectionist Palestinian groups would all have to be decisively contained by the Lebanese state.

Arab-Israeli peace negotiations after October 1991, with separate bilateral talks in Washington between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Lebanon, highlighted the issue of linkage between the Golan and Lebanon sectors of the northern front, in addition to broader linkage between the northern front and Israeli-Palestinian affairs. The Syrians emphasised that they would not go into any arrangements with Israel, presumably including interim agreements, in advance of parallel substantive progress on other Arab-Israeli matters. They also made it clear that, to the best of their abilities, they would not allow other Arab parties - Lebanon, Jordan or the Palestinians - to finalise deals with Israel in the absence of satisfactory progress for Syria regarding the Golan. Syria and Lebanon insisted on unconditional Israeli retreat from south Lebanon, demanded by UN Security Council Resolution 425, without connection to the general Arab-Israeli level, but Israel in turn insisted that this could not occur except in the framework of a Lebanese-Israeli security accord replacing the 1949 Armistice agreement, which Syria and Lebanon refused except in the context of a general Arab-Israeli convergence.

Further, from the strategic perspective, given the spread of Syrian and Israeli military alignments on the Golan and in Lebanon, it was difficult to imagine either sector being considered in isolation from the other. An examination of the particular features of each area, as depicted in the accompanying maps, will assist an understanding of the wider Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese arena.

The Golan Heights

Israel took the Golan Heights from Syria in the June 1967 war. In 1974, after the October 1973 war had ended with Israel occupying an additional salient extending towards Damascus, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger mediated a "disengagement agreement" under which Israel returned to the pre-October 1973 lines and evacuated the ruins of the town of Quneitra, meaning a minor territorial adjustment in favour of Syria. A narrow zone patrolled by the United

Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) was established between the two armies, with provision for limitation of armaments to specified depths on both sides of the front. Syrian civil administration extended into the intermediate zone.

The 1974 Golan "disengagement" was the first substantive indication of Syrian acceptance of Israel's existence, and served the immediate security interests of the two parties, but it proved a geopolitical *cul de sac*. Middle Eastern developments in the late 1970s and early 1980s maintained unmitigated hostility between Israel and Syria. Syria opposed the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, and aspired to the unlikely goal of "strategic parity" between itself and Israel. Likud domination of most Israeli governments between 1977 and 1992 excluded the possibility of serious Israeli concessions to the Palestinians, and in 1981 a Likud government officially incorporated the Golan into Israel. One of the goals of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon was to roll-back the Syrian military presence in that country, thereby threatening Syria's whole strategic posture on the Arab-Israeli northern front. Syria managed to preserve its position in Lebanon by astute exploitation of Israeli errors, and redoubled its efforts through the mid-1980s to undermine Israel's superiority by acquiring ballistic missiles, and biological and chemical weaponry.

Only with the international and Middle Eastern transformations of the early 1990s did the status of the Golan become a subject for serious Israeli-Syrian discussions. UN Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967 laid down simple parameters of Israeli withdrawal from territories conquered in the June 1967 war in exchange for Arab commitment to peace with Israel, parameters acknowledged by all parties as reference points for the peace talks beginning in October 1991. Beyond this, nothing was simple.

From the Israeli perspective, the Golan Heights after a quarter of a century of possession had a multi-faceted value, which guaranteed a fierce domestic political debate. First, in purely military terms, it was by no means accepted that ballistic missiles and air-power eliminated the value of defensive topography and buffer space. The counter-argument was that wars are won on the ground, that increased mobility and technical sophistication in ground warfare underline rather than remove the importance of topography and forward lines, and that the potentially disruptive effects of missiles and unconventional weaponry on mobilisation in Israel's rear emphasise the worth of having space to trade for time. The real questions were whether or not a "full peace" with Syria made such thinking redundant, whether or not the Golan could be maintained as a buffer without Israeli control, for example by demilitarisation or stationing of foreign forces, and whether or not Israel was prepared to rely on satellite monitoring, US guarantees and its own nuclear deterrent.

Second, Israel had established a civilian infrastructure worth several billion dollars on the Golan plateau. This included 29 village settlements and the town of Qatzrin, with a combined population of about 15,000, and an extensive agricultural, industrial and recreational investment, substantially dependent on local environmental advantages. Agriculture alone, with excellent climatic conditions for fruit and viticulture, generated US$105 million per annum by 1992.[1] The foundations for the Israeli colonisation were set in place by the Labour governments of 1967-77, which intended it as a political anchor to territory . The original Syrian population of about 90,000 largely fled at the time of the 1967 war, leaving only 6,500 in several villages on the north Golan upland, almost entirely Druzes. Druze numbers grew, by natural increase, to 15,000 by the early 1990s, and the community divided between a minority which cooperated with the Israelis and a majority which kept in mind the contingency of a Syrian return.

Despite the investments and the strategic reservations, the Israeli Labour government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which replaced the Likud in July 1992, indicated its interest in a "full peace" with Syria, and its acknowledgement that a difficult territorial price would have to be paid. A secret National Unity Government decision existed from 17 June 1967 in favour of full withdrawal to the "international boundaries", if Syria accepted Israel's concept of peace.[2] At the late 1992 bilateral talks in Washington, Israel for the first time referred officially and publicly to "withdrawal" on the Golan, although without

definition of the extent of withdrawal. Before more definition, Israel awaited clarification of the Syrian understanding of the word "peace".

In the immediate past, the Syrian Ba'athists had made it plain that, even in exchange for total restoration of Syrian sovereignty and a resolution of the Palestinian question satisfactory to Syria, they would only offer a "non-belligerency" agreement, an "ending of the state of war" without normalised inter-state relations: no embassies, no trade and no visitor entry. In other words, Syria rejected the Israeli concept of peace. For "non-belligerence" Israel was not prepared for more than a revamped disengagement agreement, perhaps with some adjustment of the cease-fire lines in the Druze area of the north Golan. In September 1992, Syrian officials, notably Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara'a, for the first time used the term "full peace", but without clarification of whether and how this might differ from "non-belligerence".

Through early 1993, the two sides appeared to have reached the limits of amenability, without vigorous intervention by the American patrons of the negotiations, or raising the talks to ministerial level. There was the hint of a promising endpoint, but no clear path towards it. Syria pressed for an Israeli commitment to full evacuation of the Golan before it would become more forthcoming on "peace". The Israeli government, with deep long-term security fears and facing a domestic public more than 50% of which sympathised with the Golan settlers, according to May 1993 opinion polls,[3] felt it could not do other than demand the reverse order of topics.

Ministers, such as Shimon Peres and Mosch Shachal, who speculated about full withdrawal, were accused by Israel's military intelligence chief as undermining Israel's negotiating position.[4] Reluctance persisted concerning a pullback from the shoulder of Mount Hermon and the western scarp of the Golan plateau, in the absence of a general reduction of Syrian armaments. Syria did not oppose comprehensive and internationally guaranteed demilitarisation for the Golan neighbourhood, but expected the arrangement to extend into adjacent parts of Israel. Options for Israeli civilians on the Golan might include living under Syrian so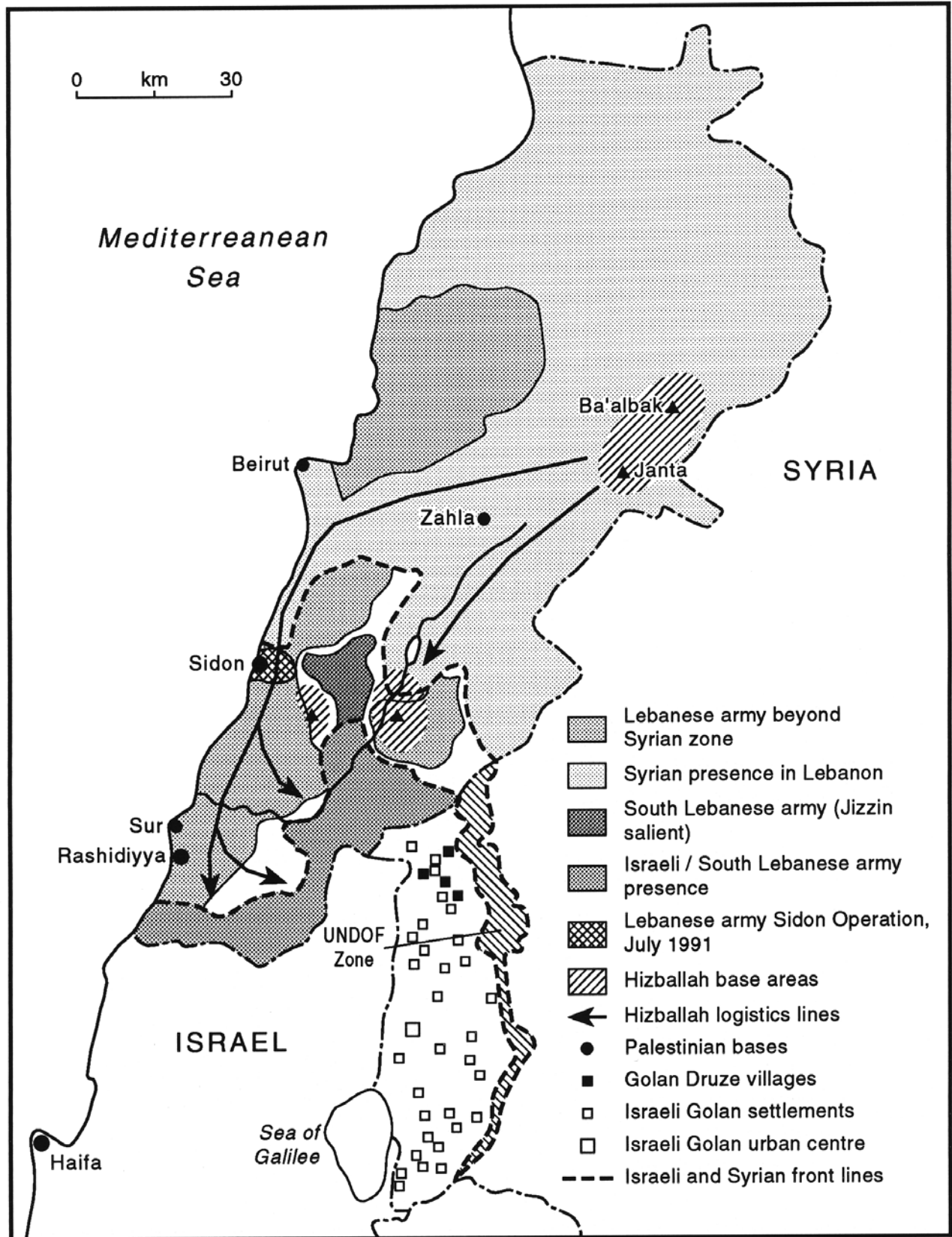vereignty, or a buy-out sponsored by the US, as in Sinai - neither was palatable to the settlers or their potent supporting lobby.

Most problematic was the linkage between the Golan and other Arab-Israeli matters. Syria tied "full peace" to Israeli retreat from "all occupied Arab territory;" in the wider Arab environment Asad could not afford to adopt any other stance. Given the intricacies of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, and the idea of approaching an Israeli-Palestinian peace through lengthy transitional arrangements, this promised a drawn-out process regarding the Golan. As for Lebanon, an Israeli Golan withdrawal would not occur while Lebanese Shi'i Islamic radicals continued to confront Israel under Syrian cover. Also, full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan would be difficult without contraction of the Syrian strategic military alignment in Lebanon, while Syria would not enter "full peace" as long as Israel had its own military presence in Lebanon, on Syria's flank.

Lebanon

South Lebanon covered the Golan to the west, and neither Israel nor Syria could afford to leave it open to the other. Further, Lebanon as a whole represented intermediate terrain between the two regional powers. Ironically, however, both Syria and Israel entered Lebanon in the late 1970s in response to the Palestinian armed presence there, and only indirectly because of their own strategic competition.

Lebanese President Sulayman Faranjiyya appealed for Syrian intervention in 1976, when the traditional Lebanese political system and the Christian sector appeared in danger of being overridden by Palestinian factions allied to Lebanese leftists. The Syrian Ba'athist regime of Hafiz al-Asad did not wish its western flank to be dominated either by the Palestinians and assorted Lebanese radicals, who might pull Syria into hostilities with Israel at a time not of Syria's choosing and subvert Syria itself, or by an Israeli-Maronite combination. Damascus further determined to assert itself as the leading Arab force, and did not appreciate what it viewed as Lebanese and Palestinian upstarts. The US backed Syrian intervention as a cheap stabilising

Mediterreanean
Sea

Ba'albak ▲

Beirut ●

▲ Janta   SYRIA

Zahla ●

Sidon ●

Sur ●
Rashidiyya ●

UNDOF
Zone

ISRAEL

Sea of
Galilee

Haifa ●

▨ Lebanese army beyond
   Syrian zone

▨ Syrian presence in Lebanon

▨ South Lebanese army (Jizzin
   salient)

▨ Israeli / South Lebanese army
   presence

▨ Lebanese army Sidon Operation,
   July 1991

▨ Hizballah base areas

← Hizballah logistics lines

● Palestinian bases

■ Golan Druze villages

□ Israeli Golan settlements

□ Israeli Golan urban centre

--- Israeli and Syrian front lines

element, despite troubled relations with Syria, and persuaded Israel not to stand in the way. Israel proposed "red lines" which the Syrians were not to transgress: no Syrian troops south of Jizzin, no Syrian use of air power in Lebanon, and no introduction of surface to air missiles. Otherwise, the Israelis had no objection to the Syrians degrading the Palestinians and becoming embroiled in the tangled landscape and affairs of Beirut.

In large measure, the 1993 Syrian military deployment in Lebanon, geographically extended as in the accompanying map, represented a continuation of the patterns of the late 1970s. The main evolution, after sharp variations in Syrian fortunes through the 1980s, encompassed Syrian achievement of hegemony over a restored Lebanese central regime. There was a tightened understanding with the US, following judicious Syrian attachment to the American camp in the 1991 Gulf war, and elimination of any serious diversions from the Palestinians or the East Beirut Christians, Israeli "red lines" remained, but Syria found itself able to use air-power in the assault on General Michel Aoun, the critical event in establishing Syrian command of Beirut.

Overall, Syria's strategic consolidation in central Lebanon was insulated from Israel's security interests in south Lebanon. Israel's 1982-85 occupation of all southern Lebanon certainly challenged Syria's strategic position in Lebanon. However, when the Israeli presence contracted to a relatively limited border "security zone", it was by no means clear that Syria really had an interest in final Israeli departure, in advance of a wider transformation in Arab-Israeli affairs. A residual Israeli occupation eased Syria's relations with Iran and Lebanese Shi'i radicals, as all could agree on liberating Lebanese territory, and it provided justification for Syria's military domination of much of the rest of Lebanon.

Israel's territorial projection into Lebanon began in 1978, when the Israelis made an incursion against Palestinians south of the Litani river, and left behind a narrow border strip patrolled by the surrogate militia of Sa'ad Haddad. The incursion led to implantation of the United Nations force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), under Security Council Resolution 425; UNIFIL became sandwiched between Haddad's militia and the Palestinians, and later between the Israelis and Shi'i elements. The border strip temporarily disappeared in 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon up to Beirut and demolished much of the Palestinian military infrastructure, but re-emerged in 1985, when Israel pulled its forces back, after adding many south Lebanese Shi'is to its assortment of enemies.

Israel's post-1985 alignment in Lebanon had two components: the new border strip, termed the "security zone", with a reorganised proxy militia, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), headed by a retired Lebanese general, Antoine Lahad, stiffened by a direct Israeli military presence; and a northward extension of the "security zone" into the Jizzin hills, held by the SLA alone. The Jizzin salient, despite its advantages in overlooking the Palestinian refugee camps around Sidon, giving access to the Druze Shuf, and cutting south Lebanon from the south Biqa', was not part of the 1985 Israeli plan; the Israelis felt the single main road north to Jizzin was too vulnerable, and regarded the Jizzin Christians as unreliable. The SLA insisted on fortifying Jizzin after a Christian refugee influx from the East Sidon villages, and the Israelis reluctantly acceded.

In the early 1990s, the "security zone" population numbered c.200,000, with Shi'is 55%, Christians 25%, Druze 10% and Sunnis 10%. For the Israelis this was obviously more manageable than the 965,000 under Israeli control in 1984, in the extended Israeli deployment up to the Awali river, and the "security zone" did not contain Palestinian refugees, but the Lebanese sectarian ratios were not significantly different from those in the whole of south Lebanon. By 1993, the SLA had about 2,500 militiamen, disproportionately Christian but with some Shi'i recruitment backed by Israeli troop numbers fluctuating between hundreds and thousands, depending on circumstances. There is little evidence that the Israeli official interest has been other than strategic: A buffer for the northern Galilee, a minimal counterpart to the Syrian alignment, and a bargaining card for peace treaties with Lebanon and Syria.

After 1991, with the re-assertion of Lebanese central government authority, albeit guided by Syria, and the opening of the Arab-Israeli peace

talks, the viability and utility of the "security zone" to Israel came under increasing question. The local population, especially the Shi'i majority, could now only view the Israeli presence as temporary, rather than indefinite, and this encouraged restlessness and infiltration by the "Islamic resistance". The peace talks also energised Islamic radical rejection of any Arab-Israeli convergence, and the "security zone" provided a convenient target, legitimising attacks aimed at bringing violent Israeli responses, and thus at disrupting the negotiations. In the early 1990s, the Shi'i radicals of Hizballah, strongly assisted by Iranian personnel, were Israel's main active opponents, and the Palestinians only occasionally impinged as *agents provocateurs*. The SLA, sustained by Israeli subsidisation, could never stand by itself. Hizballah gained dramatically in military sophistication, with introduction of remote-controlled bombs, anti-tank missiles and well co-ordinated ambushes.[5] The Lebanese government took the line that "resistance" would evaporate with removal of its excuse - Israel's presence on Lebanese territory. Israel demanded disarmament of hostile groups and an agreed security regime before it even considered withdrawal. This paralleled the Golan "catch 22" over whether Israel should lead with defining "withdrawal", or Syria with defining "peace".

Syrian and Israeli forward positions in Lebanon in 1993 were everywhere separated from each other, with significant intermediate zones in the south and in the Biqa'. Even without Israeli "red lines", the Syrians preferred not to be caught up in the moves of allies and proxies. Damascus had alternative instruments for alternative scenarios; deployment of the Lebanese army southward showed the stabilisation card, if suitable rewards were forthcoming on the local and regional levels from the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel; permissiveness regarding Hizballah demonstrated Syria's value in either containing or facilitating disruption, thus increasing the pressure for suitable rewards. The July 1991 Lebanese army operation against the Arafatist base in Sidon completed the subordination of Palestinians in Lebanon to Syria. Hizballah and Iran, however, were more problematic.

Hizballah's main rearward bases in the Biqa' were all within the Syrian military deployment, and Iran's route to its Lebanese associates ran through the Syrian capital. Syria thus held advantages in its relationship with these allies. On the other hand, linkage with Iran was critical for buttressing Syria's international weight, particularly with the Gulf oil states and Washington. Syria also had to be cautious in dealing with Hizballah and its c.5,000 militiamen, as a falling-out could destabilise the Lebanese regime and Syria's newly acquired grip on its Lebanese flank.[6] Managing the sensitivities and contradictions, if and when Damascus draws closer to arrangements with Israel for the Golan and Lebanon, will entail political dexterity of a high order - for Syria, there could be an abrupt transition from Shi'i radicalism being an asset to being a severe encumbrance, or no such transition at all.

The outlook

Despite the obstacles, the 1992-93 Washington talks, in a context of constraining global political and economic realities, particularly for Syria but also for Israel , have undoubtedly changed the atmosphere as regards the northern front of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel has edged towards reconsideration of "sovereignty" on the Golan, while Syria has edged towards "peace" as something vaguely more expansive than "non-belligerence". It is conceivable that the American sponsored process might eventually produce signed pieces of paper, although such a result is conditional on determined American exertions - and determined exertions have not been a prominent feature of the first six months of President Clinton's administration.

However, on a more fundamental level, two matters place a question-mark over the long term stabilisation of the northern front, quite apart from what happens between Israel and the Palestinians concerning the West Bank and Gaza. First, in Lebanon, the Ta'if accord and a new central government have not ended social and sectarian ferment. Indeed, the country continues to be deeply divided and depressed under the management of an amalgam of high bourgeois and militia elements. This state of affairs creates uncertainty about the worth of Lebanese

signatures or commitments. Second, with one-man rule and its own underlying communal cleavages, Syria itself faces an uncertain future. In both Syria and Lebanon, the Ba'athist regime has put a lid over volcanic resentments and pressures. What sort of Syria might emerge from Asad's demise?

Notes

[1] *Ma'ariv*, 18 September 1992.

[2] *Ila'aretz*, 10 September 1992

[3] *Guardian Weekly* from *Ma'ariv* and *Yediot Ahronot*, 31 May 1993

[4] *Ha'aretz*, 10 May 1993

[5] Ze'ev Schiff in *Ha'aretz*, 25 May 1993. Schiff comments on a shrinking gap between Hizballah deaths and Israeli/SLA deaths: 1989 - 4.6:1, 1990 - 5.2:1, 1991 - 2:1, 1992 - 1.7:1, January-April 1993 - 1.7:1

[6] *Al-Safir*, 18 June 1992. Strategic analysts by a "Hizballah leader"

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