

COLUMBIA JEWISH NEWS

APRIL 2000

“Implications of a Unilateral Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon: Does Assad Understand?”

By Kenneth W. Stein

Twenty-one years to the day after Egypt and Israel signed their peace treaty, Syrian President Assad reportedly told President Clinton that Syria would not agree to Israeli terms for a Syrian-Israeli agreement. Given Israel's announcement to withdraw from southern Lebanon by July 2000, Lebanon might become a likely scene of military escalation between Israel and Syria, if no Lebanese, Syrian, or international force polices Israel's northern border.

Barak's requirements if Israel is to withdraw from all or most of the Golan Heights are fivefold; access to Israel's water requirements at the Sea of Galilee and its origins, early-warning mechanisms about Syrian military intentions, security arrangements in the context of withdrawal, compensation for lost strategic advantages, and the pace and level of normalization arrangements.

Assad wants what Sadat obtained; all of his territory returned. But, for Assad, the political landscape has narrowed his political options and ability to stall. There is no cold war in the region, no oil weapon to use, the PLO is negotiating openly with Israel, and the Syrian economy is like a stale donut sinking in water, isolated from the benefits of globalization.

Noticeably apparent from a recent trip to Israel withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, and even acquiesce to a Palestinian flag on the outskirts of Jerusalem as long as the city is not divided, are NOT willing to withdraw from the Golan Heights. If Assad wanted to restate negotiations with the Israelis today, the Israeli public, in its present frame of mind, is poised to oppose a withdrawal from the Golan Heights and so vote in a national referendum.

To Assad's dismay, non-movement on the Syrian-Israeli track has not hampered movement on the Palestinian-Israeli track. In fact, one might argue that Barak is more motivated to complete a deal with Arafat even if he cannot resume talks with Damascus.

The Israeli Cabinet endorsed PM Barak's decision to withdraw unilaterally from southern Lebanon by July 1, 2000, "in the framework of an agreement" with the caveat that "in the event that conditions will not

be conducive to IDF deployment in the framework of an agreement, the government will convene, at an appropriate time, to discuss the method of implementation of the above-mentioned decision." Israel also announced a willingness to support in a withdrawal its long-time southern Lebanese allies and bolster the defense of Israel's northern border settlements.

Continued Israeli military presence in Lebanon is not supported by a majority of the Israeli public; Israel lost less than 700 men in the June 1967 War; it has lost more than 1500 in eighteen years in southern Lebanon. Syria's ability to pressure Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights because it is too hot or too costly for Israel to stay in southern Lebanon is once and for all removed.

Once Israel withdraws, there is no guarantee that fighting on Israel's northern border will end; no guarantee that Syrian, Hizballah, or even Palestinian forces might not move up to the border with Israel.

Unilateral Israeli withdrawal or redeployment from Lebanon contains risks. Israeli civilians may go more frequently to bomb shelters and wait out katusha or artillery attacks. If Israel withdraws as promised, and Iran through Syria continues to supply Hizballah with military and logistical assistance, the likelihood of Israeli retaliation hitting Syrian troops or Syrian targets in Lebanon increases. Imagine this scenario: a severe Hizballah katusha attack or cross-the-border incursion against Israeli civilians in the north causing high Israeli casualties. In response, Israel sends commandos in a lightning attack on Damascus international airport destroying Iranian airliners that bring armaments and material destined for Hizballah. Or what if Israel retaliates by hitting some of the Syrian troops stationed in Lebanon, how will Assad respond? Will he attack Israel's national water carrier? Will he fire missiles at Haifa? Tit for tat, how will Israel respond? Will Israel turn portions of the already weak Syrian economic infrastructure into a parking lot with potholes? Where does that leave the Syrian-Israeli negotiating framework?

Up to now, Israeli presence in southern Lebanon was an excuse for Syria to retain its own forces there. In the mid- 1970s, Syria put troops in Lebanon to police the end of a nasty sectarian civil war. For a quarter-century, the Lebanese government has tolerated Syrian presence, rarely debating in public the issue of Syria controlling significant portions of Lebanon. However, in late March, the managing director and board chairman of Lebanon's mass-circulation daily al-Nahar, audaciously called on Syria to begin withdrawing its estimated 35,000 troops from Lebanon. The surprise call was addressed as an open letter to Dr. Bashshar Assad, the considered presidential successor to Assad senior.

For Israel, the bottom line is that its presence in southern Lebanon has not guaranteed security of its northern settlements. Occupation of a land buffer does not necessarily protect Israeli life and property. Israeli's decision is fraught with risks, but it is also a signal to Assad that Israel is willing to take risks for peace, including the evacuation of land.

Assad should understand Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon is indicative of a readiness for Israel to leave the Golan too, but only in the proper context of assured security.

Dr. Kenneth W. Stein is the author of **HEROIC DIPLOMACY: SADAT KISSINGER, CARTER, BEGIN, AND THE QUEST FOR ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE**, (New York, Routledge, 1999). Stein teaches Middle Eastern History at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.