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IBPP Research Associates: Israel/Lebanon

Gil Grein - IBPP Research Associate

Nadav Morag - Tel Aviv University

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Author: Gil Grein, Nadav Morag

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The following is an interview carried out by Mr. Gil Grein--an undergraduate in Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Science, Technology, and Globalization program and an IBPP Research Associate--with Dr. Nadav Morag, a lecturer in the Department of Political Science, Tel Aviv University.

Grein: How different would an early pull-out (Israeli forces from southern Lebanon) be from the scheduled July pull-out? What are some of the positives and negatives of an early/scheduled withdrawal?

Professor Morag: The question about advantages or disadvantages of an early withdrawal is kind of a moot point in view of the surprise withdrawal of last night--ultimately not that surprising given the military's fear that soldiers might be trapped at outposts given the general collapse of the security zone in the past few days. The advantage to an early withdrawal is the ability to pull out the troops and expose them to a minimum of hostile fire, and not necessitate sending in large forces to rescue them. This, in fact, is what occurred as the troops were evacuated safely.

The disadvantage of last night's move is threefold: 1) It hurts the country's military image because the withdrawal appears to be a total defeat at the hands of the victorious Hezbollah rather than a decision to cut losses and pull out in the hopes of improving the tactical situation as well as gaining international political support. 2) It allows the Hezbollah, rather than the UN [United Nations] or the Lebanese Army, to take up evacuated IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] and SLA [Southern Lebanese Army] positions thus bringing the guerrilla army right up to Israel's border. 3) It created chaos vis a vis the members and dependents of the SLA thus putting Israel in a moral bind and creating a situation in which Israel has abandoned a large number of its erstwhile allies. This does not bode well for other elements in the Arab world (such as among the Palestinians) who might want to collaborate with Israel and may thus hurt Israel's critically important intelligence gathering capability. These disadvantages, while more numerous, do not necessarily outweigh the benefits of pulling the troops out without any loss of life.

Grein: What do you predict Hezbollah's role will be after Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon?

Professor Morag: My guess is that Hezbollah will undertake some provocative attacks against Israel in the short run in order to show that it has not given up the struggle and because it will be difficult for Hezbollah to make the transition from a guerrilla army to a Lebanese political party and social organization. Ultimately, if Hezbollah keeps attacking Israel and Israel retaliates (as it has promised) thus making life difficult for the Lebanese and undermining stability and economic development in the country--which would not be good for the Syrians either--it will lose a lot of the patriotic support that it now enjoys among the some of the Lebanese. I think that the Lebanese will want peace and quiet more than anything else, and they will ultimately blame Hezbollah if its actions bring about devastating Israeli retaliatory air strikes. It would seem therefore to be the case that Hezbollah does not have an inherent interest in continuing to fight Israel--although individuals factions within the organization may accuse the leadership of having gone soft if it does not act against Israel and this may generate some limited momentum for a few more armed actions.

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This is not the case, by the way, with respect to various Palestinian terrorist factions who, with Syrian support, may begin attacking Israel. Israel's destruction of Jibril's [Ahmed Jibril of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command] tanks in Syrian-occupied Lebanon was meant as a message to the Palestinian factions and Syria that Israel will respond in force to any Palestinian attacks.

As for Hezbollah, I think that it will focus its efforts on gaining control of Lebanese politics (the Shi'ites are, after all, the single largest ethnic group in the country). I can definitely foresee a time (perhaps a decade away) where Hezbollah will take their guns out of the mothballs and turn them on the Syrians as occupiers of Lebanon. If this happens and there is a more or less peaceful situation between Hezbollah and Israel, it would not be surprising for Hezbollah to turn to Israel for arms and support. Stranger things have happened in politics.

Grein: With many SLA members and their families seeking refuge in Israel, what kind of Issues/problems do you foresee arising within their "community" once they are brought into Israel? What kind of Issues/problems regarding this transplanted "community" will the Israeli government have to deal with?

Professor Morag: According to news reports, some 4,000 SLA members and their families have thus far arrived in Israel. The authorities suggest that, when things quiet down, most will return home. However, assuming that most elect to stay for security and/or economic reasons, absorbing them into Israeli society will not be easy--and not because of the Jewish majority. Assuming that they overcome their feeling that Israel has betrayed them (and who can blame them for feeling this way?) and are loyal to the state, the Israeli-Jewish majority will have absolutely no problem with their absorption. They may be allocated land to build their own village(s) or may try to live in existing Arab villages. If they do the latter however, there will be a big problem as the Israeli Arab population will most likely be uniformly hostile to them because of the fact that they collaborated with Israel against Hezbollah and the Lebanese government. There has been an ongoing row with the Israeli Arabs regarding Israel's attempts to settle Palestinian collaborators in Israeli Arab towns and villages and there is no reason to think that SLA personnel and dependents will not receive a similar "welcome" from Israeli Arabs.

Grein: Will the absence of Israeli occupation in Lebanon strengthen or weaken Syria's and Israel's position regarding the Golan Heights?

Professor Morag: This is the million dollar question. I think that in the long run there will be quiet (more or less) along the northern border and this will be unquestionably bad for the Syrians. Syria has been able to use attacks against Israeli soldiers as a way of pressuring Israel to make concessions [concerning] the Golan Heights. This was effective to a point and indeed both the Rabin and Barak governments (and probably Netanyahu's as well) were willing to concede all of the strategic plateau for peace with Syria and Lebanon (and an orderly withdrawal from the Security Zone). However, Syrian inability to make what would be seen as concessions [concerning] Lake Tiberias or military deployment (for a range of reasons I won't get into here) really meant that Israel was left to risk a unilateral withdrawal. If Syria is unable to use the Palestinian groups or anybody else to continue the conflict with Israel, they will have very little in the way of tools that can be used to pressure Israel --unless they want to risk an all-out conflict (which is unlikely unless the regime will feel severely threatened by domestic opponents and might embark upon a war as a way of saving itself). (Keywords: Grein, Israel, Lebanon, Morag.)