

Lebanon: A Personal Memoir Twenty Years after Israel's Withdrawal



Lebanese refugees relatives of the South Lebanon Army awaiting entry into Israel, May 23, 2000

by **Mordechai Nisan***

From Jerusalem, I had spoken with Elias in southern Lebanon on a few occasions in barely audible conversations. In what Israel called her “security zone,” Hezbollah fighters and Israeli soldiers were engaged in ongoing skirmishes and battles. The Lebanese, primarily Christian, resistance against the foreign Syrian and Palestinian foes during the 1970s-’80s, was absent in the south; there the South Lebanese Army (SLA), allied with Israel, encountered the Iranian-sponsored Shiite Hezbollah guerrilla movement. This unfolded when the Lebanese national army split along religious lines and ceased to function leaving the south, always marginal in Lebanon’s national narrative, like a dangling limb from an expiring

body.

I met with Elias and his friend Fady once in Kiryat Shmona. They crossed at Metulla through the Fatma Gate, which Israel called The Good Fence. They talked about the air of uncertainty in the south, the threat from Hezbollah. After a few hours, they crossed back into Lebanon and I drove back to Jerusalem. Living in a perilous zone, on the edge of the abyss for a generation, did not impair the solidity of their character and personal self-confidence. These young Maronite men were determined that the Christians survive the turmoil and danger that defined their lives from birth. I never knew if they visited Beirut, or how frequently, or experienced at first hand its glamour and vitality. Living in south Lebanon with its large Shiite population, and not in the sacred cathedral that was Maronite Mount Lebanon to the north, could not but conjure up the feeling of distance and marginality that only a powerful identity and pride could overcome. It was the first time I saw Elias and Fady, and I haven't seen them since.

It was May 23, 2000, when I had my last conversation with Elias. The Israeli Army was in flight, the withdrawal finally happening after 18 years of Israel's incoherent and problematic military presence – though maybe necessary – in Lebanon. Retreat is not a source of joy, but in this case, many Israelis felt relief that “the boys were coming home.” The will of the southern Lebanese was shattered, their spirits devastated, their hopes crushed. For 25 years, they had been friends and allies of Israel. Yet in the midst of chaos and fear, the South Lebanese Army forces dispersed, among which the Shiite troops surrendered hands raised to Hezbollah. Christians and Druze were more emboldened, yet the final scene of this tragedy was ineluctably unfolding. The IDF was gone, the SLA disintegrated, and thousands of civilians were on the run to the Israeli border.

Elias's voice bellowed out across the primitive telephonic

communications that linked us: "We're not leaving!" Abu Arz, who was from Ayn Ebel in the south and heading the Guardians of the Cedars party/militia, declared he would be the last Lebanese to leave the sacred soil of Lebanon. He only agreed to do so through the prodding from the Maronite Bishop in Jerusalem who urged him to flee, before it will be too late. The order was clear and the warning real, though the humiliation was an enormous price to pay for life. With Israel running and the SLA dissolving, Hezbollah filled the vacuum and the Khomeini Islamic Republic won a great victor in the Levant, poised against Israel on the Lebanese border.

I cannot exactly recall the genesis of my personal affair with Lebanon. I did a stint of army reserve duty in Marjayoun in the mid-'80s. My minor memory is guarding and opening the entrance gate to the base one day when Minister of Defense Moshe Arens visited. An indelible recollection was the moment I was saved from a roadside bomb that exploded before I arrived at the location in south Lebanon. I did see the statue of Major Saad Haddad who commanded the Free Lebanese Army until he passed away when Israel, in 1984, tamed the FLA into the SLA. Hezbollah thugs destroyed this hero's monument after the betrayal of the IDF withdrawal.

Early in my academic career I acquired an interest and a sense of solidarity with small or stateless non-Arab and non-Muslim peoples across the Middle East and North Africa. I was fascinated with exploring the source of things in connection with native peoples. This subject was a focus of my academic research, writing, and teaching. Perhaps my Jewish sensibility for the precarious existence of my people through history, or an empathy for tragic experiences that predators imposed on weaker, less fortunate, communities, was at the fore of my concern. I turned my attention to the proximate Lebanese, and the Maronites among them, and to the Druze in Israel. I learned to study, meet, and hold them all in high esteem. In

truth, growing up in Montreal before moving to Israel, I had nourished appreciation for the struggle of the French-Canadians in Quebec demonstrating cultural tenacity in their national revival. Peoples stamped with authenticity merit recognition. It was not only as an objective scholar that I took a stand, but as a student of people and life.

I had read a book by Dr. Walid Phares on Lebanon, and he invited me to lecture at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton in 1997. I was impressed with his Mid-eastern acumen, linguistic skills, American efficiency, and his will to help his mother country to be free. After discussing the fragility of south Lebanon as a security zone under the protection of Israel, I wrote a paper in December 1997 that called for *The Establishment of an Autonomous Political Entity in Southern Lebanon*. Its revealing subtitle drove the point home: *A Plan for Phased Lebanonization and Israeli Withdrawal*. I never advocated an interminable Israeli military presence in Lebanon, despite intense Hezbollah warfare that menaced northern Israel. IDF soldiers fought courageously but tens of our troops died in action annually from Hezbollah fighters. The problem demanded a different solution and that is what we sought.

After the horrific helicopter collision near Sh'ar Yeshuv in the Upper Galilee in 1997, in which 73 soldiers lost their lives on the way to Lebanon, Israel's public conversation increasingly pointed to changing the military doctrine of low-intensity warfare and defense to withdrawing from southern Lebanon and positioning the IDF on the international border. To counter the idea of a unilateral Israeli retreat, I with likeminded people advanced the argument to strengthen the SLA and prepare it to develop an offensive capability sufficient to defeat Hezbollah, the Shiite Iranian proxy in Lebanon. I went to meet with Reserve Brigadier-General Rafi Noy in his home in Rosh Pina, who advocated giving heavy and diverse

weaponry to the SLA. I also met with former intelligence officer Shmuel Evyatar, with experience in Lebanon and friendship for its people, especially the Maronites. When I organized a seminar on Lebanon in Tel Aviv under the auspices of the Ariel Center for Policy Research, Noy and Evyatar were among the speakers. At a similar conference that I organized and chaired in Jerusalem, the Lebanese speakers included Abu Arz, Walid Phares, Charbel Barakat former deputy-commander of the SLA, and George Diab a Haifa entrepreneur.

I was not naïve about my capability to alter the parameters of the Israeli narrative that demanded withdrawal from Lebanon at any price. If I sought some rough analogy for my efforts, I could find it in the role of the academics Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak who developed contacts with Palestinians, which led Israel to execute a withdrawal; while I sought to prevent a withdrawal, which would depict Israel escaping from danger in the middle of the night.

The World Lebanese Organization convened a seminar in Washington in June 1998 to develop a strategy to force Syria's military forces and security apparatus out of Lebanon. As explained by Abu Arz, the contention was that a Syrian withdrawal would disempower Hezbollah and allow Lebanon to recover and assert her independence.

I was present as the sole Jewish Israeli (George from Haifa was also there) among a gathering of Lebanese diaspora persons from around the United States, Canada, and Europe. I met people of note and learned much. I sensed the Lebanese had confidence in my friendship. Some had fought in the Lebanese war from 1975, some were compelled to flee for their lives abroad. There were participants hailing from the Christian villages east of Sidon. An air of urgency and secrecy was discernible. I delivered two short talks at the conference and in one of them, I said that Islam identifies the sword as the Muslims' symbol and weapon, while the Jews and Christians merit the title of 'peoples of the book'. Now, I emphasized,

we had to become the peoples of the sword because we could not rely on the book to survive in the ravenous Middle East. Uzi Arad, Prime Minister Netanyahu's National Security Adviser was in Washington at the time, and I vainly tried to contact him to suggest he come meet the people at the Lebanon Conference.

Some of my Lebanese interlocutors shared with me their desire to assist Israel against our common enemies, be it Hezbollah or the Muslim Brotherhood. Middle Easterners are naturally cautious in ascribing honesty to others. Yet, an intimacy with the Lebanese and a silent trust bound us together. They undoubtedly considered me an embodiment of Israel the powerful and generous, but I was not an official representative of the government in Jerusalem. Mind you, in the political culture of our part of the world, a denial of official connections is not always an admission of truth. The state is all and so everyone can be its servant. With that said, my known friendships with some of the key figures at the conference, especially Abu Arz, provided me a status as a trusted and credible friend. When I returned home, somewhat encouraged by the Lebanese struggling to sustain their dream and recover their poise, I wrote a detailed report of the conference, citing its themes, and identifying the Lebanese who participated. I sent the report to Uri Lubrani, who coordinated Israeli policy in Lebanon at the Ministry of Defense, without even the courtesy of a response.

As a one-man political campaign, I was not naïve regarding my ability to change Israel's policy orientation toward Lebanon. I wanted to do what I felt was right, and it was important to show good will and work on behalf of our desperate Lebanese friends. A public consensus emerged in Israel in the late 1990s supporting a military withdrawal and this was broadly the view of both those on the political right and left. Binyamin Netanyahu, Likud prime minister from 1996-99, and his Labor successor Ehud Barak (1999-2001), advocated the IDF

leaving Lebanon. It was an election promise that Barak was committed to fulfil, and he voiced this with determination in public addresses. It was only by conforming to this idea that, I reasoned, could we – some Israeli and Lebanese associates – promote a particular *mode of withdrawal* that did not harm the SLA and southern inhabitants, nor Israel's national interests.

It was only fair that the Lebanese not appear as beggars at the court of power. They had been fighting bravely against the Palestinian terrorists since 1975, thereafter against the Shiite guerrillas since 1982. It was no less imperative that Israel not implement a policy stained by unethical behavior toward old and trusted allies in the south. The political tension between an Israeli retreat and the welfare of our Lebanese friends could be resolved by consulting with them in the event of an IDF pullback. Israel could serve her security interests but without harming those of the soldiers and inhabitants in Klaya, Debel, Kawkaba, and Hasbaya; and in the same spirit of delicate balancing was the Israeli effort to confront Hezbollah in battle but without antagonizing or alienating the Shiite majority population in south Lebanon and their role in SLA ranks. In the final calculus, the southern Lebanese allies were patriots of their country and mobilized to defend their communities – and not primarily to protect Jewish residents across the border in Israel. They were not mercenaries for Israel but freedom fighters for Lebanon.

In the years 1998-99, I was busily engaged in writing articles, sending letters, and arranging meetings. My work at the Hebrew University and my academic career demanded much time and effort while my Lebanese file had become a personal passion. It was an obligation toward people who had been loyal and earned the support of the Jews. Hundreds of fallen SLA soldiers, considering the figure from the founding of the initial Christian militia in 1976, laid a claim at Israel's conscience. To paraphrase the rabbinic dictum, 'if we are only for ourselves, then what is our worth'?

I was convinced in the just cause of the south Lebanese to fight for themselves and stay on their land, with the pride of free people. Theirs was the only territory in Lebanon that was free from a long and murderous Syrian occupation regime. The south could become the springboard for a military thrust northward to liberate Beirut and allow the charm of Lebanon to spread its magic everywhere. My articles in Hebrew in *Nativ* and *Haaretz*, and in *The Yesha Report* in English, conveyed my own solidarity with our Lebanese friends. This feeling found a resonance with large sections of the Israeli population, especially among men whose army service included stints in south Lebanon. They ate from the same plates and visited the homes of their Lebanese brothers. Many grieving Lebanese attended the funeral of the legendary Brigadier-General Erez Gerstein who, with others, fell by an IED bomb in south Lebanon in 1999.

Among the Lebanese who went to the funeral of Erez was Charbel Barakat, from Ayn Ebel, who knew him from the military arena. Charbel was now active in political matters and I arranged a meeting for him and George Diab with David Bar-Ilan, who was communications adviser to Prime Minister Netanyahu. We had an amical conversation and the official was much in agreement with our approach to south Lebanon and its future. I had also discussed the subject with Uri Elitzur, the director of the prime minister's bureau, who was likewise of the opinion that Israel must not abandon the southern allies. In a visit to the Knesset to seek support for the south, Charbel somehow encountered PM Netanyahu and grabbed his hand and together they ascended the stairway, with Charbel conversing casually with the prime minister. With the idea of southern autonomy our immediate priority, and no less in the aftermath of an Israeli withdrawal, Charbel, George, and I travelled to Rehovot to elicit the advice from Bar-Ilan University economics professor Eliyahu Kanovsky, regarding the solvency of the south as a self-contained economic unit. We conceived of the south, abandoned by the Lebanese government in the

past, shaking on the edge of being abandoned by the Israeli authorities in the future.

With the political heat on the rise, I vigorously wrote letters to Israeli politicians from the prime minister, cabinet ministers, down to members of the Knesset. I often included in the mailing an article that I had written, or a brief policy proposal. Among the addresses from the left and right sides of the political spectrum: Moshe Arens, Haim Ramon, Avrum Burg, Silvan Shalom, Yitzhak Levy, Yitzhak Mordechai, Avigdor Kahalani, David Levy, Yossi Sarid, and Danny Naveh (with whom I met in the Knesset). Member of Knesset Uzi Landau was very concerned that Israel act with integrity toward the Lebanese allies. In response to my letters, the most I received was a short written acknowledgement, sometimes an opinion against a unilateral withdrawal. I would never know if my entreaties elicited discussion in the upper reaches of power.

In an extensive interview in *Mekor Rishon* in September 1999, Abu Arz stated that 'we the Lebanese want Israel out of Lebanon just as we want Syria out of Lebanon. However the problem starts with Syria'. PM Barak and the Labor-left political elements had for years been working to make a deal with Syria, which they believed would then solve the problem of Lebanon. They surmised that Syria, which would recover the Golan Heights, would help Israel solve her problem with Lebanon, when all the while President Assad was using his Lebanese card – that is Hezbollah – to keep Israel in a constant state of active warfare on and across her northern border. I found it inconceivable that Damascus would cooperate to extricate the IDF from Lebanon through an agreement with Jerusalem. In February 2000, Abu Arz spoke for what he called "my voiceless people" before a congressional committee in Washington, labeling Beirut "Lebanon's Vichy" – this was Syrian occupation with Lebanese collaboration. The possibility of solutions that included the UNIFIL forces or the Lebanese

Army filling the void once the IDF withdrew was but a fallacious daydream. There would be a unilateral Israeli retreat or nothing.

In March 2000, I met with Reserve-General Menachem Einan who Barak appointed to conduct negotiations with the Lebanese government. From him I learned that Israel had no intention to strengthen the SLA as a credible military alternative in south Lebanon. He tried to be circumspect about the future withdrawal, but when asked with a touch of urgency and pathos whether ultimately the good Lebanese would be cast aside, he squirmed in his chair and fell silent. Still I was unable to foresee the excruciating scenario that would transpire in late May.

I was assisting and closely cooperating with Abu Arz to provide him with opportunities to meet with senior Israeli personalities. Two meetings in the spring of 2000 are worthy of mention. One was with Ezer Weizman the President of Israel. We met with the president in his residence in Jerusalem, and immediately upon entering the room, Weizman sprung into a monologue about the need to deal with the Palestinian issue. Abu Arz had his own ideas about that subject and they were not those of Weizman. The Oslo process was mired in mistrust and lacked traction, and this frustrated Weizman. I was stunned by his unwillingness to initially address the subject of Lebanon, though he came around to denounce the Syrian occupation. Abu Arz came to solicit support from Israel and the most he heard from his host was advice to seek assistance from the United States. We did not need Weizman to enlighten us on this point. The conversation smacked of Israeli paternalism toward a weaker partner. When we got up to leave, the president's adviser Arie Shomer whispered in my ear not to release the fact of the meeting to the media.

Another public figure who I approached and responded favorably was former IDF Chief-of-Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, who in 1999 became a minister in the Barak Labor government. I met him in

the Knesset and his amiable demeanor and interest in Lebanon, where he had taken part in military operations, created a comfortable atmosphere. I spoke on behalf of Abu Arz, and he commented: if there were 10 Abu Arz, then Lebanon would be free. We fixed an appointment in Tel Aviv for the two men to meet.

I accompanied Abu Arz at the appointed time and place in Tel Aviv, and Shahak relaxed in a swivel chair at his desk. Abu Arz wanted to convince the minister that the Lebanese felt abandoned by Israel, and then he drew the lines in the sand. He reminded Shahak, the epitome of a gentleman-soldier and politician, of the many years of active security cooperation between Israel with his Guardians of the Cedars. On the verge of a catastrophe, after 10 years exiled from Beirut to the south, Abu Arz was bitter by the problematic collaboration with his Israeli ally. 'I chose Israel and look where I am now' [powerless in Israel's security zone in south Lebanon], he snapped, 'and look where Emil Lahoud the president of Lebanon is who chose Syria'. He stared at Shahak in the eye: 'when I was fighting the Syrians [in the 1970s], Lahoud was swimming at the club in Kislik' and he and his soldiers were sleeping on the beach. Silence fell upon the room.

Abu Arz also took the opportunity to explain to Shahak that the malaise in the south and in the SLA was due, not to the soldiers or the inhabitants, but to its commander, General Lahd. Abu Arz drew upon the following metaphor: 100 foxes led by a lion could defeat a 100 lions led by a fox. The imagery cast Lahd as the fox, but Nasrallah the Secretary-General of Hezbollah as the lion. It is all a question of leadership and that was lacking in the south, and really in Lebanon as a whole.

Shahak pushed back his chair and stared at the ceiling. It was a moment when truth smothered any possible denial. I remember that after we stood up to leave that Abu Arz taught me an important lesson: leave the meeting before your host tells you

to go. This salvages your dignity and preempts an embarrassing moment. I follow this sagacious advice until today.

On April 30 in the Year of the Betrayal, *Haaretz* printed a letter from Abu Arz then living in Marjayoun. He related his meeting with Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1997 that convinced his Guardian of the Cedars party to become a strategic ally of Israel. He related that in July 1999, the IDF retreated from the Jezzine enclave that was home to a Christian population, free from Syrian rule. Abu Arz was then visiting his sister in New York, and he told me in a phone conversation how devastated he was from the news about Jezzine, adding that 'I couldn't get out of bed'. He bemoaned prophetically in his letter: "we [the south Lebanese] refuse to end our long, tiring, and courageous struggle in a refugee camp in Israel." He appealed to the conscience of Israel hoping to meet up with the Israelis in Beirut, in a free Lebanon.

On May 5, two and a half weeks before the IDF withdrawal, my very long article on 'Lebanon, the Great Missed Opportunity' [*Hahachmatsa Hagedola*] appeared in the *Hatzofe* newspaper. I wrote that the withdrawal from south Lebanon would be 'very soon'. This might prove to be part of a broader pullback that would concede the Golan Heights to Syria. The strategic results would be catastrophic for Israel. In essence, Israel's limited goal in Lebanon was never more than protecting the northern Galilee border, and victory against Hezbollah was never the objective. Israel did not even conduct a diplomatic campaign, based on United Nations resolution 520 from September 17, 1982, to exert international pressure for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. Now Israel was on the verge of collapse in south Lebanon. The policy road never taken was that of promoting the SLA as a liberation force with its moral compass pointing away from a static defense posture and toward an aggressive assault to defeat Hezbollah. This re-

conceptualizing the narrative for south Lebanon would invigorate the Lebanese everywhere, enjoy diplomatic legitimation, and absolve Israel of the responsibility to remain and fight in the south. I dismiss as disingenuously protective the official Israeli position that the SLA soldiers were unable to do the job. It was a fixed Israeli policy not to upgrade the military capabilities of the SLA and to keep control over them. There was no evidence that the SLA force would be unable to match or outpace Hezbollah and prove more effective in battle. It required a new spirit, a new mode of operations, and a new commander. Israel denied them the chance, and kept her hand on the political pulse in the south, not to let things get out of hand. For the SLA, this was home, life, and honor. Israel cast them as a unit within and under the IDF command, which necessarily impaired to whatever degree the motivation and capability of the force.

My article concluded with the harsh judgment that Israel suffered from indecision, was an irresolute ally, and under great public pressure to withdraw. I mailed a copy of the article to a number of political figures, including Prime Minister/Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who acknowledged receipt as Israel stood on the abyss of retreat. One interesting response came from MK Avigdor Lieberman who cautioned that abandoning the SLA would cast Israel as an unreliable ally in the eyes of the Arabs in the Middle East. No amount of cynicism can refute the need for trust in political relationships.

Late May 2000 came with a thunderous human affliction. The brooding scandal of the government's concealment and scheming was now exposed. SLA commander Antoine Lahd was in Paris. Former deputy-commander Charbel Barakat went to the UN post at Nakura to solicit international protection for the south, but in vain. The IDF fled and the SLA collapsed. No one had prepared or warned the Lebanese for this act of sinister

abandonment. With disbelief and shame, I watched the television footage from Metulla where approximately seven thousand Lebanese pitifully pushed to cross into Israel. The once proud and armed Christians, with also Druze and Muslims, became a media image of fleeing refugees. Torment and desperation covered their faces. Meanwhile Hezbollah filled the military vacuum in south Lebanon and aimed its rockets at Israel. The Second Lebanese War erupted in 2006, and will there be a third?

The violation by Jews of a moral pact catalyzed my activity thereafter. In those heartbreaking times, I picked up Abu Arz and his assistant on May 26 and we drove to a gathering of SLA soldiers and their families at an army hostel in Netanya. MK Michael Kleiner spoke to the Lebanese in their native tongue. The indefatigable and principled MK Ayoub Kara, whom I met for the first time with my Lebanon file in hand, arranged a press conference in the Knesset on the 30th. Abu Arz spoke about honor and freedom to a host of reporters. There was no place for optimism with the collapse of a dream and the breach of a covenant. The Israelis returned home, but the Lebanese were thrust out of theirs.

Lebanon did not disappear from my life in the days and years that followed. I was active on behalf of the SLA people with a civilian committee of concerned Israelis, notably the poet Aharon Amir and the energetic Marsha Feinstein. We organized a weeklong protest tent in Tel Aviv in September. We invited well-meaning Israelis to show solidarity with the hapless Lebanese. Lebanese kids frolicked around the tent and added spirit to the event. I also participated in a meeting with senior Israeli security and military officers who had served in Lebanon, knew and worked with the Lebanese, and wanted to assist their absorption in Israeli society. General Meir Dagan (later appointed the director of the Mossad) chaired the meeting and it was there that I met Yair Ravid, a seasoned intelligence officer, with whom I developed a friendly

relationship over the years.

In the summer of 2000, I was involved in an initiative to arrange for Lebanese youth, now uprooted from home and school, to study at the Rothberg International School of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem where I lectured. We wanted to offer them a program of academic studies that beyond its own merit would emotionally distract and compensate the Lebanese youth for the sudden sorrow and initial trauma that afflicted their lives. About 15 young people signed up, as they moved from the north of Israel to the capital, studied Hebrew and other subjects, and I assisted and advised them in any way I could during this formative period of adjustment. They were wonderful youngsters and they showed fortitude in adversity in a new country, in a new language. Two of the students later married and I attended their wedding ceremony in Akko and the celebration near Meiliya. I was gratified to see them moving on with their lives, though the Israelis active on behalf of the wonderful young couple would have preferred that they do so in their native land as befits the proud Lebanese. Syrian occupation and Hezbollah were the obstacles to a safe return home.

Before the year was out in December, the *Middle East Quarterly* published my article "Did Israel Betray its Lebanese Allies?" whose rhetorical title did not allow for two alternative answers to the question. I love my country and marvel at my state, but my government was in the dock guilty of glaringly sordid treachery. It had broken the golden rule of 'love your neighbor as yourself'. I mused that perhaps a left-leaning Israeli leadership that showed no instinctive love for the Land of Israel, as if it was not part of the cultural baggage deep in the heart, could attribute a similar post-national territorial sentiment to the Lebanese. The loss of a healthy instinct can be the prelude to the erosion of ethics.

I decided to write a political biography of Etienne Sakr, and he cooperated as I went to interview him in Tel Aviv on

several occasions. Researching the recent history of Lebanon I was able to conduct a telephone conversation with Lebanon's former Army Commander Michel Aoun in Paris, who pompously and incorrectly stated that he was the only Lebanese leader who had opposed Syria's intervention in Lebanon. I drove to Nahariya to chat with former SLA major Sami Chidyaq, "the Israeli" in certain Lebanese security circles, who shared with me stories and insights about Lebanon and about "the conscience of Lebanon" – the moniker for Abu Arz that he, but also Charbel Barakat, introduced to me. Later I accompanied Abu Arz and Sami to meet with Gideon Ezra, Minister for Domestic Security, in the Police Headquarters in Jerusalem. Sami, who lost his income from his business in the south, wanted to prevail upon the minister to arrange financial support. He was after all an old friend and military ally of Israel. Crestfallen and shamed the two Lebanese left with empty hands. It was proverbial Abu Arz to comment: the worst thing in life is to have to ask for something from someone.

My investigations and curiosity to meet with Lebanese figures also led to a private meeting in a Tel Aviv hotel with General Antoine Lahd, the commander of the defunct South Lebanese Army. I showed no sign of my prior familiarity with the man and his machinations were a known secret.

In 2002, I asked for a meeting with Reserve-General Giora Island, head of Israel's National Security Council in his office in Jerusalem. Before I could hardly introduce myself and present my ideas, he systematically argued his thesis, that Syria's presence in Lebanon is an Israeli interest: Hezbollah was restrained and war was avoided. I countered that Syria's presence in Lebanon does not guarantee stability and, no less critical, Syria's hegemonic and all-encompassing occupation strangled a dynamic society, with cultural resources that can impact positively on Israel's place in the Muslim Middle East. The Lebanese people, with many now brainwashed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, had no history of

antagonism to Jews, or major conflict with Israel. In my judgment, Assad's Syria, both that of the father and the son, was the curse of Lebanon *and* Israel, not a blessing. There was no meeting of minds between Island and I.

My activities on my Lebanese file included some other entries. I wrote a short paper on the Maronite community in the world, boasting large numbers in Brazil, Australia, France, and North America. I proposed that Israeli authorities engage in an advisory capacity without public exposure to promote a Maronite return – in the spirit of the Jewish people's Zionist return – to their ancient homeland. A stronger Christian presence in Lebanon would assure the demographic and political balance