

After the Withdrawal from Lebanon

The Effects on Israeli Public Opinion

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It is extremely difficult, from so close a vantage point, to analyze and assess the ramifications and consequences of the withdrawal from Lebanon on the internal scene in Israel. Firstly, public opinion is known to be characterized by delayed reaction. The electoral effects of the Yom Kippur War were fully felt only three and half years later in the elections of 1977. Any attempt to gauge public opinion days or even a few weeks after such a momentous event is highly problematic. Secondly, at such an early date, there is a very limited amount of data, and, thus, the empirical basis essential for an intelligent analysis of public opinion trends is, in effect, almost non-existent. This paper should, therefore, be viewed as speculative in nature. Based on past experience and general insights, as well as some social psychological principles, we shall attempt to explore some of the possible short-term and long-term effects of the withdrawal from Lebanon on the Israeli internal scene.

One observation can be made with a high degree of certainty. The withdrawal from Lebanon, as such, is strongly supported by the Israeli public. In a poll taken by Dr. Mina Zemach on the evening following the IDF's hasty and complete pullout from Lebanon, a representative sample of the Israeli adult population was asked: "Taking everything into consideration, was the withdrawal from Lebanon a correct step or an incorrect step." Seventy-two percent answered in

the affirmative versus 20 percent who responded negatively. Given the current polarization of Israeli society and the fact that it is difficult today to find a consensus on any issue, such a huge majority (over 3½ to 1) is quite remarkable. Indeed, one can almost speak of a national consensus in support of the withdrawal from Lebanon. The fact that such a high degree of support was recorded despite the negative coverage of the hasty IDF pullout and the stark pictures of the flag-waving Hizbullah terrorists celebrating on the remnants of the IDF fortifications — only goes to show how tired and depressed the Israeli public was of Israel's tragic 18-year involvement in Lebanon.

Far less certain are the more subtle and far-reaching effects of the withdrawal on Israeli public opinion. Although it is really too early to tell, two possible public opinion spin-offs immediately come to mind. The first sphere is the image, standing and popularity of Prime Minister Ehud Barak. The second sphere — one, which might be influenced in a more complex and indirect way — is public opinion regarding the peace process. Israeli readiness for far-reaching concessions, including extensive withdrawals in Judea and Samaria on the Palestinian track, as well as its readiness to support a peace treaty with Syria on the basis of withdrawal from the Golan Heights, could very well be influenced by the results of the withdrawal from

Lebanon in terms of the security and tranquility of the Israeli north. Public opinion developments in both spheres and on both issues need to be carefully followed in the coming months in order to arrive at proper conclusions with regard to the effect upon them of the withdrawal. At this stage, one can merely speculate as to possible effects — such speculation being subject, of course, to future developments on Israel's northern border.

In the short term, the withdrawal has enhanced the standing and popularity of Prime Minister Barak. In the abovementioned poll, the respondents were asked whether after the withdrawal they changed their opinion — for better or worse — of the prime minister. Twenty-three percent said that they changed their opinion for the better, while 18 percent changed for the worse. Fifty-eight percent expressed no change. It would seem that the withdrawal helped the prime minister score points with the Israeli public on two counts: *credibility* and *decisiveness*. Barak made a clear-cut commitment before the election to "bring our boys home" within a year. After his election, Barak repeated this commitment, unequivocally and emphatically, time and again. It had become the litmus test of his credibility — and no one can deny that he passed it.

During Barak's first year in office, he was seen more and more as a vacillator, especially on the internal political scene. As the months wore on, Barak's image as

a strong military leader who would bring change and decisive leadership to Israel's chaotic political scene became increasingly tarnished. This was reflected in the steady decline in Barak's popularity during the past year. The tenacity and perseverance with which the prime minister implemented the withdrawal from Lebanon as promised has done much to rehabilitate his image as a decisive leader. The withdrawal was perceived by the Israeli public as "Barak's baby", and it became quite clear that he was pushing it forward almost single handedly, despite heavy opposition from the high command of the IDF. Even some of Barak's strongest critics and political opponents have admitted that he has shown leadership qualities in that he is able to take difficult decisions involving grave political risks, standing behind them, and implementing them to the end. The withdrawal, together with Barak's surprise decision to have the transfer of Abu Dis to the Palestinians approved by the government and Knesset in one day, have to a large degree, reestablished his image as a strong leader. One would expect to see in the coming days improvement in Barak's standing in the polls.

Initial signs of such improvement can already be seen. In a poll taken by Zemach in the last week of May and published on June 2, a representative sample of the Israeli adult population was asked a number of questions regarding the performance of Barak. The results showed marked improvement compared to those of April. In the April poll, 24 percent stated that Ehud Barak "keeps his promises to the

public," whereas in May the percentage was 37 percent (an increase of 13 percent). In April, only 38 percent gave Barak a positive rating "on his performance as prime minister." In the May poll, 47 percent rated his performance positively versus 50 percent who gave him a negative rating. One, of course, cannot reach a conclusion on the basis of a single poll. Nevertheless, the results of the May poll may, indeed, signify a reversal of the trend and the beginning of an upturn in support for the prime minister.

Parenthetically, one should note that the withdrawal from Lebanon is another excellent example of the importance of the identity of the prime minister, and especially of his military record, in Israeli national security decision-making. As was the case with Rabin in Oslo, Ehud Barak's military record and his unquestioned expertise in security affairs were crucial to his ability to push forward the withdrawal despite the stiff and almost unanimous opposition of the IDF high command. No one questions the authority of any government or any prime minister to take such a decision and of the duty of the army to implement it. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that Yossi Beilin or Shlomo Ben Ami could have mustered the necessary support in the cabinet, the Knesset and among the public for such a momentous and risky decision in face of the strong opposition of the IDF and in face of the dire warnings of the military and intelligence community.

All of the above regarding the positive effects on the standing of the prime minister, and consequently on his ability

to move forward in other areas, such as the Palestinian track, depends, of course, on future developments on Israel's northern border. There is no question that the withdrawal carries with it grave risks, and as far as Barak is concerned it is a big gamble. The prime minister has solemnly promised the Israeli people, in general, and the residents of the north, in particular, that that the withdrawal *will not decrease but will enhance* the security and tranquility of the people living in the north. To back up this promise, he has committed himself to massive retaliation against Lebanon and Syrian interests in Lebanon for any violation of Israel's border and for any attack from across the border on Israeli civilians or soldiers. Barak has raised the stakes and has stated unequivocally that the level of retaliation now that Israel has withdrawn to the international border will be much higher than before. This commitment has been repeated by many government spokesmen, including ministers, and especially the chief of staff.

It would seem that the Israeli public, by and large, believes Barak. Nevertheless, this commitment on his behalf is quite a tall order. Just as Barak's promise to withdraw from Lebanon was a litmus test of his credibility, so has this new commitment become the current litmus test of his credibility. Barak has, in effect, suggested a new security doctrine to the Israeli public - namely Israel will defend itself from within its own borders, based on its full deterrent and retaliatory capability. It would seem that Israeli public opinion is willing to give Barak a chance to prove this doctrine, albeit having serious

doubts about its veracity. The mood of the country is one of "wait and see". If there will be an attack from across the border on Israeli civilians or soldiers and should Israel fail to respond with a heavy attack from the air on Lebanese infrastructure as well as against Syrian troops in Lebanon, Barak will, most probably, suffer a heavy blow to his standing and popularity in Israeli public opinion.

The second sphere, namely the effect of the withdrawal on public opinion regarding the peace process, follows directly from the above. The success or failure of Barak's new security doctrine might have a significant, albeit subtle, effect on public opinion regarding both future withdrawals in Judea and Samaria and a peace treaty with Syria. Although there is a huge difference between Lebanon and the West Bank, or for that matter between Lebanon and the Golan Heights, people tend to draw comparisons. If Lebanon will prove that one can base security on deterrence coupled with international legitimacy, even if it involves controlling less territory — this might have a profound effect on the approach of the Israeli public to territorial concessions on other fronts. At the same time, one should be very cautious and not jump to hasty conclusions. The question of Judea and Samaria and that of the Golan Heights are two very different issues, involving different sets of perceptions and different

emotions. The withdrawal from Lebanon, if indeed it proves to be successful, may in the end have a totally different effect on the Palestinian track versus the Syria track.

Lebanon is not Judea and Samaria. There are no Jewish settlements in Lebanon and the people of Israel do not have any deep-seated national, historic and religious ties to the land of Lebanon. Nevertheless, there is one common feature: in both cases the struggle was, or is, between the IDF and a large hostile local population. The lessons of Lebanon and the intifada have brought home to the Israeli public the difficulties of ruling over another nation and the negative consequences, for the IDF, in particular, and for Israel, as a whole, of constant friction with a hostile civilian population. The hard core opposition to any further concessions in Judea and Samaria is rooted in the Greater Israel ideology. But the concerns and fears of most Israelis regarding far-reaching concessions in Judea and Samaria are in the area of security. Barak's challenge is to convince the Israeli public that separation between Israel and the Palestinians and the creation of an internationally recognized border between a smaller Israel and a Palestinian state will enhance and not decrease Israeli security. The success of the new security doctrine regarding Lebanon could enhance the chances of Barak achieving such a goal.

The Golan Heights is a different story.

Here, Israel does not face a hostile civilian population, and the continuing military control of the Golan Heights does not undermine the morale of the IDF. The issues at stake in the Golan Heights are of a different nature. The lesson of Lebanon — even if successful — is less applicable to the Golan Heights than to West Bank. On the other hand, by implementing a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, Barak has lost his trump card in the public opinion battle over the Golan Heights. Results from public opinion surveys over the last half-year have consistently shown strong opposition to a complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights. The only serious dent in this opposition was found when such a withdrawal was linked to an agreement with Syria for an orderly Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. The desire of the Israeli public to disengage and get out of Lebanon while guaranteeing the security of Israel's northern communities was so strong that many were willing to pay the price in the Golan. This argument or incentive is no longer applicable and thus achieving a majority in favor of complete withdrawal from the Golan would seem to be now more difficult. One should note, however, that if the situation on the Lebanese border should deteriorate and result in a major military confrontation, this assessment could rapidly change.

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