

Occupied South Lebanon: Exclusion zone

Pierre Coopman * (1998)

Last year's twentieth anniversary of the UN Security Council's resolution 425, reminded the Lebanese people that the Israeli occupier still controls a part of their country extending on 1,200 square kilometers up to the town of Jezzine. Resolution 425 demands Israel's immediate withdrawal from Lebanese territories. In March 1998, Israel accepted resolution 425. A retreat became theoretically possible. In Beirut, several officials and prominent figures, originally from the occupied territories, are considering the difficulties that are linked to both freeing the occupied zone as well integrating it with the rest of the country. This inquiry is the result of interviews conducted with those personalities.

Reminder on the geopolitics of the South Lebanese border

The Israeli government of Nentanyahou, contemplating the withdrawal from the Lebanese sloughs, proposed to comply to resolution 425 under the condition that bilateral security arrangements are to be discussed with the Lebanese authorities. What Israelis want to discuss can be summarized in two main requirements: first, to neutralize the resistance in order to guarantee the cessation of Katiousha shelling on Northern Galilee, and second, to reintegrate the members of the South Lebanese Army (SLA), the pro-Israeli militia commanded by General Antoine Lahad, into the national Lebanese army. Those conditions are hardly acceptable to the Lebanese government. Hezbollah troops are the primary actors in the resistance. This Shia pro-Iranian party is a legal political movement in Lebanon, and given its strong support throughout the country, it would be a most sensitive matter for the Lebanese authorities to try to neutralize it. Concerning the SLA, courts in Beirut have already sentenced several of its officers. General Lahad is condemned to death 'in absentia'. The simple militiamen (at least 3,000 mercenaries) would perhaps benefit from an amnesty but their participation in the national army would surely be refused.

The public opinion in Israel is regularly stunned by the deaths of its soldiers and officers in the 'Good fence' region. At least 40 percent of the Israeli

electorate and a fair number of serving army officers appeal for unilateral withdrawal. At this moment in time, March 1999, one wonders if the outcome of the May 1999 elections in Israel will bring a new government that could change the politics prevailing in the current Nentanyahou cabinet. The latter has always stressed that before any retreat, Beirut should provide security guarantees and promise to integrate members of the SLA into the Lebanese army. President Lahoud, the new Lebanese President and former army commander, has rejected this demand and calls upon Israel's unconditional withdrawal in accordance with UN resolution 425.

Still, Lebanon and Syria would nevertheless be embarrassed by a unilateral withdrawal. The Syrian tutelage on Lebanon means there is no room for separating the case of South Lebanon from the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, annexed in 1981, subject to a popular referendum in Israel before any retreat, but still reclaimed by Damascus. Syria considers that the UN Security Council's resolution 242 (November 1967), which affirms the necessary disengagement of Israeli forces from all the territories invaded during the 6-days war, continues to go hand in hand with resolution 425 (1). A unilateral departure from South Lebanon without a simultaneous arrangement regarding the Golan Heights, would place Beirut, and much more so Damascus, in an inextricable strategic turmoil.

A region looking like a cobweb

Twenty years of fracture have turned the occupied zone into a place where one continues to struggle to conserve a Lebanese identity. There is a lack of accurate statistics estimating the number of inhabitants still remaining in the area. It is a difficulty faced by academics and researchers, like Dr. Monther Jaber, professor at the Lebanese University in Beirut. He is originally from Bint Jbail, a village located in the heart of the occupied zone. Professor Jaber, conducting research (2) about the two decades of occupation, tells that "*the estimates going up to 200,000 people in the occupied border strip are likely to be quite exaggerated.*" Among the facts that can support this argument, according to Jaber, is the number of pupils attending public schools in the occupied district (public teachers almost represent the Lebanese State in these territories). If one supposes, as Jaber

does, that the proportion between the number of students and the total population is more or less identical to the proportions observed in other regions of the country, one might conclude there are no more than 60,000 or 70,000 permanent residents behind the 'Good fence'. This reflects less than a quarter of the population that was there in the mid-seventies. A majority has immigrated to the southern suburbs of Beirut, or abroad, mainly to the United States.

The choice of emigration imposes itself when everyday life is like staying in an open-air prison. Monther Jaber explains that *"there are more than 80 Israeli military bases in the zone. All are constructed on confiscated grounds and connected by a military road network, mutilating the agricultural space. This real cobweb is completed by the SLA military barracks, situated on the outskirts of each town or village."*

Habib Saadek, a former left-wing deputy at the Lebanese parliament, presides the 'South Lebanese Cultural Council' (3), a Beirut based organization lobbying for humanitarian actions in the southern border region and for the liberation of the Lebanese jailed in the occupied zone's detention center of Khiam or in Israel. Quoting Habib Saadek, *"the southerners' emigration is a direct consequence of the paralysis of their economy. Blockades are imposed on villages almost every week (...) As it is forbidden to circulate alone in a car (because Israeli forces want to reduce the risk of kamikaze vehicles), one has to organize collective trips to sell agricultural products, buy medicine, or simply go to the hospital (...) When the military authorities expel a head of family, the entire family goes to exile, and the recruitment of young people in the SLA provokes the loss of the last productive forces."* Habib Saadek also complains about the Lebanese government's slow performance in implementing projects in the occupied area. *"The authorities in Beirut talk more than they act about helping the inhabitants of the border, to whom one should offer more training opportunities in agriculture, as this would allow them not to be obliged to earn their salaries in Israel"*, affirms Habib Saadek.

However, reviving the agriculture by better training opportunities seems very 'naïve' to Monther Jaber. He insists that even at the end of the

training, the people would still be more attracted to the wages proposed in Israel. Jaber thinks, *"any attempt to develop agriculture is condemned to failure. The Lebanese market is not accessible. When getting outside of the zone, the products are rigorously controlled at the roadblocks of the Lebanese army, in order to check that no products cultivated in Israel cross to Beirut. The farmers then need to get a certificate testifying that their goods are Lebanese. A procedure lasting for days and leaving provisions rotting at the roadblock (...) Apart from tobacco, still managed by a state-owned company (the 'régie des tabacs'), one only finds agriculture for local use. People turn to work in Israel where they compare the price of fruit and vegetables. They buy one box each day and try to resell it. Sometimes they bring fruits unknown in Lebanon before, as avocado, mango and pineapple."*

Detailing the historical process of job opportunities in Israel, Monther Jaber also analyzes the relation existing between the recruitment of frontier workers and the expanding structure of the SLA: *"The uniform of the militiamen symbolizes their dependence. The dungaree they wear is coming right from Israeli stocks. To belong to the militia allows finding jobs for the family. This system runs when the economy is bloodless. Between 1985 and 1987, the 'régie' stopped collecting the tobacco. Joining the militia and the job appointments in Galilee became the only source of livelihood for a lot of farmers and their families. Today, the tobacco sector is growing again but it can't compete with the 400-500 dollars earned monthly by Lahad's subordinates."*

The advantages given through the SLA (access to daily jobs in Israel) are covering an exploitative system. According to Jaber, *"a Lebanese worker in a textile factory earns a maximum of 500 dollars per month. The 3,000 Lebanese crossing the border could raise up to 50 million dollars per year if they are paid fairly. But they only average 20 million dollars, in accordance to their kind of job"* (catering, road works, mechanics, agricultural sector and textile). Jaber asserts that *"a part of the missing 30 millions must be going to the Israeli State, serving to finance the SLA and the Civil Service (under Israeli control) in charge of the security strip. Consequently, the Lebanese workforce is the manner in which one makes*

the occupation profitable. In Israel, people are only paid in shekels. The Lebanese need to change this money in dollars, because there is no official use of shekels in the occupied zone. The commissions on the exchange rate are disadvantageous, but the Israeli economy is winning... Moreover, frontier workers do not benefit from any insurance or health indemnification. They are also serviceable (as Rumanian and Thai migrants are) to compensate the lack of Palestinian workforce following the closure of the West-Bank and Gaza."

What the Lebanese State does to affirm its sovereignty

Facilities as water and electricity are still under the responsibility of the Lebanese State. *"It is the result of a blackmail procedure", Jaber explains. "When our government tried to cut the water supply in Marjayoun (the main occupied town), General Lahad bombarded the coastal towns of Sidon and Tyre. Ever since then, the government, fed up with the reprisals, provides the public services in the occupied zone. Still, thirteen villages very close to the border receive water from the Israeli supply. A ministerial decision in Beirut exempted the occupied zone from paying water taxes, but those thirteen villages pay their invoices to Israel. If Lebanon wants to help the region, those thirteen villages must be a priority."*

The Council of the South, a public organization headed by Nabih Berry, chief of the Amal party, and Chairman in the parliament, prides itself on having completed projects as building schools, health centers and sewage systems, in the most isolated villages held by Israel. Those initiatives are supposed to improve confidence of the inhabitants. Civil servants at the Council of the South claim they can reduce, through small projects, the number of compatriots attracted by wages in Israel. But Tel Aviv has issued 500 more work permits in May 1998, and each inhabitant can, from now on, 'rent' his right to cross to Galilee. The owners of those 'crosspermits' mostly are members or families of the SLA.

Ahmad Beydoun, a well known author (4) who comes from Bint Jbail in the occupied zone, thinks the Council of the South only acts from time to time,

mostly following the political and electoral interests of Nabih Berry: *"If there is a part of the population surviving over there, it is thanks to the few agriculture still possible, a couple of enterprises (mainly stone quarries), the money transfers from families abroad, the salaries earned in Israel and the recruitment in the militia. The whole is sufficient to maintain a minimal social cohesion. You add an approximate hundred civil servants, most of them primary school teachers, and less than a hundred businessmen who facilitate the movement of merchandises... and you've got what allows the people to hold on."*

The spring 1998 municipal elections did not take place in the occupied region. To Ahmad Beydoun, this proves that the State born after the Taef Agreement (signed in 1989 to bring peace in Lebanon) fails in affirming its sovereignty on the territories still militarily dominated by Israel. But the political circumstances did not facilitate holding elections, as the SLA reiterated its menaces to expel any official State representative who would refuse to collaborate with the Israeli authorities. Ahmad Beydoun nevertheless complains: *"The parliamentary elections in 1996 took place normally. People came out of the occupied strip to vote in polling stations opened in free towns of the South (Sidon, Tyre). These people do not appreciate the absence of municipal elections. Obviously, one could not organize the vote in the occupied villages, because there would not be any guaranty for freedom. But it was possible to manage the ballot outside the zone, as one did for the parliamentary elections... Even if most of those coming from the border area have immigrated to the suburbs of Beirut, they should keep their right to vote for their municipal council. The only explanation I find is that the former ruling politicians (President Hraoui and Prime Minister Hariri) feared an outcome putting them at a disadvantage."*

An occupation based on local administration

The SLA's successful recruitment is due to a local approach of the occupation. *"The Israelis played with the conflicts between communities",* insists Ahmad Beydoun. *"At the beginning, the militia was almost essentially Christian. When Christian militiamen came to rule a Shia*

village, their behavior was odious towards the population. To avoid further problems, the inhabitants of Shia villages decided to ensure their own security by enrolling in the SLA. In this way, they could prevent neighboring Christian villages from laying down the rules. Some border localities that were already subject to pressures from Palestinian groups in the early seventies quickly developed ties with Israel. These are villages as Qleiaa, Rmeich, Aita ech Chaab, which nowadays conserve the major part of their population. The Christian locality of Rmeich is more populated than Bint Jbail. But in time of peace, Bint Jbail was three times more important than Rmeich. Although keeping most of the inhabitants is not only observed for Christian villages, Aita ech Chaab, for instance, is a Shia Muslim village."

Monther Jaber points out that "Aita ech Chaab challenged Rmeich by sending dozens of its sons to the militia. In 1993, a football match was organized to confront the teams of both villages, and was followed by threatening language between villagers of both sides. It is really at the level of this local mentality that one must find the reason why people become members of the SLA, and not in ideologies or politics. Whatever it may be, a couple of individuals who live over there don't come from the region and are pro-Israeli collaborators who moved in this zone because they fear lawsuits in Beirut. Most of them are officers in the SLA and harshly treat a population with whom they have few social ties. Israel simply makes it clear to the people that if they want to get rid of those tyrants, they should propose someone else. That's the way the SLA became as much (and even more) a self-defense militia to protect villages, as an army of collaborators. The militia merely proves to be a manner of saving the dignity of the occupied South's inhabitants." Monther Jaber believes that Israelis put a lot of energy in protecting the SLA, "because it represents their eyes and ears inside the villages... If the SLA weakens, Israel will lose a sustaining pillar of its occupation."

Inevitably connected to Israel

Ties with the occupier are inevitable for the majority. Monther Jaber discloses: *"If you want to travel to the United States (the destination*

mainly chosen to emigrate), obtaining your visa means going to Tel Aviv. For the USA, South Lebanese are only granted visas in Israel. When you succeeded in going to Tel Aviv, the US embassy takes it as a proof that you are not a terrorist. To apply for visas in Israel also signifies you must fly from or to the airport of Lod-Tel Aviv. Somebody coming back to Bint Jbail in order to sell his house, after spending fifteen years in the United States, ventures to wait several hours at the airport, at both roadblocks of the Lebanese army and the SLA, if he chooses to reach his home from Beirut. Through Lod-Tel Aviv, the journey will be no longer than two hours."

Jaber concludes with a remark about how Israel coped with the question of the occupied population and outside communications: *"Generally, Israel has been intelligent enough to allow communications. Almost everyone has relatives in Beirut or in foreign countries and needs to phone from time to time. Israel has authorized the installation of a telephone central office in Bint Jbail, run by an SLA officer, and connected through a line located in Cyprus. Today, cellular phones are authorized too. It is rumored that the whole network benefits the business of an Israeli officer. But to me it seems that this apparent freedom also signifies a manner of controlling people. I mean one can easily identify someone who phones outside too often without a valid reason, as the network is entirely controlled by the SLA and Israel."*

The role UNIFIL plays

According to the anonymous testimony of a former Norwegian 'blue helmet' who served several months in the occupied zone: *"The overwhelming feeling among the population is that logic means to collaborate. Otherwise you're a potential enemy. Thus, many choose to be loyal to Israel, but consider themselves as heroes. Some say that if they had left the region it would already be full of colonies and kibbutzim."*

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) represents an important economical resource for the occupied area. It employs around 400 Lebanese in building, manual work, or administrative services. UNIFIL

was also, during a certain period, at the origin of a 'trade boom' round its headquarters (Naqoura and Ibl es Saqi situated in the occupied zone), attracting dozens of shops, bars and restaurants, all managed by Lebanese. But the changes in the 'blue helmets' contingent today bring soldiers from poorer countries (Poland, Ghana, India) less prompted to spend their money. UNIFIL ceased to be a commercial palliative for the occupied zone.

The most outstanding initiative taken by UNIFIL lies in health services. Timor Göksel, spokesman of the Interim Force, explains that, *"only two hospitals are regularly functioning. It takes a long time to send patients to Sidon, Beirut, or to a medical center in Israel. That's why we do rounds with medical teams to the very isolated villages."*

What are the chances of reconciliation ?

Now that the possibility of a unilateral retreat is discussed in Israel, some Lebanese personalities (as Monther Jaber, Ahmad Beydoun) try to demonstrate that the inhabitants of the 'Good fence' area shouldn't necessarily all be considered as traitors. Simon Karam, lawyer and one of the leading citizens in Jezzine, was given a mandate at the beginning of the nineties, as Lebanon's ambassador in the United States, to negotiate about an eventual withdrawal from the Jezzine region (the 'Jezzine first' option, an Israeli proposal mediated through the intervention of the United States, during the Madrid Conference in 1991). *"I resigned in 1993, acknowledges Simon Karam, because I didn't understand why the State massively considers the population of the occupied South as collaborators."*

The lawyer recalls that *"anguish generally prevails among the civilians in the occupied South and more especially in Jezzine (...) Several attacks against civilians committed during the Summer 1997 in the region of Jezzine, imputed to Hezbollah, seem to prove to the population that the deployment of the Lebanese army wouldn't be guaranteed in case Israel leaves, or that such a deployment wouldn't mean an immediate takeover by the Lebanese government."*

Will the reconciliation sealed after the Taef agreement be continued in a liberated South-Lebanon? Ahmad Beydoun believes there should be a

central decision, forbidding any form of 'vendetta': *"If the army is massively present and if the different groups decide there mustn't be violence, there won't be any violence. Some difficulties will occur, but they shouldn't be worse than those that existed in other parts of the country at the end of the war. There were no significant incidents at that time. The militias were disarmed, the people moved freely and lived peacefully."*

* Pierre Coopman is a Belgian journalist, Chief Editor of the magazine *Défis-Sud*. He conducted the above published inquiry in Lebanon, in 1998.

(1) This analyses about the Syrian strategy is presented by Michael Young in the article headed 'Outlandish ribbons', published in 'The Lebanon Report', Number 1, Spring, 1998.

(2) The result of these researches should be published in 1999, in Arabic, by the Center of Palestinian studies in Beirut.

(3) The 'South Lebanese Cultural Council' has organized a conference about the occupied zone, in Beirut, in 1994. Following this conference, a collective book concerning the occupied South has been published : 'Al ihtilal al israili li janoub lubnan, wa tahadiyaat l marhala' (The Israeli occupation in South Lebanon : Challenges of the present day), 'majlis es saqafi lubnan el janoubi', Beirut, 1994.

(4) The author of 'Le Liban: itinéraires d'une guerre incivile', Editions Karthala, 1993. Ahmad Beydoun also wrote an interesting article on the South Lebanese community of Bint Jbail presently living in the State of Michigan : 'Bint Jbail, Michigan, suivi de (ou poursuivi par) Bint Jbail, Liban' in 'Maghreb/Machreq', n°125, 1989, pp. 69-81.