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An Israeli bestseller. Schiff is the military correspondent of HaAretz, author of other books chosen author of the year by the editors of the Israeli news media for his coverage of the war. Ya'ari is the Middle East Affairs correspondent for Israel television and author of a number of books and also shares with Schiff the distinction of being chosen Journalist of the Year for his coverage of the war.

In April 1981 U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig arrived in the Middle East to sound out America's friends on the notion of establishing an anti-Soviet regional alignment. Begin's people liked him. He espoused a strong policy. He spoke of Syria's regime in biting language and left the distinct impression that America intended to take a hard line towards Syria as the Soviet Union's chief client state in the region. In the same April, a bloody incident was brewing in the Lebanese city of Zahle, where the Phalange and Syrian garrison were priming their weapons for battle. Damascus was draeing up the so-called Program of National Reconciliation, a bid to install a puppet government in Beirut and undermine the position of the Christian factions. Word was out that as the 1982 Lebanese presidential elections approached, the Syrians would intervene to assure victory for their longtime ally and the Gemayels' longtime rival Frangieh. Gemayel figured he had to move fast, according to this book, and the Phalangists attacked Syrian sentries along the Beirut-Damascus highway and the Syrians responded in Zahle. The Bekka Valley was south of the city. According to the book, Assad sent a message to Israel to indicate that he wanted no quarrel with them. Soon after the seizure of Zahle began Bashir Gemayel and Camille Chamoun went to meet with Begin. The Israeli cabinet sanctioned a limited air strike to prevent genocide in Lebanon, according to Begin. Begin threatened to attack the Bekka Valley unless the Syrians removed their missiles. America asked Begin to wait for negotiation by Habib and Begin jumped at the chance for negotiation, but the Syrian missiles stayed put.

In May, at the request of Rafael Eitan, Begin approved a request to renew the bombing of PLO concentrations in South Lebanon. The book suggests that there was a political goal. Israel renewed its air strikes on the PLO strongholds in south Lebanon in July and the PLO fought back by shelling the Israeli resort town of Nahariya. The steady pounding of the PLO all but paralyzed the entire sector of northern Israel from Nahariya to Kiryat Shmona at the tip of the upper Galileean finger. Some 40% of the population of Kiryat Shmona fled the town. Then, after the 1981 election, Begin appointed Ariel Sharon to become his Minister of Defense.

As far back as October 1981 Sharon told the general staff: "When I speak of destroying the terrorists, it means a priori that [the operation] includes Beirut."

He also, in a session that early with ... it is possible [a longlasting change] on condition that a legitimate regime emerges in Lebanon, not a puppet government; that it signs a peace treaty with Israel; and that it becomes part of the free world."

Clearly, Sharon envisioned a war whose prime purpose was the establishment of a new political order in Lebanon. The Syrians would have to be driven out, the PLO would have to be expelled, PLO leadership would be forced into a gilded cage in Damascus, its influence over the West Bank would wither, allowing moderate local Palestinians to step forward and conduct negotiations with Israel on a constitution of autonomy for the inhabitants of the occupied territories.

Almost 10 months passed between the day Sharon took over the Defense Ministry and the day on which tens of thousands of Israeli troops streamed over the border into Lebanon, but he led them to that point.

Israel's march toward war from August 1981 until June 1982. Major General Amir Drori, who took over as head of the IDF's northern command in September 1981, ordered his staff to pull out the plan, code name "Little Pines," which charted the conquest of south Lebanon up to the vicinity of Sudan (?) and to review the more ambitious "Big Pines" plan, which covered the conquest of a larger chunk of Lebanon, extending beyond the Beirut-Damascus highway.

Meanwhile, in November, Bashir Gemayel declared his candidacy for the presidency of Lebanon. This would require, if he was to be chosen over Frangieh, Chamoun or Sarkis, Israeli intervention and when asked how long the IDF would have to remain in Lebanon before Bashir could firmly establish his regime, Sharon said "Six weeks." Intelligence chief Sagi (?) said "Not a day less than 3 months" but they were both way off. Drori was telling his aides that it was "out of the question to depend on the Christians. From a military standpoint, they're in very poor shape."

In December Begin and Sharon presented the plan for Operation Big Pines to the cabinet for the first time. They opposed Big Pines, but the military planning proceeded.

During this period, Sharon lectured that there was no point of an action in Lebanon unless it was thorough and no action against the PLO would be thorough unless it drove the terrorists out of Beirut. Sagi said "We mustn't go as far as Beirut. We'll only get bogged down there. We've never entered an Arab capital before." Sharon was saying at this point "Perhaps you're right. We should let the Phalange take Beirut," but Sagi said that the Phalange was not capable of taking Beirut.

In April 1982 Israel broke the cease-fire with the PLO by bombing targets in south Lebanon, the pretext being the death of an Israeli soldier whose vehicle hit a mine and again it started back and forth.

According to the authors, D-Day was scheduled for Sunday, May 17, but it was postponed when it became evident that seven ministers, including Begin's two deputies, Simchah Ehrlich and David Levi, still did not support a major ground action. Sharon had

succeeded brilliantly in turning the Israeli cabinet and the IDF general staff into two mutually isolated bodies, running on very different tracks. While the cabinet meeting ended with a general understanding that any war in Lebanon would be a limited one, the generals focused their deliberations on the Big Pines plan. The cabinet talked in terms of an action against the PLO that would steer clear of any contact with the Syrian forces in Lebanon. The general staff spoke of closing in on Beirut and cutting the highway to Damascus, which would force the IDF to engage the Syrians. Against the whole operation was the intelligence chief, Sagi, who kept saying not only that, at least in military circles, there was no way to do Big Pines without a war with Syria, but that that kind of action against the terrorists did not mean an end to the PLO.

"The question that inevitably arises -- and probably will always remain open -- is how far Sharon and Eitan took Begin in and how far the Prime Minister wittingly lent himself to Sharon's machinations."

By the time Sharon had become Defense Minister, the Reagan administration was already exasperated by a succession of precipitate Israeli moves. Washington's most bitter and consistent complaint was that the Begin government had the infuriating habit of pulling surprises on its allies, no less than on its foes, such as the bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor, the sudden annexation of the Golan Heights, etc. Sharon arranged, even though even Haig asked for restraint, to make it seem that the Israeli government had grounds for believing that Washington had indeed bestowed its tacit approval on the limited military action in Lebanon.

In the meantime, back in the PLO, by the late 1970s, having been kicked out of Jordan, Arafat was operating exclusively out of Lebanon, although there was more and more difficulty about getting terrorists through the Israeli border. He realized he would have to revamp his guerrilla warfare strategy and begin building amore established military machine. By 1981 he had put together three infantry brigades, several artillery and support units, a fledgling tank battalion. The PLO even began to found the nucleus of a navy at the Syrian port of Lataquia (?) and a combat air wing in Algeria. But in the so-called two-week war of July 1981, by the time the cease-fire was hammered out, the PLO had only two cannons in operation. The rest of its artillery had either been hit or pulled back out of range of Israeli ground fire. "His strategy was to maintain the cease-fire to the letter, while acquiring the long-range artillery for a more durable threat to the Galileean settlements."

It was a war waiting for an incident and on June 3rd 1982 came word that Ambassador Shlomo Argov had been attacked by terrorists in London. The evidence was that the terrorist group headed by Abou Nidal (?) had done the attack. Eitan said "Abou Nidal, Abou Shmidal, we have to strike at the PLO." Abou Nidal was Arafat's most vicious enemy among the Arabs. About Nidal referred to Arafat as "the Jewess's son," and had attempted to assassinate him a number of times. Arafat in turn had pronounced a death sentence on Abou Nidal.

Abou Nidal's patrons the Iraqis knew that Israel wanted to send its army against the PLO and knew that such an action would place Iraq's rival to the west, Syria, under heavy pressure if that happened.

The cabinet meeting was held the following Saturday night. At first there was explicit mention of 40 kilometres, 25 miles. This was the distance for which the Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff asked the government's approval. Nothing resembling the more ambitious version of Operation Pines was approved by the cabinet. The only issue discussed at that Saturday night conclave was the need to push back the terrorist artillery. The only exception to the ministers' silence at that meeting was Communications Minister Mordechai Zippori. Like his colleagues in the cabinet, he was in favor of an operation directed against the PLO's artillery and infrastructure in south Lebanon, but he was uneasy about the odds of becoming entangled in areas further to the north.

Begin was convinced that it would be a short war, 36 hours.

There was constant embroilment without sanction and there is no getting around the fact that the Israeli cabinet never ordered or sanctioned the IDF's entry into Beirut. When Israeli troops went into there, they did so in express contradiction to what their government wanted and what their defense minister had promised. Even on Sunday, June 13, Begin was as astonished as his ministers to discover that Israeli troops were in Beirut.

On Wednesday, August 11, the cabinet approved the Habib document in principle, calling for an agreement on evacuation against Sharon's wishes and at this point Sharon ordered the air force to mount its fiercest attack on the city to date; Black Thursday, as it came to be known; saturation bombing coming on top of massive artillery barrage. Unofficial statistics counted 300 people dead in west Beirut that day. Reagan called the bombing "unfathomable and senseless" and the cabinet was equally appalled, including Begin and Sharon was isolated at that point in the cabinet.(?)

The irony was that, instead of creating a new order in Lebanon, Israel seemed to be going out of its way to maintain the traditional balance of enmity. The vision of a strong central government was a mirage despite the steady diet of hyperbole that Bashir fed the Israelis. Even with the cover provided by the IDF's presence, the Phalangists were unable to extend the area under their control much beyond what it had been during the days of the Lebanese civil war. The Phalangist command had held a population census but kept the results from the Israelis because they showed that only 30% of the inhabitants of Lebanon were Christian.

The leading force in Lebanon had become the Syrian-backed Druse and Shi'ite front, with tacit support from the Sunni Moslems and Maronite rivals of the Gemayels in the north, and the Syrians were more deeply entrenched than ever. "Born of the ambition of one willful reckless man, Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon was anchored in delusion propelled by deceit and bound to end in calamity."

On the surface, Sharon was very careful to adapt his moves to Israel's accepted democratic and political conventions. He exploited his command over information as a weapon with which to gain decision-making control. He was a block between the general staff and the cabinet. (Johnson and the American military in Vietnam.) The incorrigible squabbling within the Labor Party and a fear of incurring the public censure by breaking ranks in time of war prevented Labor from taking a coordinated stand. The same must be said for much of the Israeli press. On paper the plan held great promise in Sharon's mind: 1) eliminating the PLO; 2) cutting Syria down to size and neutralizing its threat; 3) installing an allied regime in a rehabilitated Lebanon and 4) heightened cooperation with the U.S. while further supplanting Soviet influence in the Middle East and then of course there was the question of the consequences for the West Bank.

Among the things that happened: the blitzkrieg that should have carried the IDF through south Lebanon in a matter of hours turned into a slow, grueling trek. The Syrian army did not collapse. The PLO did not dissolve into helpless chaos and it all left deep cracks in the Army's belief in its leaders and the justice of its cause.

The major achievements were the destruction of the PLO's state within a state in Lebanon; the elimination of the centers of supply and command for the network of international terrorism and the removal of the PLO's guns from the range of the Galilee. The PLO suffered a stunning blow from which it has yet to recover ... a split in the ranks of Fatah ... However, a large concentration of Palestinian refugees remain in south Lebanon, not to mention the Shi'ite population radicalized now, which could well become the seedbed of a new wave of terrorism. The senior ranks of the PLO were not disabled and, despite the drubbing the Syrian armed forces took, especially in air battles, Assad has managed to upgrade his country's leverage as a factor to be reckoned with. It may have destroyed the credibility of Israel's deterrent power.

"Perhaps a misguided war is a stage that every nation goes through on its way to political maturity. If so, Israel has come out of its adolescence considerably sadder but wiser about the limits of what force can achieve and the illusions that power can breed."