# The Israeli Withdrawal from the Security Zone in Lebanon in May 2000 and the Peace for Galilee War in 1982 – Myth and Reality

📅 May 22, 2020    🕐 1:21 pm    🖼 Photo: Harout Arabian

This month, Israel is celebrating 20 years since its withdrawal from South Lebanon. In May 2000, the IDF withdrew from the security zone Israel created in 1985, destroying its garrisons there. It seems that Israel tried to close the "Lebanese chapter" in its history and leave behind its bloody memories from the land of the cedars. However, during these 20 years, various books have been published concerning the Israeli presence in Lebanon.[1] Recently a new Facebook group was created to tell the story of the soldiers that served in the security zone, as well as a TV series investigating the Israeli "Lebanese story" since the Peace for Galilee War in 1982 and the May 2000 withdrawal.[2] The memories of this long war are still alive.

It appears, however, that some myths merged with the recollections concerning the long battle Israel conducted in the security zone. One of these myths deals with the durability of the Israeli presence in south Lebanon. According to the collective knowledge that prevails among politicians, journalists, and academics, the May 2000 withdrawal ended 18 years of Israeli presence in Lebanon. Israel, according to this collective knowledge, invaded Lebanon in the Peace for Galilee War in 1982, partially withdrew its forces in 1985 to the self-declared security zone, and finally retreated in 2000. The truth, however, is more complicated. When the IDF invaded Lebanon in 1982, Israel was already deeply involved in Lebanese affairs, and a kind of security zone already existed.

The birth of the security zone was actually in 1976 when some Christian villagers in south Lebanon, adjacent to the Israeli border, turned to Israel for help. A bloody civil war had prevailed in Lebanon for almost a year, and the Christian villages in the south had become isolated from other Christian areas in Lebanon. Their enemies were the Palestinian organizations that settled in the south after the Six-Day War. Finding themselves under siege, they had no choice but to seek assistance from Israel.

The Lebanese-Israeli border had been hostile since the Six-Day War, when the Palestinian organizations began operating from Lebanon against Israeli targets. Aspiring to defend its northern

organizations began operating from Lebanon against Israeli targets. Aspiring to defend its northern border, the Israeli government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Defense Minister Shimon Peres, decided to supply weapons and military training to these villagers, thus laying the foundations of the future South Lebanon Army (SLA). Gradually, these Lebanese villagers took the shape of a small army, under the command of a Lebanese officer, Major Saad Haddad.

Haddad's forces were located in three separate enclaves, in the eastern, central, and western flanks of the Israeli-Lebanese border. Moving from one enclave to another had to be done through Israeli territories. It should be emphasized that from that point on, Israel did not want to give up the ties it created with the southern Lebanese villages, and it did not want to see forces other than Haddad's army near its border. IDF units often fired into south Lebanon and crossed the border to the different enclaves to back up Haddad's forces.

The Litany Operation in 1978 was a turning-point for the security zone. Israel invaded Lebanon up to the Litany River, to fight the Palestinian organizations and to destroy their infrastructure. After that operation, Israel united the three enclaves into a single unit. The united area was about ten kilometers in depth, stretching from east to west, including all the territories north of the Israeli border.[3] The united enclaves became an Israeli buffer zone, an obstacle for Palestinian activity against Israeli settlements.

In this security zone, there were no Israeli garrisons like those created from 1985 on. However, the IDF did indeed operate in this area, by either shelling or raiding Palestinian targets. Also, the IDF activity was meant to bolster Haddad's position in the area facing the Palestinian organizations as well as various Lebanese forces. It was in Israel's interest for Haddad's forces to stand firm against their enemies, who were Israel's enemies too. Israel considered this security zone to be one of its measures to protect its northern settlements.

While counting down the Israeli presence and involvement in Lebanon starting with the Peace for Galilee War in 1982 is convenient, it is mistaken. It ignores the formative years of the security zone and the South Lebanon Army, as well as the Israeli interest in consolidating this area and backing up this force. Moreover, the link to the Peace for Galilee War is misleading. The Peace for Galilee War as a whole was meant to make redundant the use of measures such as security zones near the Israeli border. One of the Israeli goals was to create a robust Lebanese regime that could control the border area. Since Israel failed to reach that goal, it retreated in 1985, not to the international border, but to the security zone it had created in the second half of the 1970s, with some territorial changes.

To wit, the Israeli withdrawal in May 2000 to the international border ended 25 years of intervention in Lebanon's affairs. After positioning itself on the national border, Israel found itself almost in the same position that prevailed until the first half of the 1970s. Namely, it had to deal with a hostile border, without a buffer zone or an effective Lebanese army force capable of controlling the border area.

[1] See for example, Ron Leshem, *Beaufort: A Novel* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2008); Matti Friedman, *Pumpkin Flowers: A Soldier's Story* (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd., 2016); Haim Har-Zahav, *Lebanon: The Lost War* (Tel Aviv, 2019).

[2] "Stories from Lebanon: What Happened in the Military Outposts," Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/groups/209634923658154/; "A War without a Name," *Kan Corporation*, https://www.kan.org.il/program/?catId=1606

[3] It did not include some strategic points such as the Beaufort castle and the high hills north of it that would eventually be included in the security zone of 1985. It should be mentioned that as a result of the Litany Operation, the UN decided to send its forces to south Lebanon, to be deployed from the Israeli border to the Litany River. Israel, however, insisted that Haddad's forces stay in their positions. The UN forces (UNIFIL) had to be deployed north to the security zone of Saad Haddad.