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Ehud Barak initiated two macro-strategic moves 20 years ago, during the one year and nine months he served as prime minister: the first was the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon after 18 years. The second was the attempt to reach a permanent agreement with the Palestinians and to end the conflict through the Camp David summit. In the two intervening decades, endless analyses, books, and articles in all languages have been written about these two events. But never such a detailed description from the then-Prime Minister's point of view, without which these events could not properly be understood or evaluated. To my surprise, Ehud Barak answered my [interview] request, though I'd sharply criticized his moves in the past, and agreed to speak with me for many hours, to answer all of my questions, and present me with an in-depth, step-by-step analysis of the events, from idea to execution.

We'll start with the first part: the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon, which occurred in May 2000, in other words 20 years ago. Next week, we will publish the second discussion with Barak, regarding Camp David, which occurred in July of that same year, as the Second Intifada exploded.

## Huge Pines

**Q: Why didn't the IDF withdraw from Lebanon to the international border already at the end of Operation Peace for Galilee – known by its military name "Big Pines" – after leaving Beirut on September 29, 1982 and an official end to the war was declared?**

"Regarding 'Big Pines' that you mentioned," Barak begins, "Defense Minister Arik [i.e. Ariel] Sharon had a multi-level strategic fantasy which wasn't explicitly discussed. I heard about this from one of his people, in his presence, before the war, and I thought I was the only one who knew about it. Later the editor of *HaOlam Hazeh*, Uri Avnery, told me that he had also heard about this from Arik, and wrote about it in his weekly. The idea was to use the grounds that Palestinian terror had reached such a point to justify attacking them in south Lebanon, and use this as a launchpad to link up with the Christians in Beirut – to empower the Gemayel family and to completely expel the PLO from Lebanon. The assumption was that they would be forced to return to Jordan and – contrary to what happened in September 1970 – they would have learned the lessons of the past and would overthrow the Hashemite family. And then all would be great for Israel [lit. a Redeemer will come to Zion]: A Palestinian State would be established in Jordan, solving the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict. I understood this wasn't 'Big Pines' but 'Huge Pines.' We didn't get to that, we stuck to 'Big Pines.' After the war, several [cabinet] ministers claimed that during the battles [of Peace for Galilee], as a result of which Peace for Galilee expanded into 'Big Pines,' that Arik had deceived them. This isn't true. Arik was a very sophisticated man. He presented them with all of the military maneuvers on maps, and spoke about the protocols in great detail. They didn't understand or chose not to understand."

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“Bachir Gemayel was killed three weeks after he became Lebanon’s President. His brother Amin replaced him, and the Christian Phalangists slaughtered Palestinians in Sabra and Chatila. The IDF withdrew from Beirut to the Chouf Mountains. A year later, the IDF withdrew again to the Awali River, and remained deployed there until the next withdrawal. At that time, Yitzhak Shamir replaced Menachem Begin as Prime Minister, and Moshe Arens and Yitzhak Rabin replaced Arik at the Defense Ministry. Arik’s fantasy remained unfulfilled. But we were stuck in Lebanon, and responsible for all that occurred in the territories under our control. The IDF wasn’t fully withdrawn from Lebanon because the political sphere is averse to bold and broad actions, because it could potentially fail and they’d be blamed. Because if negative outcomes occur, critics will always connect them to that bold action. Therefore, politicians prefer to work in small steps, to minimize the risks in each step. It’s like a person planning to chop off his dog’s tail for health or aesthetic reasons – but he doesn’t chop it off all at once. Instead, he takes it off piece by piece. And that’s always a bad thing, as Voltaire says in *Candide*.

### **A New Bar Lev Line**

**Q: In 1985, when you were the head of AMAN [IDF Military Intelligence], the IDF withdrew again. Once again, however, it wasn’t to the international border, but to the Security Zone near the border – which could only protect [Israel’s] northern residential areas from light weapons, not Katyushas.**

“Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, IDF Chief of Staff (COS) Moshe Levi, OC Northern Command Ori Orr, and myself found no reason to [keep the IDF] deployed along the Awali [River]. The question was asked to where should we exit? Several discussions were held, and the decision was based on what they already knew from the SLA [South Lebanon Army] after 1978’s Operation Litani. They decided to reestablish the South Lebanon Army south of the Litani, under the command of the Christian General Antoine Lahad, with heavier weapons and under Christian control, along a strip [of territory] similar to that which was established after Operation Litani, seven years prior. In 1985, I was the only person at the General Staff level who opposed the move. I felt that I had a better understanding of the dynamic that would arise, because my colleagues had not experienced the War of Attrition in the Sinai. I, as a Sayeret Matkal member and tank commander, did experience it. It was clear to me that we were building a new ‘Bar Lev Line,’ whose results would resemble those of the Bar Lev Line on the [Suez] Canal. We’d quickly find ourselves entangled in an ongoing escalation, protecting supply convoys, outposts, and our soldiers, without contributing to Israel’s security. I wanted to prevent this outcome then, 15 years before I succeeded [in withdrawing the IDF from Lebanon].

“I tried to convince OC Northern Command Ori Orr, whom I’d known since I was a kid. He wasn’t convinced. I went to COS Moshe Levi, and I also failed to convince him. I went to Rabin, and he also wasn’t convinced. He said that this was a unity government, and the matter was complicated – and there were a lot of sensitivities [about the matter]. In my capacity as the head of AMAN, I updated Prime Minister Shamir once a month. I raised the matter with him during those occasions, but I was also unable to convince him.”

**Q: The IDF remained in Lebanon even when you became IDF Chief of Staff.**

“Rabin was Prime Minister and Defense Minister for most of my term as Chief of Staff. When he ran for elections, he vowed that he would achieve a breakthrough within a year – either with the Palestinians or with the Syrians. The order of preference was: first the Syrians, then the Palestinians. He thought that if Israel could come to an agreement with the Syrians, Lebanon would be a ‘byproduct,’ and the Palestinians’ bargaining power would be dramatically weakened. Syria used Lebanon to make Israel bleed. They used the Palestinians from Lebanon, and after 1982 the Shiite organization AMAL, and then Hezbollah. We thought that if we first came to an agreement with the Palestinians, the Syrians would be emboldened to torpedo it, and that in any case their bargaining position would not be weakened.

“I’m the father of the ‘collateral’ that we deposited with the Americans in the talks with the Syrians: In conversations with Rabin, I formulated the idea and shape of this ‘collateral’ that we submitted to the Americans, which meant we would deposit with the Americans a conditional Israeli readiness to make certain concessions. The Americans could [then] tell [Hafez] al-Assad that they believed that if Israel’s security and political needs were affirmatively met, they could then get Israel to also address Assad’s essential needs, including the matter of the Golan Heights. This was in the ‘pocket’ of the President of the United States. But he could not commit to anything without first clarifying that Israel’s needs would also be fulfilled. The problem was that it was impossible to directly negotiate with an enemy leader – particularly Assad – without these agreements being made in advance, and far from the public eye. A leader must be flexible in negotiations and provide the other side with reasons to remain [at the negotiation table]. However, when he shows flexibility, he’s going beyond the public consensus of his people. Consensus is just as important to dictators as it is to leaders in a democracy. If the potential concessions are leaked, it shows the leader as someone willing to make concessions beyond this consensus, and he could lose his ability to continue negotiations. This was also true for Sadat. His visit to the Knesset, and [negotiations] at Camp David with Begin, were preceded by contacts and understandings whose contents – and sometimes even their existence – remained unknown to the public. This was also the case years later with Jordan, and with the Palestinians.

“This move by Rabin towards Syria failed, and we saw this in our intelligence collection: U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Middle East Special Coordinator Dennis Ross allegedly made commitments at the time [to the Syrians] ‘in Rabin’s name’ beyond what we had committed to in our ‘deposit.’ When Rabin heard what had been presented to Assad, he turned red from anger and screamed at Christopher over the telephone. So the first attempt with the Syrians failed. Therefore Rabin, who was thoroughly disgusted by Arafat – due to his inability to negotiate with a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, or even with Palestinians ‘from the inside’ [i.e. from the Palestinian territories] – went to Oslo.

“Nevertheless, attempts at achieving a breakthrough with the Syrians continued. At the time, I found myself as Chief of Staff in a round of talks with the Syrians. I once flew to Washington, D.C. with the [Israeli] ambassador in Washington, professor Itamar Rabinovich, and Rabin’s military secretary, Maj. Gen. Danny Yatom, to meet with Assad’s close associate and Syrian

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Chief of Staff, Hikmat Shihabi. A few weeks prior to that, we'd met with the Syrian ambassador to the United States, Walid al-Mualem, a sophisticated and relatively moderate individual – who looked like a hybrid between [Israeli journalist] Eitan Haber and Arik Sharon. Even after I finished my tenure as Chief of Staff, my successor Amnon Lipkin-Shahak was sent by Rabin to once again meet with Shihabi. During all of these years, we were negotiating and attempting to achieve a breakthrough with the Syrians. Even after the Oslo agreement and the agreement with Jordan which, incidentally, would never have occurred without Oslo.

“We tried to reach an agreement with Assad. This is what prevented us from leaving Lebanon. Even when Bibi came to power, he tried to reach an agreement with Assad, mediated by Ron Lauder – who updated with all of the details after [Netanyahu's] government was formed. Through there [i.e. through Lauder], Netanyahu made very generous offers to Assad. When Itzik Mordechai [Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, 1996-1999] demanded from Netanyahu ‘look me in the eye and tell me that you didn't agree to withdraw from the Golan Heights,’ he knew what he was talking about. To conclude: We did not leave Lebanon when I was Chief of Staff because Rabin wanted to do this through negotiations with the Syrians. He didn't even consider a withdrawal that was not the result of such an agreement.”

**Q: If there were so much negotiation going on with Assad, it's a sign that he wanted to reach an agreement. Why didn't this succeed in the end?**

“There could be several reasons. Assad might have been ready for an agreement, but only on his terms. The gaps that remained [between the two sides] were wide, and there was no way to do this with him directly, only under American auspices. All the places where we succeeded [in reaching an agreement,] there were direct talks. This was the case with Egypt and Jordan. When we negotiated under American auspices – we failed. Not because they're bad, but because Assad was hugely suspicious, and had demands that didn't align with our perceptions.”

### **The Silent Lambs Speech**

**Q: During the 1996 prime ministerial elections, the first direct elections, Netanyahu defeated Peres by a single percentage point. The following year, you were elected as the head of the Labor Party. Were you already planning to withdraw the IDF from Lebanon, or was your promise [lit. statement] to withdraw the IDF from Lebanon within a year born only during the elections campaign?**

“I never stopped thinking about the matter, as I told you, in 1985. How much more so in 1997! We got two years to plan the victory over Bibi. The question was when to reveal this, not [whether to carry out] the move itself.

“In May 1998, ten months before I made my declaration [to withdraw from Lebanon within one year of being elected prime minister,] I hinted to my intention in the ‘Silent Sheep Speech,’ which mainly focused on the Palestinian issue. At a press conference at Beit Sokolov in Tel Aviv, I said: ‘We're heading towards a disaster. I don't know when this will happen or how. Tomorrow, next week, or maybe even only next year. But – my gut feeling and my head, yes,

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also my head – tell me that we are on the cusp of disaster. The sheep in the government community are silent. When this happens, no one can say we didn't say it would, we didn't warn, and that we didn't all see the writing of fire on the wall...and we remember the Lebanon War! Did any one of us think, did Menachem Begin think, that 15 years on we'd still be burying our young boys in the Lebanese mud? Like [we did] this morning? Enough talk, enough excuses, enough with the silence of the lambs. It's time to decide, it's time to work.'

"I made the declaration regarding leaving Lebanon within a year shortly after the [February 4, 1997] Helicopter Disaster and the Four Mothers movement starting their activities. First, because this had always been my position. Second, to let the people know we were not afraid to act, to bring change and hope. I entered my post as Head of Opposition and then as Prime Minister because of the murder of Rabin, with whom I had established very close ties. It seemed to me natural and obligatory, practically and morally, to continue what Rabin had begun, and was carrying out when he was murdered: to try to reach an agreement within a year with the Palestinians, or with the Syrians in exchange for withdrawing from Lebanon. With an agreement – if one were to happen – or without one. Because there was no logic to remaining in Lebanon. When we entered Lebanon 17 years prior to that [i.e. in 1982], I was a young general, and I remember the patrols between the trenches that the reservists had dug into the hills of Jabal 'Araba. I would ask them, and they'd say: 'we're ready for the mission, but we're worried about the kids in their cribs.' Those were the reservists, small children in the cribs at home. 17 years later, I'm soon to be prime minister, and those kids in the cradles were now the soldiers in Lebanon. They're dying there, and I couldn't explain to myself why they were being killed there. What exactly were we protecting in the Security Zone? After all, even short-range rockets were [flying over] the Security Zone and reaching the localities and towns in the north.

**Q: In the May 17, 1999 elections for Prime Minister, you defeated Netanyahu. How did you formulate your plan to leave Lebanon and how'd you carry it out?**

"I said in advance that we would negotiate an agreement with the Palestinians and with the Syrians. If an agreement was reached, we'd bring the matter to a referendum. I also announced that we'd withdraw from Lebanon within a year. I didn't make the moves dependent upon each other. However, it was clear that exiting Lebanon was connected to an agreement with the Syrians. The day I won the elections, I faced the following dilemma: Either to establish a government that would respond to the outcry from my voters in the 'Anyone But Shas' corner – a national-civil-liberal unity government with Likud then-chair by Arik Sharon – but which would inevitably halt the political process. Or, alternatively, a government with the Haredim and Meretz that would allow – despite the built-in difficulties – to move forward with the political process.

"The political situation was as follows: We were six years after Oslo, five years after the agreement with Jordan and three years after the date set in Oslo to begin negotiations on a permanent agreement. Netanyahu had already given up Hebron, promised the Palestinians 13% of the territories of the West Bank [lit. Judea-Samaria], and 'found a friend in Arafat,' as he

said. The Europeans were threatening to recognize a Palestinian State in the coming year. Clinton, who supported Israel, was about to finish his second presidential term in a year and a half. We didn't know who would be the next [American] president and how long it would take him to formulate his positions. Our intelligence was once again warning that even absent any concrete indications, the continuation of the *status quo* contained risks of deterioration. It seemed to me irresponsible, on the national level, to abandon the process for which Rabin was murdered. After all, he wasn't murdered because of his gray-blue eyes, or because he was a good grandfather to his grandchildren, but because he tried to reach political agreements against the will of a portion of the people, amidst a worsening atmosphere of incitement. I thought it would be a historical error to abandon Rabin's efforts, which were halted due to murderous interference. Because of these reasons, I decided to form a narrow government, whose purpose was to continue what Rabin had started, and to find an opportunity to prevent the inevitable clash in the Palestinian arena that I warned about in my 'Silent Lambs Speech.'

"The government was established in July 1999. I took upon myself, as Rabin had in his time, the role of Defense Minister [as well as prime minister]. Around the time I entered my role, I sat down with Chief of Staff [Shaul] Mofaz. He asked me, 'what's your intention regarding the withdrawal from Lebanon?' I made clear to him that if an agreement was reached with the Syrians, the Lebanese issue was likely to also be resolved as part of that agreement. But even if there was no agreement - I am determined to leave Lebanon by July 2000.

**Q: I understand that Mofaz and other members of the General Staff had reservations.**

"Mofaz was an exemplary officer. A thinking man, but a loyalist. He had reservations, and he presented them to me clearly, more than once, but he understood that this was a decision that was ultimately the responsibility of the political echelon. He wasn't alone. There was broad opposition to a withdrawal from Lebanon in both the Defense Establishment and the IDF. Overcoming this opposition became increasingly difficult as it became more clear over the course of the next year that an agreement would not be reached with the Syrians, and we'd have to withdraw unilaterally - if possible covered by a Security Council resolution. That challenge in carrying out such a move was that if we'd be required to carry it out without an agreement with the Syrians, it would be of utmost importance to carry it out with total surprise. Both in terms of increasing the chances of success and minimizing casualties. Truthfully, however, we couldn't know if we'd succeed in reaching an agreement [with Syria]. As long as negotiations were underway, we couldn't publicly state that we'd also withdraw without an agreement. First, because this would have allowed Hezbollah or the Syrians to try to thwart the move when the time came. Second, because it could complicate and even undermine the negotiations. On the other hand, the IDF must always be prepared for all possibilities, including for a unilateral withdrawal. Therefore I instructed Mofaz to only update the most senior members [of the General Staff] during the first stage. OC Northern Command Gabi Ashenazi, AMAN head Amos Malka, etc. To stress the importance of maintaining secrecy and to prepare for the possibility of a unilateral withdrawal, even though that wouldn't be part of a formal guidelines in the first stage, to prevent the possibility of a leak that would jeopardize the move.



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“Mofaz understood, but wasn’t enthusiastic. Neither were many others, but they set to work. Already at the beginning of August 1999, the Chief of Staff - in addition to my instructions - ordered a staff activity called ‘New Horizon’ that would work on two central tracks: the first, unilateral withdrawal from the Security Zone against the backdrop of an escalation and a negotiations crisis. The other, leaving Lebanon through an agreement with Syria and Lebanon. In mid-October 1999, I was presented with the ‘New Horizon’ plan. Long story short, I approved the plan on the assumption that the withdrawal would occur by July 2000. That same day, I stressed and clarified to Mofaz that we would spare no effort to reach an agreement [with Syria], but that if no agreement was reached, we’d aim to withdraw from Lebanon with complete surprise. Nonetheless, the IDF must prepare for the possibility of withdrawing under fire. On December 24, I was again presented with ‘New Horizons’ with an emphasis on withdrawing in the context of an agreement. In January, we would attempt, we’d soon discover for the final time, to achieve a breakthrough in negotiations with the Syrians in Shepherdstown.”

### **The Announcement that Tied Assad’s Hands**

#### **Q: Why did the talks with Syria fail?**

“From Rabin’s failure via the Americans and Bibi’s through Ron Lauder, I learned two lessons: we should talk [to the Syrians] directly, and most importantly – away from the media. Because if what we were discussing was leaked, the negotiations would fail and end. Assad was already in an advanced stage of aggressive leukemia, and the Americans initiated the peace conference with the participation of Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara. Over the course of several weeks, in direct talks with Clinton and through Ambassador Indyk, I repeatedly requested that talks should occur in total isolation from the media. Talks couldn’t be held at Camp David due to Assad’s objections. I suggested several isolated locations in the region and the world. I offered the Americans Israeli assistance to electronically isolate the location. But the Americans decided to hold the talks at the hotel in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, from January 3 until white smoke rose – for about 10 days. They repeatedly promised that it was adjacent to a riverside town of 800 inhabitants, that the facility was isolated, and that all necessary steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the discussion.

While on the plane to Joint Base Andrews, I received information via satellite phone that dozens of Israeli, Syrian, American and other journalists and news crews were arriving in the city even before we’d landed – sitting in cades and exchanging impressions and assessments with members of the parties’ preliminary delegations. Something had gone awry in the coordination between the White House and the old-new American ambassador [to Israel] Martin Indyk, and that which I’d been dreading occurred. I was furious. It was clear to me that the possibility of a real clarification of positions had taken a hard hit. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Ambassador Indyk later complained for days that ‘Barak got cold feet.’ A ‘hot head’ would be a better description. The talks dragged on for a week with hard-line gaps, and media coverage that raised concern about progress on both sides. The talks ended in disappointment, but with the intention to try again in a few weeks.

“Two days later, a detail was leaked to the journalist Akiva Eldar about what the Syrians were willing to discuss, and he published everything in ‘Haaretz.’ Immediately after that, further details were leaked to an Arab newspaper in London.”

**Q. Does that mean that Haaretz caused the failure of the peace agreement with Syria?**

“It shouldn’t be put that way. The starting conditions were already tough. Assad was sick, almost dying, and was more focused on securing the transfer of power to his son Bashar than maximizing the chances of an agreement with Israel. In the end, Eldar, to our frustration, did what a journalist does. There was the factor that we and the Americans couldn’t find a place where we could negotiate privately. It was an unforced error. What’s correct to say is that the leak to Haaretz obstructed the continuation of the process. The publication of the leak stopped Assad in his tracks. That was the day on which I understood we’d have to unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon. I returned from Shepherdstown and immediately informed Mofaz. I concluded that in the coming weeks we’d begin with the necessary discussions to begin the unilateral withdrawal. Clinton was supposed to meet with Assad in Geneva at the end of March, and we hoped that he might be able to revive the process with Syria, but we knew we couldn’t depend on that. Mofaz was reluctant about withdrawing unilaterally but, as I stated, he acted with the understanding that this was a political-level decision that was to be carried out as best as possible.”

“On February 7, I instructed Mofaz to begin concrete preparations, under the strictest secrecy, for a surprise unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon. Detailed discussions with Mofaz on the unilateral withdrawal began in mid-February. A preliminary governmental debate on the implementation of the withdrawal from Lebanon began on February 27 and lasted until March 5. AMAN chief Amos Malka, whom I held in high esteem, also argued strongly, including in writing, that I hadn’t included AMAN in the discussions in the government. ‘It’s legitimate and it’s his duty,’ I told my military secretary Gen. Gadi Eizenkott. In the summary of governmental discussions, I wrote, “(1) the IDF will redeploy along the border with Lebanon by July 2000, and from there will guarantee the security of the northern communities. (2) The government will act to ensure that such redeployment will occur as part of an agreement. In the event the conditions for an agreement are not present, the government will hold, at an appropriate time, a discussion on how to implement the decision in Section (1).” There was criticism in both governmental discussions. It wasn’t easy for some minister to approve the move. Many others had heard different assessments and feared that the fighting with Hezbollah wouldn’t only not subside, but intensify and move into Israel. I didn’t accept these assessments.”

“After the March 10 governmental discussion, I met with the members of the General Staff. I heard the criticisms and protests of several generals. I presented them with the summary of the governmental meetings. I answered many of the General Staff’s questions. Summing up this loaded meeting, I stressed that: ‘there are many uncertainties, and I’m familiar with all of the questions that accompany this move: What if this happens? And what if that happens? There’s no way to completely eliminate all doubts. But I stated: there’s no way to achieve long-term,



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stable results, that change a reality at its foundation, without taking risks in the transition stages and acting resolutely to reduce these risks.’ I’m not sure my entire audience liked my words or agreed with them. But this was my position. In this event, it also turned out to be correct. I made clear to the members of the General Staff that when the time came, there would be a discussion in the cabinet, and the members of AMAN would of course be able to present their assessments and objections.

“On March 22, I approved the plan to unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon, which in the meantime had been renamed ‘Morning Twilight.’ I also decided that the withdrawal would be implemented under UN Security Council Resolution 425. Mofaz reviewed the matter of implementation in the decision and recommended, in coordination with Northern Command, to begin gradually removing heavy equipment from 13 IDF bases in Lebanon. I approved the recommendation.

“On March 26, Clinton met with Assad in Geneva. Clinton came from India with diarrhea and wasn’t feeling well but, as a relatively young man, continued to function. Assad, by contrast, was at the end of his days, suffering from aggressive leukemia which required occasional blood transfusions and impaired his cognitive skills. As I said, at the time he was focused on transferring power to his son Bashar. Nonetheless, he saw fit to explore the possibility of an agreement with Israel if it would go overwhelmingly according to his terms. In an attempt to exploit a last chance for a breakthrough, we briefed Clinton in advance on the issues concerning the Syrians, such as territorial swaps and the problem of the Sea of Galilee. Assad demanded that he be allowed to dip his feet in the Sea of Galilee as Syrian territory. After the meeting, Clinton called me from Geneva and told me that Assad didn’t let him finish even two sentences, but asked immediately: ‘Do I have my land? That’s all I want to know.’ Clinton said: ‘It’s complicated! You have it, but not exactly like you want it. We want to show you some maps to get your impression.’ He looked at Assad and knew he’d shut down. For the sake of courtesy, the meeting lasted another hour, but went nowhere.”

## **Resolution 425**

“When it became clear to me that the Syrian option had failed, it also became clear that we were heading towards a unilateral withdrawal. In the wake of a discussion that started at the beginning of March between Danny Yatom – my talented aide – and Uri Lubrani and Ruvkah [Reuven] Ehrlich, I agreed to base the move on UN Security Council Resolution 425, which was adopted after Operation Litani in 1978, and which decided that the IDF must withdraw to the international border [between Lebanon and Israel]. I informed Mofaz, and as I mentioned I anchored this, as I mentioned, in the summary of ‘Morning Twilight’ from March 22. I assigned Lubrani and Ehrlich to deal with the diplomatic dimension of the matter. In early April, the process began at the United Nations. Foreign Minister David Levy met with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and did a very good job.”

**Q: What was your position regarding the SLA? In the end, Israel was accused of betraying the organization.**

“SLA’s path with us was long and painful. In the Security Zone, the SLA had over 30 outposts, and the IDF had 13. The proper time to think about the future of the relationship was in 1985, when we withdrew from al-Awali [River]. At the time, I recommended establishing not an ‘army’ but four ‘civil guards’ per the sectarian composition in each sector. Each of them connected to their sectarian community. At the time, there were 53 militias of all stripes in Lebanon. I said, ‘let’s create another four. We can help them secretly. We won’t establish regular operations in Lebanon. But, if and when the need arises, we can enter with a raiding force.’ Great, but by now it was already spilled milk.

“In May 2000, the SLA had certain capabilities and heavy weapons. However, almost no one believed they would be able to remain standing for a long period of time if the IDF withdrew from the area. Things towards then became complicated from the moment we decided to withdraw per Resolution 425. The Security Council resolution was essential to grant international legitimacy to the withdrawal. Such a decision would greatly limit the legitimacy of Hezbollah’s operations against Israel. However, the Security Council wouldn’t certify Israel’s withdrawal if it weren’t along the international border and if the SLA weren’t disbanded. The members of the Lebanon Liaison Unit and Northern Command were deeply involved with the SLA and its commanders on a personal level. So were Lubrani and others with General Lahad. Entanglements create painful outcomes. There are no magical solutions. There was no way Israel would be paralyzed from leaving Lebanon. Therefore, a directorate was established to organize matters regarding the SLA for the day after the withdrawal, to assess the numbers of SLA fighters who would come to Israel, and to establish the infrastructure for dealing with those who would remain behind. Concerns were also raised in Northern Command about what would happen during the withdrawal itself. Lahad’s statement at one point that the SLA would fight ‘like at Masada’ worried some people. In early May, we encouraged an attempt to obtain a broad Lebanese pardon for the SLA members who worked with us. The request was rejected. At Lubrani’s request, I met with General Lahad in early May. A serious man, who helped us a lot, just as we helped him. I didn’t lie to him at all, even though I couldn’t share our full plans with him. He chose to go to Paris. We didn’t stop him. I think General Lahad sensed what was about to happen, and chose not to be there during those days.

“We sent Haim Serebro, from our mapping unit, together with Defense Ministry legal advisor Moshe Kochanowski, to talk to the Americans before they talked to UN personnel. They taught the Americans about the history of the border, and prepared a report for the UN. Har Dov [i.e. the Shebaa Farms], which we occupied from Syria, was a sensitive matter. Discussions were held over the course of several weeks about it. Another sensitive matter was the village of Ghajar, which was conquered from Syria – not Lebanon – in the penultimate day of the Six Day War. The discussions with the UN were also not simple. The UN sent international surveyors to mark the border. The Syrians tried to forge maps. I demanded that Assad give an official document stating that he did not consider Har Dov part of the negotiations with Syria. Assad

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refused. Serebro and Kochanowski did a great job. Lubrani helped behind the scenes. We got to a point where the UN surveyors were working on an agreed-upon border.

“On April 27, I convened the Cabinet to discuss withdrawing from Lebanon. AMAN officials were invited, as I’d promised them. Amos Malka described in a critical but balanced manner the current situation and the expected developments. [Maj. Gen.] Amos Gilad [Head of the Military Intelligence Research Division and Responsible for the Overall National Intelligence Assessment] spoke after him, in a more dramatic fashion and gave a very colorful description of the risks of withdrawal. Once again, there were cabinet ministers who raised concerns about a withdrawal that would soon result in the northern communities coming under fire. Around the time of that meeting, I once again stressed to Mofaz that the goal was to withdraw overnight, because the second Hezbollah detected our departure, it would open fire and we’d have to finish the withdrawal under fire.

“We didn’t set an exact date for the withdrawal, because that depended on the surveyors completing their work, and the approval of the UN Security Council, or at least the Secretary-General’s report on the matter. As I mentioned, I also wanted to carry out the withdrawal with total surprise, because it was obvious that if we had publicized the withdrawal date in advance, Hezbollah would attack on that day, and we’d find ourselves in a broad round [of fighting] which would include sending the entire north into bomb shelters, and [Hezbollah] would later claim to have chased us out under fire. It was clear to me that we’d be out before July, perhaps early or mid-June.”

## **The Withdrawal**

“On Thursday, May 11, during a weekly operational presentation, Northern Command requested to transfer to IDF posts – Taybeh and Rotem – to the SLA in the coming week. The request was approved by the Chief of Staff and subsequently submitted for my approval. I approved the transfer in principle, and inserted a directive to update us before transferring Taybeh to the SLA, because Taybeh was a central IDF outpost and was relatively close to the border west of Metulla. On Sunday, May 14, I was updated that we were evacuating Taybeh. My military secretary, Gen. Gadi Eizenkott, who prior had been a member of Northern Command – a man with integrity of steel – advised me not to approve [the transfer]. There had been past incidents where the IDF had transferred posts to the SLA, they failed to hold them, and the IDF was forced to return to them. I decided not to interfere with Northern Command’s decision-making process about how and when exactly to evacuate the two outposts, because they knew the area, the SLA members, and their capabilities much better than I did. But I gave instructions to support the SLA. The Taybeh outpost was transferred to the SLA that same day, and Rotem was transferred the next day. On May 18, Northern Command’s recommendation to accelerate the withdrawal and carry it out in the next few days reached me via the Chief of Staff, because the situation at the two outposts transferred to the SLA was deteriorating. We couldn’t accelerate the withdrawal [to be carried out] immediately, because the border demarcation on the ground hadn’t begun yet, the UN Secretary-General had yet to deliver his

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report to the UN Security Council. And our Cabinet had yet to approve the withdrawal. I instructed the IDF to continue holding the [Security] Zone, and Lubrani and Danny Yatom to speed up the process with the UN Secretary General as much as possible. On Saturday, May 20, the SLA's members abandoned the SLA outpost at Qantara."

**Q: I've heard rumors that [Gabi] Ashkenazi, who opposed the withdrawal, ostensibly didn't carry out your order to reinforce the outposts transferred to the SLA, in order to accelerate the withdrawal.**

"It's not important. There was such gossip, but I wouldn't dare to think that anyone did this on purpose. Maybe there was a mistake in judgment. But mistakes happen. Even the command level isn't immune to mistakes. This wasn't a normal situation, and we didn't have anyone who could have assessed the SLA better than Northern Command."

**Q: So how did the execution of the withdrawal proceed?**

"On Sunday, May 21, at 11 AM, a funeral was being held in Kfar Qantara. A relatively large procession – which included Hezbollah gunmen – came to join the funeral procession from the village of Ghandouriyah, which was beyond the Security Zone. During the funeral they realized – or perhaps they knew in advance – that the SLA post in Qantara had been abandoned, and they entered it. This was how the collapse [of the Security Zone] began. Within five or six hours, they marched towards Taybeh, and more processions from outside entered the Security Zone, to the Qantara ridge inside it. Thus, during that evening – on May 21 – the IDF outpost in Taybeh, which had been transferred to the SLA a week earlier, was also abandoned. Over the course of the day, Hezbollah's members took it over and raised their flag over it. The SLA's Western Brigade was in the process of collapsing.

**Q: When were you informed of these developments?**

"I received fairly constant information from Eizenkott and Mofaz. The next day, on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, Eizenkot brought me a request from Mofaz to meet on the border with Lebanon. I went up north for another matter, and accepted. When we got there, Mofaz told me, 'what I feared is unfolding before our eyes.' Shortly before, Mofaz halted a large Northern Command exercise which was being carried out that day, when it became clear to him that the commander of the division conducting the exercise had no idea what was happening in the area at the time, hundreds of meters across the border. He was in the midst of the exercise. When the intelligence officer began to describe the situation on the ground, it was immediately clear that we were facing a collapse, at least of this particular SLA brigade, and we'd have to leave immediately. Possibly another night. Not another three weeks or six weeks.

"I asked: 'what would you need if you wanted to retake Taybeh?' They responded, 'to reenter with two brigades.' It was clear to me that if we reoccupied Taybeh, we'd enter a total clash with Hezbollah. It would either cancel the withdrawal or make it a withdrawal under fire. In light of signs of collapse beginning to show in the SLA's other brigades, all present recommended leaving immediately. As I said, that was clear to me as well. I also knew that

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within a few hours the Secretary-General's report would be sent to the Security Council, confirming Israel's withdrawal to the border that the UN surveyors would begin demarcating within days. This would give us the stamp of legitimacy that we'd need in the future. The legitimacy of our withdrawal per Resolution 425. All that remained was the Cabinet's approval. But it was essential to maintain the surprise of the execution [of the withdrawal]. I returned to the Kiryah, and called Mofaz from my office, asking him, 'Do you think they can withdraw tonight?' He responded, 'I think so.' Truth be told, that's what I also thought. 'But let me check with them,' Mofaz added. He called me back fifteen minutes later, updating me that he spoke with Ashkenazi and Division Commander Moshe Kaplinsky. 'They said they need another day,' [Mofaz said.]

"I convened an emergency cabinet session that night, and I swore the ministers to secrecy. It's worth lives. The Cabinet authorized me to decide the date of the withdrawal with the Chief of Staff. I authorized the Chief of Staff to, in turn, give the final order to Northern Command that we were leaving tomorrow, overnight. The night between May 23 and May 24. That night, we verified that the UN Secretary-General had indeed sent his certification that Israel was complying with [Resolution 425] to the Security Council and withdrawing to the border that would be demarcated by UN surveyors. To me, May 23 seemed to stretch on forever. The SLA's Western Brigade had collapsed the day before yesterday, and the Eastern Brigade had collapsed yesterday. Meanwhile, the guns were silent [lit. there was no fire]. But this could change at any moment. The tension only abated when night fell and the reports that the evacuation was underway began arriving from all sectors. Some of our equipment and the SLA's tanks were left behind. There were facilities and weaponry that we were supposed to destroy, but didn't have time to do so. However, the withdrawal was executed with remarkable success. Without a single casualty. No one can take the credit for such an execution away from [Gabi] Ashkenazi, [Moshe] Kaplinsky, and [Benny] Gantz.

"There will be those who asked how it happened that we were forced to act hurriedly, earlier than we'd planned. If the very act of transferring the IDF's Taybeh and Rotem outposts to SLA wasn't a mistake? How did everyone remain silent when Qantara was abandoned the day prior? It's possible there was a judgment error here at the command level. However, tactical mistakes such as these can happen to good people, and I take responsibility for them. The price we paid for them were unpleasant headlines and photographs. Particularly in one newspaper. But what is that compared to the tragedy that had been ongoing for 18 years? And without a single casualty!"

## Hezbollah

**Q. Why didn't we liquidate Hezbollah during the course of the war that's been going on for several years, including when you were Chief of Staff?**

"Hezbollah couldn't be eliminated! It's an authentic resistance movement that has embedded itself within the villages [of south Lebanon] with civilian cover/support. There's no way to destroy them without going deep into Lebanon, including Tyre and Sidon, and remaining there.

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We've also already tried that, unsuccessfully. I haven't found among the critics of the [May 2000] withdrawal a single person who wants to return to Lebanon, even if you'd promise them that the invasion would occur without a single casualty. You can deliver a strong blow [to Hezbollah,] but not destroy it. Under certain conditions, you can destroy a terrorist organization in a territory under your complete control. It's worth remembering that we've also failed to totally eliminate the terror cells that pop up from time to time among the Palestinian population of Judea and Samaria. I don't think there was a practical option [for us] to eliminate Hezbollah. There were individuals in [Northern] Command like Chico [Moshe] Tamir and Amiram Levin who demanded the IDF conduct more vigorous and aggressive attacks. It's tactical and nice to work with people like that who are always looking for contact [with the enemy.] But they underestimated the fact that such [violent exchanges] imposed burdens and suffering upon our citizens, because Hezbollah responded with Katyushas, and the residents of northern Israel were forced to enter bomb shelters for days on end.

**Q. Many in Israel believe that our withdrawal from Lebanon has strengthened Hezbollah, and that they're more of a threat today [because of it].**

"The six years between the withdrawal and the Second Lebanon War were the quietest in decades, compared to prior to the withdrawal, and allowed the north to really develop. After the withdrawal, Hezbollah grew, but very little. Its missile arsenal grew from 7,000 to 14,000. However, their range remained the same and their rate of increase was about 1,000 rockets per year. The huge increase occurred between 2006 and 2019, bringing Hezbollah's missile arsenal up to 140,000, with ranges covering almost the entire State of Israel. The rate of growth increased from 1,000 per year – in the years immediately following the withdrawal from Lebanon – to tens of thousands per year, in the years after the Second Lebanon War. Furthermore, Hezbollah's improvement as a fighting force has been occurring since 2011, mainly through its involvement in the fighting in Syria. Not in fighting against us in Lebanon.

"Hezbollah was created, and grew, due to our presence in Lebanon. Not because of our withdrawal from Lebanon. When we invaded [Lebanon in 1982] there was no Hezbollah. I remember when we invaded, in some of the Shiite villages, they welcomed us flowers and perfumed rice. There was no Hezbollah. Hezbollah grew with our presence in Lebanon, and as a result of the [civilian] friction with us. I remember them walking at night, in squads, in front of the 'artichokes' (tank night vision) that would shoot them up like ducks, and they'd go crazy. They didn't understand. Whomever wasn't wounded would run to the other side, and then they'd shoot them there. They'd hide behind a boulder – the boulder would get hit. I remember that after many years, their explosive devices that were made to look like rocks were virtually identical to the IDF's explosive devices, in terms of their camouflage. We were suddenly in a competition of wits with Hezbollah. And whoever thinks that the withdrawal from Lebanon strengthened the Palestinians, I say: if we'd remained in Lebanon and continued to bleed without any contribution to our security, then what? The Palestinians would have raised a white flag? Get down on their knees and beg for mercy? No. The opposite would have happened. If we'd remained in Lebanon, holding it with the equivalent of a regular division and then some, we would have found it very difficult to carry out Operation Defensive Shield. Both



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from lack of standing manpower and because we'd be in Lebanon, with direct and daily friction with Hezbollah, the danger that a second, full-fledged front would have opened up against Hezbollah would be extremely high. And that's the last thing we needed."