

ISRAEL'S 'HUMAN SANDBAGS' SET TO COLLAPSE IN SOUTH LEBANON

Ed Blanche

INTRODUCTION

The South Lebanon Army (SLA), Israel's surrogate militia in Lebanon is on the verge of collapse. Although its soldiers have often been considered little more than 'human sandbags' for the Israel Defence Force (IDF), the SLA has occupied the border region in one form or another since 1978. Its collapse could impact heavily on Israel's actions in the so-called 'security zone' in south Lebanon and indeed to some extent on any future peace negotiations between Israel and Syria.

The SLA's withdrawal on 3 June from the mountain town of Jezzine, the apex of a finger-shaped salient that jutted north from Israel's self-declared 'security zone', was widely seen as the final chapter in the demise of the proxy force, which the Israelis have armed, funded and trained over the last two decades. The salient was nominally controlled by the SLA, but in reality it was an adjunct of the Israeli-occupied zone that had over the years provided the IDF with a useful tactical appendage in its low-intensity war against the Iranian-backed Hizbullah (Party of God) which has been fighting to liberate Lebanese territory.

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The SLA's commander, renegade Lebanese Army Brigadier General Antoine Lahd, says he decided to withdraw from Jezzine, a picturesque Maronite Christian town, into the 'security zone' because of "*the slow death*" of his increasingly demoralised force at the hands of Hizbullah and the uncertainty in its ranks spawned by the Arab-Israeli peace process. That demoralisation could only have intensified during the three-day retreat from Jezzine by the 200-man SLA force based in the town. Harried along the 5km route to the village of Kfar Hanoun (the northernmost point in the occupied zone) by Hizbullah ambushes, in which at least two militiamen were killed, there was no cover provided by the Israelis at all. The road was strewn with wrecked SLA vehicles picked off by the guerrillas.

In Jezzine, more than 200 SLA personnel surrendered to Lebanese authorities. Scores had defected over the last year, preferring to give themselves up and gain some credit with the Beirut government rather than wait to be abandoned by their Israeli mentors and shot as collaborators by Hizbullah. Lahd himself has been convicted of treason and collaboration in absentia by a military tribunal in Beirut and sentenced to death. A similar fate awaits his close associates – those who have survived Hizbullah's assassinations and ambushes over the years.

Hizbullah has helped things along by urging the Lebanese parliament to approve amnesty for low-ranking SLA personnel, arguing that many had been coerced into the militia or had little choice but to join for economic reasons, since Israeli paycheques are about the only source of income in the economically depressed occupation zone.

The militia forces which retreated from Jezzine abandoned 15 outposts that had repeatedly come under heavy attack by the Lebanese resistance. It was a major triumph for the Shiite Muslim Hizbullah, whose growing effectiveness has been due in large part to its ability to penetrate the SLA infrastructure of late. This is because the 2,500-strong SLA – which under its original commander, the late Major Saad Haddad, was overwhelmingly Maronite Catholic – is predominantly Shiite. That sect is dominant in south Lebanon and, as the Christian population dwindled, Lahd had little choice but to recruit – often forcibly – from Muslim clans and families bound by blood to fighters in Hizbullah. The guerrillas' effectiveness in targeting specific



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The disintegration of the SLA has also been marked by internal feuding between Shiites and Maronites within the force as well as rivalry between various officers who have grown wealthy from Israeli money and rackets such as smuggling, which they have been allowed to run inside the occupied sector over the years.

The situation had deteriorated to the point that the IDF stopped advising the SLA of its movements inside the zone in a bid to minimise casualties from roadside bomb ambushes, which have taken an increasing toll on the Israelis. SLA informants are widely believed to have tipped off Hizbullah about the movements of Brigadier

General Erez Gerstein, the senior Israeli liaison officer in the zone who was killed in an ambush on 28 February. He was the most senior IDF officer to be killed in south Lebanon in 16 years.

The SLA's pull-back followed an earlier withdrawal from positions in the Jezzine pocket that had become untenable in Hizbullah's relentless campaign. These moves may be the prelude to a partial IDF pull-back to the Litani River ravine, tightening the northern perimeter of the zone to a more defensible line and abandoning a chain of outposts that have been among the most heavily hit.

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The SLA's June pull-back was seen in some quarters as the prelude to a total withdrawal over which the Israelis have been agonising for some time as their casualties mount and public opinion to end the occupation swells. However, since such a full IDF withdrawal can only be carried out with any strategic value through negotiations with Syria – the undoubted master of Lebanon – it is highly unlikely to be any time soon. The victor of the 17 May elections in Israel, Prime Minister Ehud Barak, has pledged to have all Israeli troops out of Lebanon within a year. Yet until he resumes talks with Syria, stalled since late 1995, that cannot happen. It is unlikely, in any event, that Syria wants a complete IDF pull-out yet, since that would relieve it of a valuable pressure point on Israel linked to its efforts to regain the Golan.

The gradual collapse of the SLA has left the Israelis with little option but to buttress their forces in south Lebanon because they can no longer rely on Lahd's men. With Hizbullah expected to intensify its attacks on the occupiers now it holds the Jezzine pocket, the IDF's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Shaul Mofaz, declared only four days after the SLA pull-back that earlier plans to reduce the IDF's presence in south Lebanon were being shelved – in part to prevent the SLA from imploding entirely.

Between Hizbullah – sensing that its enemies are on the defensive if not the run, and gearing up to exploit its advantage – and Barak, unwilling to launch his premiership with an unseemly retreat from Lebanon that could weaken his bargaining power in any resumed talks with Damascus, there seems little prospect of a swift end to Israel's debilitating and costly presence in Lebanon. The most that can be expected is that Barak will push to restart talks with Syrian President Hafez Assad as soon as he can to find a way of ending the steady flow of body-bags coming from south Lebanon.

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Lebanon remains hostage to the power-plays between Jerusalem and Damascus, powerless to influence events on its own; it is dominated by the Syrians. South Lebanon is linked geographically and strategically to the occupied Golan Heights. The Israeli occupation of the south also serves to justify Syria's military presence in Lebanon to guard its western flank.

It is expected that the Syrians will use the Israeli's unease and discomfort by allowing Hizbullah, whose supply lines from Iran run through Damascus and the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in east Lebanon, to step up its attacks, pushing up the IDF body-count as far as it can and at whatever cost to pin Barak to the wall and extract maximum concessions over the Golan Heights.

The quiet withdrawal by the SLA which the Israelis apparently had not expected – as evidenced by their failure to cover their hapless surrogates when they retreated – buttresses that scenario. If that was indeed the 'test case' for the Israelis, then they have been served notice that their own withdrawal, when it comes, may not be easy. Given the fact that Damascus controls the level of Hizbullah activity, using it as leverage with the Israelis, it has to be assumed that Syria gave Hizbullah the go-ahead to go after the SLA as it fell back to demonstrate its resolve to make as few concessions as possible on the Golan.

Despite Israel's repeated position that it will withdraw completely if Beirut guarantees security in the south and that there will be no attacks on northern Israel in the event of a pull-back, the Lebanese have said that UN Security Resolution 425 – dating from April 1978 after Israel's first invasion of Lebanon – demands an unconditional Israeli withdrawal, Beirut argues that it is not its responsibility to guarantee the security of Israel's borders. In this regard, it is significant that it has not sent the Lebanese Army into Jezzine following the SLA withdrawal.

The eight-hour blitz launched by the Israeli Air Force on the night of 24-25 June against Lebanon's power stations, bridges and telecommunications centres – the heaviest attacks in three years – underlines how fraught the situation is with regard to the south. Outgoing Prime Minister Netanyahu noted that the raids were *“likely to serve as a basis for withdrawal from Lebanon, by making clear Israel's readiness to attack infrastructural targets in Lebanon in reaction to attacks on northern towns.”*

If Barak is serious about resuming talks with Damascus over the Golan – and it seems that he is – then it is likely that Hizbullah and its various affiliates will be given the green light by Damascus to pile on the pressure against Israel in south Lebanon.

As for Lahd and his officers, who can expect no mercy from Beirut or Hizbullah, they are understood to have already ensured that they will be given sanctuary in Israel or, more likely, quietly removed to France or Australia. Lahd has boasted that he has an Israeli passport and *“can go anywhere in the world.”* His rank and file have no such escape route and it has to be assumed that the haemorrhage in the SLA will go on, leaving the Israelis with fewer and fewer 'human sandbags' to take Hizbullah's bombs and bullets.

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