



Why Did the Idea of an Alliance between Israel and Minorities in the Levant Collapse?

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From Mistress to Known Partner: Israel's Secret Relations with States and Minorities in the Middle East, 1948-2020

by Elie Podeh

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From Mistress to Known Partner: Israel's Secret Relations with States and Minorities in the Middle East, 2020-1948, by Elie Podeh, is perhaps the most comprehensive text on the secret relations between Israel and the Arab world, from the state's establishment until the start of the present decade. The book has a broad scope, is written clearly, and is easy to read, and all the valuable information is documented with numerous and diverse references. Consequently, it is an essential text in the study of Israel's unofficial shadow policy conducted by the Mossad, the Ministry of

Defense, and of course, Israel's prime ministers over the years.

Why did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs not play a leading role in these relations? Podeh explains that since all policy regarding the Middle East was of military significance, as Israel was a country under siege, the intention was not to open the familiar civilian channels of diplomacy, as for example in Europe, North and South America, and Africa, but rather to find military solutions to military problems. Therefore, the security bodies took it upon themselves to develop these special relations in order to cope with the military challenges of a country with a military threat hovering over it, under siege conditions (p. 16).

The breakthrough in the Middle East came when Israel understood that not only were its enemies not all of the same cloth seeking to destroy it, but they were also concerned and suspicious about one another and interested in exploiting the Israeli card in struggles among them (p. 16).

Nonetheless, the reality of basic hostility between Israel and the Arabs did not allow relations between Israel and Arab countries "to come out of the closet," and everything was kept top secret. This is another reason why systems in charge of secrecy such as the security establishment were the ones suitable for developing relations in the Middle East, and not necessarily the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hence the book's title: *From Mistress to Known Partner*, although since the Abraham Accords a new chapter can be added: from common-law partner to lawfully wedded wife.

The book's importance lies not only in its scope but also in its singularity: this is the first academic book that covers almost all areas of activity of Israel's covert diplomacy (pp. 608-625),¹ except for Syria. That is a chapter that must be updated, because there were contacts that failed with the Sunni opposition to Assad, and unfortunately, it was Israel that was not interested in these connections. To understand what deterred Israel, one needs to understand

Israel's bitter experience in Lebanon. Therefore, my focus here is on the chapter on Lebanon, because through this experience one can understand the entirety of Israel's relationship with the Levant, and also because of Lebanon's return to the center of Israel's interest.

The literature on Israel's activity in the Middle East can be divided into three types: memoirs of security figures who operated in various sectors, such as Geizi Tsafir's books about Kurdistan, Iran, and Lebanon (Tsafir, 1999, 2002, 2006), or the book by Yair Ravid, the head of the Mossad's branch in Jounieh, Beirut (Ravid-Ravitz, 2012). In this kind of book, the writers relate their personal experience based on their activity in Lebanon. Books of this nature can serve as a source for judicious academic research, but in themselves are not an academic text. Another type is journalistic books, such as *Israel's Lebanon War* by Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari (Schiff & Ya'ari, 1984), and Shimon Shiffer's book *Snowball*, from whose subtitle, *Secrets of the Lebanon War*, one can understand its shortcomings (Shiffer, 1984). That is, in their books, the journalists seek to highlight journalistic achievements and scoops from where they were posted, and academic accuracy is not necessarily their priority. The academic literature preceding Elie Podeh's book focuses on certain areas such as Jordan (Susser, 1983) and Iraq (Baram, 1991, 2014; Eppel, 1994, 2004).

There are many more excellent books that I have not mentioned. Podeh's book is singular in that it seeks to give an overview examining the entire Middle East.

I chose to focus on Podeh's chapter on Lebanon in order to examine the foundations of Israel's policy not regarding Arab states, but rather regarding the ethnic groups in the Levant. The goal is to examine a very current issue that receives insufficient attention, namely, the rising weight of ethnic communities as opposed to statehood. This has been a prominent issue recently, when the Shiite community represented by Hezbollah tried

to torpedo the maritime border agreement (the "gas agreement") with Israel, which is a top Lebanese state interest. The Shiite community opposed the state, but ultimately the agreement was signed on October 27, 2022.

Significantly, the answer to the question why Israel didn't accept the outstretched hand by the Sunni opposition to Assad's Shiite regime during the war in Syria² can be found in the lessons from the ethnic quagmire that engulfed it in Lebanon. Indeed, the roots of Israeli policy regarding the ethnic groups in the Levant lie in disappointment with the close relations with the Maronites in Lebanon and with the unrealistic hopes that were placed in these relations.

A very important source for understanding the Israeli failure in Lebanon is the book by Robert Hatem, known by the code name *Cobra*, whose main contribution lies in exposing the culture of murder, lies, and corruption of the Phalanges, Israel's allies. This same "Cobra" put his finger exactly on the point where Bachir Gemayel, the leader of the Lebanese forces (the Phalanges), decided to open the channel of communication with Syria and abandon Israel.

Israel's first significant connection with the Maronites began in 1976, when a high-level delegation of Phalanges came to Israel to ask for help. The Phalanges came to the conclusion that their backs were against the wall (p. 242). It is not so clear from the book why they reached this conclusion—perhaps because of that year's [massacre by the PLO in the Christian village of Damour](#), and Catholic France, which was supposed to protect the Maronites, actually adopted a pro-Palestinian position. This is an issue that is not directly connected to the book, because it is tied more to France's relations with the Christians. In any case, the more the Palestinians gained strength, the more the Christians in Lebanon needed an alliance with Israel, because Christian Europe preferred the Palestinians.

The Shiites' need for an alliance with Israel also grew at that time, because they too suffered from the Palestinians, and indeed the Shiites

showered rice upon the arrival of the IDF in the First Lebanon War. However, Israel neglected the Shiites. Why? Podeh explains that there were two main reasons: due to the friendly relations between Israeli leaders and Maronites, with Israel not enjoying the same acquaintance or familiarity with the Shiites; but primarily because Israel was aiming directly at Beirut, and did not place a priority on relations with an ethnic group whose main power was in southern Lebanon and the Beqaa, while in Beirut Israel needed the Maronites (pp. 284-285). Had the aim of the war indeed been to establish a security zone to a range of 40 km from the border, as Israel officially declared, Israel would have placed an emphasis on cultivating its relations with the Shiites. However, because southern Lebanon was important only to reach Beirut, Israel did not pay attention to the importance of the connection with the Shiites.

It is hard to assess “what would have happened if”; it didn’t happen and apparently will not happen, and we can understand why from Podeh’s excellent book.

Here Podeh intervenes in the internal Israeli debate: did Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon and Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan (Raful) deceive Prime Minister Menachem Begin into a “futile war” and not relay their intention to reach Beirut, while Begin believed that they would stop at the 40-kilometer mark, as he reported to the United States? Podeh states—rightly, in my opinion—that the members of the Begin-Sharon-Raful triangle thought from the outset of the “great plan” of eliminating the PLO, transferring the Palestinians from Lebanon via Syria to Jordan, and establishing a Palestinian state in Jordan, so that Israel would be able to annex the West Bank (p. 278). This was a delusional plan that was tailored with Sharon’s phenomenal dimensions, and it is no wonder that it collapsed. But even without this plan, the very belief that the Phalanges could be

relied on to “do the work” in western Beirut and relieve the IDF of entering that hornet’s nest was naive, and Podeh explains why, while exposing disagreements within the Israeli establishment.

According to his description, at the head of those who believed in the alliance with the Maronites was Prime Minister Begin, with his romantic approach (pp. 276-279). As someone who came from the diaspora, the very fact that the Jews would save Christians captivated Begin, and he saw historic meaning in it. Sharon and Raful, who wanted to topple the PLO because of their plans in the West Bank (p. 250),³ did not try to open Begin’s eyes, but the professional echelons did not believe this. For example, Elyahu Sasson had argued in the past that the minorities in the Middle East must take into account the positions of the Sunni Muslim majority (pp. 244-245, 276),⁴ and in the moment of truth the Maronites would not be able to keep their word, no matter how far they went in their promises to Israel, if they promised at all, or that the Israelis understood from their hearts’ desires what the Maronites did not say. The moment the Christians in Lebanon supported Lebanon joining the Arab League, they defined themselves first of all as Arabs and only afterwards as Christians, and this was how their future steps should have been assessed (p. 288, on Begin’s rude awakening). The young intelligence officer Amos Gilad met with the Phalanges and his conclusion was unequivocal: they could not be trusted.

And here we return to Cobra. He stated that the turning point for Gemayel was the conversation with Begin in Nahariya, in which Begin demanded that Gemayel make a peace agreement with Israel in return for all the help that Israel had provided to the Christians. Gemayel could not guarantee this, because the Maronites needed to take the opinion of the Arab majority into account. Begin did not accept this and the conversation ended badly. Perhaps here Begin understood for the first time that his romantic view of the Christians

was mistaken (pp. 255, 278), and maybe at this point his mental collapse began.

Cobra relates that immediately after this conversation, Gemayel ordered Elie Hobeika to open a line of communication with Syria. The massacre at Sabra and Shatila was committed by Elie Hobeika, and it is possible that he did so in full agreement with Syria, in order to destroy Israel's influence in Lebanon. The fiasco in Beirut and the massacre at Sabra and Shatila led the Israeli establishment to the basic conclusion that "the alliance of minorities has collapsed" (pp. 220, 279).

And this brings us to the present day and an examination of Israel's unwillingness to connect with the Syrian opposition that fought against Assad. The irony is that those who turned to Israel in the Syrian war were not the religious and ethnic minorities but the Sunni Arab majority. Indeed, this may be an example where a paradigm that was correct in one situation might not be correct in another, for if we say that Israel should connect with the Sunni majority and not with the minorities, in Syria the Sunni majority rose up against the Alawite minority and wanted Israel's help.

It is hard to assess "what would have happened if"; it didn't happen and apparently will not happen, and we can understand why from Podesh's excellent book. And notwithstanding my focus here on Lebanon, the book covers the entire Middle East, and from the specific example of the Lebanese part, we can learn about the whole.

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Notes

- 1 Herein lies the importance of the chapter "Conclusions," which provides a comprehensive overview of the entirety of Israel's quiet diplomatic activity in the Arab world.
- 2 Personal knowledge that cannot yet be published.
- 3 After the cautious Dayan resigned from Begin's government, Sharon and Rafal moved to center stage in order to institute a proactive policy in Lebanon.
- 4 Eliyahu Sasson's assessment: "They [the Maronites] combined the worst characteristics of the West with the negative characteristics of the people of the Middle East." He did not believe that the Maronites would not take into account the opinion of the Sunni majority when it came to relations with Israel; see Syria's threats towards Bachir at the Arab Summit Conference in Morocco on September 6, 1982.