

1982 Kahan Commission - War in Lebanon

Translated by Roni Eshel, December 2010

On June 6, 1982 Israeli military forces entered Southern Lebanon with the intention to carry out a fast operation which would last 48 hours and gain control of 25 miles north of Israel's border for the purpose of creating a security zone that would prevent terrorist attacks against Israel. The basic objective had gradually expanded and Israel got entangled in a war that lasted three years and it took 18 years for Israel to completely withdraw its forces from Lebanon in the year 2000. This war that was named by Israel as the "Operation Peace for the Galilee" and ended up being a lengthy and costly war that caused Israel to be entangled in internationally condemned events, and a loss of 1,216 soldiers who died in action between 1982 and 1985.

The war consisted of few phases. The first was the declared intention to end it in 48 hours. The second actually extended the original 48 hours to a military campaign that ended on August 23 when Israeli forces were able to expel the Palestinian terrorists from the Beirut, the Capital city of Lebanon. Then on August 25, 1982 Israel entered Western Beirut and though it finally retreated from the city and retreated to a security zone North of Israel border it remained in that area for many years to come. One significant achievement of the war was Israel ability to neutralize the Syrian forces in the area that backed and supported the presence of the terrorist in Lebanon as a whole and more specifically their actions against civilian targets in Northern Israel. Though initially apprehensive about possible entanglement with the Syrian forces Israel was successful in defeating the Syrians deployment along the Lebanese borders. The Israeli army completely destroyed the deployment of Syrian missiles along the Lebanese strategic Baka'a Valley. At the same time Israel gained full control over the Lebanese skies after it downed at the onset 27 Syrian warplanes in a massive air battle and 100 warplanes in total thus eliminated further attacks from the Syrians.

Though the war lasted longer than expected and Israel casualties were numerous, Israel did not reach its ultimate objective which was to reach a peace agreement with Lebanon that would eliminate the constant threat over Israel civilian targets along its northern border.

The "Operation Peace for the Galilee" was the last in a series of Israel's attempts to destroy the terrorists' military infrastructure in Southern Lebanon that was used to launch attacks against the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as well as civilian communities. It was as early as 1978 that Operation Litany was launched by the IDF that invaded Southern Lebanon to fight the terrorists and advanced its forces up to the Litany River. Later that year the IDF withdrew from Southern

Lebanon but not before the formation of an alliance with the Israeli supported South Lebanon Army (SLA) thus insuring the defense of a buffer zone in Southern Lebanon. The buffer zone proved to be ineffective and groups of the terrorist organization - the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) - continued to carry on attacks against Israel and were even able to penetrate into strategic positions in Southern Lebanon including the slopes of the Hermon Mountain.

All along Israel backed the SLA and attempted to establish an alliance with the Christian leadership of Lebanon in order to achieve political stability in Lebanon that would also result in curbing the PLO activities in the area. The relations between Israel and the Christian leadership of Lebanon were kept secret and were unfolded much later.

All along the PLO became a significant political and military force in Lebanon creating a state within a state in Southern Lebanon. It also played a major role in the ongoing civil war that marred the political reality of Lebanon. In mid 1981 clashes between Israel and the PLO in Southern Lebanon were the constant occurrences. Between July 1981 and June 1982 Israel claimed that the PLO had made 270 violations of the cease-fire agreement that the United States negotiated between Israel and the PLO in July 1981. These violations resulted in 29 civilian Israelis killed and more than 300 injured in the towns and villages in Northern Israel.

At the time the PLO military arm in Lebanon numbered 23,000, 6,000-8,000 of them were deployed as terrorist groups in Southern Lebanon. It was an event that occurred outside of the confines of the Middle East that triggered Israel to step-up its actions against the PLO in Lebanon, thus leading to the war that broke out in June 6, 1982. On the 3rd of that month a terrorist group of terrorists, a faction headed by Ahmed Jibril tried to kill in London the Israeli Ambassador to Great Britain, Shlomo Argov. Argov survived but the assassination attempt paralyzed him severely. (He remained so until his passing in February 23, 2003.)

Following the shooting of the ambassador Israel retaliated on both the 4th and the 5th of June against PLO targets in Southern Lebanon and the PLO responded by launching mortar and artillery attacks on civilian targets in Northern Israel. And on June 6, "Operation Peace for the Galilee" had begun under the command of Israel Defense Minister, General (res.) Ariel Sharon. While fighting to gain control over the 25 miles in Southern Lebanon, Israel had bombarded PLO targets in Beirut and had to fight Syrian forces as well. Israel deployed massive ground forces while chasing out the terrorists and fighting the Syrians along the way. It also deployed its air force and its navy to attack PLO targets in and around Beirut.

By June 14 Beirut was surrounded by Israeli armed forces and joined forces with the Christian forces in the city for the purpose of expelling the Palestinian terrorists groups from Beirut, and put a stop to the Syrian interference in Lebanon internal affairs. Israel siege and blockade on Beirut from July until August 25th led to the departure of the PLO forces and their leader, Yasser Arafat from the city under the supervision of multinational forces. The evacuation was completed in five days. After the departure of the PLO the leader of the Christian Phalanges, Bashir Gemayel who was an ally of Israel was elected President of Lebanon but on September 14th he was assassinated. Following his death the IDF entered West Beirut, despite an exchange of telephone conversation that the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan held on the eve of that day with Menachem Begin trying to thwart Israel from making such move. Begin moved on regardless of the plea of the President Reagan and a previous agreement with the American special emissary Philip Habib.

Israel command in west Beirut had made an agreement with the Christian Phalanges that they would be permitted to deal with terrorists in West Beirut who have not departed together with Yasser Arafat. The phalanges were supposed to search for those terrorists in areas that were concentrated with Palestinians. On the evening of September 16 they entered the Palestinian camps in Sabra and Shatila and shortly thereafter they began to kill camps residents indiscriminately. Upon the demand of the IDF they left the camps on the morning hours of September 18. This mission turned out to be fatal with long lasting impact on Israel, its military and political leaders and the general public. The approximately 150 Phalanges who undertook the mission were apparently full of rage and sought revenge for the assassination of their Leader. This seek and capture terrorists mission turned out to be an all out indiscriminate massacre of about 700-800 children, women and elderly innocent Palestinians who inhabited the camps. Some bits of information about the horrendous act started to emerge on September 17 when Israeli soldiers around the camps noticed some irregular activities though that they were not aware of their nature and scope. It is said that the Prime Minister, Menachem Begin heard about the massacre only at 5 PM of September 18, while listening to the newscast on the BBC radio.

It was reported that the IDF may have had warning intelligence about the intentions of the Phalanges but did nothing to prevent it from happening. Though the massacre was executed by the Christian Phalanges Israel was perceived as being involved in it based on the fact that controlled the area and the Phalanges entered the camps with its permission.

The massacre was immediately condemned all over the world and Israel was asked to evacuate Lebanon immediately. American Marines and French soldiers

were mobilized to the area in order to calm it down and restore order. On December 16, 1982 (well after Israel decided to investigate the affair and before it published its conclusions) the United General Assembly condemned the events in the refugees' camps in Resolution 37/123 while on section D of the Resolution that defined the "massacre as an act of genocide" 123 countries voted yes and there were no votes. There were 22 abstentions and 12 countries did not vote.

Following the massacre Menachem Begin and the Israeli Government became subjected to intense internal criticism as well. The "Shalom Achshav" (Peace Now) Movement organized a massive demonstration in Rabin Square in Tel-Aviv on September 25, 1982. In this gathering which became known as the "400,000 Demonstration" there were calls for the resignation of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon and an investigation of the events that occurred in Sabra and Shatila. Until that point Prime Minister Begin supported a check-up of those events but not under the magnifying glass of a national inquiry commission. However, three days after the demonstration and with increased public and political pressure the Prime Minister, Menachem Begin and his Cabinet decided to appoint an Inquiry Commission to investigate that led to the massacre in the Sabra and Shatila camps and the people that were responsible for this horrendous event while the IDF was in control of the Western Beirut at the time though by no means taking any part in those occurrences.

At a meeting of the Israeli Cabinet on September 28, 1982 the Government resolved to establish a commission of inquiry in accordance with the Commission of Inquiry Law of 1968. The Cabinet had asked the Commission to investigate "all facts and factors connected with atrocity carried out by a unit of the Lebanese Forces against the civilian population in the Shatila and Sabra camps." The Commission that became to be known as the Kahan Commission, formally titled the *Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut* was headed by the President of Israel Supreme Court, Yitzhak Kahan. It had two additional members: Supreme Court Judge Aharon Barak and Major General (res.), Yonah Efrat.

The Kahan Commission investigated the events for about four months. 58 persons were summoned to testify before the Commission and scores of testimonies were collected from additional key personnel. The Commission produced a 149 pages report that included a classified addendum. On February 8, 1983 the Kahan Commission made the report public with its recommendations and conclusions. Its basic premise was that Israel had had no direct responsibility for the events and that the main party responsible for the massacre was the Christian Phalangists who entered the camp and carried out the atrocities. The Commission stated though that Israel has to be held indirectly responsible for the events. It was

also concluded that Israel had no intention by allowing the Phalanges to enter the camps that the civilian population will be endangered and hurt. Still the Commission found some faults and misjudgments among both political and military leaders. The recommendations had a major impact not only on the leaders of the Government but on the highest ranking commanders of the IDF. As for the Prime Minister Menachem Begin the Commission refrained from making personal recommendation and determines whether he was directly responsible for the events (from Israel's standpoint). Nevertheless it concluded that the fact the Begin was not involved in the matters of the events put some burden of responsibility on his shoulders. The Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon turned out to be the highest political figure who was recommended to be sanctioned.

The Commission concluded that he had personal responsibility to the occurrences because he ignored the potential danger of bloodshed and revenge that may result by allowing the Phalanges to enter the camps and he did not take the proper actions to protect the civilian inhabitants of Beirut from a possibility of massacre after the city became under Israel control. The commission recommended that Sharon should arrive at proper personal conclusions that derive from the deficiencies of his functioning and if necessary the Prime Minister should use his authority to remove Sharon b his post as Defense Minister. Despite these recommendations Sharon refused to resign and Begin was hesitant to remove him from his ministerial post. Once again, the public protested and held numerous demonstrations and Begin had to remove him from that position and Sharon resigned but remained in the Cabinet as a Minister without portfolio. Though his public image was highly tarnished, Sharon did survive politically and eventually he even became the country Prime Minister.

With regards to the IDF Chief of Staff, General Rafael Eitan the commission determined that he did not take the proper actions to prevent the danger of a massacre and even afterwards he did not act in order to stop the massacre while it went on. By not doing so he did not fulfill his duties; the duties that derive from his position as the Chief of Staff. The Commission did not recommend to remove him from his post since his tenure was about to come to an end.

The Commission found that the Commander of the IDF Intelligence Branch, General Yehoshua Saguy, was guilty of apathy and ignored the potential danger of the Phalanges' actions. The Commission also found that he failed to fulfill his duty by not conveying the proper warnings to the decision makers. The Commission recommended that he should be removed from his post and he promptly resigned from his military service. The Commission also reprimanded Israel Foreign Minister, Yitzhak Shamir for not acting upon information that was given to him by another minister in the Government, the Communication Minister, Mordechai

Zipori. The latter was in the past a high ranking IDF officer and during the war in Lebanon he was one of the few that confronted Sharon about the course of the war and the validity of his decisions. The Commission noted that the fact that one Minister ignored the information given to him by a colleague constituted worrying signs about the performance of that Government. Even the Head of the “Mossad”, Yitzhak Hofi was subjected to the Commission’s criticism. It was asserted that he should have to take into account that there will be acts of revenge as a result of the assassination of Gemayel “but his direct responsibility is minimal.” As a result of the Commission’s recommendations the Commander of the IDF forces in Lebanon, Amos Yaron was removed from any command post in the IDF for three years. The Commander of the IDF Northern Front, General Amir Drori was reprimanded for not taking any actions in anticipation of the Phalanges possible dangerous mission, but he completed his duty and was later (in September 1986) promoted to become the Deputy of the IDF Chief of Staff.

The Commission concluded its report by noting: “*We have striven and have spared no effort to arrive at the truth and we hope that all persons of good will who shall examine this issue without prejudice will be convinced that the inquiry was conducted without any bias.*”

The “Operation Peace for the Galilee” failed to achieve its overall targets and the country experienced for the first time in its history a lack of national consensus. Never before any of the country’s wars were publicly debated and so vehemently objected to. The Prime Minister, who relied heavily on all military decisions on his Defense Minister, defined this “Operation” as a *War of Choice*...

The immediate outcome of the war led to the formation of a new Government in 1984 and to the beginning of a lengthy withdrawal of the IDF from Lebanon and specifically from Southern Lebanon. This process was finally completed on May 24, 2000 when the last of the Israeli soldiers departed from Southern Lebanon after 18 years of the IDF presence there.

As for Menachem Begin, the Statesman who brought peace to Israel with Egypt ended his public life and political career in silence when he announced publicly on September 15, 1983 “*I can no longer.*” And few weeks later he submitted his resignation to the President of the State. He spent the rest of his life in reclusive retirement – the causes of which he never discussed in public - until his death in March 9, 1992.

Kahan Commission - Sources

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