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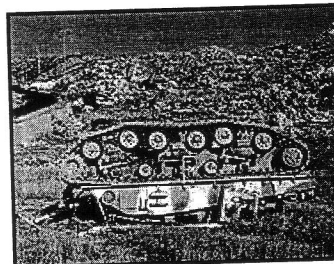
## Piecemeal Peace

### Shifting politics end 14-year siege in Lebanon

by Kate Seelye

A larger-than-life statue of the Virgin Mary, arms outstretched, stands on a hill overlooking the entrance to the Lebanese Christian village of Jezzine, welcoming visitors into this picturesque mountain town.

For more than two decades, during Lebanon's 16-year civil war and since its conclusion in 1990, this particular icon has presided over incessant strife among warring Middle East factions. Last June 3, however, Jezzine residents awoke to an unexpected lull in the violence. After occupying their town for the past 14 years, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), a proxy militia for Israel comprised of Lebanese conscripts, withdrew from the region. In its wake, long-besieged Jezzine dared to hope peace may finally be at hand.



Thunder road: SLA retreat  
Photo by Kate Seelye

Conflict dies hard in the Middle East, however. As they pulled back to the safety of Israel's nine-mile-wide occupation zone in southern Lebanon, the 200 SLA soldiers faced a familiar inferno. Hezbollah guerrillas detonated roadside bombs along their path, blowing up tanks and armored personnel carriers, killing two SLA militiamen.

The humiliating retreat looked a lot like the beginning of the end for Israel's surrogate army in the south. It also looked to many like the first sign of Israel's impending withdrawal from Lebanon after a costly 21-year occupation that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has promised to end.

Just outside of Jezzine, longtime resident Joseph Auon pointed to a rocky hill overlooking the SLA's escape route, still littered with charred Israeli tanks.

"That's Hezbollah's hill — where they launched their attacks," said Auon matter-of-factly, summing up in a single sentence everything that has been going wrong for Israel and its allies in south Lebanon.

Born in response to Israel's invasion of Beirut in 1982, Hezbollah has transformed itself from a radical organization, suspected of playing a role in the bombing of the U.S. Marines' barracks in Beirut in '83 and the kidnapping of Western hostages, into a potent resistance force. In their fight to end Israel's occupation of Lebanon, Hezbollah guerrillas have become increasingly effective in slipping into Israel's buffer zone and ambushing the 1,500-strong Israeli

#### Hollywood, Straight Up

There was the cop, Lieutenant Fremont, who shot craps in the fountain — the fountain where William Powell once posed with some showgirls for a clothing-store promotion. There were the 75 guys in Santa Claus suits, and the snowball fight. Everyone has a story to tell about Boardner's bar — including Steve Boardner himself.

#### OffBeat:

Homies Unidos win one; Hollywood forever and ever; residuals, schmiduals.

#### Troubled Help

A program that's supposed to help keep young people out of trouble has drawn heat of its own in a critical audit. Christine Pelisek and Charles Rappleye explore what really ails L.A. Bridges.

#### Conflicts 101

The conduct of L.A. schools' new environmental czar is raising all kinds of questions about possible conflicts of interest. Howard Blume sorts it out.

--> PLUS: Howard Blume on the changing of the guard at the *Times*

#### Janitor Power

They did it. Some 8,500 janitors scored a victory against rich, stubborn landlords that

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army and the 2,500 SLA troops that help patrol its occupation. The Hezbollah-launched Katyusha rocket attacks, which have long terrorized northern Israel, have only served to underscore the limitations of Israel's self-proclaimed "security zone" inside Lebanese borders.

More even than the Israeli military, the SLA has served as Hezbollah's favorite target. The SLA had emerged in the 1970s under the leadership of the late renegade Lebanese army officer Major Saad Haddad, whose militia-for-hire served as a shield between the Jewish state and the Palestinians then controlling south Lebanon.

Funded and armed by Israel, SLA troops assisted Israel during its 1978 occupation of south Lebanon, its invasion of Beirut in 1982, and later its establishment in 1985 of Israel's current buffer zone.

That same year, SLA leader General Antoine Lahad, a Christian, occupied Jezzine, claiming the need to protect the area's largely Christian population against feared massacres. Israel gave its okay, viewing the Jezzine enclave — a finger that juts just north of the declared occupation zone — as a useful tactical appendage. Ever since, Jezzine has been cut off from the rest of Lebanon, controlled by a client army and relinquished by a national government that has become little more than a tool for neighboring Syria's regional designs.

With 35,000 troops in Lebanon, Syria pretty much calls the shots, fomenting continuing tensions along the Israel-Lebanon border. That translates into constant harassment of Israel's occupation, which Syria can distance itself from, but can also promise to quell in return for Israeli concessions in peace talks.

Hezbollah helps serve that agenda by hitting hard at the SLA. This past spring, the commander of the SLA's Jezzine regiment was badly injured in a roadside bomb explosion; his deputy was killed in a similar attack a week later. Unable to find a replacement and faced with growing casualties and army desertions, the SLA's Lahad called his militia's presence in Jezzine "untenable" and ordered a pullback.

For Jezzine's 3,000 residents — down from an original 30,000 — the sudden withdrawal, after 14 years of isolation and war, has given rise to mixed emotions.

Fareed Aoun sat in the corner of his shop along Jezzine's quiet main street, carefully crafting the ebony-and-bone handles of the cutlery for which Jezzine is famous. He once employed 15 workers to help him make the exquisitely sculpted forks and knives that tourists drove two hours from Beirut to buy. Now he works by himself.

He said the last few years have been marked by weekly bombings and explosions as the SLA and Hezbollah did battle. Many civilians were killed in the crossfire, while others fled to Beirut for safety. Because of his store, said Aoun, he had no choice but to stay.

"I would go from home to work to home again, only," he said, describing life under siege. "Always we were afraid."

Now, said Aoun, there's peace and quiet. "With the war over, I just hope that Jezzine will become a tourist center once again."

Nineteen-year-old Shadi Helou agreed that life has improved in the wake of the SLA pullout. The town, he said, no longer has to worry about Hezbollah attacks.

many thought could not be won. Joseph Treviño tracks several members of this emerging political base.

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"People are more relaxed and stay out later," he said.

But others expressed only bitterness that so little had changed in the 40 days since Jezzine's return to Lebanon's fold. Many noted that the national government had yet to lift travel restrictions into Jezzine, limiting the influx of tourists and the chance of economic recovery. Others accused the government of leaving Jezzine vulnerable to Hezbollah control by not deploying the Lebanese army in the region. The government argues that sending troops would signal cooperation with the Israelis, who have long insisted that Lebanon assert control over its border region.

People were most upset, however, about the status of 200 area residents who had worked for the SLA and gave themselves up to Lebanese authorities, rather than retreat with their colleagues. Mainly soldiers for the SLA, the men, ranging in age from their 20s through their 70s, are now facing trial in Beirut on charges of collaborating with the enemy. Despite their lawyers' calls for amnesty, some already have received prison sentences ranging from three months to two years.

Edmond Rizk, a former member of parliament from Jezzine, who is representing some of the men, said they were victims of circumstance, not collaborators.

"Many were taken by the SLA and forced to join," he said, referring to the SLA's policy of recruiting a son from each family. "Others joined for economic reasons"; in economically depressed southern Lebanon, the militia's \$500-a-month salaries were hard to match.

As one walks through the Jezzine area, it's not hard to find residents with brothers, fathers or sons who served with the SLA. Their stories highlight the anguish and uncertainty of lives caught in the middle of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

At a grocery store in the nearby village of Roum, both the store owner and his customer said they had family members in prison awaiting trial on collaboration charges.

"We ran a hair salon," said a tearful Fahimi Assouf, referring to her husband. "But the SLA took him 16 years ago; he had no alternative but to serve . . . He had to survive."

Seated at a nearby gas station, elderly Boulos Akouri, a former gatekeeper for the SLA, expressed anger and disgust toward the Lebanese government for accusing his 25-year-old son of treason.

"We're Lebanese here, our sympathies are not with Israel. We always believed the SLA was a Lebanese army," said Akouri. "We were abandoned by the Lebanese government all these years, so what right does the government now have to prosecute my son?"

Despite a clear ideological gulf between the Hezbollah militants and the SLA soldiers, these erstwhile enemies also have a few things in common.

Long considered a Christian militia, the SLA is in fact predominantly Shiite today, its soldiers culled from the poor Muslim families inhabiting south Lebanon. This has made the SLA particularly susceptible to infiltration by the Shiite Hezbollah, which over the years has developed numerous informers among the client army's ranks.

Hezbollah has also been effective in encouraging defections among SLA foot soldiers, promising them protection and assistance. In 1997, Hezbollah unsuccessfully sought to pass a bill in Lebanon's parliament granting amnesty to all SLA defectors with the exception of officers.

"The Islamic resistance has pledged that we want to dismantle the SLA," said Hezbollah spokesman Ibrahim Mussawi, "because they serve as Israel's sandbags in the south."

Following the Jezzine pullout, recent SLA defectors have reported the militia to be demoralized and on the verge of collapse. Rumors are circulating that General Antoine Lahad sought to resign and retire to France, but was prevented from doing so by the Israelis. The Israeli army has since been left with little option but to bolster its own forces in south Lebanon. Just four days after the SLA retreat, Israel declared that earlier plans to reduce its troop numbers were being postponed, in part to prevent the complete implosion of the SLA.

Mussawi says efforts to force the collapse of the SLA have been part of a larger Hezbollah strategy.

"We want to remove the SLA so the Israelis will feel the pain directly," said Mussawi.

And the pain these days has become more than most Israelis are willing to bear. It has not been easy policing an occupation zone that at its deepest point is 10 miles wide and runs for 50 miles along Israel's shared border with Lebanon.

According to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), 72 Israeli soldiers have been killed in south Lebanon in the last two years alone. In February, Israel's highest-ranking commander in the region, Brigadier General Erez Gerstein, died in a roadside blast, along with three other Israelis. His loss re-ignited Israel's internal debate about the wisdom of remaining involved in what many call Israel's Vietnam, and no doubt helped strengthen Barak's pledge to remove troops within the next year.

While other Lebanese and Palestinian groups have fought to oust Israel over the years, Hezbollah gets most of the credit for undermining Israel's resolve to stay in Lebanon.

"There are many criticisms of Hezbollah's behavior," said American University of Beirut political science professor Farid el-Khazen, "but no one can say Hezbollah is not engaged in a real war with Israel, a war that has produced some results."

Aside from its guerrilla agenda, Hezbollah has over the years built itself into a legitimate political party. Members of "The Party of God," as it's known in English, hold seats in Lebanon's parliament, elected by a largely poor Shiite population that enjoys Hezbollah's extensive network of hospitals, schools, orphanages and other social services. Though its critics accuse it of espousing an Iranian-inspired Islamist agenda that uses violence to silence its opponents, even they begrudgingly recognize Hezbollah's good works.

"Hezbollah may be the least corrupt party in Lebanon," said Khazen.

Its autonomy, however, is another question. Visitors to the neighborhood of south Beirut where Hezbollah is headquartered are greeted by posters of the late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran and

President Hafez al-Assad of Syria. Hezbollah is funded by Iran and backed by Lebanon's taskmaster Syria.

Hezbollah is largely regarded as a tool of the Syrian regime, which uses it to pressure and harass the Israelis. In return for the Golan Heights, which Syria lost to Israel in the 1967 war, Syria is believed to be in a position to call off Hezbollah attacks and guarantee Israel a peaceful northern border for the first time in almost 30 years.

"It's no secret that the greatest bargaining chip that the Syrian government has against the Israelis is the resistance in the south," said Chebli Mellat, a law professor at Beirut's St. Joseph University.

The SLA withdrawal, he believes, alarmed Syria because it underscored the possibility of a unilateral Israeli pullout, which would deny Syria much-needed leverage in negotiations with Israel.

The result, according to Mellat, is that "Jezzine triggered the increased readiness of the Syrians to seek a rapprochement with the Israeli government over the whole issue of peace on the northern front."

Ever since Israel bombed Beirut on June 24, in response to Hezbollah rocket attacks on its northern border, Hezbollah military operations in the south have decreased. Israel claims its air raids, which killed nine Lebanese and destroyed two of Beirut's power stations, cowed the group. (Hezbollah responded with rocket attacks that killed two Israeli civilians.) But others say that Syria requested calm as a gesture of good will to Barak — a sign of how keen Syria is to resume peace talks suspended with Israel in 1996.

How much Syria will be able to control Hezbollah's actions to suit its political designs remains to be seen. Though it states that its sole military aim is the liberation of Lebanon, Hezbollah, whose Iranian sponsors are firmly opposed to peace with Israel, remains coy about whether or not it plans to disarm once the seemingly inevitable IDF withdrawal takes place.

In the meantime, Jezzine's residents seem little interested in the stepped-up regional power plays triggered by the SLA retreat. Instead, their thoughts lean toward survival. As one resident asked plaintively, "If the government doesn't give us back our sons and husbands, how will we manage?"

Mellat says that Jezzine's return to normalcy, like much of Lebanon's, depends upon Damascus and Jerusalem resolving their regional differences — which may or may not happen any time soon.

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