

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

When will Israel move on Lebanon?

Israel's backing for the Shi'ite-linked Amal has planted the seeds of regional war.

Since the beginning of the year, a countdown has begun which will lead toward Israeli intervention into Lebanon. There are three principal questions being pondered in Jerusalem, Beirut, and Damascus: When? Which form will it take? And can it trigger a direct conflict with Syria?

While only Israeli leaders can answer the first one, to the second, it is possible to make an approximate reply. Israel will never intervene in Lebanon in the same way as it did in June 1982. It has no intent to reoccupy any part of Lebanon, and the loss of lives provoked by the earlier intervention cannot be politically sustained a second time.

Paving the way for a new intervention is the internal collapse of the country, and the failure of the policies followed by both Israel and Syria. Shamelessly, the Israelis have played to the hilt their "Shi'ite card." Initiated by Ariel Sharon while he was Israel's defense minister, and concretized by his associate and Israel's coordinator in Lebanon, Uri Lubrani, this policy was never disavowed by the government of Labor Party Prime Minister Shimon Peres, which was in power until last October.

The policy was: Support Nabih Berri's Amal, a Lebanese partner of the Iranian regime based on the Shi'ite variety of Islam, against the Palestinians; use the Amal to pressure the Christians into line; and match Syria's own political game of divide-and-rule with the Druze sect and other Lebanese Muslim communities.

The expected result has been seen in recent weeks: Too close a relationship between Amal and Israel, including regular deliveries of weapons, has discredited the Amal leadership. Nonetheless, because Amal was given so much support, the seeds of Shi'ite Islamic fundamentalism have spread at Israel's borders. They are now being harvested by Iran's Hezbollah terrorist forces. Both the Israelis and Syrian "sorcerers" have created a monstrous and uncontrollable "apprentice," just as Jimmy Carter and his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, did before with Khomeini in Iran. Whatever illusions there may be in some military quarters, there can be no political manipulation of such games.

Hence, Israel has been faced with an intertwined military and terrorist challenge which Israel itself helped create, and to which it will soon have to answer militarily. Following a conference at the end of December of the leadership of the Hezbollah from Lebanon and Iran, the Iranian fanatics have launched a campaign of systematic harassment of the South Lebanese Army, which leaves little doubt as to its aim. The SLA is rapidly collapsing under this continuous guerrilla attack, as its soldiers get killed at the rate of a dozens per week.

On Jan. 10, Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir pledged that Israel would "give all necessary backing" to the SLA, but has done little so far. In the space of 10 days, Israeli military forces have launched several helicop-

ter raids against Hezbollah units, killing very few of them. Moreover, they ended up provoking an international incident when one such bombardment killed an Irish soldier member of the United Nations Force in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, one of the outfits of the Hezbollah, the "Organization of the Oppressed of the World," which had claimed responsibility for the hijacking of a TWA plane in June 1985 to Beirut, in which one American Navy Seal was killed, began a series of executions of the Lebanese Jews it has been holding as hostages for a year or more. More than four, brandished as "Mossad spies," have been summarily executed, with the Organization warning that it would continue to do so as long as Israel supports the SLA. The division of labor and precise timing between the executions and the Hezbollah attacks, is all too clear.

Given that retaliation in Southern Lebanon has been proven useless, Israel will have to retaliate at the heart of the Hezbollah headquarters, the Syrian-occupied Bekaa valley. Can Israel bombard the Hezbollah without hitting the surrounding Syrian troops?

It is technically feasible. Politically and militarily it is however another matter. Who can say that Damascus would not use such bombardments as a pretext to throw itself into a regional war? The question is made more hazardous, by the suspicion that the Hezbollah, who have no love lost for the Syrian Alawites, may just want to provoke such a conflict.

The Syrians are aware of these projects, but are themselves not so certain about the need to avoid a war. Reports that Moscow is delivering the newly produced MIG-31 to Damascus, give further credibility to the potential for a regional war to break out soon.