Professional Reading: The Lebanon War

Daniel S. Mariaschin

Ehud Ya’ari

Zeev Schiff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

Recommended Citation

Mariaschin, Daniel S.; Ya’ari, Ehud; and Schiff, Zeev (1985) "Professional Reading: The Lebanon War," Naval War College Review: Vol. 38 : No. 4 , Article 10.
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol38/iss4/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.
military theory be contained in a universal theory or should they be treated separately? I am not sure of the right answer and this brings us to a third perspective—the purpose of this book. And the book raises several questions. But the one which concerns us is to what degree does it contribute to the understanding and conduct of military affairs?

It certainly should be made available to war colleges and major military research institutions, if only to give further evidence of the extreme intellectual complications involved in the serious study of the art of war, as "The Giant Among the Branches of Learning." Even though the practice of military affairs requires a great appreciation of its major scientific and technological aspects and implications, I do not share Lider's optimism that military theory has a chance to become a "science." Its practice has too many subjective intangible aspects that defy precise stimulation or evaluation to be formally classed as a science.

Yet, Lider's extensive comment on this matter is excellent—particularly his concluding thought, that "the development of a generally adopted conceptual framework of the research including the concept, structure, and main problems of military theory, seems to be a precondition for establishing this as a science."

This is precisely what I have been trying to do for the last thirty years; not so much in the interest of science but rather with the hope of improving the understanding and quality of the decisions of those charged with the conduct of military affairs in our diverse free society, and in this dangerous and complex world of fallible human beings seeking to control intractable violent human conflict.

The Lebanon War

Daniel S. Mariaschin

In Israel's Lebanon War*, Zeev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari have essentially written two books: one, a detailed battlefield account of the Israel Defense Forces' engagements against the PLO and Syria and the other, an analysis of the political process that preceded and accompanied the fighting to its seemingly inconclusive end.

This book is one of several that have appeared in the past year and a half on the Lebanon war. It presents an extra measure of the substance in that its authors are veteran observers of the Israeli scene. Zeev Schiff, defense

---


Mr. Mariaschin writes widely on Middle East and Defense issues.
correspondent for Haaretz is acknowledged to be one of the experts in his field and is highly regarded by military authorities worldwide. Ehud Ya’ari is the award-winning Middle East Affairs correspondent for Israel television, one of the premier positions in Israeli journalism. In a nation where politics and defense are so intertwined, it is no wonder these two well-informed authors were able to delve so deeply into the reasons why the war in Lebanon took place and how it was fought.

First, the politics. Without equivocation the authors believe this was a war largely of former Defense Minister Ariel Sharon’s making. It is now an open secret that Israel and Lebanon’s Christians have maintained tenuous links dating back to the early 1950’s, and that Jerusalem upgraded its military ties with that community during the period of the Rabin government. But, Schiff and Ya’ari accuse Sharon of ignoring warning signals, and of placing too much faith in that relationship as he devised his plan not only to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization’s state-within-a-state infrastructure but to transform Lebanon into a Christian-dominated ally. Worse, the authors charge, Sharon did his best to conceal from his cabinet colleagues the details of his ultimate objectives, including the occupation of Beirut.

In buttressing their contention that Israel’s system of checks and balances was deliberately bypassed in this process, Schiff and Ya’ari point to the fact that in most previous Israeli governments—and especially in the first Begin government—the cabinets were well represented by former defense figures who, in their civilian capacities, served as a brake on precipitant military action. The 1977 cabinet, for example, included former Chiefs of Staff Dayan and Yadin, and a former Air Force Commander Ezer Weizman. In the 1981 government only Sharon and Transport Minister Mordechai Zippori could boast prior military experience and the latter in the authors’ views, was the only consistent critic of Israel’s 1982 war objectives, beyond the original idea of sweeping southern Lebanon clear of PLO terrorists.

Sharon is singled out for culpability, but he is not the only one. Prime Minister Begin is never quite brushed with the same stroke as his defense minister, but Schiff and Ya’ari suggest that his preoccupation with “destroying Arafat in his bunker,” and his apprehension over a “holocaust” being perpetrated against Lebanon’s Christians, may have blinded him to the direction the war would take. The authors were less kind to then Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir: “... a zealous nationalist in striped pants,” who was “turning into the most uncompromising foreign minister in the country’s history” and Chief of Staff Rafael Eytan, “a hardened soldier... who was convinced that the Arabs were bent on continuing the bloodshed until they had wiped out every last Jew, regarding that relentless enmity as justification for his own merciless attitude toward Arabs everywhere.”

In order to accomplish the task of creating a new political reality in Lebanon and for the PLO to be driven out of business, required a working
relationship with Lebanon's Christians. In reality that meant the Maronites, the largest of the country's Christian sects; their principal political instrument, the Phalange Party and their main military branch, the Lebanese Forces. Schiff and Ya'ari reveal some heretofore unpublished details of the early contacts with the Christians, including a head-to-head meeting between Yitzhak Rabin and former President Camille Chamoun in 1976 and a session on board an Israeli missile boat off the coast of Jounieh—hosted by Rabin and attended by the late Phalange Party founder Pierre Gemeyel and his son Bashir, then its militia commander.

Bashir emerges as the key Christian contact for the Israelis, but the authors are convinced that the Phalangist leader was never a reliable ally and cite reports of numerous conversations and meetings with Israeli leaders and members of the military high command to illustrate the point. They claim that Bashir was responsible first for persuading Begin to commit Israeli airpower against the Syrians, if the Christians were pressed by Damascus, and then drawing Israel into a quagmire by precipitating the Syrian siege of Christian fighters in Zahle in April 1981. It was during the siege that Israeli aircraft shot down two Syrian helicopter transports.

That incident, Schiff and Ya'ari suggest, set off a chain reaction of events resulting in a slippery slide toward a confrontation with Syria and the PLO, the catalyst for which was the shooting of Israeli Ambassador Shlomo Argov in London on 4 June 1982. The ground and air war broke out two days later.

The authors claim to have conducted 150 interviews in preparation for writing the book and that kind of research has produced some fascinating insights: the recounting of meetings between Israeli and American diplomats, particularly those with the Secretary of State; the descriptions of cabinet meetings; general staff and brigade briefings; and profiles of key Israeli military figures and PLO leaders, particularly intelligence chief Abu Iyad.

As reported by the authors, the differing views of Israeli military intelligence and the Mossad exhibited with stark clarity the ambivalent attitudes about this war, the first of Israel's choosing. As the publicly-stated 40-kilometer objective of the campaign was superseded by combat along the Beirut-Damascus highway, the Shouf Mountains, the Bekaa Valley and finally Beirut, the consensus that existed in the first days of the war began to dissipate.

Schiff and Ya'ari discuss at length the controversy over whether General Haig gave a "green" or "amber" light to the Israelis on the eve of the war. The conclusion: a vague go-ahead for a limited operation. They claim that Syria had no desire to engage the IDF in combat and did so only after being provoked by Israeli thrusts near their positions in the Shouf and Bekaa.

On military matters, Israel's Lebanon War is crammed with hour-by-hour details of war planning and battlefield action. Schiff and Ya'ari are careful to
keep the military encounters consistent with their description of the political wars taking place simultaneously. They charge, for example, that the near-secretive nature of the war’s objectives hindered field commanders, which resulted in fits and starts for some advances that might have gone more smoothly. Combat heroism—the personal courage of men in a trapped Israeli tank brigade in the Bekaa Valley town of Sultan Yakoub and at the Beaufort Castle in South Lebanon is right out of a fictional war novel—and battlefield errors, such as the Brigade entering Sultan Yakoub without proper intelligence briefings, are reported in depth. One almost gets to know personally the battlefield commanders—chief of the northern front Amir Drori, Amos Yaron (who would later command the troops in Beirut), Yitzhak Mordechai, Avigdor Kahalani, Avigdor Ben-Gal, Menachem Eitan, Yosef Peled and others.

Schiff and Ya‘ari, as if to drive home their point about the war in Lebanon being largely ill-advised, spotlight Colonel Eli Geva, a tank brigade commander in the advance up the coastal road, who later gave up his command rather than lead his troops into west Beirut. Geva is credited by the authors with warning Sharon about the risk of engaging the Syrians in the weeks leading up to the war and then with breaking the “conspiracy of silence” at a planning meeting to discuss an assault on the largely Muslim sector of the city. “This is not our fight,” he is said to have told a gathering of officers, which included the Chief of Staff. “We mustn’t let ourselves be dragged into Lebanon’s internal affairs.”

Nor is the PLO side of the military confrontation ignored. While describing how Arafat himself misread the signals as to the timing of Israel’s invasion, and while detailing the personal cowardice of some of the top PLO commanders, Schiff and Ya‘ari reveal instances of where PLO fighters exhibited surprising staying-power in combat, particularly those in the refugee camps. The camp at Ein Hilwe, near Sidon, where a battle raged for days between the IDF and the PLO—a number of whom were under the command of a mystic Muslim leader, Haj Ibrahim—was cited as an example of the difficulty of a conventional army fighting a smaller number of guerrillas in a built-up area on the latter’s home turf.

On several occasions the authors leave their observers’ perch and bare their own dilemma about the war. Understanding the rage that has built up in Israel over years of PLO acts of terror, yet doubting the efficacy of this particular war, the authors wrote: “These troops represented a new brand of Israeli soldier, young men who had not fought in Israel’s desperate wars of survival. Their commanders were older, more professional than the previous generation of officers, but what had their military expertise bought them? Did they regard the pulverization of Ein Hilwe as just a grim necessity to be carried out as best they could? Or was this relentless battering a dose of retribution for all the acts of terrorism perpetrated against innocent Israelis? And was it perhaps
fueled by an even deeper sense of vengeance for all the harm and hatred that the Jews had suffered at the hands of Arabs over the centuries? The author [Schiff] found no hint of an answer to these questions in the blank expressions and vacant, tired eyes of the young Israeli soldiers . . . . How would the grandparents of these boys react to the scene of mayhem . . . . What memories would have flooded their minds? What collective fears would have gripped their hearts?"

A similar theme underlies the chapter on the Sabra and Shatila massacres. Schiff, himself a player in this drama—heard rumors of the killings from a contact on the General Staff on Friday morning, 16 September 1982 and passed the word on to Zippori, whom he describes as a close friend—relies heavily on both personal interviews and the Kahan Commission report to reconstruct one of Israel’s most trying moments.

The authors conclude by suggesting that in letting the nation’s guard down, almost everyone was to blame for the Lebanese morass—the aforementioned key cabinet members, the prime minister, the cabinet itself, the army (for deferring to Sharon’s initiatives); the opposition (for not taking a united stand against the war’s objectives beyond the 40-kilometer line) and even the press (for being too jingoistic at the outset of the war.)

Schiff and Ya’ari aren’t too sanguine about the war’s achievements beyond silencing the PLO’s guns in southern Lebanon and wiping out the state-within-a-state infrastructure. On the debit side they charge that the Shiites in the south have become radicalized, the Palestinian problem in the administered territories has not yet been solved, Israeli military technology has been needlessly compromised, Syrian leverage has been increased, and Soviet influence has been bolstered in the region.

The on-going debate over the war in Lebanon will no doubt be further fueled by Israel’s Lebanon War. This volume takes the reader into the cabinet room and on to the battlefield, and is an important contribution to our knowledge of what went on in Lebanon and Israel in the hot summer of 1982.

The attempt to interweave the political side with the military was an ambitious one. Still, as objective as journalists may try to be, those who seek that goal sometimes fail. All the more so in Israel, where there really are no secrets and where even the man on the street calls his national leaders by their first names. Major figures in any national crisis are fair game in democracies and Israel should be no exception. Yet Schiff and Ya’ari cross the line more than once, and often turn criticism into invective. Getting into “personalities” detracts from the issues, which should be discussed candidly by all those who truly care about once and for all achieving a lasting peace in the region.

Nevertheless, Israel’s Lebanon War is a well written, provocative book, especially authoritative in military detail and should be must reading for all who seek to comprehend what happened—and what is still unfolding—in Lebanon.