



PERSPECTIVES

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Israel and Lebanon to Open Negotiations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The announcement of the opening of negotiations between Lebanon and Israel on the disputed gas reservoirs near the territorial waters of the two countries surprised many, though this will not be the first time talks have taken place between the two.

Following the assassination of Lebanon's President Bashir Jumail in September 1982, he was replaced by his brother Amin. At the time, Israel was mired in the Lebanese marsh and the Lebanese people were in the midst of a bloody civil war. Jumail felt he must reach an agreement with Israel that would lead to its withdrawal from Lebanon, and on December 28, negotiations began between the two countries, mediated by the US.

Opinions were divided on many issues at the outset: Lebanon insisted that the negotiations be military in nature and conducted by military officers (as is the case in the current negotiations), while Israel requested that they be conducted in Jerusalem in the presence of the two foreign ministers. Lebanon wanted the future agreement to be based on the 1949 ceasefire agreement, while Israel demanded the cancellation of that agreement and the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations—in other words, a peace agreement similar to the one signed with Egypt in 1979.

The US administration sent two envoys to monitor and assist the negotiations: mediator Philip Habib and his assistant Morris Draper. The Lebanese delegation, led by Ambassador Antoine Fattal, a world-renowned expert on international law, included Judge Antoine Baroud, Amb. Ibrahim Kharma, Gen. Abbas Hamdan, Lt. Col. Said Kakur, and Lt. Gen. Manir Rahim. The Israeli delegation, which was headed by FM Director General David Kimchi, included Elyakim Rubinstein, Amb. Shmuel Divon, Maj. Gen. Avraham Tamir, and other army commanders. Draper headed the American delegation.

The main issues in the negotiations were the end of the state of war between the countries, the establishment of security arrangements, and the regulation of bilateral relations and mutual guarantees. On May 17, 1983, after about five months of difficult and complex discussions, representatives of the three parties met to sign an agreement that was supposed to bring about a semblance of normalization between the two countries and lead within three months to Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. The terms were approved by Lebanon as well as the Knesset, by a large majority.

The agreement represented a delicate balance between the aspirations and constraints of Israel and Lebanon that would allow for a fundamental change in their relations: an end to the state of war between them. However, bilateral relations were not officially defined as "peace." Nor was the word "recognition" included in the agreement. The agreement did include the following elements: a mutual commitment to respect sovereignty, independence and borders; a joint declaration of the end of the state of war; a commitment to the prohibition and prevention of terrorism and incitement; and a series of arrangements to normalize civil, cultural, and economic relations between the countries.

The agreement also established security arrangements in the area south of the Awali River, which was defined as a "security zone," and it was agreed that a special counterterrorism effort would be set up consisting of two Lebanese Army brigades: a "territorial brigade" operating from the international border to the Zahrani River (including forces from the Israeli-backed South Lebanese Army) and a regular brigade from the Zahrani to the Litani River. These security arrangements were designed to allow the IDF to withdraw from Lebanon at the same time as other foreign forces were departing, such as the Syrian Army and PLO forces.

Lebanon was supposed to be the second country to sign a peace agreement with Israel, but the opposition of pro-Syrian factions in Lebanon and the fierce opposition of Damascus, which controlled most of the country and did not shy away from direct threats to the president's life, pushed the Jumail administration to cancel the agreement and cease all contact with Israel.

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