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The South Lebanon Army (SLA): History, Collapse, Post-Withdrawal Status

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Summary

Following its 1982 invasion of and 1985 partial withdrawal from Lebanon, Israel created the South Lebanon Army (SLA), composed of local Lebanese, in order to advance its political and security objectives in Lebanon. In May 2000, Israel unilaterally withdrew from its self-declared “security zone” in south Lebanon, leading to the collapse of the SLA. This report provides historical background on the SLA, its collapse, and the status of its members following Israel’s withdrawal. This report is unlikely to be updated. For further information on Lebanon, see CRS Report IB89118, *Lebanon*, by Clyde R. Mark, updated frequently.

Historical Background on the South Lebanon Army (SLA)

In June 1982, Israel launched “Operation Peace for Galilee,” an invasion of Lebanon that was originally intended to destroy the military and political presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) on Israel’s northern border. Israel subsequently expanded its war aims to include revamping Lebanon’s political system and installing a Lebanese government amenable to signing a peace treaty with Israel. However, a combination of heavy casualties and domestic and international criticism of its occupation of Lebanon led Israel to withdraw its forces, in 1985, from most Lebanese territory. After this partial withdrawal, Israel maintained a military occupation of roughly 10% of Lebanon through its self-declared nine-mile deep “security zone” in the southern part of the country. The “security zone” was designed to create a buffer between Israel and Lebanon in order to minimize cross-border attacks.

In 1985, Israel officially established the South Lebanon Army (SLA) in the “security zone” as an allied militia that it fully funded and equipped. The SLA was an outgrowth of Maj. Sa’ad Haddad’s “Free Lebanon” forces, which were composed of soldiers who broke from the Lebanese army in 1978 and worked closely with Israel. In defending the “security zone” with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the SLA bore a large share of the fighting against Hizballah (Party of God) and, to a lesser extent, Amal (Hope), two

Lebanese Shi'a organizations that fought to oust Israel from the "security zone." According to an SLA spokesperson, since its inception to March 2000, the SLA suffered 621 military fatalities and 200 civilian fatalities.¹ By way of comparison, the IDF suffered roughly 250 fatalities in the "security zone" since its establishment in 1985 to April 2000.²

The SLA was commanded by the now 73-year-old Gen. Antoine Lahad and had an estimated 2,500 to 3,000 fighters. Although the SLA was often portrayed in sectarian terms as a Christian militia battling Shi'a militias, in reality, the SLA somewhat reflected the prevailing confessional diversity of Lebanon. Though most of its commanders were Christian, only half of the members of the militia were Christian, with the remainder reportedly composed of Shi'a Muslims (30%), Druze (13%), and Sunni Muslims (7%).³ Some observers estimate that Shi'a Muslims may have composed up to half of the militia. According to media reports, Israel paid an average monthly salary of between \$500 and \$800 to SLA members.⁴ Together with maintenance and infrastructure expenditures, it is estimated that Israel spent a total of \$35 million annually on the SLA and its dependents.⁵ The relatively high salaries that Israel paid members of the SLA created a powerful economic incentive for local residents to join the militia. Living in the midst of an area economically devastated by three decades of nearly constant conflict, the SLA was oftentimes the only potential source of steady employment for many residents of south Lebanon. According to Human Rights Watch, the SLA also filled its ranks through the involuntarily conscription of residents of the "security zone," including children.⁶

Since the end of the 15-year Lebanese civil war in 1990, the Lebanese army, with Syrian backing, has been fairly successful in disarming most militias and reasserting its control in most parts of the country, with the exception of Hizballah and the SLA (prior to Israel's withdrawal) in the southern part of the country. Israel was responsible for equipping the SLA, which reportedly maintained a mainly obsolescent arsenal of 30 T-54/-55 main battle tanks, M-113 and BTR-50 armed personnel carriers, and various 122mm, 130mm, and 155mm towed artillery pieces, and 160mm mortars.⁷ The SLA might also have possessed up to 15 U.S.-made Sherman main battle tanks and Soviet-made SA-7 anti-aircraft shoulder-fired missiles, as well as ZSU-23 anti-aircraft guns.⁸

¹ Karamallah Daher, "SLA Wants Israel to Leave with Peace Deal," *Reuters*, March 10, 2000.

² Paul Taylor, "Israel Seen Stuck in 'Lebanese Mud' Despite Pullout," *Reuters*, April 28, 2000.

³ "SLA-Identity Card," *Yediot Aharonot*, April 4, 2000.

⁴ Sultan Sleiman, "Lebanese Occupation Zone Split Over Pullout," *Reuters*, May 15, 2000.

⁵ Alex Fishman, "Seniors Will Be Resettled Abroad, Juniors Will Fight for Their Lives," *Yediot Aharonot*, March 3, 2000, translated by Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), Document ID: GMP20000303000051.

⁶ See Human Rights Watch, "Israel's Withdrawal from South Lebanon: The Human Rights Dimension," May 2000.

⁷ *The Military Balance 1999-2000*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Oxford University Press, London, 1999, p. 139.

⁸ "SLA-Identity Card," *Yediot Aharonot*, April 4, 2000.

Options for the SLA Prior to Israel's Withdrawal

Option 1: SLA Maintains its Control of the "Security Zone". Israel and the SLA examined the possibility of maintaining the militia's existence after Israel withdrew from the "security zone." SLA commander Gen. Lahad favored this option and stated that the SLA would maintain its own "security zone" after the Israeli withdrawal.⁹ However, as Israel withdrew, this option became irrelevant, as the SLA collapsed and disbanded.

Option 2: SLA Disbands and Other Parties Take Control of the "Security Zone". This scenario materialized with the collapse of the SLA and a combination of 1) Hizballah, 2) U.N. peacekeeping forces stationed in Lebanon, and 3) the Lebanese police and internal security forces assuming control of the former "security zone" in the immediate aftermath of Israel's withdrawal.

Option 3: SLA Members Relocate. This scenario also materialized as the SLA collapsed during Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. Approximately 1,500 SLA members and their dependents (totaling about 7,000 people) fled to Israel as the SLA crumbled.

Israel's Withdrawal from Lebanon and the Collapse of the SLA

Upon forming his government in July 1999, newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak pledged to withdraw the IDF from Lebanon within a year, responding to mounting frustration over continued Israeli casualties in Lebanon. On March 5, 2000, the Israeli cabinet unanimously endorsed Barak's plan to withdraw by July 7, 2000. Seeking to avert further Israeli casualties in the "security zone", the IDF began to transfer some of its military outposts to the SLA in mid-May. However, the SLA proved unable to hold its ground against advancing Hizballah forces, leading Barak to advance the timetable for the IDF's withdrawal. Barak issued the official order for the IDF to withdraw from Lebanon on May 23, 2000. Israel completed its withdrawal the following day.

During Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, the SLA decided to abandon its outposts and disband rather than continue fighting alone against Hizballah, a better trained and disciplined force. The collapse of the SLA proved to be a fortuitous event that facilitated Israel's relatively smooth withdrawal from Lebanon and will likely contribute to continued domestic tranquility in south Lebanon. The U.N. apparently had conditioned its verification of Israel's withdrawal on Israel disarming and severing its ties with the SLA,¹⁰ a step that Israel was loath to implement. The collapse of the militia rendered this issue moot, thereby removing a potential post-withdrawal bone of contention between Israel and the U.N. Also, Hizballah (in addition to nearly all Lebanese) viewed the SLA as an extension of the Israeli military occupation and stated that it would have continued its fight against the SLA if it did not disband when Israel withdrew.¹¹ The collapse of the SLA prevented this scenario from occurring.

⁹ Karamallah Daher, "SLA Head Says Will Keep Israel's Lebanon Zone," *Reuters*, May 9, 2000.

¹⁰ Amos Harel, "IDF Dismantles Bases on the Lebanon Border; SLA Evacuates a Forward Base," *Ha'aretz*, May 2, 2000.

¹¹ See interview of Hizballah Secretary General Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah on *al-Jazeera Satellite Channel*, April 24, 2000, translated by FBIS, Document ID: GMP20000424000212.

In the days following the Israeli withdrawal, Hizballah, to a large extent, effectively and responsibly ensured public order and provided social services in the former “security zone”. Many analysts correctly predicted that Hizballah would increase its hold on the area but incorrectly assumed that it would exact retribution against SLA members remaining in the area, leading to a widespread bloodbath. Although there were incidences of small-scale looting, there were no confirmed reports of Hizballah executing surrendering members of the SLA.¹² All members of the SLA who surrendered themselves to Hizballah were turned over to the Lebanese governmental authorities for trial (see following section for further details). In retrospect, Hizballah Secretary General Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah’s call to “slaughter the SLA in their beds”¹³ proved to be nothing more than a rhetorical tactic issued in order to induce the collapse of the SLA.

Hizballah’s decision not to exact revenge against SLA members who surrendered stemmed largely from domestic political considerations. Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon earned Hizballah praise and admiration from nearly all sectors of Lebanese society, regardless of sectarian or political affiliation. Hizballah did not want to squander the additional political capital it gained by contributing to further instability in the area and engaging in widespread massacres. Also, if Hizballah took revenge against rank-and-file SLA members, many of whom are Shi’a co-religionists, it could have had negative repercussions on Hizballah’s domestic political base, which is drawn largely from lower and middle-class Lebanese Shi’a communities in the south and in Beirut. Instead, Hizballah reasoned that maintaining a calming influence over the former “security zone” combined with its declared victory against Israel will redound to its advantage in upcoming parliamentary elections.

When the SLA collapsed, it abandoned its heavy weaponry. Hizballah and other organizations that moved into the former “security zone” captured the SLA’s abandoned arsenal. The ultimate disposition of these weapons is unclear at this time. Hizballah has claimed that it will turn over the captured weapons to the Lebanese government.¹⁴ However, as of June 2000, Hizballah still possessed at least some of these weapons, which they displayed in a festive military parade.¹⁵ After the parade, Hizballah reiterated that it will transfer these weapons to the Lebanese army.¹⁶

SLA Members After Israel’s Withdrawal from Lebanon

Lebanon. About half of the SLA members remained in Lebanon after the militia collapsed during Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon. These SLA members surrendered

¹² A Lebanese Christian was allegedly killed by someone originally identified as a Hizballah member on May 29, 2000. However, Hizballah denied having any links with the suspect and the Lebanese police determined that an “individual dispute” and not confessional strife was responsible for the killing. See Nadim Ladki, “South Lebanon Christian Village Calm after Shooting,” *Reuters*, May 29, 2000.

¹³ “Hizballah Urges Pro-Israeli Militia to Surrender,” *Reuters*, May 21, 2000.

¹⁴ John Daniszewski, “Pullout from Lebanon,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2000.

¹⁵ “Hizballah Displays ‘Military Booty’ in a March from the South to the Suburbs [of Beirut],” *al-Hayat*, June 6, 2000.

¹⁶ “Hizballah’s Booty is for the Army,” *al-Hayat*, June 8, 2000.

themselves to either Hizballah, the Lebanon Armed Forces (LAF), or Lebanese police or internal security forces. As noted above, those SLA members who surrendered themselves to Hizballah were subsequently handed over to the LAF. According to the LAF, by May 27, 2000, the Lebanese army held in custody 1,488 SLA members.¹⁷ These SLA members tended to be Shi'a and Sunni Muslim rank-and-file militia members who often joined the militia out of economic necessity or through coerced conscription. After hearing that Hizballah did not perpetrate any massacres of SLA members who remained in Lebanon, some SLA members who fled to Israel returned to Lebanon. According to one report, by June 6, 2000, about 110 of these SLA members and their dependents returned to Lebanon and surrendered themselves to the Lebanese authorities.¹⁸

SLA members who are being held in custody have been referred to the Beirut Military Tribunal to stand trial on charges of collaborating with an enemy of the state (Israel). Verdicts of the military tribunal, which is headed by Judge Maher Safi al-Din, cannot be appealed. Government prosecutors have moved swiftly to bring SLA members to trial. The trials also have proceeded quickly because the defendants surrendered themselves as confessed militia members, thereby obviating the need for lengthy evidentiary hearings. The first group trial of SLA members, which encompassed 158 defendants, opened on June 5, 2000. The military tribunal issued guilty verdicts against 77 SLA members on the same day and sentenced them to terms ranging from one month to five years and fined them between \$67 and \$1,000.¹⁹ A second batch of 24 SLA members were deemed guilty of collaborating with Israel on June 7, 2000. Their sentences ranged from one to three years and most were fined \$270.²⁰

To date, the sentences that the military tribunal has handed down to SLA members in custody have been relatively light. These light sentences contrast with previous *in absentia* military tribunal judgements of senior-ranking SLA members, which have included death sentences and life-term sentences. The Lebanese government has apparently revisited the precedent that it established in Jezzine by lightly sentencing lower-ranking SLA members. The SLA surrendered its outposts in the Jezzine region, an enclave just north of the former "security zone", in June 1999. At this time, many SLA members in Jezzine turned themselves in to the Lebanese authorities and received comparably light sentences. One year later, most of these former SLA members have completed their jail sentences and have reintegrated into Lebanese society.²¹

Israel. Prior to its withdrawal from Lebanon, Israel incorrectly forecast that only a select number of high-ranking SLA officers would seek refuge in Israel. In April 2000, Avi Yehezkel, Chairman of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) Defense Budget Subcommittee, stated that "all we are talking about is a few hundred soldiers and their families," who will

¹⁷ "Lebanon Says 1,488 Pro-Israelis Surrendered," *Reuters*, May 27, 2000.

¹⁸ Zeina Mobassaleh, "SLA Refugees Have Different Destinations," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), June 6, 2000.

¹⁹ "Lebanon Opens Trial of 158 Pro-Israel Militiamen," *Reuters*, June 5, 2000, and Sam Ghattas, "First Group of Pro-Israeli Militiamen Get Light Sentences," *Associated Press*, June 5, 2000.

²⁰ Sam Ghattas, "Former Pro-Israeli Militiamen Sentenced to Jail Terms," *Associated Press*, June 7, 2000.

²¹ Conversation with Ambassador Farid 'Aboud, Embassy of Lebanon, May 25, 2000.

relocate to Israel.²² Therefore, the Israeli Ministry of Public Security reportedly secured only 500 short-term renewable leases for SLA members in various apartment buildings in northern Israeli settlements, such as Karmel, Ma'alot, and Shlomi.²³

When approximately 1,500 SLA members, who along with their dependents totaled 6,420 people,²⁴ flooded Israel within a day of its withdrawal from Lebanon, the Israeli authorities were caught off-guard by the large number of refugees that it would have to cope with. These SLA members tended to be mid and high-ranking Christian officers in the militia. Israel improvised a refugee registration process at a location near the Sea of Galilee and eventually dispersed them to 31 sites around the country,²⁵ including hotels, *kibbutzim*, and apartments. The ultimate status of these refugees remains unclear. Israel has apparently granted these Lebanese refugees temporary residency and work permits. Those who wish to stay in Israel permanently will be allowed to apply for citizenship after one year.²⁶

According to a recent survey conducted by the Israeli Defense Directorate for Aid, 47% of SLA refugees want to be resettled abroad, 38% want to remain in Israel, 8% want to return to Lebanon, and 12% are undecided.²⁷ The Israeli press has speculated on a number of possible destinations for those SLA members who want to resettle abroad, including France, the United States, and the Scandinavian countries. To date, Germany has been the only country that has publicly announced its willingness to take in SLA refugees.²⁸ For those refugees who wish to remain in Israel permanently, Israel is contemplating establishing a separate village specifically built for SLA members. This option appears attractive to Israel because previous plans to integrate SLA members into Israeli Arab communities have been strenuously objected to by Israeli Arabs who tend to view the SLA as traitors. On the other hand, Israeli Druze have petitioned Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to allow them to absorb into their community roughly 200 Druze SLA members and their families.²⁹ Israel has estimated that it will cost between \$350 million and \$500 million to resettle SLA members abroad and in Israel.³⁰

²² Leslie Susser, "Israel Opens Compensation Talks with SLA Leaders," *Jerusalem Report*, April 10, 2000.

²³ Zuhayr Andraws, "Israeli Plan to Settle SLA Men in Turkey, Israeli Cities," *Kull al-'Arab* (Nazareth), March 31, 2000, translated by FBIS, Document ID: GMP20000403000105.

²⁴ Elli Wohlgeleirnter, "Sharansky: SLA May Get Own Town," *Jerusalem Post*, May 26, 2000.

²⁵ Mazal Mualam, "Senior-Ranking SLA [Officer] Fled to Beirut with Much Money from the Organization's Funds," *Ha'aretz*, May 31, 2000.

²⁶ Sharon Gal, Mazal Mualam, Amos Harel, and Gidon Alon, "This Morning the Absorption of 40 SLA Families will Begin at the Sea of Galilee," *Ha'aretz*, May 23, 2000.

²⁷ Survey cited in Zeina Mobassaleh, "SLA Refugees Have Different Destinations," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), June 6, 2000.

²⁸ "Fischer Says Germany to Take in 400 Lebanese," *Reuters*, June 5, 2000.

²⁹ Yehuda Goren, "To Establish a Settlement for Druze SLA Members," *Ma'ariv*, May 29, 2000.

³⁰ The dollar amount is based on estimates made in Israeli sheqels. See Yehuda Goren, "Absorbing SLA Members will Cost the State Much More than was Planned For," *Ma'ariv*, May 28, 2000.