

Lebanon and the Planned US Airbase at Kleiaat

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On July 14, 1982, (Bastille Day) the late Bashir Gemayel sat with Ariel Sharon, Raphael Eytan, and Danny Yalon at the French flag draped Le Chef Restaurant in Ashifeyih, east Beirut for one of their working lunches.

As was by now their habit, the Israelis were inclined to pressure their recently anointed selection for Lebanon's next president. They were there to present a request for one more favor from the handsome 'golden boy' of the Phalange movement, as their army tightened its noose around west Beirut.

There was a good chance they would succeed. After all, Bashir was beholden to the Zionists, for their many 'considerations', including the arms for drugs arrangements, the weapons skimmed from what the US reflectively shipped to Israel on demand, the intelligence sharing and assassinations of Palestinians who Bashir could not abide. The trio lunching with him that day, under the celebratory French flags in this francophone neighborhood could easily destroy Bashir Gemayel and he knew it.

Yet, despite their intimidating talk, the self described 'cream of the IDF', exhibiting what Bashir had often explained to his nerdy younger brother Amin, who, unexpectedly was to become his successor as President of Lebanon, and to some of his aids, was a case of 'congenital arrogance' erred that day.

They seriously underestimated the Palestinian hating, Muslim despising, would be Phoenecian Prince, *Le sheik Bashir*. In misjudging the charismatic Maronite, the Israeli trio had failed to appreciate that, on any day of the week, the average Lebanese is rather more sophisticated, clever, descent, and patriotic than many Israeli or American politicians give them credit for. The same obtains today.

Sharon pulled out a piece of paper from his chest pocket, as one Phalange security person who guarded the restaurant door recalls, and shoved it across the table to Bashir. Written on it was Israel's 'one last request' which contained one word: Kleiaat

The Israelis studied Bashir's face for a sign of his reaction as he picked up the small piece of paper. Bashir, appearing to suppress a yawn, had heard this 'one last request' hustle many times and had long felt contempt for what he called "these pressure lunches." Yet, former alter boy that he was, the martyred, and still much loved Lebanese patriot, pressed his lips together and listened politely as is the Lebanese custom, as Sharon expounded on the details.

Bashir, fuming inside and about to erupt in anger as he had sometimes done previously

when he felt squeezed by Sharon, instead smiled at the anxious trio. He leaned forward and whispered with a voice they still say in his Bekfayya neighborhood, would make women swoon: 'you will not be disappointed, my dear friends'.

Sharon was delirious with Bashir's response and slapped him on the back, a gesture of friendship that the former parish crucifier found deeply offensive.

Returning to his Achharifeh Headquarters, bounding up the stairs to his office to meet with aids, where less than two months later, he would die from an assassins' bomb which would level the building and killed and wounded more than 200, Bashir bellowed as he entered his office, "*An Israeli air base in Lebanon? Those crazy sons of bitches won't get one grain of sand from Kleiaat.*"

As residents of Bibnin Akkar, less than two miles from the site of the proposed US base and the Lebanese daily newspaper *Aldiyar* speculate, construction of a US airbase on the grounds of the largely abandoned airbase at Kleiaat in northern Lebanon may begin late this year. To make the project more palpable, it is being promoted as a 'US/NATO' base that will serve as the headquarters of a NATO rapid deployment force, helicopter squadrons, and Special Forces units.

The base will provide training for the Lebanese army and security forces fighting Salafi, Islamist fundamentalists and other needs.

The Pentagon and NATO HQ in Belgium have given the project which, will sit along the Lebanese-Syrian border, using this vast area "as a base for fast intervention troops", a name. It is to be called ***The Lebanese Army and Security training centre***.

Kleiaat, a nearly now abandoned small airport, was used by Middle East Airlines for a period for commuter flights between Beirut and Tripoli. Residents of the area report that during the Civil War (1975-1990) a commuter Helicopter service was also operated due to road closures.

The proposed base was measured by this observer to be roughly two and one-half miles down the beach from Nahr al-Bared Palestinian Camp. Both share pristine Mediterranean beachfront. Kleiaat is an expanse of gently undulating sandy dunes covered with long prairie grass and brush.

Despite opposition from Lebanon's anemic environmental movement, that argues that the pristine area should be left to its many varieties of birds and wildlife, the local community is watching closely.

Not much activity is going on as of May 29, 2007. About 20 Quonset huts, some recently driven stakes, no evidence of heavy equipment or building material. The three man army outpost fellows appeared bored and did not even ask for ID as I toured the whole area on the back of a fine new BMW 2200cc motorcycle courtesy of one of the local militia sniper guys who until two days ago was firing into Nahr al-Bared until the Lebanese army stopped him after the PLO leadership complained.

Lebanese entrepreneurs at Bibnin Akkar, a Sunni community loyal to the Hariri's, and who will be the chief financial winners from the project, see opportunities with thousands of new construction and related jobs coming. One kind fellow who hooked me up last night to

intermittent internet via a jerry rigged dial up arrangement on one of his shop's two computers envisages running a fine new internet café with at least 50 wireless computers. Hotels, restaurants and businesses of various sorts are planning expansions to meet the demand of the expected workforce.

Who will not benefit from the building boom will be the 40,000+ Palestinians from Nahr al-Bared which is literally next door to the anticipated project. These refugees, who were driven from their homes in Palestine in 1948 and 1967, from Telezatter by the Phalanges in 1975, and others who came as a result of Israeli attacks on Lebanon in 1978, 1982, 1993, 1996, and 2006, will gain no work from Kleiaat. The reason is that the 70 top trades and professions in Lebanon are denied to the Palestinians under Lebanese law.

Even if the 20,000 Palestinians displaced by the current conflict with Fatah al-Islam are allowed to return, which I expect will be the case, and even if Palestinian fears that the Camps will be demolished are unrealized, as I believe, they will remain destitute, according to UNWRA who considers 10,000 of them 'special hardship cases'.

As reported by the NATO headquarters in Brussels, as well as by residents in Bibnin Akkar on May 28, 2007, an American-German-Turkish military delegation toured and surveyed Akkar region. US Embassy 'staff' have reportedly visited Kleiaat airport earlier this year to look over the site. David Welch also had a quick look at the site during his recent visit.

A Lebanese journalist who opposes the base commented on May 28, 2007, "The Bush administration has been warning Lebanon about the presence of Al Qaeda teams in northern Lebanon. And the base is needed to deal with this threat. Low and behold, a new "terrorist group" called Fatah al-Islam appears near Kleiaat at al-Bared camp".

The Pentagon argues that the military base will contribute to the development and the economic recovery in the region, advising the Lebanese government to focus on the financial aspect and positive reflection on the population (95% Sunni) of the region.

Contenders for the billion dollar project, according to the Pentagon procurement office could be Bechtel and Halliburton and other Contractors currently doing projects in Iraq.

The martyred Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, saw potential for the Kleiaat airport as well. But he opposed a US airbase. Instead, Hariri, which the green grocer who sells fruits and vegetables to the Lebanese army patrolling the Tripoli-Syria four lane road in front of Nahr al-Bared, commented, " Rafik Hariri, may he rest in peace, loved Lebanon. But he never saw a piece of real estate he didn't want to develop!" Hariri envisaged a billion dollar Free Commercial Zone and a port, despite Syrian opposition, and had investors lined up before he was murdered. Damascus was opposed to the Hariri dream because the new Port and Free Zone would drain the revenues from the nearby Syrian Port at Lathikiya.

According to Washington observers watching developments, the base has been pushed by elements in the office of the US Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the urging of Israeli operative Elliot Abrams. AIPAC can be expected to do the necessary work in Congress and with House Foreign Affairs, Appropriations, Intelligence, and Armed Service committees hermetically sealed by stalwarts of the Israel Lobby, it can be expected that it will be added as a rider to an unsuspecting House bill coming along.

"We need to get this base built as quickly as possible as a forward thrust point against Al

Qaeda and other (read Hezbollah) terrorists”, according to AIPAC staffer Rachael Cohen. Asked if Israel will offer training and advisors to the Lebanese army, Ms. Cohen replied, “we will see what we will see, Lebanon, smezzanon its not about them, *its about stopping the terrorists stupid!*”

“The question for Lebanon is whether the Lebanese people will allow the base to be built. Few in North Lebanon doubt that Israel will have access to the base ” according to Oathman Bader, a community leader who lives in Bahr al-Bared but has fled to Badawi.

Fatah al-Islam and their allies have pledged martyrdom operations to stop the project, according to the Fatah Intifada, the group that expelled Fatah al-Islam from their camp on November 27, 2006.

According to a columnist at Beirut’s Al-Akbar newspaper,” a US project like that would split Lebanon apart. No way will Lebanon allow it. Probably every group in Lebanon would oppose it , from the Salafi, Islamists fundamentalist to moderate Sunnis to Hezbollah. Can you imagine the Syrian reaction?”

Commenting on this project, one Arab-American from Boston, doing volunteer work at the Palestinian Red Crescent Hospital, Safad, noted:

“Hopefully the US pro Middle East peace, pro-Palestinian, and pro-Lebanon organizations with better phone and internet connections that exist locally, will join the opposition in Lebanon to this base and fight it in Congress. Welch and the US Embassy in Beirut should be questioned about it”

Franklin Lamb’s just released book, The Price We Pay: A Quarter Century of Israel’s Use of American Weapons in Lebanon is available at Amazon.com.uk. His volume, Hezbollah: a Brief Guide for Beginners is due out in early summer, 2007. He can be reached at fplamb@gmail.com

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