

# Dangerous Games

## This is how Mossad's romance with Beirut Maronites Phalange led to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon

There was nothing on the morning of April 8 1980 that even hinted at the storm that was about to shake Mossad HQ. The division heads and their deputies had gathered for their regular weekly session in the office of the director, reserves General Yitzhak Hofi. After dealing with a few procedural matters, Hofi dropped the bombshell. He accused his deputy director David “Dave” Kimche, of “disobeying orders” and “disloyalty.” He said that Kimche had crossed the red line and announced that he was suspending him from his post as deputy and as head of the division in charge of the Mossad’s external relations, Tevel, or “world” in Hebrew. “Nahik [Menahem Navot, head of administration] will replace Dave as soon as possible,” Hofi concluded the meeting. Kimche asked for permission to speak, but it was not granted. For the first time in the Mossad’s history, a director had summarily accused and sentenced so senior an official. It happened again in June 2007, when Director Meir Dagan told his deputy, “N” to take his personal belongings and clear out of the HQ, against a background of sharp differences over the handling of Iran and Hizballah.

“I spent thirty years in the organization,” Kimche observes, and all of a sudden I am given a summary court martial.” He resigned from the organization shortly afterward.

Kimche’s departure and the manner in which it occurred were not an internal Mossad matter. His opponents say that it was Kimche who thought up the concept of an alliance with Lebanon’s Maronite Christian minority and was its prime advocate. It was that concept that brought about the invasion of Lebanon two years after his

dismissal. It originated in 1975, when Kimche was running the Tevel division's European operations, and Maronite activists contacted an Israeli embassy seeking to establish ties with the Jewish state, seeking help in the civil war that had broken out in Lebanon. In 1976 he returned from Europe and was appointed head of Tevel. In that capacity he saw the fostering of those ties with Lebanon's Christians as his main goal. Within the Israeli defense establishment, there were those who from the start were not enamored of the Maronites and their political organization, the Phalange, or Kataeb party, modeled on Fascist Spain. Col. (res.) David Schick of the Naval Commandos was in charge of security at a secret meeting between prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and Phalange leader Bashir Jemayel on a yacht in Jounieh bay, north of Beirut in late-1976. Schick: "Rabin and Bashir went beneath the deck, and I stood outside the door. I shudder when I think of the Phalangist guards who were with me there and how they boasted about murdering Muslims in Beirut and throwing their bodies into a wadi that we could see from the sea. They seemed to feel no shame about what they had done". The Phalangists, according to Mossad officials who met them, were always sure to brag in a similar way about the massacre of Palestinians that they had carried out at the Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp in Beirut on August 12 1976. "*Zaatar* means thyme, and they would ask with a big grin, "do you want some pita with '*zaatar*'?" Reuven Merhav, who was head of the Mossad's Middle East department at the time: "I had reservations about the Phalange from the beginning of the connection. I never liked the Fascist strains in their ideology, their uniforms and their conduct, or the cult of the personality of Bashir. I encountered manifestations of Catholic anti-Semitism among them, especially among the lower echelons. The senior people were more careful. I realized that their goal was for us to do the whole job for them. I was worried that their extremism would lead us all into a disaster."

One of the Maronite Christians who tied his fate to Israel was Robert Hatem. Born in 1958 in the Christian Furn al-Shubak neighborhood of Beirut, at 16 he joined a Maronite group known as the Tanzim, the organization, and two years later he enlisted in the Phalange. “We had one main aim then: To kick the fucking Palestinians out of Lebanon,” he said in a 2005 interview. Soon after enlisting, he killed for the first time. “You are shocked only by the first one. It was a giant Sudanese that we killed, in a battle near Furn al-Shubak. I remember not sleeping all night, and all the time thinking about how I shot him again and again and he kept on coming. Later killing became a habit and I stopped getting excited about it.”

In 1977 Hatem, nicknamed “Cobra” was one of the first to be inducted into a special and secret department of the Phalange, Department 104, whose members traveled by sea to training camps in Israel and Lebanon. Later he was appointed chief assistant to the Phalange commander, Elie Hobeika, and commander of his bodyguards’ unit. He was not a run of the mill bodyguard. He was the man who made things happen for Hobeika, whose lust for blood was matched only by his lust for women. Hatem was supposed to provide the material for both of his master’s hobbies. He remained in this position until 1997. The Palestinians used to say that a cobra bit “Cobra,” and the snake it was that died.

Hatem has an impressive photographic memory and an ability to describe the smallest details of any event, even if it happened 20 years or more before. “Almost no one who was brought to the interrogation cells of the Lebanese Christian Forces, the Karantina [the slaughterhouse in the heart of Beirut that the Phalange made its headquarters] came out alive,” he said. We’d throw their bodies into the lime pits in the woods – Syrians, Shi’ites and Palestinians, and officers and sons of whores from the Lebanese

Army. Anyone who wanted to kill us, we killed him first, after a strenuous interrogation.”

Asked for the total number of detainees who were killed in the Karantina in the 1980s, his first reply was “between 300 and 400.” Two hours later, he said “between 2,000 and 3,000.” It turned out that a misunderstanding had occurred. “I thought at the beginning that you were only speaking about those who I handled personally,” he explained with an apologetic smile, “and not the total number.”

### **And how did you do the killing? A firing squad?**

“No, of course not. What for? We’d take them to the lime pits. One shot in the head. Puff. Enough. That’s all it took.”

Israeli intelligence operatives were stunned to see Hobeika’s men walking in the street with the ears of their victims hanging from their belts. Hatem: “I don’t remember that we hung ears ... Actually, if I think about it, there was one guy, from my neighborhood, Robert Hadad was his name, a good guy, but a little crazy, who used to collect ears. He used to cut one ear off, only one, from everyone he killed, and hung them on film spools on the walls of his house.”

But such tales hardly mattered to anyone, apart from Merhav and a handful of other opponents in the Mossad. The victory of the rightist Likud party in the Israeli elections in 1977 and the accession of Menachem Begin to the premiership opened new horizons for the Lebanese Maronites. “The Phalange learned Begin very quickly,” says Merhav. “They saw in him the noble-minded Pole who wants to show the whole world that the Jews, although they had been persecuted by Jew-hating

Catholics in Europe, would save their Catholic brethren in Lebanon, while the rest of the international community stood by in silence.”

On March 11 1978, a sea-borne Fatah unit landed on the beach near kibbutz Maagan Michael, on the Mediterranean coast between Haifa and Tel Aviv. After killing an American nature photographer, Gail Rubin, whom they encountered upon landing, they commandeered a taxi and two buses, put all of the passengers into one of the buses, and headed south along the Coastal Highway, toward Tel Aviv. They were stopped at the outskirts of Tel Aviv and in the ensuing shootout 35 of the passengers were killed and 71 wounded. Three days later, Israel launched the Litani Operation, conquering the Lebanese territory between the Litani River and the Israeli border (except the city of Tyre) and an area along the border in the eastern sector. Complying with a U.N. Security Council Resolution Israel withdrew, but left behind in the area a pro-Israeli militia of local residents, led by a Lebanese Army officer, Major Saad Hadad. Units of the militia were set up in Christian and also some Shi'ite villages to resist a coalition of Palestinian guerrillas and Lebanese leftists, and received first humanitarian and later military assistance from Israel.

Very quickly it became clear that the presence of Maj. Hadad's militia along the border was not enough to protect Israel's north from Palestinian attacks, and the Mossad decided to continue pushing the connection with the “northern Christians.” In order to shape a clear policy, a document was drawn up in late 1979 defining the limits of the assistance to be extended to the Maronites. Hofi sacked Kimche for allegedly breaching of those limits by being more generous to the Phalange than the document stipulated.

As part of the tightening of the links with the Phalange, the Mossad set up a station in Jounieh, commanded by Shmuel Evyatar, a fanatical type with messianic

beliefs who was enamored of the Maronites and strenuously promoted the alliance with them. “Gadi,” Evyatar’s direct superior in the Mossad, describes the situation: “Military Intelligence (AMAN) argued that the Christians were playing a double game. Kimche and Shmulik [Evyatar] and to a certain extent, I as well, were sucked into it. They pushed and pressed to give the Christians more and more. We believed them then when they said that they would be exterminated unless we gave them most of what they wanted. Because of our determination, especially Dave’s and Nahik’s, the whole system was dragged into believing in the Christian option. In the end, [Defense Minister Ariel] Sharon, [Chief of Staff] Rafael Eitan, and Begin bought the position that we represented, and not that of AMAN. In retrospect, the Lebanese Christians proved to be allies that could not be relied upon. All of the people who were our friends turned into groveling servants of the Syrians and Hizballah.”

The presence in Jounieh of the Mossad agents and their Israeli security guards soon became an open secret among the local Christians. One of the guards felt so at home there that he used to go running through the streets of the town at night. Col. Schick, who was in charge of security during that period, tells an anecdote that shows how overt this supposedly covert operation was: “One evening we went to a nightclub in Beirut. Each soldier had a carry-all bag containing some Lebanese money, an AK-47 assault rifle and a radio. We sat there with the bags on the floor between our feet. We were careful to speak English, to the extent that we were capable of that, to avoid being identified. All of a sudden, the Hebrew song ‘Haveinu Shalom Aleichem’ came over the loudspeakers, and everyone in the club, hundreds of people crowded around us clapping their hands. That’s how secret the thing was. It was all one long series of outings and gluttonous meals. It was French cuisine at its highest level, with entrees

like lamb fondue and desserts of heaps of ice cream with the Israeli American and Phangist flags stuck onto them.”

After a one-day overlap, Kimche handed the command of Tevel over to Nahik Navot, who only tightened the Mossad’s warm embrace of the Phalange. Reuven Merhav: “The Christians were head over heels in love with Kimche. That was killing Nahik. He wanted to show them that he was no less effective than Dave, and he began to devote enormous personal attention to them.” Not long after that, Merhav left the Mossad in anger, warning of the disaster that the organization was about to cause Israel because of its ties with the Maronites. As for Mossad director Hofi, he maintained a suspicious attitude toward the Phalange and opposed the war initiative, but Navot and Evyatar went behind his back to the defense minister and the chief of staff, who were happy about the ties with the Christians, as a stepping stone to the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon. In this way the strategy snowballed, despite the Mossad director’s displeasure.

Navot’s enslavement to the concept of an alliance with the Maronites in Lebanon soon seeped through to and captivated prime minister Begin, chief of staff Eitan and, especially, defense minister Sharon. Sharon believed that a war, in alliance with the Maronites, could solve all of Israel’s problems in the Middle East in one fell swoop. In a nutshell, the plan was for Israel to attack from the south, with the Phalange operating at full strength against the PLO in and around Beirut. Israel would install the Phalange as the exclusive rulers of Lebanon with Bashir Jemayel as president, enabling them to kick the Palestinians out of Lebanon and into Jordan, where they would topple King Hussein and the Hashemite monarchy and set up a Palestinian state there, allowing Israel to annex the occupied Palestinian territories.

Sharon and Eitan were totally bewitched by the ties with the Maronites and the grand strategy of what was codenamed the “Great Pines Project.” They made the Mossad into an instrument for its implementation.

Avner Azulai, who took over from Merhav as head of the Middle East department, comments: “Shmulik Evyatar was as spaced out as an astronaut (no offense to astronauts!). After my first visit to Junieh, I decided (and I was later criticized for not following regular procedures) to remove him from the station and assign him to desk work, away from the Lebanese project. His reports weren't intelligence reports but more like poetry and fantasy, full of his own messianic beliefs. I was swimming against the stream set in motion by Dave and others. Several times I opposed proposals made by chief of Staff Eitan ... sometimes successfully .. but that didn't change the course of history. The Sharon-Eitan-Begin trio had a fantasy that eliminating Arafat and the PLO in Lebanon would in some way create the conditions to take over the West Bank and Gaza, following the [1982] withdrawal from Sinai and the peace with Egypt.”

Although Israel's border with Lebanon had been quiet for a year, on June 6 1982, “The Great Pines Project” was activated. The official pretext for launching the First Lebanon War was the shooting three days before of the Israeli Ambassador in London, Shlomo Argov, by a terrorist belonging to the Abu Nidal gang. At one of the meetings where going to war was discussed, a senior MI officer pointed out to Eitan that the Abu Nidal group regarded Arafat as an enemy, and had nothing to do with Lebanon. Eitan replied: “Abu Nidal, Abu Shmidal, they're all PLO.”

Despite the role of his organization in developing the project, Mossad director Hofi had warned of the dangers of becoming entangled in Lebanon. And the historical roulette game set in motion by Sharon, Navot, Evyatar and their fellow believers did

in fact end up in an entanglement far beyond anything that had been surmised. The alliance with the Phalange collapsed; the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon – trumpeted by Sharon as a major achievement, with some justification – led to the outbreak of the First Palestinian Intifada in the occupied territories in 1987, and most importantly, the foundation had been laid for the establishment in Lebanon of Iran's long arm of terror and dissemination of its Islamic Revolution.

When the welcoming handfuls of rice that Shi'ite villagers in South Lebanon had scattered over the invading Israeli forces turned into a hail of grenades and roadside bombs, the Israeli deputy prime minister Simcha Ehrlich complained, "They never told us that there were Shi'ites there." This sums up the true state of affairs: An ignorant Israeli government that never knew there were Shi'ites, who constituted the largest section of Lebanon's population or what Shi'ites were, for that matter; an intelligence agency that was dominated by messianic, hallucinatory types; a prime minister who became infirm and detached from reality, and a defense minister who would stop at nothing and who misled the nation and the government into believing that the "Peace for Galilee campaign" would stop 40 kilometers into Lebanon after clearing Palestinian terrorists out of the border area.