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28 October 1982Talking Points: Israel and Lebanon

The goodwill and support Israel benefited from last summer among key Lebanese constituencies is rapidly disappearing. Those Lebanese who welcomed the Israelis as liberators from the PLO have soured on Tel Aviv. As so often in their past, the Lebanese have rapidly lost their enthusiasm for a foreign "liberating" army.

The Maronites -- who welcomed Syria in June 1976 and were fighting with Damascus by 1977 -- were the most eager to welcome Israel. Increasingly, however, influential Maronites realize that close ties with Israel mean economic suicide for Beirut. Intimacy with Israel inherently means isolation from the Arab money and markets that are the essence of Lebanese prosperity. Syria is critical to the Beirut economy since it controls all land communication with the Arab world. It is no accident, therefore, that Amin Jumayyil is planning a trip to Syria, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries soon while he has ruled out any direct contact with Israeli leaders.

-- Israeli journalists are speculating openly that Amin has turned his back permanently on Tel Aviv.

-- Only a portion of the Phalange militia retains unqualified enthusiasm for the Israelis.

The Shia -- Lebanon's largest sect but traditionally the least influential -- reportedly are increasingly disenchanted with the Israeli occupation of their southern strongholds. They resent Israeli economic penetration of the area and have clashed with several pro-Israeli local leaders. As memories of the PLO presence fade, Embassy Beirut reports day-to-day irritants turn the Shia against Begin.

The Druze are traditionally divided between two clans. The smaller Arslani support Tel Aviv but probably are losing ground to the Junblattis in the wake of several Maronite-Druze clashes.

These groups and the Sunni Muslims (never very pro-Israeli) now look to the US as their protector. All Lebanese increasingly see the US as the arbiter of their fate -- exaggerating our influence and commitment just as they did Israel's and before that Syria's.

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