

# The Invasion of Lebanon: A Disaster for Israeli Policy

By Wolf Ehrlich

*In April of 1985 Tom Morris, assistant editor of the Canadian Tribune, interviewed Wolf Ehrlich, Chairman of the Control Commission of the Communist Party of Israel, who was in Canada to attend the 26th Convention of the Canadian Communist Party. Wolf Ehrlich was our honored guest at the 11th Annual Jewish Affairs Dinner. The interview was first published in the April 22, 1985 issue of the Canadian Tribune.*

Q: Is the call by the Israeli public for a withdrawal of its troops from Lebanon mainly an expression of the cost of the war in lives and money, or does it reflect a growing realization of the political and moral illegality of the invasion?

A: First, it's true there is a shift in public opinion. Many people favor immediate withdrawal. But it doesn't mean they all favor putting an end to intervention in Lebanon's internal affairs or respecting its sovereignty. But at least they want the troops out. This is mainly due to the rising numbers of Israeli soldiers killed and maimed.

Israelis in general, including working people, are not yet internationalist in the sense that Lebanese or Palestinian victims are important. What is important is the safety of their own fathers and sons. And we must see this limitation.

But even in this limited way, the protests are having their impact, they are rising. There are one, two, five, twenty each month with an impact not only on soldier's families, but also on the public in general.

It's not mainly a moral or political issue, but a general feeling that the government's war aims have not been fulfilled, a feeling that the whole thing is futile and nothing was achieved; that it was a fruitless adventure.

On the economic side, the results are different. Of course, people feel that the economic picture is bad, that unemployment is rising. But unlike Canada, the U.S. or Europe, a big majority of Israeli workers are employed in military-related jobs, and their jobs depend on the country's military spending.

Wages have dropped by 10% over the past six months, and prices, especially on items such as bread, rice, flour, margarine (the basic foodstuffs), have

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soared. People feel something is happening, but as yet the majority do not connect it with the war.

For example, we succeeded in having one slogan accepted. We said: "Divert money from settlements in occupied territories to the slum quarters." This idea was simple and was accepted. But to convince the people that the entire aggression policy is a costly affair is a long-term struggle.

Q: The government publicly warned that, following eventual withdrawal, it will repeat its action unless its border is "secure". How can there then be peace?

A: That's true, it said that. It follows from Zionist ideological indoctrination. They only see themselves; they see everything through their own spectacles. They cannot see that one or two rockets landing on an Israeli settlement cannot be compared to the massive suffering of the Lebanese people. They see only their side, and therefore make such threats. Rabin borrows the "scorched earth" lexicon of the Nazis — and in fact is doing it already. But he is threatening to carry out a fundamental scorched earth operation should anything happen on the border in the future.

Q: The settlements issue is a key one, not only because they establish permanent Israeli presence on Arab lands, but also because Israel appears willing to pursue its settlements policy despite even Reagan's public opposition to it.

A: First, Israel doesn't think Reagan will press too hard. Second, it's part of their ideology — not only the right wing's, but also to a large degree that of the right social democratic Labour leaders. The extreme right wants all of Palestine, the others want almost all of it.

And so the settlements continue, but with two limitations. One is the lack of manpower, because not many want to live in military outposts disguised as living quarters. The government offers financial incentives to attract people to these settlements. The second limitation is the disarray of Israel's budget, which makes it difficult to provide the needed funds for settlements. Construction of them is slowing down, but at least they feel they are "showing the flag" and making a *fait accompli*.

Q: Could you outline the Israeli Communist Party proposals for a just and lasting peace in the region?

A: That's the most difficult question. The Palestinian people, their revolution and their leadership, the Palestine Liberation Organization, have been depicted in the eyes of the Israeli people as terrorists. They have been dehumanized by such comments as that of former Prime Minister Begin as "animals on two legs" which may be treated in any manner — people devoid of all

rights.

Not only the country's leadership, but a large section of the Israeli people, is not yet ready to sit together with the Palestinians, recognize the rights of the PLO, and will do all possible to remain in the whole of Palestine.

Here we have a serious uphill struggle to convince our people that it is not only a matter of solidarity, of the tragedy of another people, but that their own interests require coming to an understanding with the Palestinian people — there is no other way. That means recognizing the Palestinian right to self-determination and to their independent state. This means Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territory occupied since 1967.

The time is past when Golda Meir could say, "There is no Palestinian question." Everyone knows there is a problem, but they are not yet ready to solve the problem.

Q: Do not, then, the Israeli people face a contradiction: the longer the occupation lasts, the greater will be the Palestinian resistance to it?

A: That is correct. It has been proven that the Israeli government, with all its power has not been able to find prominent quislings among the Palestinians. And even those whom the press calls "moderates" cannot detach themselves from the national aspirations of the masses. This shows, that despite all difficulties, the Palestinian people are united in their determination to end Israeli occupation.

Q: Did last election's result show the public's wish to end Begin's hard line? A: To some extent. Some felt that with an alignment of the Labor bloc, it might be easier to solve problems. But most people do not see, that in basic political questions, there is no big difference between the two main blocs.

The fact that a so-called national unity government could be put together after the election shows they can sit together around a common platform and enact similar policies.

People expect the government to solve economic questions. But it is not trying and cannot succeed in solving the crisis — the structural or cyclical crisis facing the nation. But they have succeeded in lowering the working people's living standards. The right-wing Begin government could not do that while the Labor alignment was in opposition — but together they now can, under the leadership of a social democrat like Peres.

Q: Would it be fair to characterize the results of the three-year Lebanon invasion as not only having rad-

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ically altered domestic Lebanese politics, but also making Israel's northern border less "secure" than before?

A: You know, the Israel-Lebanon border, for a full year before Israel's attack, was peaceful. There existed an unwritten agreement between Israel and the PLO that there would be no attacks, and both sides kept to this agreement. This shows that it could be done.

This has now changed. A large part of the Lebanese people who were neutral towards Israel, some even friendly towards the Israeli army, are today very hostile. This change is to the detriment of official Israeli policy and it can not be overestimated.

After the tragedies suffered, the Lebanese people are now trying to get back on their feet, and to overcome extreme hardships. This will take time. The invasion was a disaster for Israeli policy.

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