

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

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Lebanon

The South Lebanon Army (SLA) and child recruitment Putting the pressure on whom?

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A civil war with foreign protagonists

The Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, after years of tensions between national confessional groups,¹ mainly Maronite Christians, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and Druze. Each of the groups had built up their own power bases and militias outside the weak central state and the arrival of further Sunnis, in the form of Palestinian refugees in 1948 and 1970, only served to exacerbate this uneasy balance.² Only a few serious incidents were needed to trigger a full-scale civil war.

The early part of the conflict mainly involved Maronite Christian militias against Sunni and Druze militias and their Palestinian allies in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). By 1976, government control had deteriorated to the extent that the Christian President, Suleiman Franjeh, asked Lebanon's larger neighbour, Syria, to intervene. Syria responded with a major offensive and the dispatch of troops around most of northern and central Lebanon. However, while Syrian intervention brought some initial stability, it also served to regionalize the conflict, notably in the south, where Israel began to take a far greater interest in Lebanese affairs. In 1978, Israel launched Operation Litani, its first major military offensive in Lebanon, in an effort to drive Palestinian militants back from the border and keep Syrian influence at bay.

The international response to Israel's intervention came in the form of UN Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426 (1978), which established the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to take control of the border area on behalf of the

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¹ "The main element of heterogeneity of Lebanese society is its subdivision among confessional groups, six of which are of major importance. Three are Muslim (Sunnis, Shi'ites and Druze); three are Christian (Maronites, Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics). These groups constitute sets of kinship, religious and communal loyalties to which one belongs by virtue of birth." Simon Haddad, *The Palestinian Impasse in Lebanon: The Politics of Refugee Integration*, London: Sussex Academic Press, 2003, <http://www.sussex-academic.co.uk/PDFs/Haddadp1-11.pdf>.

² UN Department of Public Information (DPI), *The Question of Palestine & the United Nations*, Chapter 4, "Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon", DPI/2276, March 2003, <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpi/palestine/ch4.pdf>.

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Lebanese government and oversee an Israeli withdrawal.³ However, Israel handed over control of the area to its own proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), which was made up of units of the former Lebanese national army and local recruits from Christian and Shi'a villages in South Lebanon. This prevented UNIFIL from fulfilling its remit.⁴

In the south of the country, Israel's continued occupation aroused greater activism from the majority Shi'a community. Israel pulled back some of its forces in 1985, although it continued to occupy a "security zone" in the south, with the support of the SLA. The conflict continued until 1989-1990, when a Saudi-backed initiative gained the support of nearly all sides, setting in place a new formula for Lebanon's government. All war-time militias were disbanded, with the exception of Hizbullah in the south and the SLA. Israel's inability to either secure the border or defeat its opponents eventually led to its withdrawal in 2000. At this time, the SLA collapsed: around 1,600 SLA personnel gave themselves up to the Lebanese authorities, while another 6,000 or more (including their families) sought refuge in Israel.⁵ After the Israeli withdrawal, Hizbullah remained the sole militant group from the civil war era still allowed by the Lebanese government to bear arms, on the premise that it was acting as a national resistance group against Israel. Under continued international pressure, Syria withdrew all of its military forces from Lebanon in 2005.

A militia to defend "the national character of Lebanon", at the service of Israel

The South Lebanon Army militia emerged out of a battalion of the former Lebanese army, after the dissolution of the national army along confessional lines in 1976. It was first known as the "Free Lebanon" militia, before it was renamed the South Lebanon Army, although the UN referred to it as the de facto forces (DFF) in South Lebanon.

The SLA originated among Lebanese army members drawn from the Christian minority in South Lebanon, particularly around the Marjayoun and Qalaya regions, and it drew its core support base from those areas.⁶ At the start of the conflict, the SLA was almost wholly Christian, although its make-up changed over time, with Shi'a and non-Christians forming around 60 to 70 per cent of the forces by 2000, when the group was disbanded.⁷

The group's principal stated objective was to preserve or defend what it saw as the national character of Lebanon, namely the pre-war character where Christians held the most important positions in a confessional system of government. At the practical level, this translated into extreme hostility to all outsiders in Lebanon, notably Palestinian militants and refugees, but also Syrian troops, both also enemies of Israel; hence, the establishment of links and coordination with Israel. This

³ UN Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426, 19 March 1978, <http://www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1978/scres78.htm>.

⁴ UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), "Background", <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unifil/background.html>.

⁵ Nicholas Blanford, "New Reality for Lebanon", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 31 May 2000.

⁶ Nicholas Blanford, "The quandary of an SLA amnesty", *The Daily Star*, 16 August 2005.

⁷ Coalition interviews with former SLA members, February 2006.

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relationship strengthened over time to the extent that the SLA was almost entirely reliant on Israel for logistical, military and financial support from the late 1970s. This dependence also meant that the SLA was directly drawn into carrying out Israel's objectives in South Lebanon, including the maintenance of a buffer region on the border and later a "security zone" to prevent attacks on Israel by Palestinian militants and (after their expulsion) by Hizbullah.⁸

At a more basic level, the SLA also acted as a civil protection force for the Christian minority and affiliated Druze and Shi'a villages in South Lebanon, who had been caught up in the cross-fire and were occasionally targeted by Palestinian and later Hizbullah forces.

The SLA had around 3,000 fighters at its peak, although numbers rose and fell throughout the conflict, depending on funds and morale. It was initially led by Major Sa'ad Haddad, commander of the Lebanese Army border unit, based in Marjayoun. After his death in 1984, he was replaced by retired General Antoine Lahd. Both men worked in close coordination with Israeli forces. Indeed, the first head of UNIFIL, Ghana's Lieutenant-General Emmanuel Erskine, noted that "hardly anyone ever met [Major] Haddad formally without ... Israeli liaison officers being present".⁹

From a guerrilla group to an organized army

In the early years of the civil war, the organization's command structure was extremely loose, made up of former army personnel and their cohorts operating in their own home towns or villages.¹⁰ Over time, Israeli financial and logistical support provided it with the resources necessary to reconstitute itself over a broader region of South Lebanon, supported by the Israeli invasion of 1978. More sustained Israeli support in the early 1980s paved the way for the emergence of a professional fighting force, both in terms of equipment and conduct. SLA fighters were given three months' training at an academy in Marjayoun and were given formal ranks and staff numbers. Further specialist and officer training took place in Israel.¹¹ According to one former senior official, there was total supervision by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). "The IDF always had an officer in every base – we were directly responsible to the IDF. We couldn't do anything without asking them."¹²

This level of investment reflected Israel's desire to withdraw some of its own frontline troops from Lebanon, which it did in 1985, and leave behind an effective friendly force to defend its interests. After this point, Israel continued to keep between 1,000 and 3,000 of its own troops in Lebanon, working alongside the SLA, although the SLA bore the brunt of frontline duties and casualties.¹³ In 1998, the Israeli

⁸ Gal Luft, "Israel's Security Zone in Lebanon - A Tragedy?", *Middle East Quarterly*, September 2000, <http://www.meforum.org/meg>.

⁹ E.A. Erskine, *Mission with UNIFIL: An African Soldier's Reflections*, London: Hurst, 1989, p. 67.

¹⁰ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training, Israel, February 2006.

¹¹ Coalition interview with former SLA fighter, Israel, February 2006.

¹² Coalition interview with former head of SLA training, Israel, February 2006.

¹³ Raschka, Marilyn, "A Bit Like Bosnia: UN Peacekeepers in South Lebanon", *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, October/November 1995, <http://www.washington-report.org/html/94-95.html>.

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Ministerial Committee for National Security announced that Israel would abide by UN Security Council Resolution 425 and “restore [Lebanon's] effective control over territories currently under IDF control”, thus admitting that the IDF had been the main authority in the occupied areas.¹⁴

Using their own children in war

The South Lebanon Army was responsible for using under-18s in combat and support roles at various points during the civil war. In the late 1970s, children from around the age of 14 were enlisted, with the only requirement being that they were strong enough to “bear arms”.¹⁵ At this stage, there were between 150 to 200 minors in a force of around 1,500.¹⁶ In addition, boys and girls as young as 13 ferried equipment, food and messages to SLA frontline positions, mostly close to populated areas.¹⁷ Children were generally treated in the same way as adult recruits and they were often related to adult SLA members.¹⁸

As a general rule, the SLA increased its efforts to recruit children in times when it was difficult to recruit and retain adults. This generally corresponded to the financial resources available to the organization and to prevailing morale and was closely related to its operational success in the field.¹⁹ The SLA was not only responsible for the forcible recruitment of children during these periods, but also for other serious human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law such as the bombing of populated areas, extrajudicial killings, illegal detentions and the systematic use of torture.²⁰

Observers state that membership of the SLA was more popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s when it was focused on combating Palestinian militants in the area. Later, desertions increased and SLA members called a strike over delayed payments.²¹ However, belonging to the group brought many benefits to members and their relatives, including having access to jobs and healthcare in Israel. SLA membership offered a source of income in an isolated area where wages were rare: by 2000, some members received up to US\$ 600 per month.²²

Former SLA members state that in the early stages of the civil war, child recruitment was seen as a necessity, given limited manpower and the sense that

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Persona Non Grata: The Expulsion of Civilians from Israeli-Occupied Lebanon*, New York, 1999, Chapter 3, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/lebanon>.

¹⁵ Coalition interview with former SLA trainer, Israel, February 2006.

¹⁶ Coalition interview with former SLA trainer, Israel, February 2006.

¹⁷ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training, Israel, February 2006.

¹⁸ Coalition interviews with former SLA members, Israel, February 2006.

¹⁹ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training in Lebanon, Israel, February 2006.

²⁰ See, for example, UN Commission on Human Rights, 49th session, Resolution 1993/67, Situation of human rights in southern Lebanon, UN Doc. E/CN.4/RES/1993/67, 10 March 1993, <http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/mainec.aspx>.

²¹ E.A. Erskine, *Mission with UNIFIL*, op. cit., pp.133-4.

²² Report by the Association for Rural Development, Regional socio-economic development program for south Lebanon, 2000, see http://www.adr.org.lb/ENG/accueil_an.htm.

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communities were under siege from Palestinian militants and fighting for their very survival.²³

When Israel provided the SLA with the funds, support and resources to become a more professional fighting force in the mid-1980s, a more formal system of recruitment came into place. This included adopting a more selective approach to adult recruits and the enforcement of age restrictions on enlistment, in line with Israeli regulations.²⁴ The recruitment of under-18s was reduced as a result, although a few 15 and 16 year olds were recruited.²⁵

However, after the Taif peace agreement of the 1990s, the SLA again turned to the systematic forcible recruitment of children from the age of 15,²⁶ and in some cases even as young as 12.²⁷ In the 1990s, feeling increasingly isolated and threatened by rising Syrian influence and actions by Hizbullah in South Lebanon, the SLA returned to forcible recruitment of adults and children to maintain troop numbers, as it had done in the late 1970s.²⁸

Parents were sometimes able to make payments to avoid the conscription of their children, or sent their offspring outside SLA areas or overseas to avoid enlistment. However, this happened on an individual level and the communities were not involved in protecting the children from enforced recruitment.²⁹ Some children also wanted to join the group as a means of supporting their families in the absence of economic alternatives in an isolated area.³⁰

The use of children in combat roles in the early stages of the war seems to have been more a case of “all hands on deck” rather than a systematic policy by the SLA. In addition, the location of SLA bases in populated areas encouraged the use of children (and other family members) in logistical support roles until 1984, when SLA bases were relocated further away from civilian areas.³¹ Later in the war, under-18s were the only expanding group in a limited population base of fewer than 100,000 people. This may have provided a demographic logic for targeting younger children, particularly as the civilian population was eroded through successive waves of migration out of the SLA area.

²³ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training in Lebanon, Israel, February 2006.

²⁴ Coalition interviews with former SLA members, Israel, February 2006.

²⁵ Coalition interview with former SLA trainer recruited as a minor, Israel, February 2006.

²⁶ Third periodic report of Lebanon to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), UN Doc. CRC/C/129/Add.7, 25 October 2005, [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/f41bd308098869ecc12570fb0034dfc7](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/f41bd308098869ecc12570fb0034dfc7).

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Persona Non Grata*, op. cit. p. 35.

²⁸ Coalition interview with former SLA trainer, Israel, February 2006; see also E.A. Erskine, *Mission with UNIFIL*, op. cit., pp.133-4.

²⁹ Second periodic report of Lebanon to the CRC, UN Doc CRC/C/70/Add.8, 26 September 2000, [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/d11949f24a039688c1256ace00329028](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/d11949f24a039688c1256ace00329028).

³⁰ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training, Israel, February 2006.

³¹ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training, Israel, February 2006.

An official child recruitment policy drawn from Israeli regulations

Former SLA members state that the group was bound by Lebanese army regulations and Lebanese law, which restricted recruitment to those over 17 years of age. Between 1984 and 1986, when Israel's direct influence over the SLA grew, the group abided by the regulations of the IDF, which viewed 17 as the minimum age of recruitment.³²

However, monitoring and implementation of the law seems to have been left to individual commanders, given that the institutions of the Lebanese state, such as the judicial system and the police force, were weak or non-existent, operating mainly in a state of war.³³ In areas where the Israeli forces had no specific interest and therefore no direct control, the SLA appeared to have been "self-regulating", modifying its own guidelines to fit the situation, although former SLA members have been reluctant to agree on this point.³⁴

Given its dependence on Israel for funding and equipment, the SLA proved far more responsive to Israeli policies on recruitment than to the desires of the local communities. When Israel demanded (and financed) a more professional fighting force in the mid-1980s, the SLA modified its practices. In the words of one former child soldier recruited in the early 1980s, "They [the Israelis] didn't want children".³⁵ This may have been a pragmatic consideration on the part of the SLA, rather than a moral position, since some children were able to remain with the group while others left the organization.³⁶

Trying to influence the SLA on child recruitment

The SLA had very limited dealings with international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in particular with UNIFIL forces, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Caritas.³⁷ Israel blocked ICRC access to prisons under SLA control for ten years between 1985 and 1995, although the ICRC was allowed some sporadic access afterwards.³⁸ This illustrates the difficult operating conditions for foreign humanitarian agencies working in Lebanon and the hostility of the key actors in the region, Israel and Hizbullah, to outside intervention.³⁹

The ICRC made continued efforts to ensure the implementation of the Geneva Conventions in South Lebanon. It approached both Israel and the SLA regarding alleged failures to "respect international humanitarian law on the part of the

³² Coalition interview with former head of SLA training, Israel, February 2006.

³³ Coalition interview with former SLA trainer, Israel, February 2006.

³⁴ Coalition interviews with former SLA members, Israel, February 2006.

³⁵ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training in Lebanon, Israel, February 2006

³⁶ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training in Lebanon, Israel, February 2006.

³⁷ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training in Lebanon, Israel, April 2005.

³⁸ B'Tselem, *Israeli Violations of Human Rights of Lebanese Civilians*, January 2000, <http://www.btselem.org/English/index.asp>.

³⁹ Coalition interviews, 2005 and 2006.

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IDF and the SLA”,⁴⁰ including the SLA’s recruitment of children. A former SLA officer told the Child Soldiers Coalition in 2006 that this message had been referred to senior commanders.⁴¹ The ICRC also worked to deter recruitment drives in SLA-controlled areas, including the detention and torture of children who had been accused of desertion or opposition to SLA or Israeli forces.

Pressure over child recruitment made senior SLA officers aware that this was an issue of grave concern for the international community. However, the SLA felt throughout the conflict that it had been “betrayed” by the international community and that it had no obligations to anyone except to some members of the Lebanese Christian leadership in Beirut and to Israel.⁴² Without Israel’s support, there was little chance for the ICRC to successfully engage the SLA over the issue of child recruitment.

On other humanitarian issues, the ICRC only had some limited impact on SLA policy when Israel was onside.⁴³ The ICRC’s ongoing pressure on the systematic torture and ill-treatment of prisoners, including children, at the al-Khiyam prison, right up to when SLA guards abandoned the facility in 2000,⁴⁴ shows the resilience of the group to outside pressure. Former SLA members have stated that the group was practically subordinated to Israel’s position on human rights: “If the IDF broke human rights, so did the SLA”.⁴⁵

Human Rights Watch also highlighted child recruitment as a major concern in its reports on South Lebanon. In the mid-1990s, Human Rights Watch had focused on children as victims of attacks by the SLA and Israeli forces, campaigning for all sides to respect the protected status of civilians. In its 1999 report it highlighted the recruitment of children as one of the factors behind the expulsions and flight of civilians from South Lebanon.⁴⁶ It recommended that Israel as the de facto power in South Lebanon investigate the forced conscription of Lebanese adults and children by the SLA, and bring the practice to an immediate halt. It reiterated these recommendations in an open letter to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in November 1999.⁴⁷ Ahead of the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, Human Rights Watch prepared a briefing document for journalists on the human rights dimensions of the Lebanon occupation, including forcible child recruitment.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Annual Report, 30 May 2005, <http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/iwpList140/B823511615EC1750C1256B66005900E8>.

⁴¹ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training in Lebanon, Israel, February 2006.

⁴² Coalition interviews with former SLA members, Israel, February 2006.

⁴³ Former Khiyam inmate, Souha Bechara, quoted by Alexander G. Higgins, “Red Cross, feeling the pressure to go public, convinced its quiet approach is best”, Associated Press, 11 May 2004.

⁴⁴ Second periodic report of Lebanon to the CRC, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Coalition interview with former head of SLA training, Israel, February 2006.

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Persona Non Grata*, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Letter from Hanny Megally, Executive Director, Middle East and North Africa Division, Human Rights Watch to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, 5 November 1999, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/1999/11/05/isrlpa1957.htm>.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Israel’s Withdrawal from South Lebanon: The human rights dimensions*, May 2000, <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/lebanon/israel051000.htm>.

However, international NGOs focused their attention on the issue of child recruitment by the SLA at a relatively late stage in the conflict, when Israel was close to withdrawing its troops from the area and when the SLA itself was in disarray. Moreover, the advocacy efforts of Human Rights Watch were on wider abuses by the SLA, including forced expulsion. By not focusing on child recruitment in itself, it limited the impact of its campaign on this issue in Lebanon. The documentation of abuses by the SLA, however, was used effectively to advocate for the drafting and adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the subsequent work by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

Stopping child recruitment and use – actions and missed opportunities

During the civil war era, there was only a limited focus on the SLA's child recruitment by the international human rights and humanitarian community. Perhaps the most important reason for this was the scale of human rights abuses committed by all parties to the conflict which dominated the attention of international organizations and demanded all available resources. Such abuses by the SLA and Israel included shelling and attacks against civilians and failure to abide by UN Security Council Resolutions, as well as attacks on UN forces in the area.⁴⁹

However, the failure of key political powers at that time to take effective action against serious human rights violations or hold Israel to account meant that the international humanitarian community had very little impact on events in the SLA areas. Reports of the UN Commission on Human Rights often stated that “no [Israeli] reply had been received at the time of the preparation of the present report”. Meanwhile, UN forces on the ground “faced the dilemma of being caught in the middle of fighting without the authority or the means to force Israel to withdraw and to disarm the SLA”.⁵⁰ Given that state of affairs, child recruitment seemed to have been fairly low down the list of priorities.

Another factor undermining efforts to stop child recruitment was limited external access to South Lebanon by governmental and non-governmental organizations, as a result of both Israel's and Hizbullah's opposition to foreign involvement. Also, the conflict took place at a time when child rights in general and child recruitment in particular had not yet been given a more prominent place on the international human rights agenda.

Given the particular situation in South Lebanon, international NGOs missed an opportunity to campaign and take action against child recruitment. This could have been achieved by putting pressure on Israel as the occupying power in the region, rather than on the SLA, and appealing to Israeli public opinion on this and other issues of abuse in Lebanon. As it was, the Israeli public had little interest in reported cases of human rights violations in Lebanon and tended to regard these issues as “up to the Lebanese who had their own standards in battle”, according to one observer.⁵¹ However, by 2000, one Israeli human rights group, B'Tselem, had

⁴⁹ For example, Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, 2001, p. 138 and E.A. Erskine, *Mission with UNIFIL*, op. cit., p. 87.

⁵⁰ Questions and Answers with UNIFIL Information and Press Officer, Dalgeet Bagga, 1998, see <http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/peacekeeping/bagga.html>.

⁵¹ Coalition interview with Amos Harel, *Haaretz* Defence Correspondent, February 2006.

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started to investigate cases of abuse of detainees and other human rights violations by Israeli armed forces. This had come too late for child soldiers within the SLA, given the decision to withdraw from South Lebanon later that year.

While the SLA was most responsive to Israeli pressure, they also had allegiances within Lebanon which could have been called on to limit abuses. The Greek Catholic and Maronite churches remained an important influence on the SLA leadership and approaches to the SLA through their leaders might have had an impact on the group's thinking on child recruitment.⁵² However, some leaders may have been reluctant to take part in such approaches, given the role of some clergy in exacerbating sectarian tensions rather than helping end the war.

Further points for discussion

- The SLA counted on the support of the Israeli government and armed forces and only modified some of its policies when the Israeli government reacted to external and internal pressure. It remains to be seen how effective pressure can be applied on third parties/governments that support armed opposition groups in another country in order to make these groups stop recruiting children and committing other human rights abuses.
- According to former SLA commanders, the use of children was unavoidable when whole populations had to be mobilized for their own protection. Others argue, however, that there should never be a situation that could justify the use of children in conflict.
- The SLA, like many other armed opposition groups, had a very strong religious component, as the vast majority of its leaders were Maronite Christians. Religious leaders could have played a very important role in persuading the SLA to stop child recruitment and religious/inter-confessional arguments could have been employed against their use.

⁵² Coalition interviews with former SLA members, February 2006.