

Israel's security ■ By Margarita Mathiopoulos

A dose of reality

I was in Israel shortly after the end of the invasion of Lebanon, and was struck by the attitude of many active and former senior security officials I spoke to.

Many felt that the operation was too large and too lengthy, and some blamed the United States for this. More strikingly, many of the senior officers argued that the operation was proof that Israel must go all out to reach a peace agreement with the Arabs.

As one serving military officer bluntly told me: "We have to sit down and speak with Hamas, with Hezbollah, with the Syrians, with the Iranian, even with the devil himself, if we believe that there are solutions to be found to our problems with the Arabs."

It was an intriguing and unexpected point of view; the security establishment appeared to be taking a more radical position than the politicians.

Among the former military and security officials who took this position were the Labor politician Ami Ayalon, a former admiral and former head of the Shin Bet secret service; Avishai Brothman, president of Ben Gurion University; Matan Vilnai, a retired general and Labor Party legislator, and even Avi Dichter, a hawkish Kadima member of the Knesset who has served as a minister in Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Cabinet.

For these officials, the invasion of Lebanon and the ongoing operations in Gaza demonstrated once again that there are no easy or inexpensive military solutions to Israel's security problems.

The military leaders I spoke with said the first step should be for Olmert to revive his plan to dismantle Israel's West Bank settlements and then open negotiations with the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, on final borders between Israel and a new Palestinian state.

They acknowledged that Hamas was not likely to unequivocally recognize Israel's right to exist. But from their point of view, Israel's legitimacy and viability as a state do not rest on some grudging and insincere recognition extracted from its neighbors, but on its own military and economic power.

In any case, they said that once borders were agreed on, it would become the Palestinian government's responsibility to police them. If any Palestinian government failed in this duty, Israel would have every right to retaliate.

I found it striking how sympathetic many of those I spoke with were toward the Palestinians. They recognized that

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after nearly 60 years of conflict, most Palestinians long for a normal state that can supply a functioning electrical grid and running water.

Nehemia Dagan, a retired Air Force general, argued further that it was time for Israel to return the Golan Heights to Syria. The military's preference would be for the Heights to be ceded back to Syria but still controlled by Israel on a long-term lease. If nationalistic sentiments in Syria made such an arrangement impossible, then it should still be possible to negotiate the area's demilitarization, Dagan said.

A renewed Arab-Israeli peace process may also represent the only remaining opportunity for President George W. Bush to have a concrete and positive impact on the dynamics of this critical region. But to do this, I believe the administration needs to regain at

least some credibility with Arab governments and people.

If Hamas and Hezbollah are to be reduced in stature, if Syrian posturing and Iranian troublemaking are to be curtailed and one of their major propaganda tools removed from the hands of terrorist recruiters, Bush and his administration have to embrace, as many Israelis have already done, that conditions for a peace process are never going to be perfect. The negotiators on all sides have to do the best possible job with the situation in which they all find themselves.

Many of the officials I spoke to expressed frustration with the American role in the latest clash. Dagan told me that Israel could and should have achieved its military objectives against Hezbollah in a week, and that this would have been perceived by the world as a clear response to a deliberate Hezbollah provocation.

A number of senior military officers, both serving and retired, expressed the view that the prime minister, defense minister and chief of staff gave in to pressure from Washington to continue the war. In their view, this U.S. encouragement prolonged the conflict in ways that served no immediate Israeli interest and meant that Israel ended up acting as a proxy in the Bush administration's face-off with Iran and Syria.

Does Olmert have the strength and courage now to move on and pursue the path to peace? And, in what is perhaps the most critical part of this complicated equation, does Bush have the vision to throw sustained support behind a new peace initiative?

In the view of the Israelis I spoke with, it's time to find out.

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