9 Perceptions: The Key to Understanding the Alliance

The Israeli–Maronite minority-alliance was created in response to early Zionist and Maronite perceptions of each other and their own place in the Middle East. These perceptions existed on two levels. The first was the image the Maronites and the Israelis had of themselves, their strengths, weaknesses and their role as a minority surrounded by Arabs. The second was how the Maronites and Israelis perceived each other. These two levels, however, were not self-contained. Rather, self-image influenced the decision to enter into a relationship with the other as much as it influenced the other’s decision to enter into an alliance. In other words, how the Maronites perceived themselves was central to Maronite decisions and how the Maronites portrayed themselves to Israel, based on their self-perception, was central to Israeli decision-making. The same applied for Israel’s self-perception.

Thus, it is important to look at the mutual perceptions and self-perceptions to understand the currents underlying the whole Israeli–Maronite relationship from the 1920s to 1984. The central questions which will be discussed are how Israel saw its role and its strength with regard to Lebanon, how Israel perceived Lebanon, and finally how Israel perceived the Maronites and the alliance. Along similar lines, what was the Maronites’ image of Lebanon and the Christian position in Lebanon, and how did they perceive Israel and the alliance?

ISRAELI SELF-PERCEPTION

Israeli decision-makers saw Israel, on the one hand, as a beleaguered state surrounded by hostile Arab countries and, on the other hand, they saw Israel as a militarily strong force within the Middle East. Thus, Israel not only had to preserve its own identity and future as the ‘isolated nation’ image would suggest but it also took on the voluntary role of protecting other Middle Eastern minorities. Israel’s strength, bordering almost on regional superpower status, would enable Israel to fulfil this protective role. However, this military superiority also led to a belief of invincibility.

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These self-perceptions played a vital role in Israeli decision-making. Yet, each decision-maker focused on different facets of Israel's image as a basis for his individual decision. This can be seen by looking at the two most prominent, and in a sense most extreme views. Prime Minister Begin’s decision to enter into full alliance with the Maronites was heavily influenced by his ‘moral’ view of Israel. Israel was isolated but so were the Maronites. Israel, being the stronger force and having a history of persecution and genocide, had an obligation to prevent a repetition of such history with regards to the Maronites. Indeed, Israel would prove its moral superiority by saving the Maronites while all other Western nations were turning a blind eye. Israel, as a ‘moral’ nation, would restore Lebanon to its rightful Christian status. And it had the power to do so.

Defense Minister Sharon’s decision to enter into full alliance with the Maronites was based on a different part of Israeli self-perception. He focused on Israel’s strength and invincibility. Israel was self-sufficient and had the power to change a situation it did not like by force. Israel, as the stronger partner, would create a Christian Lebanon, which in turn would serve as a stepping stone to recreate the Middle East in Sharon’s image. The IDF would serve as the vehicle for this transformation, relying on its heroic soldiers and unadulterated military power.

Others involved in the decision-making process fell in between these two views, often combining them. All, however, were convinced or had convinced themselves, that the 1982 operation was feasible and the alliance secure because of Israeli self-perceived strength.

THE ISRAELI PERCEPTION OF LEBANON

The Israeli idea of Lebanon was central to six decades of decision-making with regards to its northern neighbour. From the 1920s onwards Lebanon was never perceived as hostile or as an enemy country. Indeed, the underlying feeling towards Lebanon was that it was Israel’s friend, sometimes more and sometimes less secretly. During the time of the Yishuv, many Lebanese openly dealt with Israel. Agreements were made and many Lebanese supported the creation of a Jewish state. This experience of Lebanese, but mainly Maronite support, gave credence to the image of a ‘friendly Lebanon’ which prevailed until the 1980s.