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Secret Negotiations between Israel and Lebanon's Prime Minister Riad al-Sulh

Mahmoud Muhareb

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Introduction

Israel conducted top-secret negotiations with Lebanon's Prime Minister Riad al-Sulh in Paris between mid-November and mid-December in 1948. While these talks were ongoing, Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion made a decision to assassinate al-Sulh sometime between December 9 and 12, 1948. Since receiving the order to assassinate the Lebanese Prime Minister on December 12, 1948, two groups of Israeli Jews, posing as local Arabs in Beirut, tried to carry out the order, but were unsuccessful; on February 22, 1949, they received a new command cancelling the assassination.

It should be pointed out that Israel's decision to assassinate al-Sulh during a specific period, which is the topic of this study, bears no relation to the eventual assassination of Riad al-Sulh at the hands of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) during his visit to Jordan on July 16, 1951; his assassination was in retaliation for his role in the execution of Antoine Saadeh, founder and leader of the SSNP.

This study aims at monitoring and analyzing the secret negotiations conducted between Israel and Riad al-Sulh in the aforementioned period, followed by an examination of Israel's dangerous decision to assassinate the then prime minister of Lebanon and the decision's background, which relates closely to Ben-Gurion's Lebanon policy at the time, especially his attempt to maintain control over the Southern Lebanese region that was occupied by Israel at the time – prior to its official annexation.

In addition to historical works and memoirs that dealt with that period, this study relies on primary sources in the form of reports written by high officials in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs who participated in the secret negotiations with Riad al-Sulh. These documents, which were classified as top secret, are currently stored at the "State Archives" in Israel. We will draw especially from the reports of Eliyahu Sasson* and Tofeh Arazi, as well as others who were involved in the negotiations.

These documents were made off-limits to the scholarly community until many decades had passed, and provide us with an opportunity to examine the details of the negotiations between Israeli officials and Riad al-Sulh, thus allowing us to delve into the mentality and intentions of the Israeli leaders who conducted these talks and carried out negotiations.

* Sasson was born in Damascus in 1902, and in 1920 he left Syria and settled in Palestine. In 1934, he joined the Arab Department of the Jewish Agency's political division, quickly becoming its director (effectively an intelligence agency for spying on Arabs). After Israel's creation, Eliyahu Sasson became the director of the Middle East Department in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs; then, he was a minister in Israeli cabinets throughout the 1960s.

During the period of the British Mandate in Palestine, the political division of the Jewish Agency created an intelligence apparatus whose task was to collect information on Arab countries and build intricate and ramified relations with Arab elites in countries bordering Palestine. This included recruiting agents from their ranks to work for the Jewish Agency.¹ Throughout the period when the mandate was in effect, the vast majority of the political division's meetings with the Arab contacts took place in Arab capitals since, at the time, the borders were open between Palestine and its neighboring countries. Under the request of the Arab elites, these meetings and discussions took place in the utmost secrecy because Arab public opinion at the time considered such meetings, and the politicians who engaged in them, shameful. The Arab public, especially after the Great Palestinian Revolt (1936-1939), began labeling such leaders as connivers and collaborators with Zionism.

After the outbreak of the 1948 War, it became difficult to pursue secret contacts with the Arab elites in most of the neighboring capitals. During the 1948 War, Eliyahu Sasson proposed that the interim government in Israel should establish a base for intelligence and secret diplomatic work in Paris in order to maintain ongoing contacts with members of the Arab elite in the neighboring countries. The interim Israeli government approved Sasson's proposal and allocated a budget for the project.² In early-July 1948, Sasson traveled to Paris with two senior officials of the Foreign Ministry's Middle East Department, Tofeh Arazi and Ziyame Dibon, who were joined shortly thereafter by Salim Bikhor,³ and later – in October 1948 – by Yolanda Harmer.⁴ This core group worked in Paris for over six months, during which time Sasson and his team were capable of reconnecting with their old Arab clients, and holding many secret meetings with diverse elements of the Arab elites, some in power, some not, and others in the opposition.

¹ For more details on the subject, see Mahmoud Muhareb, "Zionist Intelligence: the Beginning on Spying on Arabs", *Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi* (in Arabic), Issue 257, November 2008.

² Shmuel Cohen-Shani, **The Paris Campaign: Intelligence and Secret Diplomacy at the Beginning of the State** (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ramot Publishers, Tel-Aviv University, 1994), pp. 73-75.

³ Shlomo (ne Salim) Bikhor is an Iraqi Jew who joined the intelligence service of the Jewish Agency's political division as soon as he arrived in Palestine when Israel was established. His mission, while in Paris, was to establish contacts with the Iraqi delegation to the United Nations. Many reports on these contacts are in Israel's state archives (HETS File: 13749)

⁴ State Archives, HETS File 70/377; Eliyahu Sasson's message no. 45 from Paris on October 16, 1948. Yolanda Harmer is a Jewish-Egyptian journalist of Greek origin. She worked as a reporter for several foreign publications. Sasson recruited her to work on a salary basis with the Jewish Agency's intelligence service in Cairo in 1945. She used her press credentials and her looks to infiltrate the circles of the Egyptian political elite and many Arab elites in Cairo, especially the main figures in the Arab League. For several years, she was one of the main sources of information for the Jewish Agency in Cairo. She was arrested by the Egyptian authorities months after the outbreak of the 1948 War, but was later released and relocated to Paris in the first ten days of October 1948, continuing her work with Eliyahu Sasson. She immigrated to Israel in 1952.

Secret Meetings with Riad al-Sulh in Paris

On July 24, 1948, upon his arrival in Paris, and in the context of renewing his contacts with Arab elites, Sasson sent a letter⁵ to Riad al-Sulh, Lebanon's prime minister, though it seems al-Sulh did not respond. Despite the claims of Israeli sources that, in the months preceding the war, al-Sulh played a central role in convincing Arab states to send their armies into Palestine, and that, in the previous year, he took an unrelentingly hostile position towards Israel in Lebanese, Arab, and international arenas, Sasson continued seeking contact with al-Sulh. He did so because al-Sulh conducted, according to Israeli documents and sources, many meetings with Jewish Agency representatives during the British Mandate for Palestine.

Al-Sulh arrived in Paris on September 19, 1948 as the head of the Lebanese delegation to the Third Conference of the United Nations' General Assembly, which opened in Paris on September 21, 1948. Al-Sulh was the highest-ranking Arab head of delegation during this session of the General Assembly since he was the only Arab prime minister in attendance. This has allowed him to garner a significant role in formulating and coordinating the position of the Arab delegations on the Arab-Israeli conflict. After the arrival of al-Sulh and his delegation, Sasson took the initiative in contacting several members of the Lebanese delegation in order to explore the possibility of al-Sulh agreeing to a meeting with him, and to prepare for such a meeting. Sasson also sent Yolanda Harmer twice to meet with al-Sulh; eventually, she met with al-Sulh and Zuheir Usairan in mid-October 1948 in the United Nation's hall and spoke to them about various subjects without getting into political details.⁶ It seems that Yolanda Harmer agreed, during that encounter with al-Sulh, whom she had met in Cairo earlier, to schedule a meeting since they met again on October 28, 1948 in al-Sulh's hotel. From her report on the meeting, it appears that al-Sulh informed her that he did receive the letter from Sasson, but that circumstances did not permit him to respond, and that the situation is still unsuitable for him to meet with Sasson anytime soon, though he added that he will provide an answer on the proposed meeting with Sasson after the announcement of the results of the American presidential elections being held during that week.⁷ It goes without saying that Yolanda Harmer's activity was not limited to her new country of residence, for she soon began re-establishing contact with many members of the Arab elite in Cairo. In a report by Sasson, he writes that before departing Cairo for Paris, Harmer agreed with "three officials, and she will be writing them, and they are: Taqi al-Deen al-Sulh from the Arab League General Secretariat, Kareem Thabit Head of the Royal Palace Press and Information Office, and Ali Hasan, a highly placed police officer who is loyal

⁵ State Archives HETS File 70/3771; Eliyahu Sasson's letter to Lebanon's Prime Minister Riad al-Sulh on July 24, 1948 (in French).

⁶ State Archives, HETS File 70/3771; Eliyahu Sasson letter no. 45 from Paris on October 16, 1948.

⁷ State Archives, HETS File 70/3771; Yolanda Harmer's report to Riad al-Sulh, October 29, 1948 (in French).

to the King.” Sasson adds: “Therefore, it falls on me to prepare reports for her,” continuing on to say that “it is possible to include more than news items, but also opinions, positions, and trends as well. What we do not doubt is that the high echelons will be reading these reports, which will help in directing events in our favor.”⁸

Eliyahu Sasson and Tofeh Arazi held six secret meetings with Riad al-Sulh in Paris in the period ranging from mid-November 1948 to mid-December 1948. Most of these encounters took place in the Bristol Hotel where al-Sulh was staying, and were divided into two rounds, each comprising three meetings. The first round was at Sasson’s initiative, with the first meeting taking place on November 15, 1948, the second on November 17, and the third on November 28. The second round related to the status of the Lebanese territory occupied by Israel during Operation Hiram and al-Sulh’s call for Israel to withdraw from it; the fourth meeting took place on December 8, the fifth on December 12, and the sixth, and last, on December 15, 1948.

To understand the significance of these meetings and Sasson’s motives for seeking a reunion with the Lebanese prime minister, we must examine Sasson’s – and Israel’s – objectives behind establishing contacts and communications with various Arab elites during that decisive phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict. From Sasson’s reports on these meetings and communications, we can conclude that Sasson attempted to realize a number of objectives from these meetings and contacts, which can be summarized in the following points:

1. Renewing relations with the Arab elite, whether in power, outside, or in the opposition, and establishing new relations with new individuals and elites with the purpose of obtaining direct information on the strategy of Arab countries and their policies within the Arab-Israeli conflict.
2. Seeking to establish, and then develop, shared interests between Israel and Arab elites, especially governing ones, that contradict with the national rights of the Arab Palestinian people and Arab rights.
3. Re-establishing contacts with clients and agents of the Jewish Agency that were put in place before the outbreak of the 1948 war, and cementing their relations with the nascent Jewish state.
4. Fomenting and deepening differences between Arab countries, and inciting dissent, as well as feeding divisions within Arab societies and deepening them along sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and regional bases to make these differences the dominant factor in Arab-

⁸ State Archives, HETS File 70/3771; Eliyahu Sasson letter no. 47 from Paris on October 16, 1948. For further details on the spread of Zionist ideas and positions in the Arab Press, see Muhareb, Mahmoud, “Zionist articles tucked in Lebanese and Syrian press (1936-1939),” *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Beirut), Issue 78, Spring 2009.

Arab relations, with the intention of weakening Arab cooperation, Arab nationalism, and Arab unity as an idea and a project.

5. Promoting Israeli postures on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and attempting to win over these elites, drawing them to the Israeli side at the expense of Arab and Palestinian rights.

It is noteworthy that, at the time, Eliyahu Sasson stressed, during his meetings with Arab contacts, the importance of accepting the partition plan as a matter of principle, since that would grant legitimacy to Israel's existence. At the same time, however, Sasson was a main advocate of occupying half of the territory of the prospective Arab state – as per the partition plan – which effectively aborted the part of the partition resolution relating to the creation of a Palestinian state next to the Jewish one. He also forcefully defended this “status quo” and Israel's refusal to withdraw from these occupied Palestinian territories and their annexation to Israel – and he attempted to draw the Arab elites to these positions. Sasson also tried to draw Arab elites into bi-lateral negotiations with Israel in the hope of dealing with Arab opponents separately and extracting the best possible deals.

Sasson, who was born and raised in Damascus and spoke fluent Arabic, gained extensive experience in dealing with Arab elites, and despite the fact that peace with the Arabs was not on Israel's mind at the time,⁹ Sasson spoke with the Arabs at length about peace and its benefits, without specifying its premises and content, playing the tune of “Jewish-Arab cooperation” in all fields in order to entice the Arab elites – being aware that these terms have a strong effect on the weak, needy, and defeated. During his proselytizing efforts, Sasson's reports reveal that he – and his assistants – would seize any possible opportunity to compliment and flatter the person he was speaking with and to exploit any chance to offer him bribes after having paved the way – as a down payment for collaboration services.

In reality, Sasson was not attempting to stimulate peace negotiations, as he alleged to his Arab contacts, and as Israeli historians usually claim; rather, he was simply promoting the official Israeli policy of maintaining the status quo, while trying to search for common interests between Israel and his contacts, as well as for potential bribe-takers.

It was within this context that the six meetings took place between Eliyahu Sasson and Tofeh Arazi, on the one hand, and Lebanon's Prime Minister Riad al-Sulh, on the other. Both of the Israeli agents attempted to win over al-Sulh to the Israeli side of the Arab-Israeli conflict under the pretense of discussing peace, and his role in it as “a peace maker” and “an angel of peace,” as well as by offering him numerous bribes, as we shall see later.

⁹ For an extensive description of Israel's peace policy towards the Arab during that period, see: Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: A Lane, 1999).

The First Meeting between Riad al-Sulh and Tofeh Arazi

The first meeting between al-Sulh and Arazi took place on November 15, 1948 in Riad al-Sulh's hotel in Paris, lasting 45 minutes.¹⁰ This meeting was not the first between the two men, for they had met several times in the decade preceding 1948, but it was their first encounter since the outbreak of the 1948 War, and after Israel's occupation of large Lebanese territories all the way to the Litani River in the context of "Operation Hiram" that was waged by the Israeli Army on October 28-31, 1948. Since this meeting prefaced the later ones, we shall discuss it in more detail relying on Arazi's report to the Israeli leadership on this gathering. We shall also detail the later meetings with Arazi and Sasson to assess the evolution of that relationship, and its nature and objectives during that phase. As we discuss these meetings, we will attempt to preserve the flair with which Sasson and Arazi wrote their reports, and the impressions they included in their reports to their superiors, because such impressions convey the mood and positions of each of them after their direct meetings with al-Sulh. This is especially relevant because these reports did not transcribe the totality of the discussions, but provided a general summary of the talks during each meeting.

In his report on the first meeting, Arazi says that al-Sulh received him with his signature affability, reminding him of the previous encounters they had in Beirut, and also of his meeting with Moshe Sharett when he visited him in Beirut in 1944. Towards the beginning of the meeting, Arazi told al-Sulh that it would be better for their encounters to be direct, without the Lebanese mediators who present themselves as friends of al-Sulh. Their years-old relationship, Arazi argued, does not require mediators.

Al-Sulh approved Arazi's points. Arazi went on to say that the Israeli government views al-Sulh as a realist, despite the radical statements that are published under his name or attributed to him. Al-Sulh again affirmed Arazi's view, denying having made the statements that were attributed to him, and claiming that his statements were misconstrued. He especially denied having said that he is willing to be at the lead of the Arab armies against Israel, and that the Arabs will fight Israel even if the war lasts for a hundred years. At that point, Arazi told al-Sulh that he, Riad al-Sulh, is aware of the reality and that a major task within the Arab camp falls upon him, which is to work – upon his arrival in Cairo and his participation in the meetings of the Arab League's political committee – on pushing things in the right direction, in order to find a solution to the conflict that the entire Arab world wants to see resolved, and to end the state of war between Israel and Arab states. Arazi added that many of the Arab leaders engage in a game of one-upmanship in making radical statements in order to please their public opinion. He argued that the situation

¹⁰ State Archives, HETS File 70/3770; Arazi's letter from Paris, November 15, 1948.

with al-Sulh is different, since the public opinion in Lebanon is aware of reality and wishes to find a speedy solution with Israel, with the opposition being even more enthusiastic about that than the regime; therefore, Arazi claimed, al-Sulh has nothing to fear.

Arazi added that if al-Sulh accepted the mission offered to him, he would thus reinforce his stature in his country, and would be advancing the cause of Lebanon, for Lebanon has no territorial ambitions in the part of Palestine allocated for an Arab state as per the partition plan, nor is Lebanon in need of territorial gains to appease a public opinion that is reeling from a military defeat. Arazi noted that Lebanon is suffering economically because it is in a state of war with its main economic client, Israel, and added that Lebanon could be the main engine within the Arab League favoring regional peace. As an attempt to prod al-Sulh into accepting the role of the peacemaker, Arazi predicted that peace should come by itself within a few months. Peace is not distant, he claimed, because five major actors are seeking it: Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan, the refugees, and Israel.

Al-Sulh responded to Arazi by stating that, before accepting the role proposed by Arazi, he must be convinced that this role befits the righteous path that he must follow. Riad al-Sulh then asked Arazi about the basis on which this would-be peace was to be founded upon, adding that there was a need to specify the details, and not to be content with broad guidelines. Arazi did not answer al-Sulh directly, and conceded that he came to the meeting without a pre-approved plan or a map, but if al-Sulh really wanted to understand the basis of this proposed peace, he must learn it from Eliyahu Sasson who was currently in Paris. In that case, both Sasson and Arazi could meet with Riad al-Sulh to detail these issues. Arazi followed by saying that the basic principles are largely formulated, with the existence of the UN resolution of November 29, 1947, and the Bernadotte proposal, as well as the status quo at the time.

After that, Arazi went on to attack the Arab-Palestinian leadership, especially Hajj Amin al-Hussaini, leader of the Palestinian national movement at the time. Then, Arazi wondered aloud: where is Riad al-Sulh? How can we find, among the Arab-Palestinian families, figures similar to the al-Sulh family, or Bayhum, or al-Dauq, and many other personalities with whom Lebanon has been blessed? Arazi then challenged al-Sulh to mention figures from among the Palestinian families on the level of those mentioned.

Arazi says in his report that al-Sulh did not answer that question, nor did he comment much on the three bases of peace, contenting to say that he is prepared to hear more about the matter. Warning Israel against the “facts on the ground” policy that it adopts, he said that “[establishing] facts on the ground is not a manner of conducting debate, even though this status quo must be taken into account.” Riad al-Sulh expressed his readiness to meet with Arazi and Sasson to listen

to the details of the points of principle regarding peace, asking Arazi to contact him and set up a date for the next meeting.

After summarizing his meeting with al-Sulh, Arazi mentions that al-Sulh told him something from which we can glean the nature of the relationship between the two men. Riad al-Sulh told him that he intends to resign from the Lebanese government and devote himself to Arab League work. Arazi answered that Lebanon would lose due to that though al-Sulh's leverage would increase if he reached the helm of the Arab League.

At the end of his report, Arazi mentions that he wanted – throughout his discussion with al-Sulh – to push him to believe that his stature will not increase if he appeared to be the most radical of Arab leaders in front of the public opinion; in fact, Arazi argued, wisdom in their situation would hold that al-Sulh should be the man who extracts the Arab world from the quandary it had put itself in.¹¹

The Second Meeting Between Riad al-Sulh and Eliyahu Sasson and Tofeh Arazi

The second meeting, gathering Riad al-Sulh with Eliyahu Sasson and Tofeh Arazi, took place at the Bristol Hotel on November 17, 1948, lasting for an hour and a quarter. In his report on the meeting, Sasson mentions that al-Sulh was – as usual – courteous and candid. At the beginning of the meeting, Sasson inquired about the letter he sent to al-Sulh months ago. Al-Sulh confirmed receiving the message and apologized for his inability to answer it, admitting that it was not a gracious act on his part. Al-Sulh mentioned that he was aware of Sasson writing to two other men: Lutfi al-Haffar and Taqi al-Deen al-Sulh, adding that Taqi al-Deen al-Sulh had informed him of his past talks with Sasson over a potential Jewish-Arab accord, and that Husain Haikal Pasha also spoke to him of the same matter.

Al-Sulh said that he was aware of the importance of reaching an Arab-Jewish accord, but saw no potential of achieving it in the conditions at the time, for the gap between the two sides was too large. Al-Sulh added that it seemed Israel was never satisfied with what it achieved, stating that “the appetite grows with eating”; “only yesterday, in the United Nations’ political committee,” he exclaimed, “Moshe Shertok (Sharrett) was demanding an exit into the Red Sea on the Gulf of Aqaba.” He also said that Israel announced in the Security Council that it has no intentions of withdrawing from the Galilee, which is part of the Arab state in Palestine per the partition plan. Sasson and Arazi denied that Israel harbored any expansionist ambitions in Palestinian and other Arab territories, justifying at great length Israel’s occupation of large tracts of Arab lands outside

¹¹ *Ibid.* It should be noted that all the reports sent by Sasson and Arazi arrived in their “raw” form, without any editing, to the Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and his Foreign Minister Moshe Sharet, as well as many of the key Israeli security and political officials.

of the territories allotted to the Jewish state per the partition plan. They placed responsibility for Israel's actions squarely on Arab states and the Palestinians, claiming that Israeli expansion was a response to Arab aggression, warning that if Arabs persist in their hostility, Israel would occupy further Arab lands. They also denied that Israel was working to undermine Arab unity, or that it had ambitions of economic hegemony in the region.

Before speaking on the basis of peace in detail, the points of principle in any prospective peace, which al-Sulh had inquired about in the previous meeting, Sasson and Arazi answered that two issues needed be clarified: first, are Arabs willing to conduct direct negotiations with Israel? And second: will Arabs accept a partition of Palestine? If the answer to both questions were positive, they would engage in further discussion. Riad al-Sulh followed up by saying that he could not answer their questions at that moment, needing to think about them. Al-Sulh added that he is likely to resign from political work in Lebanon and devote himself to the Palestinian cause, perhaps leaning towards either peace or war.

Towards the end of their report, Sasson and Arazi spoke to al-Sulh on “the importance of preparing Arab public opinion in the Arab states to accept a Jewish-Arab accord, and made (al-Sulh) understand that we are prepared to offer financial assistance for this purpose. He did not answer. We meant to make him understand that we intend to pay him.”¹²

The Third Meeting Between Riad al-Sulh and Sasson and Arazi

The third meeting between Riad al-Sulh, Eliyahu Sasson and Tofeh Arazi took place on November 28, 1948 in the Bristol Hotel and lasted for two hours; al-Sulh was polite and courteous according to Sasson's report. At the beginning of the meeting, Sasson asked al-Sulh whether he reached a decision on the matter of war and peace discussed in the previous meeting. Before waiting for al-Sulh's answer, Sasson explained the repercussions of each option on the Arabs, adding that if al-Sulh chose the path of peace, he could perform several roles and tasks simultaneously, including mediation, defending the cause in the media, and convincing colleagues. Sasson notes in his report: “we explained to him these roles and the means to perform them.” Sasson did not detail this matter in his report further. It appears from al-Sulh's reaction to Sasson's explanation – according to Sasson's report – that Sasson offered al-Sulh a new bribe under the cover of funding media-related activities; it also appears that al-Sulh understood that performing these tasks would make him into an Israeli agent. In the beginning, al-Sulh's reaction to Sasson's proposal came in the form of a question: “why did you choose me and not other Arab leaders for these missions?” Sasson answered that they targeted al-Sulh

¹² State Archives, HETS File 70/3771; Sasson's letter no. 59 from Paris November 17, 1948.

specifically because he has no personal ambitions, having reached the top post in his country, and because Lebanon has no ambitions in Palestine – whether political or territorial. Sasson says that he mentioned other reasons that he did not include in his report. In his response, al-Sulh said that Israel's leaders seemed drunk with victory since they had stated their acceptance of the UN partition decision on December 1, 1947; this time, however, they backed off from their initial position, claiming all the territories they had occupied belong to the Arab state per the partition decision. Additionally, there is reason to believe that they will rescind their position in the future and claim the whole of Palestine. Then, could he, Riad al-Sulh, a self-respecting man, engage with peace with the Jews under these conditions? Al-Sulh asserted that he would prefer to commit suicide rather than hand all of Palestine to the Jews with his own hands. He, then, lurched into a strong critique of Israel's positions in the UN, noting that Israel is trying to oppress Arabs both militarily and politically, and to drag them through the mud in front of the entire world. He added that Israel has achieved, in reality, significant successes, though they are temporary successes that cannot bring peace closer or secure Israel's borders and interests.

Eliyahu Sasson notes in his report that al-Sulh reiterated terms like: “do not hit the Arabs where it hurts,” and “do not widen the gap even more”. Sasson also says that al-Sulh tried to assuage them by saying: “you are now a state; you are today part of the Arab Levant; you must not forget that it is not in your interest, whether economically, politically, or militarily, to have the Levant appearing weak and stricken to the outside world. This could come back at you on two fronts: from outside the Middle East and from within it, from foreigners and Arabs alike. They will both view you as their main enemy. They will both plant a dagger in your back at the first opportunity, bringing down your entire entity. Be careful, the British are plotting against you.” Sasson writes of his impression, along with that of Arazi, in response to al-Sulh's words, saying that al-Sulh “spoke with honesty and real pain, and with a true desire to find a decent exit.” He adds that he tried, along with Arazi, to convince him that his fears and doubts are baseless, and “that we are prepared to offer concessions for the sake of a sole purpose: peace. And this assertion affected him a great deal.” Thereafter, al-Sulh promised to present them with an answer after a few days regarding their invitation for him to play the role of “the angel of peace,” as Sasson stated in his report.

At the end of the meeting, Riad al-Sulh asked two things of Sasson and Arazi: 1) to suggest to the Israeli delegation not to ask the United Nations for new resolutions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, but to seek, instead, a resolution calling for the appointment of a compromise committee tasked with resolving the conflict between Israel and the Arabs, and 2) to propose to the Israeli delegation that it asks one of the neutral countries to present a proposal to the UN, demanding a resolution that calls the Arab and Israeli sides to peace.

Al-Sulh said that if these two actions were taken, he – and other proponents of peace – would have an easier time in creating a new mood in the Middle East that is receptive to negotiations with Israel. Al-Sulh added that Israel stands to lose nothing if the UN issued no further resolutions, since Israel already has two important advantages: the partition resolution, which was passed on November 29, 1947, and the facts on the ground in Palestine.

When asked how the Arab delegations would likely cast their vote if his two proposals reached the voting stage, al-Sulh said that he did not discuss the topic yet with the Arab delegations, but that he believed he could obtain their consent. Sasson promised al-Sulh to raise his points with Moshe Shertok (Sharett), the Israeli Foreign Minister.¹³ Indeed, Sasson did in fact discuss the suggestions with Shertok, who decided to act on al-Sulh's request and coordinated an international backing in favor of the United Nations forming a conflict-resolution commission, which resulted in the resolution being passed in the United Nations.¹⁴

It appears from Sasson's report on the third meeting with al-Sulh that Eliyahu Sasson was optimistic regarding al-Sulh's consent to execute the missions offered to him. This is also clear from Arazi's report on the same meeting. In his minutes of the third meeting, Tofeh Arazi writes: "my impression from this meeting with Riad al-Sulh is that it is clear to al-Sulh that he is capable of accomplishing a great mission in the form of hurrying peace ... and that if he did achieve this, it will raise his personal stature and respect in the Arab World, so he stands to gain in this way as well". Arazi adds: "it appears that the previous talks with him have been fruitful; in this meeting, many issues became clear to him, which he hesitated in the past to decide on, all of that despite him claiming that he remains in a phase of deliberation."¹⁵

The third meeting was supposed to be the last between al-Sulh and his Israeli contacts, but when al-Sulh did not give a final answer on the "angel of peace" task offered to him by Sasson, the two parties decided another meeting. It becomes clear from Arazi's reports that numerous contacts were made with him after the third meetings, touching not only on the matter of Riad al-Sulh becoming "the angel of peace," but also on the eventual fate of the Lebanese territories occupied by Israel during Operation Hiram, which was the first mention of this issue between the two sides, despite the fact that all the previous meetings had taken place subsequent to Operation Hiram and Israel's occupation of Lebanese land.

The Fourth Meeting between Riad al-Sulh and Tofeh Arazi

¹³ State Archives, HETS File 70/3771; Sasson's letter no. 65 from Paris, November 29, 1948.

¹⁴ Reuven Erlich, *In the Lebanese Trap (in Hebrew)* (Tel-Aviv, 2000), p. 256.

¹⁵ State Archives, HETS File 70/3770; Arazi's letter from Paris, November 29, 1948.

The fourth meeting between al-Sulh and Arazi took place on the December 8, 1948 in al-Sulh's hotel. Eliyahu Sasson did not participate in the meeting because he had returned to Israel, but he maintained contact with al-Sulh through cables and letters that he exchanged with Tofeh Arazi. The main topic, which dominated the meeting as it did the subsequent ones, was al-Sulh's heated calls for Israel to withdraw from the Lebanese territory that it had occupied during Operation Hiram. Arazi says in his report that he had told al-Sulh of receiving a favorable initial response regarding Israel's withdrawal from the Lebanese occupied territory, adding that Sasson will write Arazi about the specifics of the withdrawal as soon as he arrived in Israel. Arazi adds that al-Sulh repeatedly stressed the importance of the withdrawal, and that it could have a positive influence on him playing "the angel of peace". Arazi also says that he brought up the matter of "strengthening Riad al-Sulh by our side" as Sasson had told him days before (the quotation marks were placed by Arazi in the original document, indicating that he offered a bribe to al-Sulh another time). This time al-Sulh reacted, unlike with previous attempts at bribery, saying that "the matter is not one of money and that if he decided to act, he would not need our help for he would enter the fray with his full being". In an attempt to entice him to accept a bribe, Arazi re-explained the financial offer that was made earlier by Sasson and offered another by Arazi in this meeting; Arazi said that they understand in Israel the state of public opinion in Lebanon and the Arab countries, and that they believe that it is necessary to prepare the ground for Riad al-Sulh and his public image. They realized that he must return to his country as a man who accomplished his mission, and that this should be stressed in the media. Arazi meant, through this expose, to point out that all these measures required money. Al-Sulh answered that "he would be thankful to us if we took care of spreading the news of his success in the American newspapers," which Arazi promised, and called an American reporter at the *New York Times*, as he claims in his report, who promised to publish that al-Sulh was more distinguished in his UN performance than all of the other Arab delegations and that all the accomplishments of the Arab delegations were the result of his efforts. Arazi mentions that he also spoke to another journalist about spreading news items on al-Sulh, and that he – Arazi – hopes that the journalist publishes extensively on Riad al-Sulh.¹⁶

The Fifth Meeting between Riad al-Sulh and Tofeh Arazi

The fifth meeting between al-Sulh and Arazi occurred on December 12, 1948, again at al-Sulh's hotel. In light of the Israeli leadership's slowness in responding to al-Sulh's request to withdraw from occupied Lebanese territories, which could have made al-Sulh more agreeable according to Arazi, at the start of the meeting, Arazi told the prime minister that he has not yet received a response from Sasson regarding the specificities of Israeli withdrawal. To justify the absence of a

¹⁶ State Archives, HETS File 70/3771; Arazi's two letters from Paris on December 11 and 12, 1948.

response, Arazi claimed – falsely – that Sasson was delayed in his return to Israel. Al-Sulh asked Arazi to write Sasson and exhort him to respond due to the extreme importance of this subject. In the meeting, Arazi explained to al-Sulh the complexities of an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, informing him that withdrawal can only be executed by handing the territories directly from the Israelis to the Lebanese. Al-Sulh responded that this could be done through General William Riley, the chief UN observer, and that he does not mind a Lebanese officer accompanying Riley on his mission; what matters for al-Sulh – he said – was that the withdrawal be synchronous with his return to Beirut. Arazi mentions that al-Sulh informed him of the method he used in the United Nations to vote on the conflict-resolution committee, adding that al-Sulh’s face lit up when Arazi congratulated him for his personal success in the session; al-Sulh asked whether this was the position of Moshe Shertok as well. At the end of his report, Arazi told his superiors that he would be meeting al-Sulh before his scheduled departure from Paris in a few days.¹⁷

The Sixth and Last Meeting between Riad al-Sulh and Tofeh Arazi

The last al-Sulh-Arazi meeting took place on December 15, 1948 in a Paris café, shortly before al-Sulh’s departure from France. This meeting was dominated by the Israeli government’s unresponsiveness regarding withdrawal from Lebanon. Arazi opens his report by complaining of the delay in receiving the awaited response from the Israeli leadership, “despite Eliyahu Sasson’s promise to al-Sulh of a resolution, and despite the cables I sent you, I have received no response regarding the Lebanese villages we had occupied. Riad al-Sulh places great importance on this subject and he was calling on me daily.” Arazi adds that “Riad al-Sulh delayed his return to Beirut in order to prepare the public to be supportive of him, based on his ‘success’ (quotation marks in the original) in Paris, the question of Israeli withdrawal from occupied Lebanese villages was an important component of his plan to return ‘victorious’ (quotation marks in the original) to Lebanon.” Arazi also says that al-Sulh took special care in having the French press praise him, including *Le Monde* newspaper, since articles published in France are sent to Beirut and Arab capitals to be published there. Arazi also says that Riad al-Sulh paid close attention to the Arab journalists.

It appears that al-Sulh’s daily phone calls to Arazi and his beseeching to hasten the answer of the Israeli leadership have led Arazi to find an exit, after consulting with Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Moshe Shertok. He says in his report to the leadership that, after consulting with Shertok who was in Paris at the time, he told al-Sulh that the Foreign Ministry has presented a political recommendation to withdraw from occupied Lebanese territory, and that the subject is now in the hands of the Israeli Army that occupied the Lebanese villages for military purposes. Arazi

¹⁷ State Archives, HETS File 70/3770; Arazi’s letter from Paris, December 12, 1948.

also claimed that he does not know the reason behind the delay of the Israeli response. He also said that al-Sulh asked him to contact him once he receives the Israeli response regarding occupied Lebanese land, whether he was in Rome or Cairo, where he was scheduled to spend a few days before returning to Beirut.

Towards the end of his report, Arazi says that al-Sulh attempted, throughout the talks, to convince him that a timely Israeli withdrawal from occupied Lebanese villages “would have a positive effect [on al-Sulh] taking the decision to work for peace; otherwise, he believes that all our talks with him will lead to no result.” Then, Arazi adds that Riad al-Sulh “spoke angrily of the topic numerous times, and of our delayed answer. His request was that, if we were really prepared to withdraw from the villages, we ought to do it before, or simultaneously with, his return in Beirut”.¹⁸

Before we delve into Israel’s decision to assassinate Riad al-Sulh, while negotiations were ongoing with him, it would be useful to present a quick overview of Israel’s occupation of Lebanese territories, and the IDF reaching the Litani River within “Operation Hiram,” all of which are closely related to Israel’s decision to assassinate the Lebanese prime minister.

Operation Hiram

During Operation Hiram, which the Israeli Army conducted between October 28 and 31, 1948, large territories of the Palestinian Upper Galilee were occupied, as well as large tracts of land in the Eastern part of South Lebanon. During the operation, the IDF occupied 15 Lebanese villages and reached the Litani River, which was the dream that the Zionist leadership had oft-discussed and sought.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that Israel, upon occupying this area of Southern Lebanon, as they did in Palestine, wished to have the least possible amount of Lebanese inhabitants left in their villages. Israeli sources agree that neither the Lebanese Army nor the inhabitants of the 15 villages attempted to resist the Israeli Army during the Hiram Operation. These sources also add that the Salvation Army showed no resistance, withdrawing from the area instead. Despite this, the Israeli Army committed war crimes in its invasion in the Lebanese village of Hula, which saw dozens of its people killed during the Israeli incursion, which was followed by the cold-blooded murder of 58 civilian prisoners – according to Israeli sources – on October 31, 1948, the same day Israel occupied the town.²⁰ The Israeli objective behind the massacre was to terrorize the Lebanese and push them to abandon their villages.

¹⁸ State Archives, Hets File 79/3771; Arazi’s letter from Paris December 15, 1948.

¹⁹ The Lebanese villages occupied in the context of Operation Hiram were: Blida, Mhaibib, Mays al-Jabal, Hula, Markaba, Tallusa, Daiseh, Rubb Thlatheen, Bani Hayyan, Kfar Kila, al-Tayybeh, al-Qantara, Deir Siryan, Alman, al-Qasr. Israeli sources mention that official Lebanon has hidden the fact of this occupation from the Lebanese public for years.

²⁰ For details on the Hula massacre, see *Ha-Ulam Haze* magazines report in its March 1, 1978 issue.

The Decision to Assassinate Lebanon's Prime Minister Riad al-Sulh

Three Israeli published sources have discussed Israel's intention to assassinate Riad al-Sulh, then Lebanese prime minister. Two of these sources originate from individuals who participated in the attempt to execute the assassination order, while the third rests in a doctoral dissertation. These sources are:

1. The memoirs of Gamaliel Cohen, leader of the *Mistaarvim* (Arabist) unit in Beirut at the time, published under the title *The First Mistaarvim* (Tel Aviv, Israeli Ministry of Defense, 2002). The book's importance stems from the fact that the author did not draw on his memory alone, but also on the Israeli Army archives in reference to al-Sulh's assassination attempt, especially the string of cables exchanged between the leadership of the Arabist division in Israel and the two Arabist units in Beirut who were tasked with the assassination of al-Sulh. By using these records, the author documented the dates of these cables and their content regarding al-Sulh's assassination plot.
2. The book of Rafi Siton and Yitzhak Shushan, *Men of Secrecy and Mystery: Tales from Israel's Intelligence Services behind the Borders* (Jerusalem, Aydanim Press, 1990). The book's importance results from the fact that one of the authors – Shushan – was one of two individuals whose mission was to assassinate Riad al-Sulh in Beirut.
3. The work of **Reuven** Erlich, *In the Lebanese Trap*, was originally the author's doctoral thesis. Erlich has a security background, and published his work with the Israeli Ministry of Defense in 2000.

On December 9, 1948, at the same time Israel was negotiating with al-Sulh in Paris, the leadership of the Arabists' Unit Sh.M.18, which is affiliated with the Israeli Military Intelligence, sent a telegram to Gamaliel Cohen, who headed the two Arabist units in Beirut, demanding that he informs the Israeli leadership of the date of al-Sulh's arrival in Beirut.²¹

Israeli sources state that three Arabist groups were active in Lebanon and Syria (two in Lebanon and one in Syria) during the 1948 War. These three groups were part of the *Ha-Shachar* (Dawn) Arabist (*Mistaarvim*) unit affiliated with the Palmach forces, the Hagana's shock troops, which eventually became part of the Israeli Army. Israeli sources add that the decision to send the Arabists to Beirut was taken in November 1947. The Arabist Gamaliel Cohen arrived in Beirut on January 18, 1948, seeking to mingle with the Lebanese society and put in place a secret base for Israeli Arabist agents in Beirut. A short while after Cohen settled in Beirut, the *Mistaarvim* (Arabist) leadership sent him an additional number of Arabists, two radio communication

²¹ Gamliyel Cohen, *The First Mistaarvim* (Tel Aviv, Ministry of Defense, 2000), p.268.

devices, and arms and explosives to carry out acts of sabotage in Lebanon. After Israel's creation and the founding of the IDF, the *Ha-Shachar* Arabist unit was affiliated with the IDF's Military Intelligence apparatus, and given the new codename Sh.M.18.²²

On December 12, 1948, the leadership of this unit sent a telegram to Cohen, the Beirut leader of the two Arabist cells, informing him of a grave decision: "It has been decided that Riad al-Sulh is to be liquidated, and the task falls on us. Track him and present proposals for the execution of the mission. You will receive the go order then."²³ On the same day, the Sh.M.18 sent another telegram to Cohen which read: "we are preparing to send a plane to drop all the necessary equipment ... send us a list with all that is required ... you need to determine, as soon as possible, a suitable landing zone outside of the inhabited areas. The drop will take place at night..."²⁴

The Sh.M.18 leadership chose Cohen Yaqub to execute the assassination; Yaqub was one of the elements of the two Arabists' cells in Beirut.²⁵ As soon as the elements of the Arabist cells received the order to assassinate al-Sulh from their leadership, they began observing al-Sulh and tracking his daily movement, especially when departing from his house to the Parliament's Hall in Beirut and back. In some cases, they followed his movements at night while on his way to meet with Lebanon's president. Among the many tasks performed by the Arabists was to thoroughly examine the roads traveled by al-Sulh and the security measures surrounding him. In their book *Men of Secrecy and Mystery: Tales from Israel's Intelligence Services behind the Borders*, Rafi Siton and Yitzhak Shushan say that Shushan, who was Yaqub's partner in the assassination plot against Riad al-Sulh, discovered a weak spot on the road traveled by al-Sulh from his home to the Parliament. The street had a section where the sidewalk doubled as a market, which caused passing cars to slow. Yitzhak Shushan proposed that a "Konos" mine be planted on al-Sulh's car as it traveled through that section of the road, but the plan was not adopted. Beirut's Arabists persisted with vigor in shadowing al-Sulh and investigating his surroundings and formulating plans, seeking the best methods for assassinating al-Sulh, without leaving traces in the scene that could lead back to them, or cause their arrest or killing during the execution of the operation.

From the second half of December 1948 and until the end of February 1949, unit Sh.M.18 exchanged many telegrams with the Arabists in Beirut, which included directives and guidance from the Israeli leadership regarding the assassination attempt, constantly urging that the plot be carried out. In his book, *The First Mistaaravim*, Gamaliel Cohen mentions that on December 8,

²² *Ibid*, Chapter 14.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 268.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

1949 the leadership of the unit issued an order to Cohen Yaqub again demanding that he carries out the operation. The order stated: “Thus, we give you an order to execute the assassination of Riad al-Sulh, Prime Minister of Lebanon. Carry out the liquidation order at the earliest opportunity.” This telegram stressed that “this operation is of great importance to our interests.”²⁶

On January 10, 1949, Cohen Yaqub sent a telegram to his superiors in Israel stating that the operation to liquidate al-Sulh could take time, and that success must be guaranteed one hundred percent, adding that he will work on the liquidation of al-Sulh at the earliest possible moment. In response to Yaqub, the leadership agreed that the success of the operation must be fully guaranteed and offered some technical advice regarding the use of explosives in the assassination, recommending that the assassination be carried out in the nighttime. On the same day, Yaqub sent his response to his superiors’, mentioning that it would be impossible to liquidate Riad al-Sulh using gunfire due to the impossibility of withdrawal and escape. He also said that security in al-Sulh’s house is tight, and that his guards accompany him in his movement, and that his schedule is irregular. In this telegram, he informed his leadership of the details of his plan to assassinate Riad al-Sulh. He wrote that he would carry out the assassination, along with Yitzhak Shoshan, and another Arabist, during the night hours on al-Sulh’s residential street. The operation will be carried out with the use of a timed “Konos” mine that sticks easily to a car as it is moving. The next day, the *Mistaarvim* Sh.M.18 unit sent its remarks on the al-Sulh assassination plan to Cohen Yaqub, agreeing with him that assassination with firearms is out of the question, warning him that the vehicle that will be used by the agents in the operation may expose the group if it were parked too close to the scene, advising that the vehicle be placed in a safe location. The leadership added that two agents, not three, should execute the operation. It also pointed out the possibility of halting al-Sulh’s vehicle by peppering the street with nails, and once the car stops, the two agents could head towards it pretending to offer help, and quickly stick the two timed “Konos” mines to the vehicle.²⁷

In his book, *The First Mistaarvim*, Gamaliel Cohen reveals that the command in Israel kept urging Cohen Yaqub to carry out the liquidation, proposing, on January 17, 1949, that due to his failure to proceed with the mission, placing a mine in the carcass of a dead dog along the route of al-Sulh’s vehicle. The author claims that the resources and the ability to assassinate Riad al-Sulh did not match the high expectations of the leadership in Israel, and its incessant pressure to liquidate al-Sulh.²⁸ Gamaliel Cohen proceeds to say that on January 28, 1949, the leaders of the Arabist unit in Israel telegraphed Cohen Yaqub and informed him that “for political reasons

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 269.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 270-272.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

related to Israel's relationship with Lebanon, we order you to delay the liquidation operation"; the message told Yaqub to pursue his observation work and to keep refining the assassination plan. Again, on February 22, 1949, the Arabists' unit in Israel issued an order to Cohen Yaqub aborting the entire operation.²⁹

At the time, Israel was attempting to physically liquidate al-Sulh, and the Israeli leadership tried to "assassinate" him politically. In January 1949, an Israeli official leaked the info of the secret meetings held between Riad al-Sulh and Eliyahu Sasson and his group in Paris to the *New York Herald Tribune* through its reporter Kenneth Pelby. On the day following the publication of the news item by the *Herald Tribune*, the Beirut-based *al-Nahar* newspaper (which opposed al-Sulh's government) published a translation of the article that appeared in the American newspaper in its January 24, 1949 issue.³⁰

Tofeh Arazi understood the political meaning of the Israeli command leaking the matter of the secret meetings with al-Sulh. In a letter he sent to Eliyahu Sasson in Tel Aviv regarding the press leak, Arazi said: "what you said about the Riad al-Sulh leak has shaken me, especially after seeing the responses from Beirut: I have sent you a copy of *al-Nahar* of Beirut, which published a headline based on Pilby's article in the *Herald Tribune*. I am told that the Lebanese intelligence was rushed into the streets to collect the issue including that item. In this parcel, I also send you newspapers mentioning the occurrence of searches in the editorial rooms. We were sure that you intentionally caused the leak, but we did not understand the logic behind it; you have decided to bury Riad".³¹

The fact that Israel decided to assassinate Lebanon's prime minister at the time it was still conducting negotiations with him pose several questions, including: why did Israel decide to liquidate al-Sulh? What were the motives behind this grave decision? What objectives did Israel seek to achieve from the assassination? To answer these questions, we must take into account a number of facts relating to Israel's strategy under Ben-Gurion on the Lebanese front during the 1948 War, and to Ben-Gurion's ambition to keep the Lebanese region occupied by the IDF during Operation Hiram, in anticipation of its formal annexation into Israel.

Ben-Gurion and the Decision to Murder

David Ben-Gurion was endowed with the qualities of a historic leader of the Yishuv, and then Israel, keeping firm control over national-security decisions in Israel. Ben-Gurion combined his

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See Hasan Hallaq, *Lebanon's position towards the Palestinian cause: 1918-1952* (Beirut: Palestinian Research Center, 1982), p. 240.

³¹ State Archives, HETS File 70/377; Arazi's letter from Paris on February 6, 1949.

leadership of the Mapai and the labor movement on the one hand, and the positions of the prime minister and minister of defense, on the other. His authority included direct responsibility over the various security organs; the security force that issued the order to assassinate al-Sulh – the military intelligence – could not have taken that decision without its director receiving a direct order from David Ben-Gurion.

Ben-Gurion was not convinced with the armistice borders that were delineated after the second round of the war in July 1948. He described the borders as ridiculous and laughable, and sought ceaselessly to expand Israel's borders on all fronts.

The Jewish Agency, and then Israel under Ben-Gurion, as well as the governments that came after his, considered Israel's interference in domestic Arab affairs, as well as their desire to influence events in their favor, to be an integral part of Israel's security. Ben-Gurion feared that Israel might come to face a unified Arab enemy, determined to resist it; therefore, they expended a great deal of effort to foment dissent and internal conflict within each Arab state, as well as between Arab states, along sectarian, tribal, geographic, or racial lines. They also sought to establish common interests between the political elites of these countries and Israel.

On May 25, 1948, ten days after Israel's birth, Ben-Gurion wrote in his memoirs: "the weak point of the Arab coalition is Lebanon. Its Islamic dominance is an artificial and ephemeral one that can be easily reversed. A Christian state with the Litani as its southern border should be established. And we shall sign a treaty with it."³² Ben-Gurion did not write these words wantonly; he was basing his assertions on strong and extensive relations with broad, influential sections in Lebanon, some of which are mentioned below:

- A. After the "National Pact" formula was reached, and with the ascension of Bshara al-Khoury and Riad al-Sulh to the helm of the government in Lebanon in 1943, the Jewish Agency intensified its contacts with Lebanese sides that opposed the "National Pact," making many contacts. These exchanges and negotiations were crowned with the signing of a secret treaty on May 30, 1946 between the Maronite Church, presenting itself as the representative of the Maronite community in Lebanon (first party), and the Jewish Agency (second party). The treaty came in six articles, stating that an alliance is to be struck between the two parties, as well as cooperation in all fields. We are content to state the first article, in order to point the importance of the matter and its effect on the thinking of Ben-Gurion during that period. The first article says: "the first party declares its full admission of the existing historical links between the Jewish people and Palestine,

³² Avi Shlaim, "Israeli Interference in Internal Arab World: The case of Lebanon", in *The Politics of Arab Integration*, Giacomo Luciani & Ghassan Salame (eds.) (London, 1988), p. 236.

and of the aspirations of the Jewish people in Palestine, and of the right of the Jewish people to emigrate to Palestine and to inhabit it freely”; it also declares its approval of the current public and political program of the Jewish Agency, especially their seeking the erection of the Jewish state.³³

- B. In the first half of 1948, the representatives of the Jewish Agency made an agreement with the Lebanese priest Joseph Awwad, whose purpose was the incitement of the Maronite public opinion against Riad al-Sulh’s government. Father Awwad also received sums of money from the representatives of the Jewish Agency to achieve this end. He established contacts with many Lebanese parties, including the leadership of the Kataib (Phalangists) Party, to whom he offered the organization of a military coup to bring down al-Sulh’s government, and the Kataib leadership – in turn – expressed its approval of the idea.³⁴
- C. Israeli documents show that the idea of a military coup against Riad al-Sulh’s government was presented by Tofeh Arazi at least twice to the former Lebanese President Emile Edde, who called for a “small Lebanon” allied with Israel, without the South and the North. In the second meeting between Edde and Arazi in early July 1948, Edde said that the Lebanese opposition was not strong enough to fell the government through a military takeover at that moment in time. However, he added something grave and important, saying that if the Israeli Army occupied large territories in South Lebanon all the way to Tyr and Sidon, then the opposition could organize itself within a month or two and use the occupation as a pretext to bring down the government of Riad al-Sulh and form a new cabinet. Arazi’s report on the meeting states that Emile Edde urged Israel to make that move, suggesting in the same meeting that Israel should show its strength and firmness and to embark on a series of steps, including the aerial bombing of Damascus to teach it a lesson; afterwards, Edde recommended, the Israeli planes should drop thousands of leaflets on Beirut, clearly threatening that if the Lebanese government does not alter its policy towards Israel, Israel would bomb Beirut. Following on that, Israel should begin its invasion of Lebanon, with the Israeli Army occupying the lands north of the Litani all the way to Sidon.³⁵

³³ Central Zionist Archive; Collection S25/3269.

³⁴ State archives, HETS; Collection 23/5563.

³⁵ State Archives, Hets Collection 6/3766; letter to Shamuni on July 13, 1948. It is noteworthy that Israel did execute the proposals presented by Emile Edde to Tofeh Arazi.

The Lebanese Occupied Territories and International Pressure

David Ben-Gurion saw that the arrival of the Israeli Army to the Litani within Operation Hiram constituted a suitable end for a successful operation. In his book *The Renewed State of Israel*, he wrote: “The Carmeli Brigade crossed the northern borders and took control of the villages west of the Manara road, most of which are situated inside the state of Lebanon. The Brigade reached the Tayr Dibba valley in the West and the Litani to the North. The operation named “Hiram,” after the king of Tyr, the ally and friend of King David, has reached its end.”³⁶

The commander of the northern front of the Israeli Army in the 1948 War, Moshe Carmiel, spoke of the Hiram operation, saying: “we have found an opportunity to introduce serious modifications to the border between us and Lebanon, in the northern part of the country ... the Litani River has always spoken to us [enticed us].”³⁷

Israel took practical steps after having invaded the 15 Lebanese villages, which points to the fact that Israel wanted to leave the door open for a continued occupation – and eventual annexation – of these territories. The Israeli Army sought to displace the majority of the population because of the Hula Massacre against IDF prisoners, as well as direct and indirect expulsion of the locals. As a result, out of 15,000 Lebanese who inhabited these villages before the Israeli occupation, less than 3,000 remained after the conclusion of Operation Hiram.

Yaqub Shamuni, who was Vice Director of Middle East Department in the Israeli Foreign Ministry, which was headed by Eliyahu Sasson, recounts that, on the eve of Operation Hiram, consultations took place between the Israeli Army and the Middle East Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During these consultations, the Israeli Army put forth a query regarding the fate of the Lebanese locals south of the Litani. Shamuni adds: “the question was: do we expulse them or allow them to remain and try to make them cooperate? Here, we did not give specific or definitive instructions, generally adopting a middle ground: to encourage, or arrange for, the flight of the largest number of locals during our troops’ advance ... while being careful to keep at least a number of people in each village who could serve as notables and representatives of the village, asking for our protection and presence...”³⁸

Israel dealt with the occupied region, since the moment of occupation, as a part of Israel, with hundreds of Israeli civilians flocking into the Lebanese villages to visit and trade. Israel also

³⁶ David Ben-Gurion, *The Renewed State of Israel, Volume 1* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: 1969), p.306.

³⁷ Reuven Erlich, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

³⁸ State Archives, HETS Collection 2570/11; Yaqub Shamuni’s letter to Eliyahu on November 12, 1948.

employed hundreds of the Lebanese villagers to build roads and collect olives and other tasks inside Israel.

In his quest to expand Israel's borders, Ben-Gurion not only ignored the UN-sanctioned partition borders (as per the November 29, 1947 resolution), but also the international borders separating Palestine from the surrounding Arab countries. The main factor influencing Ben-Gurion to take such an aggressive expansionist stance, beyond Israel's allotted territory according to the Partition resolution, and also beyond Palestine's international borders into neighboring Arab countries, was the position of the Great Powers, especially Great Britain, the United States, and France. On October 31, 1948, on the eve of the conclusion of Operation Hiram, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: "this evening, I had a discussion with [Yigal] Yedin and Jacob [Dori]. Yigal asked: what now? I said that we should wait for a few days to see the reaction that will develop in Paris ... in the meantime, we must bring down the Falluja pocket without gravely transgressing upon the armistice ... if nothing serious and grave emerges from Paris in the coming days, we must take the next step, in a week or during this weekend: attack the Triangle, Jenin, Umm al-Fahm, Tulkarm, Beit Nbala, and Tubas..."³⁹

During that period, Ben-Gurion was wildly attempting to expand Israel's borders. His army's strength was increased to 96,441 soldiers in December 1948, and the army's confidence skyrocketed after the successive defeats it dealt to the disunited Arab armies, whose combined effectives participating in the war numbered much less than their Israeli counterparts. At the same time, conflicts and struggles between Arab countries were rife; tension and internal dissent within each country escalated and the potentiality of military coups began to be publicly expressed. In these conditions, Ben-Gurion watched and tested the reactions of the Great Powers and the seriousness of their position opposing the occupation of Arab territories, in addition to the Palestinian territories belonging to the Arab-Palestinian state per the partition resolution.

Just as the international borders between Palestine and Lebanon did not check Ben-Gurion's expansionist drive, as in Operation Hiram, the borders between Palestine and Egypt were also not enough of an obstacle to his ambitions in Egyptian land. On December 28, 1948, the Israeli Army crossed the international borders between Egypt and Palestine, in the context of Operation Horev, advancing deep into the Sinai until it reached the outskirts of al-Areesh. Following sustained Anglo-American pressures, and after Britain's use of its air force, the Israeli Army finally withdrew from Sinai and behind international borders.⁴⁰

³⁹ David Ben-Gurion, *War Diaries, Volume 3* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv), p.790. By using the term "Paris," Ben-Gurion meant if nothing happened on behalf of powerful nations that were participating in the meetings of United Nations Assembly in Paris.

⁴⁰ Reuven Erlich, *op. cit.*, p.224.

Ben-Gurion realized that Riad al-Sulh was the main catalyst of international pressures against Israel on the occupied Lebanese territories, and in restraining Israel from occupying more Lebanese land. Ben-Gurion was aware of the activities of al-Sulh from the reports he received, especially from Eliyahu Sasson, including al-Sulh's efforts to sign a treaty with Great Britain. Eliyahu Sasson learned, on October 11, 1948, from Lebanese sources in Paris, that Riad al-Sulh discussed Israel's occupation of Lebanese lands with the British delegation to the United Nations in Paris. According to the information received by Sasson and transmitted to Ben-Gurion, Britain promised Lebanon military aid if Israel occupied new Lebanese territories. In such an eventuality, and upon the Lebanese government demanding help from Great Britain, British warships would appear within five hours in front of Beirut, Sidon, and Tyr; simultaneously, the RAF would land planes in Lebanon's airports.⁴¹

Ben-Gurion's decision to assassinate Riad al-Sulh had little to do with al-Sulh's patriotism, or lack thereof, or his preparedness to play "the angel of peace" between Israel and Arab countries, as Sasson and Arazi's reports were cautiously optimistic he might. Peace at that stage was the last thing on Ben-Gurion's mind.⁴² Ben-Gurion's main concern at the time was the possibility of expanding Israel's borders and how to prepare the conditions and opportunities to achieve that purpose. Given the information on the Lebanese, regional, and international scene that were available to Ben-Gurion, Lebanon's Prime Minister Riad al-Sulh constituted – in a critical historical juncture – a barrier to Ben-Gurion's policy seeking to preserve occupied Lebanese territories, in advance of their annexation, as well as to the possibilities of further Israeli expansion into Lebanon.

At the beginning of the second stage of negotiations between al-Sulh and Arazi, on December 8, 1948 in Paris, al-Sulh insisted on his demand to see Israel withdraw from the occupied Lebanese region, with the content of these meetings reaching Ben-Gurion through the reports of Sasson and Arazi. Ben-Gurion made his decision, sometime between December 9 and 12, 1948, to assassinate Riad al-Sulh; having realized, following the fourth meeting between Arazi and al-Sulh, on December 8, that al-Sulh was strongly insistent on the demand of Israel's withdrawal from occupied Lebanese lands and his rejection of bribery offers.

It is likely that Ben-Gurion read Arazi's December 9, 1948 report, having believed until then, along with Eliyahu Sasson and other Israeli officials who were active on the subject, that al-Sulh had implicitly accepted Sasson's bribe offer in the second meeting, but that he remained silent

⁴¹ State Archives, HETS Collection 3771/70; Sasson's letter from Paris no. 56 on November 11, 1948; Sasson's letter from Paris no. 57 on November 12, 1948.

⁴² For further details on Ben-Gurion's stance regarding peace with the Arab countries and his expansionist policies, see the first two chapters of: Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: A Lane, 1999).

without expressly rejecting it – as Sasson stated in his report. Sasson conveyed the same information to Ben-Gurion when he traveled back to Israel and briefed the Israeli prime minister on his communications with al-Sulh. Both Sasson and Ben-Gurion interpreted al-Sulh’s silence as an implicit acceptance. In his diary on December 9, 1948 Ben-Gurion wrote: “[Eliyahu] Sasson has arrived [from Paris]. According to him, there are possibilities for peace. Riad al-Sulh is prepared to work for us. Lebanon has no territorial demands and ambitions. The burden of war is too heavy for them, but they do not want to exist alone; he wanted everyone to exit. Riad al-Sulh has no chance for further ascension, he has already reached the highest position a Muslim in Lebanon can occupy. Outside Lebanon he has no hope; his only ambition is to be influential in the League [of Arab states]”.⁴³

Afterwards, when the telegrams and reports of Tofeh Arazi began arriving to Ben-Gurion, he was surprised at al-Sulh’s insistence on the demand of Israeli withdrawal from occupied Lebanese lands as a conditional prelude to any relationship between him and Israel, Ben-Gurion decided to kill Riad al-Sulh, believing that he represented the main obstacle to keep, and then annex, the region occupied by Israel.

The decision to assassinate an important person to achieve political goals was not new to Ben-Gurion; weeks before his decision to assassinate Lebanon’s prime minister, Israel had assassinated Count Bernadotte on September 17, 1948, the UN mediator to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Bernadotte had presented a project – which carried his name – calling for a new partition of Palestine making the Negev part of the Arab state, which Ben-Gurion fiercely opposed and labored to undo. While Count Bernadotte was heading from the palace of the high commissioner in Jerusalem to a meeting with an Israeli official, along with four aides and the protection of three cars, four Israeli gunmen belonging to the Lehi organization intercepted his motorcade. After blocking his way with a Jeep, one of them, Yehushua Cohen,⁴⁴ directed his fire at him, killing him along with his French aide. Fingers were not only pointed at the Lehi, having claimed the assassination under the name “Hazit Ha-Molidet” (The nation’s front), but also to Ben-Gurion who was strongly suspected of covering and protecting the killers, as well as in the decision to assassinate the Count.⁴⁵

⁴³David Ben-Gurion, *War Diaries, Volume 3, Op. Cit.*, p. 870.

⁴⁴Yehushua Cohen was born in Tel Aviv in 1922, joining the Zionist “National Military Organization” (Etzel) in 1937. In 1940, he joined the Zionist military group “Fighters for the Freedom of Israel” (Lehi, also known as the Stern Gang). He became one of Lehi’s main figures in conducting assassinations in the 1940s. He joined the Israeli Army in July 1948 with the rank of officer and led the assassination of Count Bernadotte. He became friends with Ben-Gurion after the assassination and remained one of his confidantes, moving with him to the Sde Boker Kibbutz in the Negev.

⁴⁵For more details on the context of the assassination of Count Bernadotte, see the book by Abd al-Hafeez Muhareb, *Haganah, Etzel, Lehi: Relations between Armed Zionist Organizations* (Beirut: Palestinian Research Center, 1981), pp. 385-390.

It appears that Ben-Gurion believed – based on the information he possessed regarding Israel’s secret relations and contacts and deals with influential Lebanese figures (not all of these files have been publicly released by Israel yet) – that the mere assassination of Riad al-Sulh in that period, and in that tense political environment in Lebanon, would lead to one of the following results:

- A. A military coup executed by Israel’s proponents in Lebanon
- B. Limited internal strife
- C. The outbreak of a civil war

Ben-Gurion believed that if one of those possibilities came to bear it would provide Israel with the possibility of annexing the part of Lebanon it occupied, and expand Israel’s borders to the Litani River if this struggle resulted in the victory of Israel’s allies in Lebanon.

Conclusion

Israel’s objective behind meeting with Riad al-Sulh and other Arab dignitaries in that stage was not to achieve peace. Peace was the last thing on Israel’s mind at the time. As Israeli reports on these meetings and contacts reveal, these meetings and communications were meant to promote Israeli positions and Israeli policies, especially Israel’s “facts on the ground” policy. And then, to attract Arab elites to the Israeli camp, founding common ground and interests between Israel and the Arab elites – as individuals and as a class – that contradict with Arab interests and the rights of the Arab Palestinian people, and, above all, to seek bribe takers and agents.

As this study shows, Eliyahu Sasson and Tofeh Arazi refused, throughout the meetings they held with al-Sulh, to discuss the basis of the peace that al-Sulh kept inquiring about. Instead, they used the general talk of peace as a cover to offer bribes to Riad al-Sulh with the pretext of his playing “the angel of peace”. When al-Sulh rejected the bribes and insisted on Israel’s withdrawal from occupied Lebanese territories as a condition to keep the door open for him to be this “Angel of Peace,” Ben-Gurion decided to liquidate him.

Based on the reports he received on al-Sulh, his knowledge of internal Lebanese contradictions and struggles, and on Israel’s alliance with influential Lebanese parties, Ben-Gurion realized that Lebanon’s prime minister was the main obstacle to his ambitions and policies in Lebanon – primarily his effort to annex Lebanese lands then occupied by Israel. For over two months, Israel labored to assassinate al-Sulh, but failed.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that Israel did succeed in killing Lebanon's Prime Minister Riad al-Sulh, without leaving traces pointing to their responsibility, would anyone have considered – merely considered – accusing Israel, given the heated internal struggle in Lebanon at the time?

The close observer of Israel's strategy in Lebanon can only conclude that Israel has always considered that Lebanon must be under heavy Israeli influence. It became clear to Israel since the failure of the May 17, 1983 peace treaty, and the ascendancy of Hezbollah, that two main powers were blocking it from pursuing its objectives in Lebanon: Hezbollah and the Syrian influence in Lebanon. The question is: was the assassination of Rafiq Hariri separate from Israel's continued attempts to spread its influence in Lebanon? This is the question.