

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Strategic debate surfaces in Israel

The future for Israel—to be a regional gendarme or a sovereign national state—is at stake.

An April 5 comment on Israeli television by former Israeli Chief of Staff Mordechai Gur that “no one made Israel the policeman of the Middle East” may signal the opening of a long-overdue debate on future Israeli political-military strategy within that nation’s higher echelon military and intelligence community.

Gur’s comments were made specifically in reaction to the Begin government’s crisis mongering around the Lebanon situation, with Gur charging that the Begin team was “overreacting” by defining a “red line” for Syrian military actions in Lebanon.

Instead of such reactive approaches, Gur insisted, the Israelis should develop a “long-term strategic plan” to enunciate their interests in the region.

Aside from the Lebanon focus of his comments, Gur’s critique is thought to have potential significance as a polemic in the national electoral campaign, since, according to Israeli sources, Gur is an “activist” in the prime ministerial campaign of Begin’s main opponent and probable successor, Labour Party chairman Shimon Peres. Gur is reportedly a possible choice for a cabinet post in a Peres government.

But beyond the narrower considerations of Lebanon and the elections, Gur’s call for adoption of a “long-term strategic plan” and for avoidance of a regional Israeli

gendarme role is designed as an intervention against the evolving strategies not only of Begin, but of retired general and former Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan who is now the point-man for the “utopian” geopolitical school of Israeli strategic thinking.

Gur’s comments were made on the same day as an interview given by Dayan to the ABC-TV “Issues and Answers” program.

During that interview, Dayan extolled the virtues of a U.S.-Israel military treaty that would have, as a component aspect, the deployment of at least 2,000 American troops to form the backbone of a multinational force to be situated in the Sinai area now being evacuated by Israel, as provided for in the Camp David Egypt-Israel treaty. Then, Dayan made the glib commitment that “even without” a bilateral military treaty, “we shall play our role. We are ready to put our forces at U.S. disposal. If the Russians move in, Israel will fight. I think you can take Israel into account as an American base.”

Both American and Israeli military planners would do well to regard Dayan’s offer with extreme caution. In the past, his strategic exploits, for example, in the 1956 Suez war or in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, have hardly ever been to the benefit of either Israel or the United States.

A further dimension is added to this caution now by a report in the

April 3 *Jerusalem Post* that Dayan is a leading spokesman for the Israeli adoption of a “nuclear option” as the bulwark of its defense strategy.

Post military correspondent Hirsh Goodman noted that this Dayan-endorsed option is a “non-conventional, albeit destabilizing strategic alternative” that is being viewed as possibly the only path open to Israel, given Israel’s “immigration-emigration situation” and “economic and social problems.”

But many Israeli strategists, noting Israel’s lack of territorial depth and realizing that nuclear war could never be restricted within the Middle East region, think that such an option is a path to national suicide.

From their standpoint, Dayan’s endorsement of the nuclear option will only further necessitate the immediate opening of a strategic debate in Israel.

The last impetus to this immediacy is that Dayan is in active electoral collusion with Begin. On April 4, he announced the formation of a party, TELEM, a Hebrew acronym for “Movement for National Renewal,” to run in the elections.

Repeatedly, Dayan has indicated that his sole purpose in running will be to prevent the Labour Party from winning a majority in the elections.

But this might only encourage Begin’s adventurism. According to a front-page editorial in France’s *Le Figaro* April 6, Begin is “finally resolving to permanently implant in Lebanon the military forces of his country,” which would be the “ultimate and vigorous electoral argument” for his party.