

# Dave Kimche Remembered

*Yosef Lamdan*

*Yosef Lamdan joined Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1975 and served at the UN in New York (1975–79), Beirut (1982) and Washington (1985–89). Among his senior positions were Director, North American Division (1989–94), Ambassador to the UN, Geneva (1994–99) and to the Holy See (2000–05). He holds a doctorate in history from Oxford University.*

It was my special privilege to work closely with Dave Kimche on various diplomatic fronts, particularly as head of the Egypt Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1981 to 1985. The man I came to know was tenacious, pragmatic, creative, cerebral, and, above all, inspired by a strategic vision for Israel vis-à-vis its immediate Arab neighbors. He was also a supreme civil servant, unusually willing to delegate responsibility to those who worked for him and placing immense trust in them.

When I took over the Egypt Department, the Foreign Ministry had been relegated to a secondary position in the Arab–Israeli peace process, following the 1979 peace agreement with Egypt. The Prime Minister's Office maintained overall authority, while the normalization process with Egypt was directed by the Ministry of Defense. The issue of Palestinian autonomy was the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior. Dave Kimche, who had played a behind-the-scenes role in the preliminaries to the peace agreement, appeared far from happy with this situation, which he inherited when he became director-general of the Foreign Ministry in 1980. The most he could do was to closely monitor relations with Egypt and insist that the Foreign Ministry be properly represented in policy planning forums.

The outbreak of war in Lebanon on June 6, 1982 offered a diplomatic opening. On the strength of contacts he had developed with Maronite Christians in his Mossad days, and with great political prescience, Dave foresaw the possibility of negotiating a peace treaty with Lebanon as an outcome of the hostilities. He therefore made it a strategic goal for the Foreign Ministry to develop an effective presence in Beirut. He promptly dispatched a senior diplomatic liaison officer to Beirut, Moshe Arad (later ambassador to Mexico and the US). The war also badly jolted our relations with Egypt. Without much delay, the Egyptians recalled their ambassador to Israel, Saad Mortada, whereupon Dave summoned me to his office. "So now you're unemployed?" he inquired with an impish grin. I protested that relations with Egypt, with or without an ambassador *en poste*, would continue. But

Dave, with a wider strategic view of things, had something else in mind. Within a couple of days, I found myself making my way with an IDF escort to Beirut as the second Foreign Ministry representative in what was still very much a war zone. At that point, my instructions were simply to link up with Moshe Arad and assist him in the incipient diplomatic work already underway.

The ministry's presence in Beirut inevitably led to tensions with the Mossad, which until then had enjoyed a monopoly over Israeli activities in Lebanon and was not inclined to share its turf with intruders. Dave was not deterred by possible run-ins with his former employers, either at the policy or practical levels. We were, for example, dependent on the Mossad for secure communications with Jerusalem, which meant that the Mossad had complete access to our confidential material and information. At Dave's urging, we devised various ways to bypass the Mossad channel when need be, sometimes by simply resorting to three-way calls from public telephones, directly to Dave's desk.

Moshe Arad went back to Jerusalem shortly after I arrived and only returned to Beirut intermittently thereafter (eventually to be replaced by Bruce Kashdan, who later made a career as the ministry's roving representative in Arab countries). Consequently, I took on more of Moshe's political work, which included acting as diplomatic adviser to the IDF team in negotiations under American auspices regarding the ouster of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from West Beirut. Dave's input in these talks was considerable and his pragmatism contrasted with a certain rigidity on the IDF's part.

On August 30, towards the end of the PLO's withdrawal, President Ronald Reagan's special envoy to Lebanon, Philip Habib, and I ascended a grain silo overlooking Beirut's port to monitor Yasser Arafat's departure. We spotted him leading a convoy of jeeps, with guns mounted on their hoods, moving in the direction of the transport ship due to take him and his men to Tunisia. This was patently contrary to the agreements reached, whereby PLO men were only permitted to carry their personal weapons. I asked Habib to halt the convoy so that the situation could be reviewed. Irked, Habib retorted that if I jeopardized the operation at this point, he would phone the president. "The president of Lebanon?" I asked, a little surprised. "No—the president of the United States," he replied. Alarmed, I insisted on speaking with my superiors. Habib helped patch me through to Jerusalem, via the US embassy in Beirut, in a conversation that went something like, "Grumpy [Habib's code-name] to Disneyland [the embassy], Grumpy to Disneyland, get Kimche on the line fast!" After a hasty conversation and some brief consultations that Dave conducted from his end, a compromise was reached. Arafat could proceed in his weaponized jeep, but as for the rest of his

men, personal arms only. The PLO's retreat from West Beirut and the surrounding area was completed without further incident.

In keeping with Dave's longer-term approach, another "operation" in Beirut in which he took a personal interest was the search for premises, separate from those of the Mossad, which the Foreign Ministry was to share with the IDF spokesman. We were shown a number of properties, the most attractive of which belonged to a Saudi princess of high rank. The IDF spokesman was attracted to the place but I advised against it on the grounds that renting it might cause embarrassment in the Saudi court, which, at some point, Israel might come to regret. Dave accepted my recommendation without demur, only to be thoroughly put out when another Israeli security service promptly moved in.

Eventually we found appropriate quarters in the Ba'abda district that could be adequately guarded by IDF troops. Dave's sensitivities to diplomatic niceties then asserted themselves, leading us to conduct a learned debate as to what the Foreign Ministry's offices should be called (in French). Clearly they were not an "embassy" or a "consulate," since we did not have formal relations with Lebanon and indeed were precluded from direct contact with the Lebanese Foreign Ministry. The diplomatic terms of "mission" and "légation" did not fit either. Even though the ostensibly innocent appellation of "représentation d'Israël" was not without its legal problems, that was what Dave finally opted for.

I returned home on leave a few days before the killing of hundreds of Palestinian refugees in the camps at Sabra and Shatila by Christian militiamen in September of 1982. In this connection, my name, as the representative in Beirut of Israel's Foreign Ministry, was published in a Lebanese newspaper, *al-Safir*, and thus it was deemed unwise for me to return to Beirut. Dave, of course, stayed with the Lebanese issue and it was largely thanks to his tenacity and vision that Israel and Lebanon signed a peace agreement in 1984—which the Syrians made sure would never go into effect.

For my part, I went back to my old job in the Egypt Department, soon to become immersed in the "Taba dispute," another question that engaged a fair amount of Dave's attentions. In preparing Israel's case over this disputed patch of land at the Gulf of Aqaba end of the Israeli-Egyptian border, the historical/geographical aspects were handled by the Egypt Department, while the legal aspects were dealt with by the legal adviser, Eli Rubinstein (now Chief Justice Rubinstein), and his staff. The historical/geographical aspects were far from simple, going back to an Ottoman-Egyptian border agreement of 1906, which reflected British imperial interests at the time. With a doctorate in modern history and experience in the Mossad's research department, Dave was taken by the intellectual challenge of

building our case. To this end, he enlisted his brother Jon in London to sift through dusty files in the Public Records Office (PRO). Almost weekly, Dave would hand over a package of Xerox copies of material that Jon had uncovered and I would go off and write yet another memo developing our position.

All went reasonably well for several months, until one day Jon came across a 1906 photograph that definitively showed that the international frontier ran to the north of the Taba triangle and that the whole area had been ceded by the Ottomans to the Egyptians. To make matters worse, we suspected that Egyptian researchers, also working in the PRO, were tracking Jon's investigation and were methodically going through every file he examined. One way or another, they were sure to come across the "incriminating" photo. Dave did not give up, as others may have been tempted to do. He chose instead to change the whole thrust of the preparatory work and stress the legal side of our case. In the end, Israel and Egypt agreed to international arbitration and in 1988 a ruling was handed down in Egypt's favor.

Dave Kimche was a man of many talents. However, for my own part, I shall remember him especially for the straightforward respect he offered his colleagues and the deep friendship he developed with them, which went far beyond the office environment and long outlasted it.