

American Policy In The Middle East:
Where Do We Go From Here?

Edited by Steven L. Spiegel

1984

1. There are a number of labels, and a number of labels involved in the process of the program, and the program is a program of the program, and the program is a program of the program.

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NEXT STEPS IN LEBANON

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Daniel Pipes

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President Reagan has repeatedly stated that the United States has vital interests in Lebanon and will remain actively involved in that country. He has not, however, spelled out what those interests are nor how to attain them. The question is: Given the President's commitment, what is the nature of U.S. interests in Lebanon and what are the means to achieve them?

The multiplicity of actors involved in Lebanon makes this among the most complex of international problems. Internal Lebanese groups number about a hundred with over a dozen wielding significant power. About a half dozen Middle East states have had a direct military presence in the country. And troops from some ten non-Middle East countries have become involved on the ground in Lebanon, including both great powers.

Behind this myriad of factions, however, lies one principal conflict, that between two groups in Lebanon: those in favor of preserving the status quo or bringing it down. Christians predominate among the former and Muslims make up most of the latter, though numerous and important exceptions to this pattern exist. These two groupings differ over such matters as the distribution of power and privilege, the country's political identity (whether to be Arab or not), and relations with Israel. Muslim resentment of Christian domination, building since the 1950's, came to a head in April 1975 and led finally to civil war.

After war broke out it could not be contained. Although full-scale battles were ended after one and a half years, the country remained geographically split and embroiled in local fighting. Neighboring states became involved in the conflict, especially Syria in 1976 and Israel in 1982. The latter event -- a major incursion intended to drive the PLO out of Lebanon -- also brought the United States directly into Lebanon for the first time since the civil war began.

U.S. involvement began on August 25, 1982 when 800 Marines

(along with a similar number of French and Italian troops) took up positions in the region around the port of Beirut to facilitate the evacuation of PLO soldiers from Beirut. American troops left only seventeen days later, on September 10, when the PLO had left and the mission was completed. But Bashir Gemayel was assassinated on September 14 and the Sabra and Shatila massacres followed from September 16 to 18; by September 28 the U.S. Marines (as well as the French and Italian troops) were back in Beirut, this time with no specific mandate. Their presence was understood specifically to protect Muslims from the vengeful anger of Gemayel's Phalangist troops and generally to stabilize the situation in Beirut. On the day the Marines reentered Beirut, President Reagan indicated no more than that they would stay until Syrian and Israeli and PLO forces withdrew from the country.

The President made this open-ended statement on the basis of a widely held view in Washington that all foreign troops could be out of Lebanon within weeks. The PLO was seen no longer to be master of its fate in Lebanon, Israel was known to want to disentangle from Lebanon, and Syria was seen to be willing to leave as well, so long as its security needs were met. This last expectation, however, turned out to be wrong: then and now Hafiz al-Assad has clearly shown that he will do whatever he can to stay in Lebanon and will leave it only under duress. Keeping Syrian troops in Lebanon offers the following advantages to his regime:

1. It increases the legitimacy of the Assad government by fulfilling the decades-old Syrian aspiration of bringing Lebanon back under the control of Damascus.
2. Many Sunni Muslims in Syria interpreted the cooperation in 1976 of their Alawi rulers with the Maronites of Lebanon as a conspiracy against their interests. For this reason, conflict with the Maronite government of

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took to the sidelines for several months, losing precious time as the Soviet Union rearmed Syria.

By now it is clear to all that Syria presents the main obstacle to peace in Lebanon and that the vital U.S. interests in that country -- so far as they exist -- are to prevent the Syrians from dominating it. The question is: What can the U.S. do to make Syria leave Lebanon? Military action is one possibility, for the U.S. disposes of great power in Lebanon in conjunction with its NATO allies and Israel. Even alone, it could expel the Syrian forces from Lebanon. But military action on its own poses insuperable problems and would be ineffectual, for the following reasons:

- o U.S. - Soviet confrontation. The USSR has major military installations in Syria and is unlikely to stand by and watch its investment jeopardized by the U.S.; the fear of direct U.S.-Soviet military engagement would therefore severely impede U.S. actions against Syria.

- o The Vietnam syndrome. To expel Syrian troops from Lebanon would require the deployment of U.S. ground troops. This could easily turn into a protracted military involvement if the Syrians avoided direct combat and resorted to guerrilla operations. As months passed and casualties mounted, U.S. public opinion might turn against the President, forcing a withdrawal.

- o Nickle and diming. If the Syrians were successfully forced out of Lebanon by the U.S., American troops would have to remain until a unified Lebanese force could replace them. Yet the government in Beirut lacks the backing of the population in areas now under Syrian control, which would fiercely resist occupation by the Gemayel forces. Further, the government lacks the manpower to hold the areas against the will of the local population. U.S. troops would have to remain as an occupation force until they could be relieved by Lebanese.

The longer they stayed, the greater the chances that they would be subjected to sniper fire, car bombs, ambushes, and the other tactics that worked so well against Israeli troops north of the Awali River. These would probably have the same effect as they had on Israeli public opinion and might lead to an American retreat. The Syrians would then have the opportunity to return to Lebanon, nullifying the U.S. military efforts.

o Open-ended occupation. If the United States did manage to pacify the areas under its control (as Israel did in the land south of the Awali), it might then embark on a quasi-permanent occupation (again, as in the Israeli case). American soldiers would then rule portions of Lebanon, provoking intense internal and international opposition. But so long as no Lebanese authority could replace them, the soldiers would have to stay to protect the U.S. investment.

For these reasons, military action on its own will not work. If the U.S. is to be successfully involved in internal Lebanese affairs, it must prepare for this politically. Before becoming engaged on the ground, the U.S. needs the backing of a Lebanese consensus to repulse the Syrian forces; it needs a Lebanese government that can call on the allegiance of most of its citizens. The existence of a strong central authority would help avoid all four of the dangers noted above. Were the Lebanese united, their forces could take on the Syrians, reducing the danger of a U.S.-Soviet confrontation, lessening American casualties, decreasing the danger of guerrilla warfare, and insuring the existence of a legitimate authority to take over areas under U.S. control.

The key problem facing U.S. efforts to expel Syria from Lebanon is the fact that there has been no effective government since the outbreak of civil war in 1975. If the U.S. is to become deeply involved in Lebanon, it must first address the problem of Lebanese political disunity; only after that can it

deal with the Syrian presence. Syria will be excluded from Lebanon only if the Lebanese are at peace among themselves; otherwise Damascus will find Lebanese allies willing to serve its ends. The first U.S. goal must be to deprive Hafiz al-Assad of Lebanese agents by effecting a reconciliation between the citizens of Lebanon.

After eight years of fighting, relations between the pro- and anti-status quo forces are bitter and suspicious; yet the U.S. has powerful means at its disposal to pressure both sides to enter into serious negotiations about the formation of a strong central government and the reestablishment of a peaceful political life in Lebanon. This can be achieved with a two-pronged effort, first toward the Christians, then toward the Muslims.

The Christians come first because they are easier to influence. The United States provides vast support to the status-quo-oriented government of Amin Gemayel -- much more than the press has noted. In addition to the direct backing of American forces, the Lebanese authorities receive arms and military trainers. They depend on the United States to represent their interests internationally (for instance, in the negotiations with Israel); they look to us for economic aid; and the Lebanese President and his advisors have become psychologically dependent on Washington for moral support.

In return, the United States has asked very little of Gemayel. Specifically, it has not yet insisted that he make real concessions to the anti-status quo side, the Muslims. Gemayel has talked of reconciliation but until now has offered nothing concrete to the opposition. He claims that fundamental changes cannot be made while foreigners dominate the country -- hardly a convincing argument to the Muslim faction. As Lebanese commentators have noted, the government's motto, "Liberation before Reconciliation" should be reversed, to "Reconciliation for the Sake of Liberation." (WSJ, Aug. 12,

1983)

Concessions Gemayel should make involve the holding of a new census, the opening of government offices to Lebanese regardless of faith, the elimination of the 6-to-5 ratio in the government and so forth. If the U.S. government forcefully demands concessions -- perhaps even in the form of ultimata -- the status quo faction will have little choice but to submit.

These same concessions then become the basis of U.S. government relations with the anti-status quo faction. Insistence on Christian concessions should induce the opposition to negotiate with the government, assuring it that the Gemayel regime must bargain in good faith to retain United States support. At the same time, it discourages the opposition forces from trying to overrun the government by assuring U.S. military backing to Gemayel so long as he is committed to sharing power. If the anti-status quo faction is still not convinced to forego the military option, the U.S. can take more active steps, both positive (offering it economic assistance or military protection) or negative (fighting against them alongside the government forces).

Inducing the Lebanese to lay down their arms and join in serious talks is by far the most difficult challenge facing the United States in Lebanon; it means tackling no less than the problems about power that led to the outbreak of the civil war in the first place. This daunting task, however, is implicit to the American mission in Lebanon as defined by President Reagan. If the U.S. cannot help solve the issues that prompt the Lebanese to fight among themselves, it will not be able to keep the Syrians out of Lebanon.

It was a mistake to focus on the withdrawal of foreign troops, for these are a symptom, not a cause, of Lebanon's fundamental political problem. The real issue is the conflict between the Lebanese themselves. In 1975, it was the citizens of Lebanon -- and not foreigners -- who began the fighting that

led to civil war; today it is they who most often kill each other. Foreign troops were dragged in only when requested by the Lebanese factions; they remain because the Lebanese are deeply divided.

Rather than pursue the pipedream of near-term Syrian and Israeli withdrawals, the U.S. government would do better to press the Gemayel government to restructure Lebanese policy. The Phalangist authorities, dedicated to maintaining Maronite preeminence, will not welcome this, but the topic must be broached if the Lebanese are to make peace with each other. Power must be redistributed before the communal factions will stop the killing. And the internecine killing must stop before the Syrian forces will evacuate.