

Lebanon has become a pawn in international politics. Things can never be the same again: but the outcome remains highly unpredictable.

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LEBANON: The Middle East battleground

PRESIDENT REAGAN'S IDENTIFICATION of Lebanon as the scene of a major confrontation between East and West has added a dangerous extra dimension to the already deep-rooted crisis in that divided and embattled country. Having decided that he could not persuade the Syrians to withdraw their 40,000 or so troops by diplomatic means, he used the Israeli Prime Minister's visit to Washington in late November to cement a new military and strategic alliance with the major aim of trying to expel them by threat of force. For the time being the pressure will be exerted by the bombardment of Syrian positions by sea and air. But President Assad and his advisers in Damascus can be in little doubt that the bottom line of the new agreement is an Israeli commitment to start a ground war if necessary. Justification — as always — is provided by the allegation that the Syrians are acting directly as the agents of Moscow. As Reagan himself tried to argue during his invasion of Grenada — itself triggered off in part by the lorry-bomb attack on the American marines in Beirut: 'The events in Lebanon and Grenada, though oceans apart, are closely related'. Both, he said, were scenes of major Soviet activity by means of a 'network of surrogates and terrorists'.

The American/Israeli military alliance is only the latest in a series of abrupt twists and turns in American policy beginning with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. There seems little doubt that Mr Begin and General Sharon were given some sort of green light to go ahead by the then Secretary of State, Alexander Haig. But no sooner had the Israelis besieged Beirut and come into potentially dangerous conflict with the Syrian troops along the Beirut/Damascus road than the Americans tried to defuse the situation and to build up the authority of Lebanese central government. This was an effort to safeguard their wider Middle Eastern peace initiative designed to sidetrack Palestinian demands

for an independent state. It was with this aim that in September 1982 they helped to negotiate the agreement which allowed Yasser Arafat and his Palestinian guerrillas to leave Beirut, using a small detachment of American troops to assist their departure. Then, after the assassination of President Bashir Gemayel and the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps, they sent in a larger number of Marines as part of a four-nation Multinational Peacekeeping Force. The force was given the twin task of facilitating the withdrawal of Israeli troops from West Beirut and of shoring up the authority of the government of the new President, Amin Gemayel. The announcement of the Reagan Peace Plan calling for a 'fully autonomous' Palestinian entity linked to Jordan during that same month, was also part of this general strategy.

Growing doubts

American policy worked after a fashion for about six months. Inside Lebanon the Multinational Force provided sufficient support to allow President Gemayel to begin to rebuild some of the central organs of the state. Outside, the Arab Summit of Fez followed by the meeting of the PLO in Algiers in February 1983, seemed to provide promise of movement in the direction of a joint Palestinian/Jordanian approach to negotiations with the Israelis over the future of the West Bank. As far as Lebanon itself was concerned, the culmination of this stage of American policy was the joint agreement between Israel and Lebanon for the withdrawal of Israeli troops, finally signed on 17 May 1983.

But even before the Syrians, and some of their Lebanese allies, had begun to challenge the withdrawal agreement on the grounds that it provided the basis for a continued Israeli military presence in the south, other developments were taking place which cast serious doubts on the viability of the American policy. One was

the way in which the new Lebanese government soon lost most of its credibility for being either neutral or properly national as a result of its employment of large numbers of members of the President's own Phalange party in sensitive positions. The fact that the regime also pursued a heavy-handed security policy against Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims living in West Beirut while continuing to tolerate Phalange control over much of East Beirut, was a further sign of its basic orientation.

Equally important developments were taking place in the Shuf mountains behind Beirut. Here the Phalange had sought to take advantage of the Israeli occupation to extend its enforced protection over Christian villages while trying to undermine the authority of Walid Jumblat, the leader of the majority of the Druze community which was concentrated there. This soon produced a united Druze counter-reaction in the form of sectarian killings and then increasingly bitter fighting against Phalange encroachment. Under the pressure of these events, the initial Israeli encouragement of Phalangist expansionism gave way to an attempt to contain the intra-communal fighting and then, finally, to a much more decidedly pro-Druze stance; so

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that, by February 1983, the Israelis had gone so far as to allow the Druze to drive the Phalange out of the important town of Aley on the main Beirut/Damascus road. Pressure from the Israeli Druze community certainly had something to do with this change of strategy. But it also coincided with the resignation of General Sharon, the main architect of the Israeli/Phalange alliance, and his replacement as Defence Minister by Moshe Arens who quickly began to pursue the very different policy of

trying to reach a *modus vivendi* with the leaders of each of Lebanon's major confessional groups.

Arafat's fall

Finally, in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in the east Lebanon, an accelerating revolt was taking place among the Palestinian fighters stationed there, against the leadership of Yasser Arafat. While there is no doubt that this movement was encouraged and supported by the Syrians, it was certainly based firmly on a growing sense of grievance against Arafat himself, notably his tolerance of inefficient and sometimes corrupt subordinates and his apparently growing taste for negotiations which were supposed to lead to the creation of a West Bank mini-state. For such men,

designed to facilitate the creation of a Palestinian state.

The next stage in these developments took place through the summer of 1983, culminating in the Israeli military withdrawal from the Shuf mountains early in September and the attempt by the Lebanese army to replace them. It was during this same period that the Gemayel government began a concerted attempt to use its army to establish control throughout Beirut and its immediate environs, producing an increasingly angry reaction from the Muslim inhabitants, notably the half a million Shiites living in the western suburbs. Meanwhile, continued American support for the training and deployment of the Lebanese army was being widely interpreted as placing the United States

followed by three weeks of bitter fighting in which the Druze managed to drive the remaining Phalangist militia out of the mountains while preventing the Lebanese army from doing more than maintain a tenuous bridgehead in the hill-town of Souk al-Gharb directly above the American positions at Beirut airport. There seems little doubt that this town too would have fallen if it had not been for a steadily escalating use of United States naval and air power against Druze artillery. It was then that an international mediation effort involving the Saudis, the Americans and the Syrians led to the negotiation of a ceasefire which came into effect on September 26. The general context of this was a programme of national reconciliation calling for a conference of Lebanese confessional leaders to solve their differences and to allow the formation of a government of national unity.

It was at this stage that American/Syrian relations were at their closest. It would seem that strenuous United States efforts were made to repair the damage caused by the fact that the Syrians had been largely ignored in the negotiations leading up to the Israeli/Lebanese withdrawal agreement, even though their own security interests were so vitally affected. The care with which the main American representative, Robert McFarlane, attended to these negotiations seemed to pay off in a Syrian willingness to drop their larger demands for the return of the Golan Heights and for the recall of the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference on Palestine of which both the United States and the Soviet Union are co-chairpersons. President Assad did, however, stick out for the abrogation of the Israeli/Lebanese withdrawal agreement. And it was this, in the end, which seems to have been one of the major reasons for the final shift in American policy which took place in November, away from the limited diplomatic cooperation with Syria towards a strategic cooperation with Israel against Syria.



LEBANON November 1983 showing its main population centres and areas currently controlled by main forces.



LEBANON November 1983 showing its present boundary and the broad traditional location of main communities.

the news of Arafat's negotiation with their arch-enemy, King Hussein, in the spring of 1983 was, it seems, the last straw. And with Syrian and Libyan assistance they began to drive pro-Arafat loyalists out of the Bekaa and back to the two refugee camps located just north of the port city of Tripoli. The Syrians, for their part, were using their newly restored confidence, based on the arrival of Soviet military equipment and, in particular, ground-to-air missiles, to try to bring the Palestine Liberation Organisation completely under their control. This was a way of sabotaging any possibility of a Jordanian/Israeli agreement over the West Bank and elevating themselves as the main negotiators in any international conference

squarely behind a government which, judged by its acts, is little more than an instrument for renewed Maronite/Phalange domination over the other Lebanese communities. The bombing of the American Embassy in April 1983, and then an intensified spate of attacks on the Marine base near the airport, were obvious signs of this. Unsuccessful American efforts to persuade the Israelis to delay their withdrawal until the Lebanese army was strong enough to take over their positions in the Shuf only made the inherent ambiguity of the American position still clearer.

Close US/Syrian relations

The final Israeli pull-out in September was

US hard line

The reasons for this abrupt change of policy are still not clear. But they must certainly have something to do with the dangerous and dramatic events of late October and early November. These included the huge bomb explosions at the French and American military headquarters in Beirut and the one at the Israeli headquarters in Tyre which soon followed. All three of the aggrieved governments were quick to blame the huge loss of life on Shiite militants egged on by Syria. The American invasion of

Grenada followed. And so did a strenuous counter-attack against the policy of cooperation with Syria launched by the Secretary of State, George Schultz, anxious, many would say, to protect his one and only major foreign policy achievement: the Israeli/Lebanese Withdrawal Agreement. Hence, even while the Lebanese National Reconciliation Conference was taking place in Geneva in the first week of November and agreeing to send President Gemayel off to Washington to try to ease — or even 'freeze' — the objectionable terms of this agreement, an American Under-Secretary of State, Lawrence Eagleburger, was visiting Israel to sound out the new government of Itzhak Shamir on a plan for joint military pressure on Syria. The fact that President Assad went into hospital at

Lebanon's Religious Communities (estimates)

Maronite Christian	9,000,000
Orthodox Christians	250,000
Greek Catholics	150,000
Shiite Muslims	1,100,000
Sunni Muslims	750,000
Druze	200,000
Armenians	175,000

just this same time may have given added impetus to these discussions. With both the Syrian and Soviet leaders ill, so it may have been argued, now was the time to get tough.

With the Israeli leaders willing to cooperate — albeit in exchange for a huge list of arms supplies and credits — those officials in favour of a hard line against Syria were able to obtain President Reagan's support. No doubt their arguments went something like this: the only hope of keeping President Gemayel's government in power and of allowing it to extend its control outside Beirut is to get the Syrians to withdraw; United States military pressure alone cannot guarantee this because of the shortage of ground forces but an agreement with Israel will get round this problem; success will bring the added bonus of allowing the marines to be withdrawn in time for the 1984 presidential election.

By the time Prime Minister Shamir and President Gemayel arrived in Washington in the last week of November the plans for the new policy were complete. While Shamir came away with an agreement to establish a joint United States/Israeli military committee in January 1984 to plan further strategic cooperation, President Gemayel was given little more than a homily about the need to act tough in the

deployment of his army and to behave in a more conciliatory fashion towards the Muslim communities — an obviously contradictory policy which he seems incapable of pursuing. Meanwhile, Yasser Arafat's last stand in Tripoli could be conveniently forgotten and his role as leader of the PLO outside Lebanon ignored.

The Lebanese nation

The country which provides the arena for all this external manipulation is small — some 3.5 million people, divided into numerous religious communities and, since 1976, subject to the prolonged occupation of all but its central heartland by Syrian, Israeli, and, to a lesser extent, Palestinian forces. It owes its boundaries to the French who created it as an enclave for their Maronite Christian proteges after the First World War, and its constitutional arrangements to France's efforts to co-opt the leaders of the Muslim communities into a system of government designed to preserve its own, and Maronite, hegemony. These avowedly confessional arrangements were enshrined in the so-called National Pact of 1943 in which some of the leaders of the two most numerous and powerful communities, the Maronites and the Sunni Muslims of the coastal towns, came to an agreement about the basic principles upon which their power in the newly independent state should be founded. This agreement is usually presented as involving a set of mutual concessions, with the Maronite leaders agreeing to act as though Lebanon was an Arab state and not an outpost of Europe and the Sunni Muslims acquiescing to continued Maronite domination of the state structure. But, just as important, it also reaffirmed the desire of both sets of leaders to find a way of

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cooperating together in the management of a system which ensured their own economic and political supremacy.

The new system was immediately subject to a large number of pressures, both internal and external. Internally, the rapid growth of the economy based on the development of Beirut's role as a commercial entrepot and banking centre for the region created a widening gap between the wealth of different social groups, while drawing more and more of the peasant agriculturalists into the capital-city in search of better employment. Meanwhile,

the state structure remained weak, being dominated by bankers, merchants and landowners who had little use for its support, and was unable to provide even the most elementary services in the more economically backward parts of the country in the north, east and south.

Externally, Lebanon was drawn into a number of Middle Eastern disputes taking place around it, becoming unwilling host to over 100,000 Palestinian refugees after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and then being turned into something of a battleground for proxy lights between supporters of one or other of its stronger Arab neighbours. The culmination of this process was the brief civil war of 1958 in which local factions, aided and abetted by an array of outside fighting forces from the Americans to the Egyptians, engaged in a short period of bitter fighting before the system was put together again by the Army Commander, General Shehab, who had wisely kept his troops out of the struggle until the warring chieftains had agreed to negotiate.

The Lebanese Left

It is often asserted by Lebanese historians that the presidency of General Shehab, 1958-64, offered a last chance for Lebanon to avert catastrophe. Their argument is that the General's attempt to increase the power of the central government and to use its resources to develop the economic life of the more backward and deprived regions was the only way to avoid that overlap of class and confessional conflicts which was later to play such an important role in igniting the Second Civil War of 1975/6. But is probably more true to say that Shehab's failure only served to underline the way in which the system was impervious to reform. A predominantly service economy, dominated by merchants and bankers, and with only a few industrialists, meshed closely with a confessional political system in which the leaders of the various communities were able to cooperate together to a sufficient degree to share out the few spoils among their clients and supporters. Neither the economic nor the political elite had any interest in increasing the power of the state, while the fact that up to two-thirds of the workforce was employed in the service sector left little room for the creation of class-based organisations which might have posed a successful challenge to the existing distribution of wealth and power.

What would have happened in Lebanon without the 1967 Middle East war and the consequent establishment of a powerful

Palestinian guerrilla movement is impossible to say. What in fact did take place was a momentary coincidence of interest between Lebanon's fledgling leftist groups, and the Palestinian fighters in and around Beirut, which, in turn, provoked a major counter-challenge from the Phalange party and its militia as defenders of the existing *status quo*. The ferocity of this struggle, which really began in earnest in the early 1970s, was greatly exacerbated by two other developments: the intensification of the fighting between Palestinians and Israelis across Lebanon's southern border and the effect this had on driving numbers of the poor Shiite peasants from the disputed areas north to find work in Beirut. All this seemed to provide an opportunity for the further progress of the radical groups, including the Lebanese Communist Party, and the 'New Left' Organisation for Communist Action, loosely connected together after 1969 in the Lebanese National Movement under the general leadership of the Druze socialist, Kamal Jumblat. But, in the event, the unashamedly sectarian response of the Phalange to their challenge, and the fact that they were a coalition of so many different social forces and ideological tendencies, made effective coordination difficult. Already, by February 1976, some of their leaders like Jumblat were backing away from their Transitional Programme of August 1975 with its emphasis on a thoroughgoing democratisation and secularisation of the Lebanese system, towards a strategy designed to use their armed strength to push for confessional reforms of a kind which would allow Muslims, *en masse*, parity of representation in Parliament and the state administration.

As the fighting progressed the Left's greatest chance of success could have been military victory over the Phalange in the spring of 1976. But this was prevented by Syrian intervention. And from then on, the National Movement, deprived of the unifying role of Jumblat after his assassination later that same year, became militarily weaker and more fragmented, while the Phalange was able to intensify its control of East Beirut and the Maronite heartland to the north under the violent leadership of Bashir Gemayel, the second son of the founder of the party, Pierre Gemayel. By 1980, Bashir had eliminated all but one of his Maronite rivals, and then organised his militias into a new military grouping known as the Lebanese Forces which he used to further his strategy of taking over the main institutions of the Lebanese state with the help of an increasingly close alliance with the Israelis.

The rise of the Shiite Movement

As the power of the National Movement waned, the only opposition of Bashir's plans seemed to be provided by the Palestinians and the Syrians. But this was to ignore the potential of a new group which had emerged among the Muslim population, the Shiite Movement of the Disinherited begun in 1974 by the religious leader, the Imam Musa Sadr, with its military arm known as Amal. The movement announced itself with a number of mass rallies and a policy of opposition to the Israeli raids into southern Lebanon where at least half of the over a million strong community continued to live. However, it played little role in the fighting of 1975/6 and only became of real military importance in 1978 when, as a result of the brief Israeli occupation of the south, large numbers of poor Shiites were again driven to Beirut to find shelter in the slums and shanty towns around the western part of the city. Such people provided ready recruits for the Shiite militia, and from then on its strength grew impressively, even if it was not able to pursue a coordinated political and military strategy due to the fact that the community was still geographically dispersed and ideologically divided.

While the main Beirut leadership under Musa Sadr's successor, Nabih Berri, developed a 'nationalist' stand aimed at increasing Shiite power within a reconstituted state structure, others in the Bekaa

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Valley and in the south adopted a more 'Islamic' stance, influenced by the Iranian revolution and stressing the primacy of the fight against Israel and American imperialism.

The importance of the Shiites increased still further after the Israeli invasion of June 1982. Both in West Beirut and in the Israeli-controlled south they began to play an increasing role in the fighting against the Israeli army and, latterly, the Lebanese army as well. In addition, Amal succeeded in creating closer the links with the Shiite leadership in the south, making it much more difficult for the Israelis to organise the village militias which they hoped would provide useful local agents for their policies. With the Israeli withdrawal to the line of the Awali river, halfway between Beirut and the southern border, in

September 1983, and more especially with their attempts to control movement across this line in the wake of the Tyre lorry-bomb attack, the Shiite population of the south is steadily moving from passive resistance to open insurrection. It is clear that the Shiite/Druze military alliance will now do much to determine the course of events in the Muslim areas south of Beirut.

The future

What of the future? It is obviously clear that the people of Lebanon are not going to be left alone to sort out their own difficulties even if they are capable of doing so. For the time being the main military battle will be fought in the air and around the Marine base at the edge of Beirut airport. And given the enormously high stakes involved, with Soviet anti-aircraft missiles deployed so close to American and Israeli positions, it seems likely that there will be an initial period of bluff and pin-prick pressure. This, while it lasts, will at least have the advantage of allowing certain countervailing forces to assert themselves: the American Congress, Israeli anti-war opinion and the increasing alarm at American policy felt by the three European governments with troops in the Multinational Force. Among many other things, fighting in Lebanon is a very public and highly televised encounter, where news cannot simply be managed as in the Falklands or Grenada. Beyond that, the only other prediction which can be put forward with any certainty is that Syria will resist efforts to eject her troops by force so long as the home front, under the leadership of an ill President Assad, continues to hold.

In these circumstances, the Lebanese leaders, if and when they reassemble for the second stage of their Reconciliation Conference, will still be faced with a situation in which three-quarters of their national territory and about half their population are under foreign control. And even what they do with what is left is not entirely up to them to decide. A new National Pact and the creation of a government of National Unity seems to be about the best they can hope for. But whether they can even agree on this, and whether all of the fellow members of their different communities will consent to follow their lead is doubtful. Meanwhile, stresses and strains within the government's shaky institutions are bound to get worse, with a mutiny of the army's predominantly Shiite rank and file perhaps the most obvious bet if fighting should start again. It is a grim prospect.