

Back In Beirut's Morass

Syrian troops are back in Beirut more than 10 years after President Hafez al-Assad first decided to intervene militarily to try to end the Lebanese civil war. Much has changed since Syrian tanks rumbled over the Mount Lebanon range in June 1976 to prevent the Palestinian-Lebanese leftist forces securing an outright victory in the civil war.

But Syria's objectives have remained remarkably consistent. Assad's primary aim has been to keep control over the Palestinian question - this has meant keeping control over Lebanon since the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) set up its base in Beirut in the late 1960s.

Syria has striven for the past 20 years to wipe out

Palestinian aspirations for independence. The danger of an independent PLO, in Assad's view, is twofold: it could provoke Israel into attacking Syria; and it could make peace with Israel, leaving Syria out in the cold. For Syria, the Palestinian issue is too important and too fraught with risks to be left to Palestinians, especially devious, independent-minded ones like PLO chair Yasser Arafat.

Since Syria withdrew its forces from Beirut in June 1982 after reaching a ceasefire agreement with the invading Israelis, Assad has tried the option of pursuing his objectives in Lebanon through proxies. Shia Muslim groups, inspired by the Islamic revolution in Iran and given logistical support by Syrian intelligence, engineered the departure of the US-led multinational force from Beirut and obliged Israel to pull its forces back to the border area. Amal, the

main Shia organisation, was actively encouraged to try to subdue the Palestinian refugee camps. A shadowy intelligence operative in the Maronite Christian Lebanese forces, Elie Hobeika, 'delivered' Christian approval of a Syrian peace plan, but was subsequently ousted by his own community.

The proxy option worked up to a point, but things began to become complicated for Syria when the proxies either failed to perform properly or went their own way. Hobeika's failure was a severe blow, but Damascus has since managed to resume a dialogue of sorts with Maronite leaders.

More worrying was the failure of Amal to subdue the Palestinian camps. The decision to send Syrian troops into West Beirut came after rival Muslim and Druze militias turned on Amal. The Syrian action saved Amal from humiliation, but it also forced Syria to become



The PLO in West Beirut during the Syrian withdrawal in 1982

directly engaged in the Beirut morass. This has been a political defeat for the PLO, but it has provided some respite for the Palestinians in the Beirut camps, who have no option but to accept Syrian protection.

The thorniest question for Assad now is how to deal with the pro-Iranian Shia Hizbollah party. Hizbollah has stayed out of the war on the Palestinians, and was not involved in the fighting in West Beirut which triggered the Syrian incursion. But Hizbollah is involved in attacks on Israeli positions in south Lebanon, it has a strong presence in Beirut's southern suburbs and it almost certainly holds most of the 25 or so Western hostages. Assad has assured Iranian leaders that he does not intend to crush Hizbollah by force. But all the signs point to a confrontation between Hizbollah and Syrian troops.

But beyond all the political complications, the presence of Syrian troops in Beirut has come as something of a relief for ordinary Lebanese, who have been yearning for some strong centralised authority to end the anarchy and disintegration.

The Lebanese pound recently fell below 100 to the dollar; between 1975-82 the pound stayed in the range of 3-5 to the dollar. This accelerating depreciation translates into a 150% annual increase in the cost of living. The Syrian intervention has done a little to stabilise the currency, but it will be a long haul to restore the central government authority which is vital if Lebanon is to reconstitute itself. The country is effectively divided into cantons controlled by militias - the best organised are the Maronite Lebanese Forces and the Druze under Walid Jumblatt.

The economic and political vested interests in a fragmented Lebanon are too well entrenched for any attempt to put the country together again to stand much hope of succeeding. The best that can be hoped for is a period of relatively peaceful coexistence. •

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