

Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 35: The United States in Lebanon: A Case for Disengagement

April 3, 1984

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Executive Summary

With the recent failure of Lebanon's feuding leaders to agree to a national reconciliation, or to achieve even a durable cease-fire, it should not be forgotten that American ships float offshore carrying large guns and over 1000 Marines. That continued presence is especially noteworthy in light of the incessant fighting in Beirut and the kidnapping of American diplomat William Buckley in the capital's Moslem sector. Despite President Reagan's decision to "redeploy" the Marines from Beirut International Airport to the safety of the ships, and the hiatus in active diplomatic efforts, it would be premature to say the United States is out of the picture.

Paradoxically, the redeployment was both an implicit admission by Reagan that his Lebanese policy was misguided from the beginning and a wrong-headed attempt to stick to the general policy aims. While the president has decided to remove the Marines from the proximity of the fighting that threatens to reduce Lebanon to a smoldering battlefield, bringing down what is left of the government of President Amin Gemayel, Reagan's decision to loosen the restrictions on the gunboats and bombers could mean that deeper American military involvement lies ahead. Indeed, with the Marines out of the way, at least temporarily,[1] the 16-inch guns of the battleship *New Jersey* and the American bombers may even rain further destruction on Lebanese Moslems and Druze. Civilians are sure to be among the victims of the American strikes on the hills outside Beirut.

Once again, we must witness the sad spectacle of Americans scurrying from violence in a foreign country. The tragedy is not that they flee, but that the government puts them in such a position in the first place. Those in this country who have called for the withdrawal of the Marines all along had hoped to avoid this spectacle.

President Reagan sought to put the best light on his decision to move the Marines offshore, but this was a formidable task, indeed. The decision was combined with measures that "will strengthen our ability to do the job we set out to do and sustain our efforts over the long term." The measures include naval and air bombardment of Moslem and Druze areas from which fire on Beirut originates and stepped-up training and equipping of the fading Gemayel government. In other words, the removal of the Marines indicates little change in the basic Reagan policy of backing President Gemayel. But since Gemayel has done little or nothing to solve the problems his presidency created for Lebanon, Reagan continues to commit the United States to a dangerously unwise policy.

The sudden decision to move the Marines (Reagan only days before had characterized Democratic calls for such action as "surrender") vindicated the Pentagon's Long Commission, which investigated the October 1983 truck bombing of the Marine compound that killed 241 members of the contingent. The commission, arguably going beyond its charge, looked at the mission itself. It didn't like what it saw.

It concluded: "U.S. decisions regarding Lebanon taken over the past 15 months have been to a large degree characterized by an emphasis on military options and the expansion of the U.S. military role, notwithstanding the fact that the conditions upon which the security of the [Marines was] based continues to deteriorate as progress toward a diplomatic solution slowed."

The release of the report, though delayed by the administration in an attempt to blunt its impact, unleashed a flood of criticism that had been pent up for some time. Congressional Democrats and Republicans, many of whom held their criticism when Congress and the president struck a War Powers agreement giving the Marines 18 months in Lebanon, again began questioning the mission. Seventy representatives, Democrats and Republicans, demanded a review of the War Powers agreement, while Senator Charles Mathias (R-Md.) offered an amendment to cut the length of the mission to six months.

As the president's policy came in for renewed critical examination, signals from Beirut, Damascus, and Washington occasionally gave hope that withdrawal was not far off. Statements by President Reagan or special envoy Rumsfeld, especially those following the Syrian release of Navy Lt. Robert Goodman, indicated that some modus vivendi would be struck with Syria that could lead to an agreement among the contending parties and the withdrawal of the Marines. But in each case, the conciliatory tones were followed by tough American language about the intentions of Syrian president Hafez Assad, his Soviet backers, and his Moslem and Druze allies. Hope of progress toward a U.S. disengagement soon faded.

And each time this happened, President Reagan responded that American credibility was at stake and that a withdrawal would not only leave Lebanon in a bad way, but would undermine the U.S. claim to being a reliable ally. President Reagan continued to espouse this line even after the decision to remove the Marines was made. On February 2 he told the Wall Street Journal, "If we get out, it also means the end of any ability on our part to bring about an overall peace in the Middle East and I would have to say it means a pretty disastrous result for us worldwide."

But the resignation of Prime Minister Wazzan, a Sunni Moslem, and the rest of President Gemayel's cabinet, the outbreak of fierce fighting in Beirut, and major defections from the Lebanese army underscored the hopelessness of American policy in Lebanon.

President Reagan appears to have put the United States in an impossible and trying situation. Lebanon is beset by old and complex internal and external problems that virtually preclude social cohesiveness and tranquility, yet such cohesiveness and tranquility are made the pre-conditions of an American disengagement. Moreover, the American presence further aggravates the Lebanese problems, making the conditions for disengagement even less likely. The Marines were never peacekeepers; they were partisans. The Reagan policy, then, is caught in a deadly net: by its very nature, success is unlikely.

President Reagan's defense of his policy goes beyond Lebanon and any direct link it may or may not have to American security. He has made Lebanon a matter of U.S. credibility, saying, "We cannot simply withdraw unilaterally without raising questions about the U.S. commitment to moderation and negotiations in the Middle East." [2] To leave, he argues, is to diminish America's standing in the world. He has said disengagement would be a disaster for U.S. foreign policy.

The argument from credibility, rather than being persuasive, actually-calls into question the prudence of the United States' postwar foreign policy. By adopting a policy which holds that events anywhere in the world necessarily affect its interests, the United States has made virtually any development a test of its credibility. This is no exaggeration of the administration's position. The president said in October, "The struggle for peace is indivisible. We cannot pick and choose where we will support freedom. We can only determine how. If it's lost in one place, all of us lose." [3] Secretary of State George Shultz amplified Reagan's point when he speculated on whether there might be other "Lebanons" in America's future. Shultz said, "I think we are going to be presented around the world with a lot of situations that fall...between...massive deterrence on the one hand, and the neat, doable, Grenada-type operation on the other. Maybe...there aren't any circumstances between the extremes to which U.S. forces should be committed. If so, there are going to be a lot of U.S. interests that will be forgone around the world." [4]

What the administration ignores is that if one announces that something is a test of one's credibility, it becomes so. In the name of credibility, errors are prolonged, and anyone is invited to name the time and place of the next credibility test.

Critics of Reagan's policy may say that the credibility argument is a good reason not to get involved in situations such as Lebanon's. But this is not fundamental criticism. Reagan could easily have argued, before the Marines entered Lebanon, that to refrain from intervening would itself undermine U.S. credibility. It is part of Henry Kissinger's world view, for example, that avoiding opportunities to exert U.S. influence emboldens America's adversaries. So the credibility argument must be uprooted, not just pruned. The roots lie in America's bipartisan foreign policy. By forswearing the role of global policeman defending farflung "interests," and adopting instead a noninterventionist foreign policy, we would define most changes in the world out of the category of tests of our credibility.

The specific problems that make America's mission in Lebanon so poorly chosen are both external and internal, though there is considerable overlap between the two.

Internal Problems

Lebanon's unfortunate and distinguishing characteristic is a violent, multi-dimensional religious rivalry involving some sixteen sects. Militias abound. There are rivalries between the major religious groups--Christian and Moslem--as well as within subgroups. For instance, the Maronite Catholics, the major Christian sect, have had bitter internal conflicts based on family, geographical, and political rivalries. The disputes among the old ruling families led by Pierre Gemayel, Suleiman Franjeh, and Camille Chamoun are legend in the Middle East. These various conflicts are old, bitter, and at times very bloody.

In addition, the country is split culturally. The Christians are Western-oriented, with strong ties to the French and the traditions of republicanism and free enterprise, with the exception of Pierre Gemayel who took the Spanish Falange of Francisco Franco as his political model. The Moslems are more concerned with Lebanon's place in the Arab world.

Before France gained responsibility for Lebanon under the League of Nations mandate system in 1922, Lebanon was no more than the principedom of Mount Lebanon--part of Greater Syria--plagued by the same religious rivalries that survive to this day. Since about 1820, according to the late historian Enver Koury, Lebanon has been the scene of continual international meddling. Following a popular Lebanese uprising, Egypt intervened to support the ruler, Bashir II, whom the uprising had ousted. A second uprising, in 1840, deposed Bashir and led to European entry into the area. This is when the association between the French and the Christian Maronites, begun during the Crusades, was started anew.[5]

With European approval, the Ottoman Empire partitioned Mount Lebanon into two cantons divided by the Beirut-Damascus road. The north had an Ottoman-appointed Maronite governor, the south an Ottoman-appointed Druze governor. The governing councils in each canton were representative of the so-called subcommunes, which included the Druze, Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Maronites, Shi'ites, and Sunnis. This was the first use of the arrangement known as confessionalism, since its purpose was to assure proportional representation to the various "confessions" or religious groups. The arrangement brought relative peace for twenty years, but when the populations of the northern and southern cantons became mixtures of Christians and Druze, the peace was disturbed. The civil strife Lebanon suffered during 1859-1860 gave the Europeans another opportunity to intervene.[6] Under the new organization devised in 1861, Mount Lebanon became an autonomous Ottoman province, ruled by an Ottoman Christian governor, but divided into seven districts along religious lines. A central council was made up of village officials, with the representation determined according to the proportion of the population each religious sect accounted for.[7]

This arrangement, the Reglement Organique, gave way to direct Ottoman rule with the coming of World War I. That rule ended with the Ottoman defeat in the war, when the Middle East spoils went to England and France. France got Greater Syria, from which it carved out Maronite Mount Lebanon and enlarged it to include the Moslem territories of the Bekaa Valley and the areas around several coastal cities. Though the additions almost doubled the area and increased the population about 50 percent, cohesion was diminished. Lebanon "lost its internal equilibrium, though geographically and economically it became more viable," wrote historian Philip Hitti in his book, *Lebanon in History*. [8]

Again the confessional system was used to subdue religious rivalry. The system in force today was devised, under French supervision, when Lebanon declared independence in 1943. Under the constitution, Lebanon was to be a secular republic. Ironically, it tried to achieve this by providing for proportional representation of the religious groups in the government. Then, as today, there was to be a ratio of six Christians to every five Moslems. The system did not allow for change when the religious composition of Lebanese society changed. The impoverished Shi'ite Moslems, because of their rapid birth rate, are now the largest group in Lebanon, with 28 percent of the population. The Maronites and Sunnis each account for 16.8 percent and the Druze are 8.4 percent.[9] Yet the parliamentary and government ratios enshrined by the confessional system are based on the 1932 census in which the Maronites had 28.8 percent, the Sunnis 22.3 percent, the Shi'ites 19.6 percent, and the Druze 6.7 percent.[10] The disparities between current population and parliamentary representation are shown in Table 1. As Koury wrote, "To coin an oxymoron, the fixed ratio is one variable that [was] responsible for the 1975-1976 crisis in Lebanon.[11]

Table 1. Lebanon's Principal Ethnic and Religious Groups

Group	Estimated Population	Seats in Parliament
Shi'ite Moslems	1,000,000	19
Maronite Christians	600,000	30
Sunni Moslems	600,000	20
Greek Orthodox	400,000	11
Druze	300,000	6
Melchites	250,000	6
Armenians		
(Orthodox and Catholics)	250,000	5
Protestants		
(and other minorities)	100,000	2
Palestinians*	500,000	0

*estimated 60,000 have obtained Lebanese citizenship.

Source: New York Times

Under this system, political offices are reserved for particular sects. Since at the time of independence the Maronites were the largest Christian subgroup, the powerful office of the presidency must be held by a Maronite; the Sunnis were the largest Moslem group, so the prime minister's office went to them; the Shi'ites were third largest, so they got speaker of the Chamber of Deputies. Other offices were similarly reserved for the Druze and Greek Orthodox. Seats in the Chamber were also allotted according to population distribution. As might be expected from such a system, Lebanon has suffered crises (in 1958 and 1975-76) stemming from shifting demographics, the lack of a firm political consensus, and the fear that advantage would be seized by one group at the expense of the others. Periods of relative tranquility were deceiving. According to Koury, "Lebanon was then and is now a political entity lacking central cultural values--having a sense of community de jure but not de facto. Far from producing consensus and homogeneity, the confessional system aggravates political controversies....Lebanon evidently possesses political community, but not much sense of community: it is a collection of ethno-religious subcommunes (confessions) bound together by common necessity, if that, and bridging the gaps between the subcommunes remains a crucial problem." [12]

The problems found no solution in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion. A ten-year-old legislature, which had

extended its own tenure by declining to hold a required quadrennial election during the 1976 civil war, elected right-wing Phalangist party leader Bashir Gemayel (son of Pierre) president, confirming the worst fears of the Moslem and Druze populations. Gemayel had founded the much-feared Lebanese Forces, the militia of the Phalange party. It was the first time a "committed Maronite strongman" had been elected president.[13] When Gemayel was assassinated, presumably by Moslem extremists, shortly before taking office in the fall of 1982, the legislature turned to his older brother Amin, who was regarded as more moderate than Bashir. Nevertheless, he has been unable to convince the Moslem leadership that he is interested in "power-sharing" or some arrangement under which Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Druze would not feel left out of the system. On the contrary, he has given Maronites important posts and disarmed rival militias, while leaving the Phalangist militia alone. For example, Gemayel moved against the militias in Moslem west Beirut, but did not disturb the Phalangists in Christian east Beirut.[14] In addition Gemayel ordered the army to remove Shi'ites from their homes on the outskirts of Beirut shortly after he was inaugurated.[15]

Lebanon's strife-plagued history seems to clash with the vision of the country as the Switzerland of the Middle East. There is reason to believe that the years of Lebanese peace were deceptive, that while Beirut was a center for open trade and the good life for some, serious problems bubbled under the surface.

It is arguable that post-independence Lebanon never really worked. Between 1943 and the first breakdown in 1958, 18 governments were formed, and 16 more between 1958 and the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. Things held together reasonably well for 10 years after General Chehab's election in 1958. But his enlightened effort to create a nation out of the Lebanese cocktail ultimately failed, and the writing was on the wall. The full-scale explosion in 1975 was the logical outcome of seven years of growing crisis.[16]

Under these circumstances, the backers of Gemayel did not help things with their gloating about victory. Indeed, they seemed to be asking for the very sort of offensive by Shi'ite and Druze that has taken place recently.[17] In the past, temporary reconciliation among the factions could be achieved because, as Koury put it, "The elites in Lebanon appear to share a consensus on at least one basic value, the preservation of the system in which they are the elites." [18] Apparently, it was better to have a piece of power in a unified country, than full power over only a single faction. This seems to explain the years in which Lebanon settled into something resembling the normal rhythm of a nation. What remains to be seen is whether such can again be achieved under new circumstances, namely, the passing of factional power to the new generation and away from the traditional godfathers. Gemayel's opponents are not united on how Lebanon's political system should be changed. While the Druze want to maintain a religious balance, reflecting their small proportion of the population, the Shi'ites do not. Shi'ite leader Nabih Berri has called for popular election of the president and an end to sectarianism in the government appointments. He says he is not seeking to impose a Moslem president and that he favors the presidency remaining in Christian hands. But the minority Christians, worried about their safety in a Moslem-controlled state, fear that Berri is only saying that to get concessions.[19] Some Christians, such as Chamoun and the elder Gemayel, have proposed a federal system of semi-autonomous provinces.

Lebanon's association with the West imparted to it a tradition of respect for economic freedom and property rights. "[M]odern Lebanese are commercially, not militarily, minded. Amidst a world of trade restrictions, state economic planning and currency control, the merchant republic had adhered to the principle of free enterprise and the traditional law of supply and demand." [20] That largely explains Beirut's status as free-trade center of the Middle East. For several reasons, including culture, not all segments of Lebanese society progressed to the extent that others did. This created the conditions for envy and demands for "reform," to which the ruling elite acquiesced in order to keep Lebanon from unraveling.

The 1958 crisis, which had domestic and foreign causes, led President Fuad Chehab "to implement a program (known as Chehabism) tailored to meet the rising expectations of the people, a kind of welfarism for social justice....[I]t provided an impetus for an acceleration of welfarism and more equitable distribution of wealth (and power)." [21] Koury noted that the grafting of "welfarism" to Lebanon's economy continued under Chehab's successor, President Helou. Helou once said that it "is no longer possible in the second half of the twentieth century for any government to follow a policy of laissez-faire." In Helou's view, government should build the "infrastructure of development land and provide the fundamental conditions needed by the enterprising Lebanese." [22] The Chehab and Helou administrations instituted social security and spent a great deal of money on electricity, water facilities, sanitation, and transportation.[23]

One of the predictable consequences of the increase in government spending was inflation. From 1971 to 1976, under the Franjeh administration, Lebanon's money supply expanded by an annual average of 16.8 percent, much higher than in previous years, according to the International Monetary Fund. As a result the consumer price index increased by 78 percent from 1971 to 1976, after a mere 7 percent rise over the preceding four years. The increases accelerated during the early 1970s, ending with a 29 percent jump from 1975 to 1976. Later increases were smaller, but nevertheless larger than Lebanon had experienced previously.[24] The consequent rise in the cost of living substantially eroded the savings of the middle class (whose savings rate was 15 percent). This helps explain why large segments of the middle class joined in the challenge to Franjeh's regime.[25]

The classical liberal political economist Ludwig von Mises in 1919 discussed the problems with proportional representation as a way of bringing peace to "mixed territories." Mises noted that while proportional representation precludes gerrymandering and ensures seats in a legislature, it does not solve the major problems of a "polyglot" country. "A minority is politically collaborating in the true sense only if its voice is heard because it has prospects of coming to the helm some time," Mises wrote. "For a national minority, however, that is ruled out....In polyglot territories that application of the majority principle leads not to freedom of all but to the rule of the majority over the minority." [26]

Mises went on to suggest that the real solution to the clash of forces contending for political power within a country is limitation of that power. "The greater the scope the state claims in the life of the individual and the more important politics becomes for him, the more areas of friction are thereby created in territories with mixed populations. Limiting state power to a minimum, as [classical] liberalism sought, would considerably soften the antagonisms between different nations that live side by side in the same territory." [27]

Lebanon seems to be a country that has traditionally limited state power and not one plagued by the problem Mises identified. But in Lebanon the less obvious "civil service" power is much coveted because it offers many opportunities for wealth. The Middle East, among other places, sees a great deal of money change hands in the form of bribes to customs officials, police, and other civil servants. It is this sort of power (and hence, wealth) that the Shi'ites and others have been excluded from under the old confessional system.

Mises's point directly contradicts the strategy of President Reagan. A major goal of U.S. policy has been the establishment of a strong central Maronite government in Lebanon for the purpose of unifying the country. In a letter to Rep. Lee Hamilton last December, Reagan said he favors "a comprehensive security plan permitting the Government to begin extending its authority beyond Beirut (including both Christian and Moslem areas)." But it is precisely the strengthening of the central government, involving, as it must, control of those offices that are seen as paths to wealth, that will undercut efforts to create peace among Lebanon's warring factions. As long as the factions see the state as a means for extracting money from others, and as long as the state is available for this purpose, Lebanon will remain a battleground. This is not to say that all of Lebanon's problems would be solved by radically limiting government power. Religious hatred has its own motor and would presumably find other outlets if political mechanisms were unavailable. In this case, the only long-term solution is tolerance and respect for individual rights. But however tempting it may be to force-feed such concepts to people, the U.S. government should resist the temptation. The Long Commission put the matter diplomatically, but accurately, when it wrote, "The facts of political life in Lebanon make any attempt on the part of an outsider to appear non-partisan virtually impossible.'

External Problems

Lebanon's external problems are closely linked with its internal problems because the domestic factions have patrons outside the country and because Lebanon is situated between Israel and Syria. The Maronites, who are Western-oriented, have had allies in the Israelis. It should be noted, though, that in the Middle East rarely is a generality to be trusted. The prominent Maronite leader and former president Suleiman Franjeh (a bitter Gemayel foe) is a member of the pro-Syrian National Salvation Front. Israel has long supported the Christian leadership as a way of keeping Lebanon from being a base for Palestinian operations. A friendly Lebanon would also prevent Syria from extending its anti-Israeli influence. At times there have been suggestions by Israeli leaders that a partitioned Lebanon would better serve Israel's security interests. Their cultivation of the late Col. Saad Haddad, whose unofficial militia ruthlessly ruled southern Lebanon as an Israeli ally since the mid-1970s, was arguably part of this strategy.

At any rate, Israel has been the patron of the Maronite community. But its relationship with the Maronites has caused problems for itself and its allies. Its May 17 (1982) agreement with President Gemayel (devised and pushed by U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz) theoretically established peace between the two countries and obligated Israel to withdraw its invasion force. But an accompanying letter stated that the Israeli withdrawal was contingent on a Syrian withdrawal. The agreement also granted Israel some authority in southern Lebanon. For Israel, the purpose of the agreement was to alleviate its concern about the security of its northern border and demonstrate the value of Arab-Israeli peacemaking. It didn't work out that way. The agreement, recently abrogated by Gemayel, guaranteed Gemayel's failure in bringing reconciliation to Lebanon. His opponents could object that Israel pushed for the agreement while still occupying parts of their country. They saw it as an Israeli attempt to permanently remain in southern Lebanon. They also objected to the equating of Israel's presence with Syria's presence: To them, Syria was an Arab country invited into Lebanon; Israel was an invader.

Syria is generally allied with the Moslems, including the Palestinian refugees who took up residence in Lebanon at various times since the establishment of the state of Israel. (However, Syria entered Lebanon during the 1976 civil war at Christian request.) Syria has been motivated by an historical sense that Lebanon is really part of Greater Syria, as it was before the 1920s,[28] and by a fear that Lebanon could fall under Israeli influence. Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel in 1967, and in 1981 Israel formally annexed the territory. When Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel at Camp David, Syrian President Assad saw himself as the remaining standardbearer for Nasserite pan-Arabism, holding out against Western neocolonialism as represented by Israel. Despite Assad's interests in Lebanese affairs, there is no evidence that he wishes to annex Lebanon.

Since the collapse of the Lebanese army and Gemayel's visit to Syria, President Assad again has emerged as a limited stabilizing influence on Lebanon, as he was in 1976 (he presumably does not want things so stable that no one would look to Syria for help). Assad is credited with tempering the two opposition leaders most vocal in calling for Gemayel's resignation. Nabih Berri, head of the Shi'ite Amal movement, and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt have softened or retracted their demands in this regard. Jumblatt, who has been close to Syria throughout the Israeli invasion, backed off his anti-Gemayel position after meeting with Assad in February for what the New York Times called "evidently effective arm-twisting." The irony is that Syria is accomplishing what U.S. Marines and gunboats could not.[29]

The Palestinians themselves are a vital non-Lebanese influence on Lebanon. Some 500,000 Palestinians are in Lebanon, most of them having moved there before the 1967 Arab-Israel war. In both Jordan and Lebanon, large groups of refugees created friction and strife. In 1970, King Hussein of Jordan bloodily threw the Palestinians out. In 1975-76, civil war broke out in Lebanon, in part due to the Palestinians and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) violence, which brought harsh Israeli reprisals in Lebanese territory. This made the Christians further resent the Palestinian presence. With classic Middle East irony, the Maronite government invited the Syrians to intervene and restore peace. The Syrians, wishing to prevent a chaos that could provide an advantage for Israel, obliged (with Arab League blessing) and have been there ever since.

It seems obvious that Lebanon's external problems are also not the type that can be solved by the United States. Syria's historical claims, meritorious or not, are between it and Lebanon. After all, Western interference--that of France in the 1920s--is at the root of Syria's complaint in the first place. The United States will not be accepted as an objective participant.

The Palestinian problem likewise is not amenable to American solution, especially in the light of the United States' "special relationship," recently confirmed, with Israel.[30] The Palestinian grievance relates to a dispute about land ownership and self-determination. Palestinian refugees aspire to return to land that is now within the state of Israel: the refugee camps are regarded as temporary. The PLO, meanwhile, has used Lebanon as a base to press its effort against Israel, sometimes engaging in criminal violence, though not to the extent alleged by Israel. (The Palestinians had honored the ceasefire with Israel for 11 months before Israel launched its Lebanon invasion, purportedly to secure its northern border from PLO attack.)[31] In response to real and imagined PLO acts, Israel crossed the Lebanese border repeatedly in the 1970s and shelled territory from offshore ships. In 1978 Israel invaded Lebanon, establishing an enclave in the south for its late ally, renegade Lebanese Col. Haddad. Israel invaded briefly again in 1980.[32]

In light of the American record as a defender and supplier of Israel, it is difficult to see how the United States can help

solve this difficult problem. Again, it is too firmly identified with one of the parties.

This identification was made more apparent to the Arabs by American entry into Lebanon. Each step, including the defense of Gemayel, could be interpreted as a favor to Israel. The initial entry allowing the PLO fighters to leave Beirut came when Israel, at the gates of the capital, was reluctant to enter because of the fear of heavy casualties. The marine escort for the PLO enabled Israel to avoid having to pull back from Beirut without winning the Palestinian evacuation. The second marine landing came after Israel was gravely embarrassed by the Phalangist slaughter of Palestinian refugees under its supervision in September 1982. The United States had given the Palestinians assurances of safety before the Israeli Defense Force allowed the Phalangist militiamen into the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.[33]

The United States, then, seems singularly incapable of bringing a just peace to Lebanon (and the Middle East in general). Not only has it been the major backer of Israel, it has always identified with the distrusted Christian leadership in Lebanon. In 1958, President Eisenhower landed 14,000 Marines in support of a Maronite regime that had alienated the Moslem population by seeking to make Lebanon a partner of the United States in the Cold War. The predominant Arab sentiment, as articulated by Egypt's Nasser, was (and is) against aligning with either the United States or the Soviet Union.

As a measure of how much things have remained unchanged, it is useful to note that the Reagan administration is repeating the Eisenhower mistake in seeing the Middle East in Cold War terms. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said recently that "the primary objective of our policy for the Middle East is to deter Soviet aggression." [34]

But although the Soviet Union is Syrian President Assad's chief patron, it does not follow that the Russians can manipulate him to establish dominance in the Middle East. Assad needs the Russians for arms (where else can he get them?); the Russians need Assad or else they are without influence in this long-coveted region. It is a marriage of convenience and not always agreeable. The Russians, for example, did not approve of Assad's campaign to split the PLO. As *The Economist* wrote recently, "The Americans...exaggerated the east-west dimension of the Lebanese mess; if the marines' undignified departure is rated a success for the Russians, it is largely Mr. Reagan's own fault for portraying the problem in too lurid a shade of superpower picture-book rivalry." [35]

The Soviet Union won influence in the Middle East after World War II when Western intervention frightened many Arabs into thinking that their dream of independence would again be denied. The Russians were seen as the only counterweight. But the Arabs had little love for the Russian atheists who voted in the United Nations to establish Israel. On the other hand, Arab nationalism was regarded by the communists as reactionary and unworthy of support. Yet the Arabs found they needed the Russians, and the Russians, worried about American moves in the Middle East, needed the Arabs. In essence, Western defense plans in the Middle East led to much of the Soviet interest in the area.

It stands to reason that the best way for the United States to minimize Soviet influence in the Middle East is to disengage. Many Arabs want to regard the American people as friends. According to *Wall Street Journal* reporter David Ignatius, the Lebanese are "passionately pro-American." [36] But the Arabs resent being seen as chess pieces on the Russian-American board. They are also reluctant to embrace the United States because of its support and arming of Israel, and its tolerance of the abuse of Palestinian rights. The United States could further minimize Soviet influence by objectively reassessing its categorical support of Israel and refusal to acknowledge Palestinian grievances.

This is not to dismiss the possibility that in the absence of American might, the Soviets could expand their influence in the Middle East. What must be considered, however, is how vital the region is to the security of the American people, as opposed to vague interests in the minds of political leaders. President Reagan consistently maintains that "vital interests" are at stake. He has said, "It would be a disaster if a force took over the Middle East, and a force is now ready to do that, as witness what has taken place in Yemen, in Ethiopia...and Syria." Secretary of State George P. Shultz has added, "If we are driven out of Lebanon, radical and rejectionist elements will have scored a major victory. The message will be sent that relying on the Soviet Union pays off and that relying on the United States is a fatal mistake." [37]

What exactly does the Middle East have to do with American security? Oil comes to mind first, but according to the American Petroleum Institute, Middle East oil accounted for only 3 percent of the oil used in the United States in

1983. Japan and Western Europe are far more dependent on Middle East oil, but it is likely that whoever controls the oil in the Middle East will find it necessary and desirable to sell to the West and Japan.

Lebanon, of course, does not have oil, so Reagan's argument rests on a version of the old "domino theory," namely that if Lebanon falls, so too will other Middle Eastern nations. The problem with this theory is that each country in the Middle East is unique and that what happens to Lebanon is no portent of what may happen to others.[38] Were Lebanon to fall to a totalitarian or authoritarian power, it would be a tragedy for the Lebanese. But it would not threaten the American people. Were the U.S. government empowered to prevent tragedies in other countries, the American tradition of limited, unobtrusive government, already so badly eroded, would be further jeopardized.

The American position in the Middle East, as exemplified by Reagan's Lebanese policy, is dangerous because, though unrelated to the security of the American people, it places them in the middle of a rising tide of Arab nationalism and Moslem fundamentalism. There simply is no good reason for the U.S. government to side with Arab Christians and alienate millions of Arab Moslems. (The U.S. experience in Iran is instructive here.) Doing so only makes Americans targets of terrorism and risks dragging them into war, first with the Syrians, and possibly the Soviet Union.

The only sensible policy is disengagement. The Lebanese, most of whom are tragic victims, must be left to work out their own problems. A Gemayel government that stands only because American gunboats support it is not what Lebanon needs. If the disparate factions are to achieve some kind of peaceful coexistence, they will have to first discover the value of it. If they don't, perhaps another arrangement, such as a system of cantons, is the answer. What is important is that the solution must not and cannot be imposed from outside.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Brig. General James Joy, commander of the U.S. task force in Lebanon, has said the Marines could return if there is an appearance of national reconciliation. Alan McConagha, "General suggests Marines could go back to Lebanon," Washington Times, March 13, 1984, p. 6A.

[2] Letter to Rep. Lee H. Hamilton, New York Times, Jan. 24, 1984, p. 6.

[3] "U.S. Presence in Lebanon Is Called 'Central to Our Credibility,'" Washington Post, Oct. 25, 1983, p. 8.

[4] Joseph Kraft, "The Shultz Version," Washington Post, Feb. 19, 1984, p. C7.

[5] Enver M. Koury, *The Crisis in the Lebanese System: Confessionalism and Chaos* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1976), p. 2. See also Philip K. Hitti, *A Short History of the Near East* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1966), p. 222.

[6] Koury, p. 3.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 4.

[9] Thomas L. Friedman, "Can Lebanon's Warlords Make Peace?" New York Times, Oct. 2, 1983, Week in Review, p. 1.

[10] A.H. Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 121.

[11] Koury, p. 5.

[12] *Ibid.*, 8-9.

[13] "Lebanon's Godfathers," *The Middle East*, Oct. 1983, p. 15. The same has been said about Amin Gemayel. See Leslie Gelb, "The U.S. Commitment Continues to Deepen," New York Times, Feb. 7, 1984, p. 1.

- [14] "Many Lebanese Question Gemayel's Leadership," *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1984, p. 12.
- [15] Helena Cobban, "Lebanon's Chinese Puzzle," *Foreign Policy*, No. 53, Winter 1983-84, p. 40.
- [16] "Lebanon's Godfathers," p. 15. [17] A Phalangist official was quoted as saying, "This time there is a victor and a vanquished. We have won, and they had better start getting used it, even though we haven't started implementing it yet. They made their choices and we made ours, and we came out on top." (*Ibid.* Emphasis in original.) It seems this official spoke too soon.
- [18] Koury, p. 14.
- [19] Frederick Kempe, "Berri Emerging as Power in Lebanon," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 16, 1984, p. 38.
- [20] Hitti, p. 250.
- [21] Koury, p. 30.
- [22] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- [23] Hitti, p. 252.
- [24] World Bank. Of course, CPI figures--questionable in advanced industrial democracies like the United States--are highly suspect in countries like Lebanon characterized by informal bargaining, open-air bazaars, and a high degree of cultural and ethnic diversity. Nevertheless, the magnitude of these changes is indicative of significant change.
- [25] Koury, p. 35.
- [26] Ludwig von Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), pp. 51, 55.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- [28] See Michael Kramer, "Taking Syria Seriously," *New York Times*, Oct. 3, 1983, p. 32, and Milton Viorst, "We Forget That Syria, Too, Has a Vital Interest," *Washington Post*, Dec. 11, 1983,
- [29] "Gemayel Takes a Necessary Trip to Damascus," *New York Times*, March 4, 1984, Sect. 4, p. 1; Alan McConagha, "Lebanese factions to try talks again," *Washington Times*, March 7, 1984, p. 1, and Thomas L. Friedman, "New Lebanon Talks: Forced Optimism and Crumbs of Hope," *New York Times*, March 12, 1984, p. 10.
- [30] The newest U.S.-Israeli pact calls for a joint military-planning commission and the storing of American weapons on Israeli soil. See Richard Halloran, "U.S.-Israel Military Pact to Start Soon," *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 1984. [31] Shulamit Har Even, "A War Based on Lies," *Ha'aretz*, June 30, 1982, reprinted in *Palestine/Israel Bulletin*, Sept. 1982, p. 1. The U.S. State Department confirms this point.
- [32] See "Bleeding Lebanon," *Inquiry*, Oct. 6, 1980, p. 3.
- [33] Charles Glass, "Vietnam--I mean Lebanon," *The Spectator* Oct. 29, 1983, p. 7.
- [34] *Washington Post*, Feb. 2, 1984, p. 13.
- [35] "There Goes Lebanon," *The Economist*, Feb. 11, 1984, p. 16.
- [36] David Ignatius, "Getting Out of Beirut," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 11, 1984, p. 32.
- [37] "Standing Fast: 'Vital Interests' of U.S. at Stake," *Washington Post*, Oct. 25, 1983, p. 1.
- [38] For an important critique of the "domino theory" as it has operated in U.S. foreign policy, see Theodore Draper,

"Falling Dominoes," New York Review of Books, Oct. 27, 1983, P. 6.