

The Challenge of Lebanon by ROGER EDDE

I

There is in Lebanon Today a new political consensus that calls for policies of national renewal organized around a political leader able to save the country from its prevailing turmoil. Uniting Moslems and Christians, if such a consensus were given a chance, would assert itself in the forthcoming presidential elections, now scheduled to be held in July 1982. Yet, as paramilitary factions continue to blackmail the Lebanese people, the international community often ignores this political consensus, and neglects to provide the support Lebanon's national leaders and representatives deserve.

Peace in the Middle East can only come a piece at a time. The Experience of the past many Years has shown that a comprehensive solution in the area must be sought one step at a time. However tedious the process may appear to be at times, keeping up a momentum for peace helps avoid war. A lack of progress quickly leads to despair and, inevitably, to a renewed cycle of violence to provide and sustain such momentum, the leadership which was assumed several years ago by the United States

remains, of course, vital. A holocaust in Lebanon has occurred, perhaps all too conveniently, as of the most tragic and deplorable side effects of an erratic search for peace in the region. Yet, together with other moderate Arab states common economic, political, and strategic objectives which are not incompatible with the long-term interests of Israel as well. Concerned over the rise of subversive influence in the area, Lebanon supports now as before a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Clearly, it deserves a U.S. Commitment to its territorial integrity and overall security at least equal to that extended to Israel.

In 1981, the Reagan administration uncovered, in the words of Secretary of State, Alexander M. Haig, the "interrelationship which developed between the situation in Lebanon and the Peace process" in the Middle East. The Early Declarations of the Reagan Administration appeared to make

Lebanon a priority of its Middle East policy. Yet, the actions that were subsequently launched reflected the continued U.S. unwillingness to overcome the tacit alliance that has developed between Israel and Syria

over the control of Lebanon.

Thus, The United States has often failed to take into account the consequences of its policies in the region on Lebanon Proper. In 1976, Syria entered into Lebanon under conditions secretly negotiated with Israel through the intermediary of the then secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. Surprisingly Kissinger apparently assumed that Assad's Syria could eventually control the PLO, and with Jordan quickly emerge as the main U.S. interlocutor in the unfolding peace process. With the approval of Israel, the Syrians were said to rescue the Israeli-backed phalangists against the counter-offensive launched in Mount Lebanon by the PLO and the leftist Lebanese factions, thus leaving Syria with the startling role of the "peace Keeper" in a country over which its ambitions have been such that no Syrian regime in Damascus has ever agreed to an exchange of ambassador. In 1976, the presidential elections held in Beirut reflected the informal entente between Damascus and Tel Aviv, an entente that Washington hoped to manipulate but of which it soon became the hostage, and Lebanon the victim. In 1977-1981, the Limits of Syria's credibility were

quickly exposed. Not a participant in the Camp David process, Damascus soon provided support for Iran against Iraq confirming further its growing isolation from the rest of the Arab World. In the fall 1980, its isolation was completed when Syrian president Hafez al-Assad signed a treaty of friendship and defense with the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Later, in the spring of 1981, the missile crisis between Israel and Syria permitted an effective manipulation of U.S. diplomacy. By engaging in such an artificial confrontation at the very time when Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig was promoting his vision of an anti-Soviet consensus in the region, both Begin and Assad forced a reappraisal of U.S. priorities as Philip Habib engaged in shuttle diplomacy meant to end the "crisis" by endorsing a status quo (Syrian and Israeli control over Lebanon) that was the source of the true crisis. Finally, in 1981-1982, whatever remained of Syria's status in the region was ended as internal developments revealed the domestic vulnerability of Assad's regime. By then Damascus influence on the PLO could only be negative: it could prevent the Palestinian leadership

from participating in any diplomatic effort aimed at the resolution of conflict, but it could not lead that leadership to that path. Thus, when the Fahd Plan was proposed, Syria successfully blocked PLO chief Yasser Arafat's effort to secure the PLO's endorsement of a plan that implied the recognition of Israel in return for the creation of a Palestinian State in the Territories occupied by Israel in 1967.

II

With the negotiations on Palestinian autonomy stalled, the Syrian Golan Heights annexed by Israel, and new outbursts of Israeli repression on the West Bank and in Gaza, it has become increasingly clear that the initial phase of the Camp David process has now been completed. Whether or not it will resume remains to be seen. In the meantime, however, the fear of a major Israeli-Arab war that would begin on Lebanese territory has become a cause for serious concern in Washington and in Arab capitals. Adopted in March, 1978, following the Israeli forces' withdrawal of Israeli invasion of South Lebanon, U.N. Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426 aimed at "confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces, restoring international peace and security, and

Assisting the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area." In addition, the Security Council called on all parties to "respect... the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon within its internationally recognized boundaries." Not surprisingly, neither Israel, Syria nor the PLO has cooperated in achieving goals which are tantamount to an actual neutralization of South Lebanon if not, ultimately, the whole of Lebanon.

In the political diaries of Moshe Sharret it is clear that in 1984 Israel planned the destabilization of Lebanon through the manipulation of some of its Maronites in order to take over the waters of the Litani River. More recently, since the start of the Lebanese turmoil in 1975-1976, Israel and Syria have repeatedly agreed to their respective involvement in Lebanese affairs, thus undermining Lebanese sovereignty in such a way as to use Lebanon as a launching pad for their designs there and elsewhere. North of the Litani River, this surprising but tacit alliance between these two "enemy-partners" brought about Syria's *de facto* annexation of 80% of Lebanon's territory within which the phalangists (linked to both Israel and

Syria) received a measure of local control over a tiny territorial enclave .South of the Litani River, the area invaded by the Israel in 1978 was shared among the Israelis and the Haddad -led southern phalangists, UNIFEL and the PLO. This informal entente between Damascus and Tel Aviv survived the 1978 bombing of the Palestinian camps in South Lebanon (a ceasefire between Israel and the This informal entente between Damascus and tel Aviv survived the 1978 bombing of the Christian city in Zahlé , as it did the bombing of the PLO headquarters in Beirut and of the Palestinian Camps in South Lebanon (a ceasefire between Israel and the PLO was then negotiated by presidential envoy Philip Habib with the assistance of Saudi Arabia) .Only the requirements of electoral politics in the case of Israel , and of Arab money-politics in the case of Syria ,brought about the appearance of a confrontation between the two countries in the spring of 1981.

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challenge, political or otherwise, launched by the many armed factions within the Country

Finally, in its war with Iraq, Iran has enjoyed the open support of Syria and the more discreet, but quite effective military assistance of Israel. Significantly enough, cooperation between the Lebanese factions sponsored by Tehran, Damascus and Tel Aviv has been simultaneously increased, thereby leading to new and violent confrontations with the Lebanese and Palestinian left.

As we now move closer to a new Israeli military strike in Lebanon, the contradictions between the objectives pursued by Washington on the one hand, Damascus and Tel Aviv on the other, become even more significant.

The consequences of such a strike would be considerable. In Lebanon proper, hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees will pour into northern areas with nothing to lose and seeking revenge for their tragic

losses from whomever they can. in so doing , they will set in motion a self-destructive dynamic that may end Lebanon's last chance of recovery ,and deny the hopes placed in next July's presidential elections . This will in turn confirm the worst fears of the Lebanese: that in 1982, as in 1976, the elections of a president will be the result of a compromise between Syrian and Israeli preferences, thereby preventing the selection of the choice of the real majority of the Lebanese people.

A new military invasion of Israel in South Lebanon would facilitate the radicalization of moderate Arabs, ranging from Egypt to some elements of the PLO. And, perhaps worst of all, it may help generate a new wave of anti-Americanism and Islamic fanaticism a la Khomeini among the 700 million Moslems in the world, reaching as far as Pakistan and Turkey. Thus, if the rise of the PLO proved to be the logical outcome of the Arab humiliation suffered during the Six day war in 1967, the spread of uncontrollable Islamic fanaticism may

well prove to be the result of further Israeli adventurism in 1982.

While helpful, the recent 1,000 man increase of UNIFIL forces was voted by the Security Council with the approval of the United States in Order to fill the Gap which allows the Israelis and the Palestinians to infiltrate Lebanese territory without confronting the U.N. Peace –Keeping forces. Such measures however, hardly permit the full implementation of the original U.N. mandate. Yet, a forceful and determined approach of the United States could have made then, and could still make now, the difference, and secure, at last, the withdrawal of Israeli and Syrian forces from Lebanon.

Liberated from the “protection” extended by 30,000 Syrian forces, the moderate leadership within the PLO would be less sensitive to rejectionist pressures exerted by Syria and Marxist-oriented factions. the restoration of the sovereignty of the Lebanese government over Lebanese territory would therefore ,reinforce the PLO’s

commitment to the ceasefire .Israel and The PLO would be denied the foremost channel of confrontation open to them since the early 1970s with the Syrian forces in Lebanon replaced by an international or multinational peace – keeping force. Instead they may then find it possible to use diplomatic channels for peaceful engagement.

There can hardly be any stable peace between the Arab States and Israel without reconciliation between the Israeli people and the Palestinian people. Indeed, no separate peace with any one Arab country will last, let alone suffice, so long as an agreement with the Palestinians has not been worked out and implemented the predictable evolution of Egypt’s policies after the April 25 deadline is a case in point. Egypt’s return in the Arab World will not merely result from a change in its leadership, from Anwar el-Sadat to Hosni Mubarak. It reflects instead the gap that prevailed throughout the Camp David process between the frustrated

commitment of the Egyptian people to Arab solidarity of which the Palestinian cause is the minimal expression, and the rejection of that cause by the Israeli leadership. Now, it is time for an Israeli leader, too, to do the unthinkable, and, like Sadat, risk an initiative that would at last overcome the remaining psychological barriers that divide the Israelis and the Palestinian people. Once this reconciliation has taken place, other Arab States will inevitably follow. Israel will then be integrated in a region of which it will have finally become a real component and within which it will have finally achieved its long-term security.

III

To save Lebanon demands a strong and charismatic leader able to mobilize the nation and remain invulnerable to any challenge, political or otherwise, launched by the many armed factions within the country. The dynamic of national renewal would restore the morale of the Lebanese army, and renew its mandate to re-affirm the national

sovereignty and protect the territorial integrity of Lebanon.

This may not have been possible before these seven years of turmoil and suffering from the domination of divided, irrational, greedy, and self-centered factions that left both Moslems and Christians weary of the rhetoric and the politics of the "warriors". The people of Lebanon are now ready to die for their flag, their democratic system, and their traditional values. They are coming back to their roots, seeking their country's survival, their dignity, and their individual freedom and human rights.

For too long, the paramilitary factions have taken advantage of the vacuum created by a paralyzed Lebanese authority to share the spoils of war and increase their mercenary incomes. Ultimately, their foremost objective is to prevent the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty, and keep any central government in Beirut from enforcing a minimum of national discipline. Indeed, the reverse would have been

surprising, as national unity can only take place at the expense of the very privileges these factions have violently stolen from the nation.

The PLO can not escape the exasperation of both Lebanese Moslems and Christians with the influence and violence of the paramilitary factions. This is especially significant. Aware of such trends, moderate PLO leaders have privately expressed their concern about the growing hostility of the Moslem communities in Lebanon toward them. Ever since the arrival of the first Palestinian refugees in the late 1940s, the Lebanese (Christians and Moslems alike) have endorsed the Palestinian cause. Long before the PLO came into being, every Lebanese president and diplomat has argued the Palestinian case before the world community. When PLO chief Yasser Arafat was received at the General Assembly of the United Nations, he was introduced by Maronite Lebanese president, Suleiman Franjeh. As for the Moslem Lebanese, their dedication to every Arab and Palestinian issue has

been unconditional and passionate. Whenever there has been conflict between the objectives of the PLO and the national interest of Lebanon; the Lebanese Moslems have forcefully shown their solidarity with the Palestinians.

In 1969-1970, as the PLO forces were beginning to settle in Lebanon with an armed contingent of hardly more than 200 men, the Lebanese National Bloc repeatedly underlined the risks of a paramilitary force which would escape the control of the Lebanese government. This, it was argued at the time, would provide Israel with the pretext for retaliatory or preventive strikes, at first against the PLO, but ultimately in order to satisfy its historical designs on the waters of the Litani River. As the leader of the National Bloc, Raymond Edde campaigned relentlessly to gain support of other Moslem and Christian Leaders for his proposal to deploy U.N. forces in Southern Lebanon along the only internationally recognized borders between Israel and any of its neighbors.

Although such forces were already in place between Israel and its two main adversaries, Egypt and Syria, no other Christian leader – Whether Pierre Gemayel, Camille Chamoun or Suleiman Franjeh – agreed to endorse Edde’s proposal because they did not want to lose whatever Moslem support they sought at the time. Nor was any Moslem leader any more willing to support this peace initiative. Despite a nearly unanimous agreement among the Christian and Moslem leaders that Raymond Edde’s proposal would protect Lebanon from being sucked into the quicksand of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the proposal was ignored.

Confrontation between the PLO’s military and administrative build-up and the Lebanese army began in 1969, one year before Jordan forced the Palestinians out and left them with a democratic and vulnerable Lebanon as their most accessible refuge in the Arab World. At that time, the Lebanese army could have defeated the PLO’s rising power. But, given the solidarity extended

to the Palestinians by the Moslem communities and pressure from other Arab countries, and with a presidential election scheduled for the summer of 1970, army action was restrained. Instead, the main objective of the second Bureau that led the Lebanese army at the time, was to ensure the election of any “shehabist” candidate who would guarantee their survival.

In November 1969, the Cairo Agreement that was signed between General Boustani and Yasser Arafat made such unbelievable concessions on Lebanese sovereignty that it astonished its sponsor, President Nasser. Later, a government that included the phalangist and Chamoun parties had the Cairo agreement approved by a parliament which was not even aware of its content. Once again, the Lebanese National Bloc warned and voted against and accord that gave the PLO the right to establish a state within the Lebanese state, and operate on Lebanese territory without any regard for

the legitimate authority of the Lebanese government.

With a strong and united Lebanon able to discourage expansionist designs against its territory or its sovereignty, the Lebanese people will have a chance to play, once again, their historic role as mediator, not only in the economic field, but also in politics, culture, and elsewhere.

Following the 1973 War, as Kissinger was initiating the Israeli disengagement from Egyptian and Syrian territories, private militias were organized by the Phalangists and their allies with the covert support of President Franjeh. Subsequently, in 1975, a coalition of three Christian leaders – Franjeh, Chamoun, and Gemayel – engaged in a military challenge of the PLO. During two years of fierce fighting, the Moslem community withstood the pressure of the PLO and its leftist allies to participate in the conflict. From without, Syria’s president Hafez al-Assad played one side

against the other, maintaining a close and sustained dialogue with Franjeh and the phalangist militias on the one hand, and feeding the confrontation through its control of the Al Saiqa and the Syrian-backed Lebanese Baath faction on the other.

Deceived into believing that the order side was about to exterminate them, the Christian and Moslem Lebanese communities were used in a conflict, which they did not understand, and which most of them refused to enter. The Christians, not surprisingly, made Lebanese nationalism the foundation of their rejection of such violence. As a minority in the area, they have always considered an independent Lebanon as a refuge and a shelter without which they cannot survive in the region. But, even more significantly, as the Moslem communities experienced Syrian and Palestinian military rule in their towns and villages, they too have come to embrace Lebanon's national identity to a point which for the first time in their

history, may well be even more intensely left than by the Christians. Today, therefore, the Lebanese Moslems can play a vital role in helping the country regain its sovereignty and its independence as it resists any non-Lebanese, including Syria and the PLO.

Lebanon's future does not demand depend on a confrontation with the Syrian army or the PLO. In truth, both Syria and the PLO have strategic and economic interests in Lebanon, and as Lebanon has in Syria and with the PLO. No side in this relationship has any interest in a violent conflict; indeed, they have all lost in the Lebanese war. It is now time to resolve existing differences and secure the freedom, economic interests, and security needs of all the parties involved.

The Lebanese, the Palestinians, and the Syrians are preordained by geography, culture, and history to a cooperative future in which they share risks and opportunities alike. Clearly, with a strong and united Lebanon able to discourage

expansionist designs against its territory or its sovereignty, the Lebanese people will have a chance to play, once again, their historic role as mediator, not only in the economic field, but also in politics, culture, and elsewhere.

But to do so, what is needed first and foremost is a strong national leadership which embodies a national consensus that, despite repeated attempts to dismantle it, has not only survived, but even matured over the past seven years.

IV

The Lebanese crisis is an international problem. Even the presidential elections now scheduled for next July may well require the presence of an international commission that would guarantee its procedures. The fact that this may be the case shows the limits that are placed by Syria and Israel on Lebanon's sovereignty.

Most urgently, the international community should help achieve the withdrawal of Israeli and Syrian forces from Lebanon, and successfully prevent an Israeli invasion through

the implementation of U.N. Security council resolutions 425, 426, 450, 459, and 490. This would entail the replacement of Syria's "war-keeping" forces with an international peace force that would include the participation of the United States and a number of European States, as well as those moderate Arab states without expansionist design over Lebanon. Without such international initiatives, the "Iranization" of the whole area is likely to follow. With regard to Lebanon specifically, this would mean the destruction of an ancient, prosperous, multi-de-nominational, and western-oriented democracy where Jews, Christians and Moslems coexist without discrimination.

A strong national leadership in Lebanon would impose its own discipline on the PLO, and deny it the use of Lebanese territory in ways that conflict with Lebanon's own interests. By limiting the PLO's behavior within Lebanon, such a leadership would also strengthen the hand of the Palestinian

moderates who are now ready to face the hard challenges of peace against the ideologues whose interests lie elsewhere, in Marxist-inspired dogmas and subversion. In no case would the international peace-keeping force need to police a domestic order which the Lebanese army itself can easily preserve. Well equipped and well led, the Lebanese army, which now numbers 30,000 men, would be the dominant military force in the country. It now merely lacks the morale credibility, and national support a popular leader would quickly provide.

The Lebanese social, economic, and cultural infrastructure have endured seven years of intense and constant turmoil during which they have miraculously managed to prosper. This alone should be enough to convince the policy makers of friendly nations that Lebanon can and must be helped to regain its sovereignty and restore peace. Saving Lebanon requires the expression of renewed Lebanese nationalism. But, it also needs the assistance of a

decisive and visionary U.S. leadership that reflects the will of an international community ready, at last, to meet the challenge of Lebanon.