



Lebanon: Key Battleground for Middle East Policy

By As'ad AbuKhalil

Lebanon has historically prided itself on maintaining good relations both with its Arab neighbors and with the Western world. During the cold war, Lebanon navigated carefully between the two superpowers, although its political elite identified more closely with the United States. Lebanon's relations with the United States have been close over the years. Lebanon, from the standpoint of U.S. foreign policy, represents special opportunities and challenges.

Before the 1975 civil war, this small country enjoyed a free political climate that allowed Palestinian and Lebanese leftist parties and factions to operate freely and openly. The U.S. found this relatively open political climate threatening and sought to curtail radical influences in Lebanon and any possibility that they could spread elsewhere in the Arab world. The Lebanese government, meanwhile, allowed the U.S. (and other interested outside parties) to use Lebanon as a base for intelligence and propaganda operations.

American concerns about developments in Lebanon were clearly illustrated in 1958, when President Dwight

Eisenhower dispatched the U.S. Marines to the country, ostensibly to maintain law and order but actually to prevent an array of leftist and Arab nationalist forces from threatening the rule of a very unpopular president. Although the Marines did not engage in battle and were quickly withdrawn, their presence sent a clear signal about U.S. support for the right-wing leadership in the country, led by the Maronite Christian establishment.

The system of sectarian representation established in the 1926 constitution artificially maintained domination by the Maronites and conservative

elites of other religious communities. The U.S. government wanted to prevent a democratic redistribution of power in Lebanon because Muslim public opinion adamantly opposed U.S. economic and political interests in the region. The U.S. continued to play an important role in Lebanese affairs up until the mid-1970s.

Initially, the U.S. supported (both militarily and through the provision of intelligence) the right-wing

coalition in the 1975 civil war, which was also supported by Israel. The U.S. also tacitly supported the Arab League-backed Syrian intervention in 1976, designed to halt a military victory by leftist and Muslim forces supported by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Washington eventually lost faith in the ability of the right-wing coalition to achieve control of Lebanon and began advocating political reforms and a redistribution of power to assuage the Muslim majority.

Throughout the 1970s, the U.S. largely supported Israeli attacks against Lebanon, ostensibly launched against Palestinian guerrilla bases, though Palestinian and Lebanese civilians were the primary victims. The Reagan administration supported Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, blocking United Nations efforts to end the fighting and increasing military assistance to Israeli forces even as civilian casualties escalated into the tens of thousands. Under Israeli guns, the Lebanese parliament elected Bachir Gemayal, leader of the fascist Phalangist militia, as the new president. He was assassinated soon afterward and was succeeded by his brother Amin. U.S. troops moved into Beirut to help in the evacuation of Palestinian forces, but the Americans exited prior to an Israeli-facilitated Phalangist massacre of thousands of Palestinian refugees.

Amin Gemayal opened a new chapter in Lebanese-American relations, with the U.S. quickly recognizing a golden opportunity to impose a peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel based largely on U.S. and Israeli terms. The May 1983 U.S.-brokered peace agreement collapsed, however, in the face of widespread opposition among most Lebanese.

Meanwhile, U.S. forces returned, not as peacekeepers but as supporters of the rightist government, bombing and shelling Lebanese towns supportive of leftist and Islamic opponents of the Phalangist regime. Not surprisingly, some Lebanese retaliated: the U.S. embassy was bombed twice, the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut was destroyed with hundreds of soldiers inside, and several Americans were kidnapped and held hostage. A 1985 car bombing—organized by the CIA in an attempt to assassinate an anti-American Islamic cleric—resulted in scores of deaths in a Beirut suburb.

By early 1984, Reagan announced a "redeployment" of American troops in recognition of U.S. political and military failure in Lebanon. This was followed by years of neglect of Lebanon until the end of the civil war in 1989, when the U.S. gradually reentered the country. The American embassy is currently functioning in a peaceful environment.

Key Points

- U.S. involvement with Lebanon has extended over several decades. The Middle East was a key battleground during the cold war era, the legacy of which continues to this day.
- The U.S. sent combat troops into Lebanon in 1958 and again in 1982 to support unpopular right-wing presidents.
- The U.S. has largely supported Israeli attacks against Lebanon, furthering Lebanese resentment of the U.S. role in the region.

America's foreign policy toward Lebanon still suffers from a number of problems and cannot be divorced from the history of U.S. interference in Lebanon's internal affairs and U.S. support of Israeli policies detrimental to the Lebanese people and interests. Washington has demonstrated indifference toward the plight of the Palestinian refugees, who still languish in squalid refugee camps, subject to Israeli bombardment and Lebanese army and security harassment. The Clinton White House is the first administration to openly oppose their right of return. In addition, Washington, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, has also supported (directly or indirectly) Israeli attacks against Lebanon for more than thirty years.

The U.S.—which went to war against Iraq ostensibly to force the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions—has blocked enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 425, passed in 1978, which calls on Israel to withdraw unconditionally from Lebanese territory. Indeed, Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk has publicly advised the Israeli government not to withdraw its forces unilaterally from Lebanon, irrespective of its international obligations.

The Lebanese have consistently called for Israel's withdrawal and for an end to its support of the South Lebanese Army (SLA), a militia of local thugs attracted by relatively high salaries. Reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem have repeatedly documented widespread and systematic human rights violations against the civilian Lebanese population by both Israeli occupation forces and the SLA. Yet, the Clinton administration actively participated in a cover-up of Israel's 1997 massacre at the UN base of Qana—where over one hundred Lebanese civilians were killed—by attempting to suppress a report by the United Nations revealing that the attack was deliberate.

The continued Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory—amounting to one-tenth of the country—prevents Beirut from establishing peace and security throughout its territory. The Lebanese government has virtually no presence in southern Lebanon, where people live at the whim of the Israeli army and its allies. That the U.S. remains the main military and political benefactor of the Israeli occupiers only adds to the deep antipathy that most Lebanese feel toward the United States.

Similarly, many Lebanese resent the anti-Muslim tone and substance of U.S. foreign policy, especially the rush to characterize Muslim political acts as terrorist. Although armed resistance to foreign military occupation is recognized as legitimate under international law and though the resistance is officially endorsed by the Lebanese government, those fighting the Israelis in southern Lebanon are frequently characterized by Washington as a terrorist movement due to the leadership of the Hezbollah, or "Party of God." The anti-Muslim prejudice in American popular culture also leads many Lebanese to believe that there is a deliberate campaign in the U.S. to defame Islam and to malign Muslims and Arabs. Recent discourse about the "clash

of civilizations" thesis of Samuel Huntington has alarmed many Lebanese, who fear a revival of a cold war directed toward Islam at Arab expense.

The Lebanese people can point to many issues that heighten their concerns and objections to U.S. foreign policy. The continued sanctions against Iraq, which largely harm civilian Iraqis, are overwhelmingly opposed by the Lebanese and most other Arabs. Public opinion surveys clearly reveal that the Lebanese people support the Iraqis during their current ordeal, which they blame on Washington. Without U.S. intervention, the Gulf War would not have been fought and the sanctions would have been lifted a long time ago. The Iraqi crisis is often cited by Lebanese and other Arabs as an example of the anti-Arab bias in U.S. foreign policy.

Many Lebanese are also irate that the U.S. embassy routinely interferes in Lebanon's political affairs. Recent meddling by the U.S. ambassador troubles those who wish to rebuild the sovereignty of Lebanon after decades of civil war. In the 1980s, U.S. diplomats openly talked about U.S. preferences in Lebanese presidential elections, reviving the role Washington had played at the height of the cold war. Many Lebanese resent such U.S. intrusions as much as they resent the Syrians, who effectively dictate Lebanon's foreign policy.

Besides the ongoing Israeli occupation, the top concern of most Lebanese is the state of the economy. Here, too, there are apprehensions about the U.S. role and its economic agenda. In 1998, Washington—in league with Microsoft—pressured the Lebanese government to pass a special copyright law to protect U.S. products, ensuring that such technologies remain beyond the reach of most Lebanese, who have become accustomed to purchasing affordable, albeit pirated, products.

In this regard, serious misgivings are being expressed about globalization and its impact on Lebanon and other developing countries. The World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are now symbols of resented U.S. global hegemony. U.S. economic and trade policies in the region seem to reward client regimes regardless of their human rights violations, and the policies of the World Bank and the IMF are increasingly geared toward privatization and the reduction of the public sector, which is often the largest employer within a country. Conditions imposed by the IMF and the World Bank often lead to substantial reduction in government expenditures on health and education, while military expenditure is allowed to grow. Thus, the U.S. version of globalization is scaring, not reassuring, many Lebanese.

Key Problems

- The U.S., to the regret and consternation of most Lebanese, still does not support UN Security Council Resolution 425, which calls on Israel to withdraw unconditionally from Lebanese territory.
 - Many Lebanese resent the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim attitude that they detect in U.S. foreign policy and popular culture.
 - The effects of globalization and the policies of the World Bank and the IMF frighten most Lebanese, who are concerned about the greed of multinational corporations.
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The U.S. remains committed to its commercial, economic, military, and political interests, which are often defined in ways that run counter to support for human rights and democracy in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East. Washington's policy toward Lebanon (and the Middle East as a whole) is based, contrary to the misconceptions of many Arabs, on firm principles of

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should support all UN Security Council resolutions, including UNSC 425, which calls for immediate and unconditional Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory.
- Washington should change its foreign aid policies, which are currently determined according to political criteria, to ones based on need in order to address the serious problems of underdevelopment, poverty, and hunger.
- The U.S. could improve the political climate in the region by promoting democracy and human rights universally rather than targeting only regimes the administration opposes.

realpolitik and is not designed by a small group of lobbyists and contributors. U.S. foreign policy in the region has been institutionalized and has largely remained unchanged even with the passing of different political administrations.

A new foreign policy toward Lebanon should, at minimum, include supporting the enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 425. The U.S. cannot continue to press for the vigorous enforcement of UN resolutions dealing with Iraq while ignoring similar resolutions against Israel. Along with U.S. tolerance of human rights violations by Israel and its allies in South Lebanon, such duplicity

poisons U.S. relations with the Arab world as it underscores what Arabs see as U.S. "double standards." Support for an Israeli withdrawal would not only be popular with Lebanese and other Arabs but—based on recent public opinion polls—with Israelis as well.

A new U.S. foreign policy should also be based on universal support for human rights and democracy. This would encourage a process of democratization in Lebanon and the region, one that allows for genuine self-determination for the Lebanese without interference by Israel, Syria, France, the U.S., or any other outside power.

Washington's fixation with a peace process that has failed to deliver in its basic promise of peace, ignores the plight of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and elsewhere, and acquiesces to Israeli settlement drives in the West Bank and Gaza cannot hope to gain Lebanese support. U.S. policy toward the Palestinians and Israel must include support of basic Palestinian rights—including the right of refugees to return to their homeland—if the U.S. is to expect friendly relations with Lebanon and other Arabs.

The United States also needs to redefine its relationship with Islam and with what is identified as "political Islam." The inappropriate association between terrorism and Islam remains firm in the West. Recent conflicts in Lebanon have helped fuel this trend, and a more balanced and rational policy toward Lebanon could help reverse it.

Due to America's warped view of Islam and given deep-seated Arab suspicions of American motivations, real peace cannot be achieved through unilateral U.S. initiatives but only through international organizations and regional players. Lebanon has too long been the victim of unilateral moves by great powers and would be far more open to multilateral initiatives. As part of a shift toward a more multilateral approach, Washington should allow the UN to play its logical role in implementing its own resolutions. The U.S. should also allow France, and other powers more trusted by the Lebanese, to play a more prominent role.

Economically, the United States should revise its foreign aid priorities. In contrast to the Canadian government, which determines its foreign aid policy purely on the basis of need, Washington continues to apply reward-and-punish standards, often to the detriment of Lebanon's economic development. By contrast, Israel, one of the world's wealthier countries, is still the largest recipient of U.S. aid. Foreign aid based on need, rather than politics, would go a long way toward addressing the deep problems of poverty, underdevelopment, and hunger.

The U.S. also needs to encourage the World Bank and the IMF to reverse their policies and start supporting initiatives that facilitate wider public access to food, education, and health. Finally, U.S. aid to the region should shift away from military hardware to support for sustainable development. Until now, Lebanon has been on the receiving end of too little American economic assistance and too many American weapons.

Unfortunately, the end of the cold war has seemingly only hardened American unilateralism toward Lebanon and the Middle East. Unless there is change, most Lebanese—like many others throughout the world—can only look forward to an aggressive and often violent imposition of American economic and political will.

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