

24 US foreign policy in Lebanon

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For Americans, Lebanon conjures up images of terrorism and Israeli invasions. More recently, Lebanon's mass demonstrations to rid the country of its Syrian occupation swept the media in 2005. Often called the Cedar revolution, the West saw contrasting images of Western-looking women and black-clad Islamists. The perspective of Lebanese politics neatly divided into two—one western, Lebanese, and democratic, the other Islamist, non-Lebanese, and anti-democratic—has permeated US perspectives of the country. Moreover, this divided view of Lebanese domestic politics is usually equated with international and regional alignments and conflicts. Domestic actors here are viewed as reflecting regional ambitions and not their own political priorities. Throughout Lebanon's history, actors have been seen to represent the opposing forces in the cold war, civilizational divisions, or neighboring hostile states. These lenses, obscuring the domestic players' interests, transmit a skewed interpretation of Lebanese politics and hinder a complete understanding of the effects of US foreign policy in Lebanon.

In this chapter, I describe US policy during its various phases. I begin with the common petroleum and business interests of the post-war era. I then analyze US intervention in Lebanon during its first civil war of 1958, interpreted as a fight between pro-Soviet and pro-American groups. In the 1980s, President Reagan entered Lebanon's civil war in force, resulting in the bombing of American facilities as the US took sides. From that time, US personnel in Lebanon have been scarce and American policy informed even more by its Lebanese allies than previously. Support for business elites continued as Syrian forces occupied Lebanon after the civil war. In 2003, US policy in Lebanon focused on combating Syria and Iran. The US demanded the disarmament of Lebanese Islamist group Hezbollah's militia. US support for the 2006 Israeli–Lebanese war and the Israeli bombing of Lebanon was driven by this desire to eliminate Hezbollah militarily. The intense split that resulted after the war between the opposition groups (including Hezbollah) and the government saw the US on the side of the government during the most current phase of US policy. Throughout the description of these phases of US actions in Lebanon, I address the other themes that constitute the foundation of US policy. I analyze the influence of Israeli priorities and the US response to Israeli actions, US support for Lebanon's military and the actions of the military, and the persistent view of Lebanese domestic actors solely as pawns of regional actors.

Despite the differing stages of US policy, I argue that the basic orientation of the US toward Lebanon has remained constant. US policy in Lebanon is founded on support for Lebanon's ruling elite who ally with US interests. The common priorities of both this ruling elite and the US include an open economy and business with the US. The resulting US foreign policy stance embracing the status quo necessarily commits the US to propping up a traditional elite and the confessional system that returns it to office. To rationalize its support for a Lebanese political system that institutionalizes traditional and religious distinctions, US officials depict confessionalism in Lebanon as peaceful multiculturalism.² In this story, problems in Lebanon are attributed to external actors; the Lebanese people themselves constitute a harmonious system of religious co-existence. Following this interpretation, the opposition

must necessarily be portrayed as controlled by other countries or antagonistic to Lebanon's working democracy. Thus, as the Lebanese opposition expresses reservations toward US policy preferences, Washington stands against groups calling for a secular, non-religious system.

US actions in Lebanon have proceeded through several phases. Prior to the 1950s, the US was involved in Lebanon through support for Western, mainly Christian, business elites and US oil pipeline priorities. Cold war battles overlay these business and oil concerns from the 1950s to 1980. In the 1980s, during the Lebanese civil war, Israeli interests became dominant. After the civil war, backing for Western business elites continued while the US played a background role, acquiescing to the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. Regional animosities took pride of place when Syria opposed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the US shed its low-key policy for activism once again. Since that time, US policy has focused on countering Syrian and Iranian influence, particularly as that influence is believed to be represented by the Islamist group Hezbollah. As a result, the US supported Israeli military action against Hezbollah, most notably in the 2006 war, and continued to actively back the ruling government against its domestic opposition.

Running through these various phases were some constants: the concern for Israel, the influence of strong links to Westernized Lebanese business elites, and interpretations of Lebanese politics as controlled by regional actors. As a solution to these issues, the US maintained a long-standing policy of building a strong Lebanese military and aligning with military actions in Lebanon against groups affiliated with regional enemies of the US. Old friends were supported while Lebanese soil was used to send messages to hostile countries.

These US policies have not generated positive results for the US. US policy has not maintained Lebanon as a friendly to the US or combated regional enemies in Lebanon. US support for Israeli attacks in Lebanon turned increasing numbers of Lebanese against the US. The policy of siding with unpopular ruling elites prevented compromise between those elites and opposition groups, resulting in potentially violent domestic tensions and political standoffs. Further, US aid to Lebanon's military as a method of achieving US policy goals is flawed. Bolstering the military is founded on the assumption that a strong Lebanese military would control the country, enforce the rule of the pro-Western elites in government, and act as a bulwark against domestic militias and external countries alike. The Lebanese military has not fulfilled this government-supporting role, but instead avoided conflicts with all but unarmed domestic demonstrators and some unpopular foreign groups. The Lebanese armed forces act in accord with Lebanese public opinion and have tacit agreements with the actors that the US wants them to disarm, such as Hezbollah. In the most favorable of interpretations, ignorance is responsible for misdirected US policies. The US has inadvertently taken stances in domestic Lebanese conflicts while believing itself neutral. Viewed on the ground as partisan, the US and its officials have been attacked as participants in on-going conflicts.

By itself, Lebanon is a minor player in US foreign policy concerns.³ Lebanon's importance to the US today comes not through waterways or oil assets, but through the country's relation to other conflicts and actors of importance.⁴ Lebanon's geographical position on the front lines of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and its domestic opposition movements, allied to the Soviet Union or Iran, have continually returned the country to the attention of US policymakers. Building on the Islamist groups and enemies of Israel operating in Lebanon, larger regional and international conflicts dominated the interpretation of Lebanese politics for the media and international community. US policies furthered this minimization of domestic Lebanese factors in politics. As Lebanon alone was of little interest to the US public, US officials portrayed Lebanon's fate as linked to important issues of oil and relations with the Gulf in order to generate foreign policy interest.⁵ Local grabs for power appeared to be religious battles of Muslims against Christians, or Western civilization under threat from world communism. The Lebanese themselves are complicit in this perception, emphasizing international actors over Lebanon's domestic groups. For their own purposes, some Lebanese have translated their

politics into terms easily digested in US policy circles: Christian versus Muslim, Communist versus Western. The US appeared to comprehend the difference between rhetoric and reality when its officials were on the ground in 1958. Since then, information about Lebanon has increasingly arrived with US intelligence already packaged and interpreted by others with their own interests, interests that often conflict with those of the US.

The Lebanese domestic political structure

A brief outline of the Lebanese domestic political structure is necessary to interpret US foreign policy, as US actions continually intersect with the differing factions in Lebanon. France created Lebanon from the Ottoman territories of Greater Syria, expanded from a small mountain area to include the surrounding grain-producing areas. The League of Nations, predecessor to the United Nations, granted France a mandate to rule the country, ostensibly to guide the country to independence and democracy. The jerry-mandered drawing of Lebanon's borders generated a slight majority of Christians along with Sunni, Shi'a, and Druze populations. This slight numerical superiority of the Christian population was established in the country's only census of 1932. The country's democracy was based on confession or religious identity, and all political institutions were based upon these identities. Upon independence in 1943, the informal National Pact provided that the president would be from the dominant Christian sect, Maronite Catholic, the prime minister would be a Sunni, and the parliament led by a Shi'a. A complicated formula similarly allocated government positions and representation by sect.

The other element of the understanding reached between the Christian and Muslim elites at independence was that Lebanon would not lean either Eastward or Westward: it would not bind itself to the West as the Christians wanted, nor to the Arab world as the Muslims wanted. The communities agreed to disagree. The precarious nature of the new state meant that it would continue to be dependent upon France and subject to repeated battles for leadership and changes in government policy. Government mainly functioned as a sinecure for traditional notables from the different communities, while funding a patron-client system. Electoral rules return communal politicians to office, and many political posts are inherited. The formula dividing positions by religious sect forestalled real change in government policy, solidifying a minimalist state in a country with large rural and underdeveloped areas. The problem of underdeveloped rural areas has persistently nagged at all subsequent Lebanese governments.

Two main trends arose from the divisions embodied in the National Pact. Out of the Christian, pro-Western side, the trend of "Lebanists" emerged, those wishing to side openly with the West and eschewing their Arab heritage and connections. They insisted on Christian domination of Lebanese politics. The early institutional manifestation of this political trend was the right-wing Phalange or Kata'ib political party, later a militia, inspired by the fascist parties of Europe in the 1930s. This trend became identified as separatist, desiring to split a portion of Lebanon off from the Muslim rest of the country. The second, looser grouping has been more typical of the Muslims and often pro-Arab, siding with the Palestinians and Arab nationalists at different times. Despite the apparent religious nature of the divisions, these political trends were not split along religious lines but cut across them. The Phalange with its overtly Christian philosophy was overwhelmingly Christian, but Christians were present in large numbers in other anti-Phalange political and military groups. Lebanon's conflicts were not about religious dogmas or hostility toward other religions per se, but were battles for control of the country that largely fell along the differing perspectives of the religious groups. The sides are more aptly described as rightist versus leftist. As the conflicts progressed, polarization along religious identity did occur, and massacres and ethnic cleansing were directed at religious and ethnic groups in themselves.

Oil transit, business elites, and initial US interests

US interests in Lebanon in the 1940s and early 1950s were dominated by the importance of petroleum interests and commerce. Washington sought to acquire the oil needed to meet post-war requirements, establish US businesses as prominent or dominant in Middle East trade, and secure the US politically over European countries. These goals were undertaken through direct diplomacy and covert actions. The consequences of US policy priorities in Lebanon at this time set an enduring American pattern of endorsing the confessional religious system against detractors.

In the post-war era, Lebanon, or more precisely its capital Beirut, became a trading center between East and West. Lebanon of this time has been referred to as the “Switzerland” (or Paris) of the Middle East. Democratic freedom, respected institutions of higher education, free markets, and a Western elite existed in a regional sea of coups, counter-coups, revolutions, and bolstering war rhetoric. US oil companies, airlines, and businesses found Lebanon an important site for profit in the region. To oil companies and US oil interests, Lebanon was central to the oil pipeline that ended in the Lebanese city of Sidon.⁶ The pipeline, TAPLINE (Trans Arabian Pipeline Company), owned by several Western oil companies, pushed Beirut to be a commercial center joining Eastern Arab countries with Western business representatives. Lebanon was a gateway not only for oil and gold to reach the West, but also for Western goods to head East. ARAMCO and Pan American Airways were heavily involved in Lebanon. American airlines set up shop in Lebanon seeking supremacy over air routes to the Gulf states.⁷

Underneath the pleasant appearance of this commercial hub was the confessional system—political rule built upon religious identity—that constituted the foundation for continued business and policy aligned with US interests. American officials were intertwined with both business interests from their own country and the Lebanese commercial elite who ran the country. The confessional system kept those elites in power that had like interests with the US, namely that Lebanon remain an economy unconditionally open to Western business and American governmental priorities. This Lebanese elite placed their commercial interests above political and foreign policy differences with the US. Despite their personal disagreement with US policy in Palestine, the Lebanese elite subordinated such disagreement to continued trade. Further, representatives of the Lebanese business elite had direct, personal connections to officials in Washington,⁸ and it was their interpretation of Lebanese domestic politics that Washington heard. American officials and Lebanese business alike portrayed Lebanon as a democratic, pro-Western country, unique in its mix of peaceful religious groups. This view supported the maintenance of the confessional system.⁹ The image of a stable, happy Lebanon, with no interference from external powers, persisted against reports to the contrary from US officials on the ground. America was heavily involved in propping up this system, even funding local elections to result in its allies’ favor.

The cold war and Lebanon’s first civil war

The cold war era in Lebanon demonstrates the complex overlay of international hostilities onto domestic battles. The US became militarily embroiled in Lebanon’s domestic affairs in 1958 when Lebanon’s President Chamoun invoked the Eisenhower Doctrine. He claimed to be threatened by international communism by way of Arab nationalism and Egypt’s charismatic president Gamal Abdel-Nasser. At times, a struggle between the Soviet and American spheres of influence played out in coups, revolutions, and the spread of Arab nationalism throughout the Middle East. In reality, these events were more about Arab nationalism and discarding regimes left by the colonial powers (France and Britain) than intrinsically pro-Soviet or anti-American. But the US administration considered Arab nationalism, spearheaded by

Abdel Nasser, to be under the sphere of influence and control of Moscow. Socialism—not communism—was indeed a central component of many opposition movements of this time, albeit a modified version often called Arab socialism. Many Arab nationalist movements and states did become allied with the Soviets. The terms of Soviet–Arab relations were often rocky, and the Soviet Union was not often the alliance of choice for Arab nationalists. Still, in the polarized environment of the 1950s, overthrowing a pro-Western regime denied the possibility of allying with the West.

The civil war in which the US intervened in 1958 began with the Lebanese president's attempt to unconstitutionally extend his tenure in office.¹⁰ While Washington supported the president and wanted to protect its oil and commercial interests, it did not want to intervene militarily until regional events changed.¹¹ President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles were convinced Lebanon was threatened by communism, but did not want to confront Nasser. In part, this was because they believed that Nasser and Arab nationalism had significant popular support. Bound by the Eisenhower Doctrine, the US said it would abide by the findings of a United Nations observer group that determined whether Lebanon was truly threatened by international communism. The observer group did not find evidence of communist interference, and Washington was therefore not obliged to intervene.¹² On the ground, US officials continued to argue that the conflict was one of personalities and unequal representation, not communism. The president was widely unpopular, he ruled with broad prerogative, and he marginalized other elites who in turn mobilized against his rule.

Once the US sphere of influence had been severely reduced as a result of the Iraqi Revolution in July, Washington decided to enter the Lebanese presidential crisis. On top of the Iraqi Revolution that toppled a pro-Western monarchy, internal socialist opposition was threatening the Jordanian regime, a Western ally, and Egypt and Syria entered the Soviet orbit by forming the United Arab Republic in 1958. Not wanting to lose another ally and desiring to send a message to Nasser and the Soviet Union,¹³ the US sent the marines and army. The marines landed on the beach alongside sunbathing Lebanese.

The actual intervention itself, entailing 15,000 troops and marines, was confused and lacked a commander or a defined mission.¹⁴ The conflict essentially ended the second day of the US intervention with the impromptu meeting of the leaders of the American forces, the US ambassador, and General Shehab, head of the Lebanese army, at a roadblock on the road to the airport. The Lebanese army subsequently accompanied the marines to Beirut and acted as a buffer between them and the domestic population. The US forces avoided opposition-controlled areas to prevent clashes, and essentially stayed off the radar.¹⁵ Eisenhower sent Robert Murphy to negotiate a solution, which resulted in the election of the head of the Lebanese army, Shehab, to become president.¹⁶

On the ground, US officials corrected Washington's pervasive conclusion of Soviet meddling and were able to find a compromise without military involvement. The two militaries on the scene, the Lebanese and the American, never took part in fighting in this civil war. The US handling of this crisis reflected a nuanced view and acknowledgment of the domestic conflicts involved, which was not the case later in Lebanon's history. This permitted the US to stand aside, oversee new elections ousting the president who had called for US support in the first place, and help restore stability. The ability of the US to abandon its erstwhile ally President Chamoun in deference to the large existing opposition to his tenure facilitated the end of the crisis.

The PLO and Shi'a in Lebanon

Between the 1958 crisis and the civil war in 1975, Lebanon experienced large-scale demographic changes that drew continued American concern. From the late 1960s, the Palestinians, mobilized in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and later the Lebanese Shi'a in the

Islamist political party and militia Hezbollah, drew the diplomatic ire of the US and military fire from Israel. Israeli invasions aimed to rid Lebanon first of the PLO then of Hezbollah. Both were declared terrorist organizations by the US, and Israeli actions against them had full American support. However, the two organizations are not equal in Lebanese politics. There are important differences between them that complicate current military moves against Hezbollah. While the PLO is a foreign organization, Hezbollah is not.

The PLO has long been a problem for US policy. In 1967, the Israeli takeover of the West Bank and Gaza Strip pushed more Palestinians into the surrounding countries, first to Jordan and then after 1970 to Lebanon. There were now 300,000 Palestinians living in sixteen camps in Lebanon. Palestinian organizations became increasingly militant, striking at Israel from neighboring countries. Israel struck back, and Lebanon was caught in the middle. Southern Lebanon became known as "Fatahland" after the main component of the PLO, Arafat's group, Fatah. As the PLO launched operations against Israel from Lebanese territory, the Lebanese army was powerless to intervene. One of the perennial characteristics of Lebanon has been the weakness of its army. In 1969, the Lebanese army and the PLO agreed to the Cairo Accord, which stipulated they would leave each other alone. The army would not enter the Palestinian camps but was acknowledged as the sovereign power in southern Lebanon, and the PLO could continue its attacks on Israel.¹⁷ Israel's retaliations against the PLO, most famously bombing the Lebanese airport in 1969 and assassinating PLO officials in Beirut in 1973, highlighted the inept nature of Lebanese security. Again and again, Lebanon has been unable to prevent foreign actors from acting on Lebanese soil.

Hezbollah, a group designated as terrorist by the US, arose through demographic changes linked to Israeli actions in Lebanon. Israel-PLO bombardments, along with the lack of economic development, caused a rural exodus of the southern population into Beirut. Most of these were Shi'a Muslims, who settled in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982 drove more Shi'a north into Beirut. Lacking even basic government services such as drinking water and sewage collection, the residents organized to provide for themselves. Numerous small organizations arose, each with a limited capacity. Displaced Shi'a in urban Beirut formed the base of Hezbollah or the Party of God. This Islamist militia, political party, and social service umbrella organization formed in the wake of the Israeli invasion of 1982 by uniting many of the existing social service and civil society organizations.

Reagan, Israel, and Lebanon's long civil war

Lebanon's long civil war broke out in 1975 after much hostility and clashes among rival groups. Washington's main concerns in Lebanon after the oil pipeline TAPLINE ceased operating in 1976 were combating the PLO and avoiding a confrontation with the Soviets. While the war in Lebanon threatened to bring the PLO into a central influential position, US officials wanted to exclude the PLO from any potential negotiations on the future of the occupied Palestinian territories—the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Instead, the preferred negotiating partner was Jordan. When the civil war ended, the PLO was marginalized and then became a legitimate player eliminating one US policy concern, but the war had also created Hezbollah, which remained armed.

American promotion of the Christians in the war was part of the administration's embrace of the status quo ruling elites and part of its help to Israel. Israel and the right-wing Phalange militia were allies for a time, and the Phalange was clearly against the PLO. Israel sent arms to the Phalange militia with US approval, and if necessary the US was willing to supplement this indirect aid with direct military actions.¹⁸ In 1976, Syria intervened in the Lebanese civil war with the blessing of the US to defend the Phalange, mainly Christian, forces against the Lebanese National Movement and its allies the PLO. At this point, the PLO and Phalange were the main protagonists and the Phalange was not doing well. Against the wishes of its ally

the Soviet Union, Syria intervened to defeat another Soviet ally using Soviet weapons.¹⁹ Washington approved these moves, viewing Syrian actions as positive for US interests as they thwarted the PLO and protected the Christian Phalange. But the administration was aware that too much Syrian involvement would draw the Israelis into the conflict. An Israeli move against Syria could incite Soviet intervention and a broader war with larger economic consequences directly tied to US interests, including use of the oil boycott weapon.²⁰ Israeli needs and concerns about the Soviet actions were at the forefront of American policymakers' minds. For the rest of the 1970s, Lebanon was marginalized in US policy as the Carter administration focused on attempting an overall settlement that could subsume the Lebanese problem.²¹

Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978 and established a zone of influence in the south. Washington protested and voted for UN Security Council Resolution 425 calling for Israeli withdrawal. The US threatened a halt in aid to Israel, and Israel moved back to the strip it called its security zone on the border. It established a new, proxy militia in this occupied southern area, the South Lebanese Army (SLA). Israel and the SLA remained in southern Lebanon until 2000. The US did nothing further to push Israel to withdraw fully from Lebanese territory.²² The United Nations sent a new unit, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), to monitor Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and provide security. The organization remains in Lebanon.

American policy toward Lebanon shifted with the Reagan administration. Reagan was more confrontational than his predecessor, and his chief concern was the Soviets. In the Middle East, Reagan believed Israel to be a strong ally. Syria, in the Soviet orbit, was to be excluded from peace efforts. Despite this global perspective of superpower competition, US involvement in Lebanon would become entangled in domestic affairs, taking the right-wing Christian side in the conflict. Reagan brought US forces back into Lebanon, although unlike 1958 the US forces engaged. The result was disastrous. In the end, the US was considered just another militia active in the war and was attacked as such.

In 1981, Reagan sent Philip Habib to negotiate a crisis between Syria and Israel over Syrian missiles placed in Lebanon. He mediated again between Israel and the PLO over a particularly intense series of civilian casualties resulting from Israeli attacks in Beirut. A ceasefire between the PLO and Israel was put in place in 1981.²³

In 1982, Israel invaded deep into Lebanon, surrounding West Beirut. Israel believed that Washington approved, as a result of conversations with Alexander Haig prior to the military action. Haig indicated that Washington did not oppose an Israeli invasion provided there was appropriate justification.²⁴ The invasion sparked widespread condemnation in the international community, Israel, and the US. After the invasion, Washington vetoed UN resolutions calling for Israeli withdrawal or even a ceasefire.²⁵ The US shared Israel's goals in the invasion, those of eliminating the PLO as a force, marginalizing the PLO in peace talks, and protecting Israel's northern border. As Israel bombed West Beirut heavily, Washington sought PLO withdrawal from Lebanon, and US officials decided on an appropriate location for PLO forces to relocate.²⁶ US troops briefly entered to see the PLO evacuate, and the US guaranteed the safety of the remaining Palestinian civilians, now without a militia for protection. The US troops left and the PLO went to Tunisia. Reagan presented a comprehensive peace initiative for the Palestinian issue without involving the PLO. The Reagan administration also informed Congress that Israel could have violated restrictions on the use of cluster bombs in the Lebanon war, and the administration then temporarily halted further cluster bomb transfers to Israel.

In September 1982, a few days after the US troops left, Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel, a close ally of Israel, was assassinated. Israeli troops went into West Beirut, against the agreement negotiated by Habib, and oversaw the massacre of about 2,000 unarmed Palestinians in the refugee camps by the Christian Phalange militia. The massacre of Sabra and Shatila camps became known throughout the world. Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon

was found by an Israeli commission to be partly responsible for the massacre. These massacres caused the marines to return to Beirut as part of the Multi-National Forces including French, British, and Italians. As American actions became more clearly aligned with Israel and the Christian forces, and the US lost the pretense of neutrality. Syria, the Soviets, the Shi'a, the PLO, and the Druze were all viewed as the opposing forces to the Americans.²⁷ Put simply, the conflict was viewed as Soviet–Muslim against Christian–Western. Now perceived as propping up Christian dominance of Lebanon, opposition Lebanese groups fired upon US positions. US troops were instructed to return fire against the advice of commanders on the ground.²⁸ American ships also bombed Druze and Syrian positions in the mountains.

Washington staked its hopes on a new treaty signed with the Lebanese president. Amin Gemayel succeeded his brother as president and signed a peace treaty with Israel on May 17, 1983. Known as the May 17 Accord, it delivered Israeli security demands, particularly regarding its proxy army in the south, while excluding Syria and non-Christian parties from the negotiations entirely. The accord placed the Lebanese government within the Israeli orbit and the US backed it fully. The May 17 Accord was viewed as the one accomplishment of the US administration in the Lebanese war and a vehicle for peace.²⁹ In reality, the accord narrowed support for the Lebanese president and drew the lines between the sides more sharply. The opposition came to rely more heavily on Syrian support. With the Christians isolated and unable to govern without Israeli or American firepower, Syria became the main power broker in Lebanon.³⁰

The response to American partiality in the Lebanese civil war came in attacks against the US embassy in April and October 1983, the latter resulting in 241 US troops dead. The French barracks were attacked as well. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the bombing. This Islamist group's relation to the Shi'a Islamist group Hezbollah, formed around this time with the help of the Iranian revolutionary guards, is murky, and Hezbollah is generally accused of the actions against American and French troops. The US responded by retreating from Lebanese soil to the coast and using the battleship *USS New Jersey* to strike at the mountains above Beirut, Druze and Shi'a territory presumed pro-Syrian and anti-American.³¹ In February 1984, US forces left Lebanon. The remainder of the war was characterized by kidnappings and the departure of virtually all foreigners from Lebanon. Numerous US hostages were kidnapped and three were killed. Flights to Lebanon by US planes were prohibited from 1985, and a ban on all travel to Lebanon by US citizens was enacted from 1987 to 1997.³² US policy degraded into defensive aggression and became entangled with Iran in the Iran–Contra scandal, partly to obtain influence over Iranian-allied actors in Lebanon.³³ In 1985, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-linked activities resulted in the bombing of a Beirut neighborhood in order to assassinate Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah. The bombing killed eighty people but not its target. A major kidnapping of an American occurred days later.

American goals in Lebanon in the mid-1980s were to ensure the border with Israel, support the extension of the Multi-National Forces for peace and security in the border region, and to continue supporting the Lebanese government and army, training and arming the latter.³⁴ It was and still is the American belief that the Lebanese army can combat and replace the militias and anti-American forces operating in Lebanon such as the PLO and Hezbollah.

Reconstruction and the Syrian occupation

The end of the Lebanese civil war began with the Ta'if Accords signed in Saudi Arabia in 1989, as the sides accepted a (slightly) modified government formula. The agreement changed the system slightly, decreasing the balance of Christians to Muslims from six to five, to equal numbers of both in parliament. Syria was a strong player in this accord, and led the new peacekeeping body in Lebanon, the Arab Deterrent Force. The accord did not delineate a final date to Syria's military role in Lebanon. The head of the Lebanese army, General Michel Aoun, vehemently disagreed with this treaty and waged a "war of liberation" against Syrian

occupation. In 1990, when Syria agreed to take part in the first Gulf war against the Iraqi Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of Kuwait, the US turned silent on Syria's actions in Lebanon.³⁵ Syria dispensed with Aoun's war and extended its forces throughout Lebanon with the exception of the border area occupied by Israel and the South Lebanon Army. Syria remained in Lebanon until 2005. American policy sought a comprehensive peace treaty among all parties to the Arab–Israeli conflict after the Gulf war, initiating the Madrid peace process in 1992. Policy toward Lebanon was subsumed within this process or the country was ignored.

The policy of supporting Lebanon's business and ruling elite continued after the civil war, in the person of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. A business tycoon, he was pro-Western and advocated neoliberal economic reforms and privatization of Lebanese public companies. To accomplish these goals and reconstruction of the country after the civil war, Western countries lent large amounts of money to Hariri.

The US began to pressure Syria after the US war in Iraq, a war Syria protested. In 2003, Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act imposing sanctions on Syria for its continued occupation of Lebanon, among other things. This prohibited trade from Syria to the US, airplane traffic of Syrian planes, financial dealings with the Bank of Syria, and allowed freezing of the assets of certain Syrians. In fall 2004, Lebanon was preparing to extend the term of President Emile Lahoud unconstitutionally, a move benefiting Syria. France and the US responded by promoting UN Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanese territory.

After the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, an aggression often attributed to Syria, anti-Syrian demonstrations in Lebanon caused Syria to end its long occupation of the country. For Washington, these demonstrations—called the Beirut Spring in Lebanon and the Cedar revolution in the West—affirmed the power of civil society and the pro-Western character of Lebanon. This view of Lebanon as either Western or Eastern, but not both, could not explain Lebanese reaction to the Israeli invasion of 2006 when the country turned anti-American. The US supported a UN investigation into those responsible for the assassination, believing it would lead to Syria. Lebanon's opposition, chiefly Hezbollah, opposed the investigation and tribunal into the assassination because of fears that international rulings in a pro-American court could be turned against them.

Countering Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah

US policy toward Lebanon in the 2000s was a by-product of US hostility to Hezbollah and Syria and its tight alliance with Israel. American goals in Lebanon after the end of the civil war went from support for a Syrian solution to the civil war to overt animosity to Syria and its presence in Lebanon, even after Syrian troops left the country. The US views Syria and Iran as controlling the actions of Hezbollah, whose continual skirmishes with Israel and association with Iran are major concerns to Washington. Hezbollah is also accused of sponsoring terrorism, and arguments have been made that Hezbollah is more of a danger than Al-Qaeda.³⁶ US foreign policy again sought to promote the Lebanese army and now Lebanese civil society in order to thwart Hezbollah.

Clinton's advisors did not push Israel to withdraw from its occupied security zone in Lebanon, called for in UN Security Council resolutions. Such a selective application of UN resolutions led to charges that US policy suffered a pro-Israeli bias.³⁷ President Clinton affirmed his belief that the continued occupation was for Israel's security and the US should yield to Israel given that security consideration.³⁸ The 1990s saw multiple Israeli attacks on Lebanon that the US also did not protest. Israel bombed Lebanon particularly in 1993 and 1996, hitting civilian targets and causing large refugee populations. The operations were geared toward causing Hezbollah to disarm by forcing the Lebanese government to act. The US, through Secretary of State Warren Christopher, negotiated ceasefires. After the 1996 bombing, Christopher

negotiated agreement to a set of rules for keeping the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and confined to military targets. An international force monitored the agreement, which includes US forces.

Skirmishes continued between Israel and Hezbollah forces, and by 2000, the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon had become unpopular with the Israeli public. Israel withdrew in 2000, intending to leave its proxy militia, the SLA, in place. The SLA collapsed, and its leaders fled to Israel while others were tried in Lebanese courts. Hezbollah took over security in these areas of southern Lebanon. The Lebanese army did not exert control over southern Lebanon, a key demand of the US and Israel, until after the 2006 war. The Israeli withdrawal was not complete, but continued in an area known as the Sheb'a farms. Israel contends this area was Syrian, captured as part of the Golan Heights in 1967, while Lebanon and Syria maintain the area is Lebanese.

The US continued to support Israeli action against Hezbollah, notably in the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war, known in Lebanon as the July war. While Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, incursions, bombings, and clashes between Israel and Hezbollah persisted. In July 2006, Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers across the Lebanese border in Israel, intending them for a prisoner exchange (which had occurred before). The Israeli response was full-scale bombing and invasion of Lebanon, as Israel considered the taking of soldiers to be an act of war. In this war, the US approved of Israeli actions for the purposes of disarming Hezbollah. Some observers maintain the 2006 war was pushed by the US.³⁹ The American stance was clear inside Lebanon when the Bush administration did not push for a ceasefire. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that she would not press for a halt to hostilities, as in her view the Israel–Lebanon war demonstrated “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.”⁴⁰ The remark indicated at least implicit support for Israel’s actions and insensitivity to the devastation in Lebanon. The effect on Lebanese public opinion was clear: in this historically pro-American population, opinion swung decidedly anti-America.⁴¹

Once more into the fray

US policy in Lebanon is in a quandary. Current US policy is focused on building Lebanese civil society and its armed forces, and pressuring the government to disarm Hezbollah. Washington supports the reigning government, called the March 14 coalition, against broad opposition spanning major Christian groups along with the Shi’a Hezbollah. While the US very publicly supports democracy, it objects to Hezbollah, an organization with significant electoral success in Lebanon. Further, other opposition groups who advocate an end to the confessional system are also not welcome in Washington. The result is American attempts to bolster civil society and win “hearts and minds,” through increased economic aid, promotion of civil society, and still more help for Lebanon’s military.

The US gave economic aid through the civil war and after. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) sponsored projects in Lebanon throughout the civil war and after, in business, schools, and civil society. The US helped the Lebanese reconstruction effort even during the war. Washington funded projects to rebuild bridges, remove rubble, and donate foodstuffs.⁴² The US gave around \$35 million annually between 2001 and 2005, increasing dramatically after the 2006 war with Israel.⁴³ After the 2006 war, aid stepped up in order to compete with Hezbollah’s aggressive rebuilding of the areas destroyed by Israel.⁴⁴ Aid topped \$800 million in 2007, which included economic, foreign, and military assistance.⁴⁵ For most previous years, the amount was significantly lower, between \$35 and 40 million. In 2008, \$60 million was requested. While Washington expanded its economic assistance in recent years, this assistance never dealt with the fundamental lack of social service institutions in Lebanon and the state’s confessional bias. American money worked through the state, meaning the money was still allocated on confessional and patron–client lines.

Developing civil society is another focus of current US policy. The US encourages a wide range of civil and political society organizations in Lebanon and the broader Middle East through the Middle East Partnership Initiative, from literacy campaigns to election monitoring.⁴⁶ Altering attitudes was the focus of public diplomacy campaigns in Lebanon. USAID supported an advertising campaign for the slogan “I love life,” presumably in contrast to Hezbollah’s emphasis on martyrdom and death. On the ground, the slogan was changed in order to protest against the public relations effort itself and turned into negative slogans such as “I love capitalism” and “I love sectarianism,” highlighting Washington’s support for the current government and confessionalism historically. Society also responded with positive slogans, such as “We love life,” affirming a difference between US individualism and support for the Lebanese community in its entirety.⁴⁷

The US has begun to take an even clearer position on domestic Lebanese issues. In late 2007, the Bush administration issued an executive order freezing the assets of anyone participating in anti-democratic actions in Lebanon. The order was directed at what the administration considered interference by the Syrians, but was so worded that any members of the political opposition could be targeted.⁴⁸ As the largest element of the opposition, Hezbollah, already has sanctions against it by the US, the order threatened the other elements of the opposition who are chiefly Christian. This brings the US squarely into the domestic political fight for power. As has been witnessed previously in Lebanon, US officials became targets. The wave of bombings in Lebanon encompassed the US in January 2008, when embassy officials were attacked.⁴⁹

A consistent and continuing US policy has been the attempt to strengthen, train, and arm the Lebanese armed forces. This policy springs from the belief that a strong military would conquer militias hostile to the US such as the PLO previously, and Hezbollah, and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Lebanon currently. Iranian influence allied with Syria is another target of US policy. The belief that the Lebanese army would follow the (pro-Western) government’s direction and move against Hezbollah or the PLO has not been borne out. The army has either split or refused to enter conflicts that force it to take sides on issues that divide the population. US arms to the Lebanese army during the civil war were channeled directly to the differing militias, especially the Christian one. The Lebanese military only acts in reflection of popular opinion, and current Lebanese opinion supports the presence of Hezbollah and its militia.

In 2007, the Lebanese army acted effectively against a small group of Islamist terrorists called Fatah al-Islam operating out of a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon. While appearing to bolster US faith in the Lebanese military’s ability to control the country, the incident in fact confirms the Lebanese army’s deference to public opinion. There was societal consensus for the military’s actions, and even Hezbollah publicly approved. Further, the target of military action was viewed as foreign, not Lebanese, and not even affiliated with the Palestinian cause or the residents of the refugee camps.

The fallacy of the US view that the Lebanese military could and would move against Hezbollah was borne out in the Hezbollah–Sunni militia clashes in May 2008. The army stayed absent from the fight, refusing to support the government, as Sunni militias filled that role. Hezbollah easily trounced these militias, then pulled back and allowed the Lebanese army to take over. For its part, the army reversed the governmental decrees that sparked the conflict. The incident demonstrates both Hezbollah’s role in the Lebanese system and the futility of US attempts to remove the Islamist group.

Conclusion: prospects for change?

Throughout the differing phases of US policy in Lebanon, the US has sided with the ruling elites and the confessional system. The efficacy of US policy goals has suffered. Washington’s depiction of any opposition to these ruling elites as puppets of disliked foreign countries has inhibited the ability to see the domestic popularity of these opposition groups and the

unpopularity of Lebanese governments. Foreign actors have surely acted in Lebanon, but they are not the cause of Lebanon's governing quandaries. Domestic discontent with the ruling elites persisted and periodically caused violent clashes. The precarious foundation upon which Lebanon is built has been propped up by US support even as it is further taxed by Israeli military actions. While the US views Hezbollah as the main danger in Lebanon, a large—by some accounts majority—of Lebanese instead perceive their danger is Israel. US support for Israel and for the ruling government serves short-term US policy goals of maintaining pro-American elites in power. However, a longer perspective would question the wisdom of this policy. The popularity of the opposition, including Hezbollah, has only increased throughout US opposition to the group and the 2006 war with Israel. In 1958, the US recognized the domestic nature of grievances and the broad support for the opposition as due to the influence of officials on the ground. The isolation of US government officials since the 1980s has exacerbated the reliance upon others for information and advice on Lebanon. Without an independent view of the Lebanese situation, the US will continue to back one side in a domestic conflict without realizing the unpopularity of its ally. Such policies will not keep Lebanese friendly to the US or maintain US priorities in Lebanon when the ruling elite changes.

Notes

- 1 The views here are those of the author and not those of the US government or any other institutional affiliation. Thanks to Rob Weiner and Jessica Piombo for comments.
- 2 Irene L. Grendzier, *Notes from the Minfield: United States Intervention in Lebanon and the Middle East, 1945–1958* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 16.
- 3 Paul E. Salem, "Superpowers and Small States: an Overview of American Lebanese Relations," *Beirut Review*, 5, 1993.
- 4 Clyde R. Mark, "Lebanon," in *CRS Issue Brief for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 2005).
- 5 Irene L. Grendzier, "Exporting Death as Democracy: US Foreign Policy in Lebanon," in Nubar Hovsepian, ed., *The War on Lebanon: A Reader* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008).
- 6 Salem (1993).
- 7 Grendzier (1997): ch. 5.
- 8 *Ibid.*: 10.
- 9 *Ibid.*: 16.
- 10 US reaction to this is in marked contrast to the same move in 2004. In that year, Syrian-allied president Emile Lahoud attempted—and succeeded—in extending his stay, also unconstitutionally. On this occasion, it resulted in uproar in the West and was fiercely condemned by the US.
- 11 Fawaz Gerges, "The Lebanese Crisis of 1958: The Risks of Inflated Self-Importance," *Beirut Review*, 5, 1993.
- 12 Charles Winslow, *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 118.
- 13 Gerges (1993).
- 14 Winslow (1996): ch. 5.
- 15 *Ibid.*: 124–25.
- 16 *Ibid.*: 126–27.
- 17 See Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 18 Minutes, National Security Council Meeting (Top Secret), April 7, 1976 (declassified). Available from www.ford.utexas.edu/library/DOCUMENT/NSCMIN/minlist.htm.
- 19 Salem (1993).
- 20 National Security Council Meeting, April 7, 1976.
- 21 He did not succeed in a Geneva conference of all the parties, and switched instead to the eventual Camp David treaty. Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab–Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 5th edn (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004): 345–46.
- 22 Stephen Zunes, "The United States and Lebanon: A Meddlesome History," in *FPIF Policy Report* (Foreign Policy in Focus, April 26, 2006).
- 23 Smith (2004): 363–65.
- 24 Avi Shlaim, "The Impact of US Policy in the Middle East," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 17(2), 1988: 21.
- 25 Zunes (2006).
- 26 Taped phone conversation between Morris Draper and Charlie Hill, July 3, 1982. Available from www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Histroy/lebtoc.html, "State department officials discuss PLO evacuation," unclassified document.
- 27 Shlaim (1988): 22.
- 28 Smith (2004): 371.

- 29 Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon, A Shattered Country: Myths & Realities of the Wars in Lebanon*, trans. Franklin Philip (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1996): 126.
- 30 Shlaim (1988): 22.
- 31 Witness the circular nature of this violence: a man whose family was killed in the indiscriminate bombings in 1985 took part in hijacking a TWA plane in which an American navy officer was killed. Zunes (2006).
- 32 Mark (2005).
- 33 Zunes (2006).
- 34 National Security Decision Directive #103, September 10, 1983.
- 35 Salem (1993).
- 36 Daniel Byman, "Should Hezbollah Be Next?" *Foreign Affairs*, 82(6), November/December 2003.
- 37 Zunes (2006); Joel Beinin, "The Israelization of American Middle East Policy Discourse," *Social Text*, 21(2), 2003.
- 38 Zunes (2006).
- 39 Stephen Zunes, "US Role in Lebanon Debacle," in *FPIF Policy Report* (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy in Focus, May 18, 2007); Seymour M. Hersh, "Watching Lebanon: Washington's Interest in Israel's war," *The New Yorker*, 21, August 2006.
- 40 Secretary Condoleezza Rice, Special Briefing on Travel to the Middle East and Europe, July 21, 2006. Available from www.merln.ndu.edu/archivepdf/syria/State/69331.pdf.
- 41 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "People say no," *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, 3 9 August 2006.
- 42 America.gov, August 26, 2006, David Shelby, "US Foreign Assistance Director Outlines Aid to Lebanon. Randall Tobias identifies Six Projects the United States will fund." Available from www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2006/August/20060831123055ndyblehs5.626857e-03.html.
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- 44 Jeremy M. Sharp, "US Foreign Aid to Lebanon: Issues for Congress," in *CRS Issue Brief for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 2007).
- 45 Jeremy M. Sharp, "US Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends, and the FY2008 Request," in *CRS Issue Brief for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 2007): 19.
- 46 "MEPI in Lebanon," Middle East Partnership Initiative, US Department of State. Available from www.medregion.mepi.state.gov/about_lebanon.html
- 47 Lara Deeb, "Louder Than Bombs," *Middle East Report*, 242, 2007.
- 48 "Blocking Property of Persons Undermining the Sovereignty of Lebanon or Its Democratic Processes and Institutions." Available from www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/08/20070802_1.html; Iman Azzi, "US makes list of those engaged in 'anti-democratic actions': FPM slams charge of undermining sovereignty as 'ridiculous'," *The Daily Star*, August 9, 2007. Available from www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=84433.
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