

# SORTING OUT LEBANON

by Zalmay Khalilzad

Much of the recent commentary on Lebanon has focused on its internal conflicts, giving the impression that these are primarily responsible for the current state of affairs and that only by dealing with them can the Lebanon crisis be resolved. One detects particularly in the media, but also in the statements of many analysts, the notion that Lebanon and the Lebanese are metaphysically or psychologically destined to chaos and disintegration. The implication, in other words, is that Lebanon is by its very nature a problem state.

Clearly, the domestic problems are substantial and the country needs a new political formula that provides greater authority for the central government and a new national pact acceptable to the several important communities. But contrary to this emphasis on internal matters, I would argue that Lebanese sovereignty and stability cannot be achieved unless there is a change in the current *external* environment. What are these external factors affecting Lebanon's stability? What external arrangement would be more conducive to the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty and internal stability? And what, specifically, are the dilemmas for Washington in its attempt to bring about these favorable conditions?

## CHANGING CONFIGURATIONS

Lebanon is a country of minorities. Encouraged by a favorable international environment in 1943, the major religious communities in Lebanon came to an unwritten agreement called *al-methaq al-watani* (National Pact), dividing political power among them. Under this agreement the all-powerful president of the republic was always to be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the unicameral parliament a Shiite Muslim. Membership in the parliament was divided among the various sects, with six Christians to every five non-Christians. A similar division of offices was agreed upon for the bureaucracy and the military. The political system allowed substantial freedom of the press and political activities.

In the 1970s and '80s this arrangement came under considerable stress because of demographic changes that added to social and economic cleavages in the country. Nonetheless, it was a number of *external* factors that greatly

escalated the level of conflict. Primary among these factors has been the Arab-Israel conflict, which is increasingly a Syrian-Israeli rivalry. Lebanon's size and relative capability have rendered it incapable of protecting itself against its more powerful neighbors. Whenever these neighbors have used internal Lebanese conflicts to their own purposes or have failed to deter each other from moving against Lebanon, they have caused or escalated Lebanon's internal conflicts and weakened the Lebanese state.

For example, the 1975–76 civil war might not have occurred, and once started might not have taken the direction it did, without the active role played by the Palestine Liberation Organization. Although the strong desires of some for a redistribution of power was causing tensions within Lebanon, the PLO was an important protagonist in the conflict. With Syrian support, the PLO had greatly increased its presence in Lebanon following its debacle in Jordan in 1970. The stronger Arab states, such as Syria and Egypt, did not want substantial PLO military operations against Israel launched from their territory, in part out of fear of Israeli reprisals and in part because they did not want a relatively independent force inside their own borders. Lebanon was too weak to stop the Palestinians, and the PLO had no alternative but to base itself there.

The Syrians favored an increased PLO presence in Lebanon, and Israel failed to prevent it. This development had a decisive effect on Lebanese stability. The Israelis may not have appreciated the implications of the PLO presence in Lebanon or else did not altogether oppose it—or they were unable to reach a decision on effective countermeasures. Preventing a PLO buildup at that point would probably have cost the Lebanese, Palestinians, and Israelis less than did subsequent events.

Over time the PLO presence became an important factor in Lebanese politics, with the cumulative effect of weakening the Lebanese system and leading to the 1975–76 Lebanese war. First, Lebanon became the target of Israeli reprisals aimed at getting the Lebanese Government to stop PLO operations against Israel. Although Lebanon's government was too weak to do so, the reprisals did produce some desirable consequences for Israel, namely, conflict between important Lebanese minorities—especially the Maronites and the Shiites—and the PLO. The PLO, thus engaged, had fewer resources available for attacking Israel. Israel then encouraged Christian parties, particularly the Phalange, to develop their own militias against the PLO, thus adding to the proliferation of armed militias and further weakening the Lebanese state.

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Second, as the PLO became an issue in Lebanese politics, the Maronites—especially the Phalange and Chamounites—and increasingly the Shiites in the South, sought to place severe restrictions on the PLO, viewing the Palestinians as a threat to their own position in Lebanon. Consequently, the PLO, in order to ensure *its* position, allied itself with leftist and Sunni forces in the country. These forces, seeing an opportunity for themselves in the Palestinian presence, sought to entrap the PLO into supporting them. It was the PLO factor that made the leftist forces more ambitious in their goals while it made the Maronites fearful of compromise with their internal rivals. Even prior to the 1975-76 conflict there had been many sporadic clashes between the Phalange and the PLO.

Once the civil war was under way, the PLO became increasingly involved on the side of the Muslim Left, especially after October, 1975. The PLO and its allies got the upper hand in the war, gaining some 80 per cent of territory by March of 1976. This success by the Lebanese Left and its allies showed that the Israeli policy of covertly supporting the forces of the Christian Right was not working. They were failing to hold their own, even though the war was keeping the PLO preoccupied with problems other than Israel. At this point the Israelis might have used the pretext of an impending Left-PLO victory to intervene overtly and massively in Lebanon, but they did not. Instead, Lebanon found itself divided into two spheres of influence, which further undermined its sovereignty and independence.

The Syrians, who have claimed the right to dominate Lebanon, saw an opportunity for themselves in the plight of the Maronite elite. They moved in—massively in mid-April, 1976—to help the Maronite leaders against the PLO and the Left. That they came to the aid of the Maronites complicated Israeli and Western responses to the Lebanese situation. Israel—with Washington's approval—did nothing to deter them. The Phalange, after initially welcoming the Syrians, came to fear a permanent Syrian hegemony and wanted them to withdraw. The Syrians, now more willing to support the PLO once again, changed their alignment. While these shifting configurations appear paradoxical, they are all congruent with Syria's goal of consolidating substantial influence in Lebanon.

There developed a tacit agreement between Israel and Syria: The latter would dominate all of Lebanon except the south, which Israel regarded as its own sphere. Over time both sides followed policies that made life difficult for the other. Israel stepped up support for the Phalange in the hope that Syria would get so bogged down in Lebanon as to seriously curtail its ability to wage war against Israel. In the south the Israelis strengthened the Maronite leader, Major Sa'ad Haddad, and developed ties with those Shiites who were no longer willing to pay the costs of Palestinian activities against Israel. The Shiites themselves had developed a militia, called Amal; and a significant number of Shiite peasants left the south for Beirut, where, living in miserable conditions, they were ready subjects for political radicalization. At the same time, the Palestinians, with Syrian acquiescence, increased their activities against Israel from southern Lebanon. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1978—Operation Litani—aimed at pushing the Palestinians out of Lebanon, but ended with Israel being forced to withdraw and accept a United Nations

force in the south. Nevertheless, the fundamental division of Lebanon into spheres of influence, and the policies of active cooptation of rival Lebanese groups by Syria and Israel, continued, as did the activities of the PLO.

### THE INVASION

The Israeli invasion of August, 1982, was launched after the completion of the peace process between Egypt and Israel in April, which thereby altered the regional balance of power in Israel's favor. Whereas Israel might earlier have feared that a broad-based campaign in Lebanon would be too much of a provocation for Egypt, it now believed it could take on Syria, paying, if need be, an acceptable cost. General Sharon wanted to crush the PLO, defeat the Syrians, impose a strong Maronite state with strong ties to Israel, and diminish the PLO influence in the West Bank.

Immediately after the military operations in August, Israel and many in the U.S. were happy to note several important goals that had been achieved: Syria had been dealt a devastating blow; the PLO headquarters and large numbers of its fighters had been forced out of Lebanon; other Arab states had not come to the PLO's defense; Left-Muslim forces appeared to have been weakened in Lebanon, with more moderate Sunni figures such as Saeb Salam emerging as important once again. And, although opposed by Syria, Bashir Gemayel, the Phalange militia leader, was elected president.

Despite the unhappiness of some Lebanese with Bashir's election, many—including leftist leader Walid Jumblatt—were now expressing a desire for the Lebanese to come together. All the principal political groups seemed no longer willing to let their country continue to pay such a price and feared future wars between Syria and Israel on Lebanese soil. Further, all agreed to the presence of American peacekeeping forces and U.S. mediation efforts to get foreign forces out of Lebanon.

United States Marines supervised the PLO withdrawal from Beirut. Syria, which had suffered enormous equipment losses in the war and whose capital was within twenty-five kilometers of Israeli artillery in the Bekaa Valley, feared further military engagement with Israel. Had Syria seen itself actively threatened by such engagements in the rest of Lebanon, and had the alternative of a simultaneous withdrawal of the forces of both countries been offered, Damascus might have found it acceptable at the time. With Syria considerably weakened and with the major Lebanese groups willing to compromise, there was a unique opportunity for Lebanon to regain its sovereignty, perhaps even its stability.

This opportunity was lost due to a number of developments. Prominent among these was the assassination of Bashir Gemayel and the massacre of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila. It was the massacres that contributed most to increased opposition within Israel to the war—opposition that continued to escalate with the number of Israeli casualties in guerrilla attacks. Tension developed too between the United States and Israel over Israeli conduct during the war, and between the Phalange and Israel. Contrary to Israeli expectations, Phalange political leaders were unwilling to take substantial risks with their own fighters in support of Israeli military operations, and they did not want to isolate Lebanon from the Arab world by signing a peace treaty or security arrangement for southern Leb-

anon, which Israel was demanding.

The growing opposition to the war within Israel, including the removal of its architect, Sharon, allayed the Syrians' fears about the possibility of Israeli military action should they refuse to withdraw. Israel's demands of the Lebanese were opposed by the Syrians because of their negative implications for Syria's regional position. Here, it appears, Washington made some tactical errors in the conduct of its mediations. Instead of trilateral negotiations that included Syria, U.S. diplomacy focused on first reaching an agreement between Lebanon and Israel to get the Israelis out of Lebanon on terms acceptable to both. Washington mistakenly believed that whatever the agreement, Israeli withdrawal would be followed by a similar Syrian response. This assumption was surprising, given Syria's historical interests in Lebanon and its statements during the Lebanese-Israeli negotiations.

The United States argues that Syria reneged on its promise to withdraw its forces from Lebanon once the Israelis had agreed to do so. However, since July, 1982, Syria has stated publicly that a Syrian withdrawal might take place only after an *unconditional* Israeli withdrawal. Damascus must have known that there was little prospect of such an agreement by Israel and, to justify its own continued presence in Lebanon, from the beginning was setting conditions it knew Israel could not accept. Trilateral negotiations *might* have produced conditions acceptable to all three parties, although this would have been very difficult.

Meanwhile, Syria was regaining its strength. Moscow, which had suffered a substantial loss of prestige as a result of the Syrian defeat, stepped up arms supplies, including SAM-5 missiles and Soviet personnel. In fact, both Israel and Syria had gained time to undermine the consensus that had emerged among the Lebanese groups. Israel, appar-



ently abandoning the idea of having ties only with the Maronites in the center, now extended assistance to the Druze-Left leader Jumblatt. Syria increased its control over the PLO, allowed more Palestinian fighters to filter into Lebanon, and rejected the Lebanese-Israeli agreement.

#### MORATORIUM

More than a year after the invasion, the operation appears a major setback for Israel. Its withdrawal to the Awali River is a clear indication that it has given up its invasion goal of eliminating Syrian influence in Lebanon. Meanwhile, the relative Syrian position has improved. In fact, if the Israeli goal had been the control of southern Lebanon alone, it could have been achieved at far less cost to the Israelis, Lebanese, and Palestinians.

The Lebanese-Israeli agreement, while meeting many of Israel's demands, has gone nowhere because of Syrian objections. In my view, the Israelis pushed the Lebanese too hard for concessions, complicating relations between Lebanon and Syria. Israel was pressuring the Lebanese because it wanted to show a skeptical public at home that the invasion had brought substantial gains. But the unpopularity of the war and Israel's growing unwillingness to confront the Syrians in Lebanon hardened Syria's opposition to Beirut's accommodation with Israel. To the Syrians, the Israeli-Lebanese agreement enhances Israel's strategic position in relation to Syria. They argue that while Tel Aviv is about two hundred kilometers from the Lebanon border, Damascus is only twenty-five kilometers from this new Israeli security zone.

Lebanon cannot regain its sovereignty and stability without Syrian and Israeli withdrawal and the cessation of substantial interference by both in Lebanese affairs. Either of two circumstances might make such a withdrawal possible.

One is renewed war, or the serious threat of war, between Syria and Israel over Lebanon. It seems likely that the Syrians would agree to mutual withdrawal if they believed that the alternative was war with Israel—a war that would force them out of Lebanon. Dangerous as it is, for this approach to be successful Israel must persuade Syria that its refusal to accept mutual withdrawal substantially increases the risk of war between the two countries.

This outcome is unlikely in the near future. At the moment Israel appears unwilling to accept any major risks to restore Lebanon's independence and is hoping that others, especially the United States, will shoulder that responsibility. Many Israelis believe that the 1982 war was a mistake. With the country in a state of political and economic disarray, the Syrians are encouraged to stand pat.

A second condition that might persuade both sides to leave Lebanon is a general settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflicts: the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and Gaza. President Reagan's 1982 plan for the Middle East pointed in this direction. However, that plan has had little success because of the enormous gap between the parties involved. Israel had already annexed the Golan, and its current government appears unwilling to grant self-determination to the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza. The Arabs, especially Syria, are committed at the minimum to recovering the Golan for themselves and obtaining Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the 1967 war. Without radical changes in the positions of Israel and Syria,

there is little prospect of a general settlement, including the Lebanese dispute.

The regional configuration between Syria and Israel points to a de facto division of Lebanon. Both countries seem to favor this over some other alternatives. The Israelis have returned to the prewar position of "spheres of influence" and are preparing for a long stay in southern Lebanon. Because of its comparative weakness, Damascus has not directly challenged the Israeli military presence in southern Lebanon, but has sought to bring the rest of Lebanon under its control—with some success.

The practical effect of the Syrian-Israeli rivalry for Lebanon is the division of the country into three parts: the Shiite south under Israeli control, with assistance from the Christian Major Haddad (Israel might replace him in future) and his militia; the Sunni north and the largely Sunni Bekaa Valley under Syrian control (with Damascus allowing other military, including the Palestinians and Iranians, to operate in these areas); and the center, including Mount Lebanon, divided between the warring factions of the Lebanese Government of President Amin Gemayel and the Druze forces currently under Walid Jumblatt. The Israelis have at different times supported both; the Syrians are supporting the Druze.

Such a division of Lebanon, while providing some benefits for Syria and Israel, is unlikely to be a stable one. For one thing, the Syrians are seeking to extend their influence to the central areas, where they are meeting the opposition of the U.S. and the Lebanese Government. Even with Syrian success, stability is not guaranteed: The situation would return to what it was prior to the Israeli invasion, with the difference that the PLO has been brought under greater Syrian control and Israel's area of control in the south has been expanded. Both occupation armies would have Lebanese groups opposing them. Even in the unlikely prospect that there is an arrangement between Israel and Syria not to support each other's opponents, there would be a significant, if reduced, degree of resistance against their forces. The Lebanese Government, with American support and the participation of forces from Britain, Italy, and France, has been struggling to prevent such a division from becoming a reality.

#### U.S. DILEMMAS

Immediately after the Israeli invasion there were several analysts who believed that this action represented a major gain for the United States. Today, Lebanon has become a major U.S. headache, with the potential of becoming a disaster for U.S. policy and prestige in the region.

The U.S. forces first entered Lebanon to oversee the evacuation of PLO forces and were then withdrawn. They returned after the massacre. Government leaders argued that their role was simply a peacekeeping one and that they would be withdrawn if they were to become the object of significant attacks. Gradually, the mission of the Marines has changed. Now U.S. policy is focused on central Lebanon, where U.S. forces, with support from other Western powers, have sought to encourage a political compromise between the Gemayel government and its opponents and prevent the takeover of Beirut by Syrian-backed antigovernment forces.

This approach does not confront Lebanon's fundamental problem: the Syrian and Israeli occupation. Without a res-

olution of this external problem, it will be difficult to obtain agreement among the protagonists of Mount Lebanon, some of whom are at the mercy of these same external forces stationed nearby. For example, it will be hard for the Druze and various Shiite groups to accede to any domestic political formula unacceptable to Syria, and Damascus is likely to push for changes in Lebanese domestic and foreign policy that the Gemayel government would find hard to accept. Even if an agreement were made at the center, Lebanese stability would remain vulnerable to the actions of its large occupying forces.

The current U.S. approach merely exposes American and other participants in the multinational forces to continuous and major risks. The current level of American military commitments is not large enough to signal to the regional powers that Washington might force them out militarily if they do not withdraw. Rather, it is sufficient to signal only the U.S. opposition to a takeover of Beirut. Clearly, the aim of the anti-U.S. forces is to subject these vulnerable troops to harassment, thereby pressuring the U.S. to withdraw. Such efforts could go on for some time and, given the impatience of the American people, might yield the desired result. Impatience is likely to increase if American casualties mount from such terrorist operations as the bombing in October.

What options does the United States have? One is to focus on the regional dimensions of the problem and increase Syrian and Israeli incentives to withdraw. Washington could use both negative and positive sanctions to achieve this goal. It could increase its own forces to indicate to the Syrians the seriousness of the U.S. intent and, at the same time, increase its pressure on Israel to a similar end. But committing large forces will be difficult and expensive. At present, the political will for such a commitment is absent. Washington, however, has other alternatives. It could, for example, pressure Israel to play its regional role in such a way as to encourage Syrian withdrawal. This would mean recognition of legitimate Syrian interests in Lebanon but also rejection of de facto partition and a willingness to confront Syria if it rejects compromise. Or, Washington might consider making Syrian life quite difficult in occupied territories by supporting groups hostile to their presence.

If Israel is unwilling to go along with this and finds de facto partition of Lebanon acceptable, the U.S. should consider slowly disengaging its forces. This will not be without cost: American prestige in the region will suffer, especially if the disengagement is abrupt, seeming to indicate weakness in the face of terrorist violence. But the U.S. might choose to reduce its presence in Lebanon gradually, while keeping its ships near Lebanese waters. Washington could encourage other organizations, such as the U.N., to take over its role in Beirut, or seek some Arab and non-Arab forces acceptable to the Lebanese factions as substitutes.

American disengagement could have several effects. It might encourage Israel to play a role more conducive to Syrian-Israeli withdrawal. If not, Lebanon's division between Israel and Syria would become more permanent; Lebanon would return to pre-1982 but post-1976 conditions, with some modifications; and the country's low-level resistance to Israel and Syria would go on as before.