

## Research and Writing

### Ending Syria's Occupation of Lebanon: The U.S. Role *Report of the Lebanon Study Group*

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The Syrian occupation of Lebanon began nearly a quarter-century ago; its implications continue adversely to affect what is the world's only satellite state. At the same time, Lebanon policy has atrophied in Washington.

When Syria imposed itself on its western neighbor in 1975, Washington officially supported "the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Lebanon." The government in Damascus repeatedly promised to withdraw its forces. Instead, it deepened its hold on Lebanon orchestrating a forceful occupation when the world's attention was focussed on the crisis in Kuwait. Today, the occupation appears more entrenched than ever.

In response to these circumstances, the Middle East Forum convened the Lebanon Study Group to analyze this situation and recommend assertive measures in the interests of the United States, Lebanon, and the Middle East at large. The bipartisan group comprises statesmen, diplomats, legislators, military officers, scholars, experts and business leaders. The group recognizes that Lebanon is a significant and forceful presence in the Arab world capable of being a leader towards religious tolerance, democracy and greater economic and social freedoms, once Syrian hegemony is brought to an end. Stemming from this understanding, the Lebanon Study Group holds that until Damascus removes its heavy-handed influence re-deploying its forces in accordance with the Ta'if agreement, endorsed by Syria in 1989, there will be no real and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Although Syrian rule in Lebanon stands in direct opposition to American ideals, U.S. policy has been to court the Asad regime with the hopes of it achieving a peace treaty with Israel. This approach has had grave consequences for both Lebanese society and American strategic interests in the Middle East, and has met with very limited success.

The Lebanon Study Group endorses an American foreign policy strategy refined to reflect a commitment to salvaging Lebanon's freedoms and anchor its regained sovereignty. The U.S. government should make the withdrawal of Syrian forces a priority. In accordance with this conviction, the Lebanon Study Group presents several specific policy recommendations designed to effect this goal.

The Middle East Forum extends its appreciation to the members of the Lebanon Study Group and their efforts to forge the consensus opinion detailed in this report. That said, not every member endorses every judgement or recommendation in the report. Further, the signatories endorsed this report in their individual capacities. Finally, as sponsor of the Lebanon Study Group, the Middle East Forum did not control the group's deliberations nor does it or its Board of Governors necessarily endorse the report's findings or conclusions.

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## **SUMMARY - [return to top](#)**

The Syrian occupation of Lebanon began nearly a quarter-century ago; its implications continue adversely to affect what is the world's only satellite state. At the same time, Lebanon policy has atrophied in Washington. The Lebanon Study Group was formed to analyze this situation and recommend measures in the interests of the United States, Lebanon, and the Middle East at large.

Lebanon has a number of abiding features that make it a significant place worthy and requiring of American attention. First, the United States and Lebanon have mutually benefited from a longstanding friendship. Ties between the two countries have seen American businesses and academic institutions flourish in Lebanon and Lebanese immigrants establish a strong community of close to three million in the United States. Second, the economic, personal and political freedoms found in Lebanon offer a model for the wider region that complements American strategic interests. To preserve Lebanon is to promote free market enterprise and democratic ideals. Third, Lebanon occupies an important place in a strategically vital corner of the world. This fact is cause for great alarm when considered with Syria's current domination as Lebanon has unwittingly become a breeding ground for various threats to the stability of the Middle East.

Not surprisingly, Syria holds a very different view of its western neighbor. It never truly reconciled itself to an independent Lebanese republic and seized the opportunity to involve itself in Lebanese affairs with the outbreak of war in 1975 and then, to impose forceful occupation when the world's attention was focussed on the crisis in Kuwait some years later.

Syrian hegemony has served Damascus well. It fortified a totalitarian regime by eliminating the perceived subversive influences. It has gained international leverage in foreign policy and military strategy. Syria has taken to economic exploitation through such tactics as dumping its labor surplus and products on Lebanese markets, tapping Lebanon's precious water supply, and by other more disguised and boldly illegitimate business practices. Each of these excesses helps to mask Syria's own potential instability. It is saddled with the heavy burdens of a backward economy showing negative growth, a population explosion, internal discontent, and unfriendly rivals among its immediate neighbors. As opposed to addressing these problems, in effect, Damascus is exporting them.

Each benefit reaped by Syrian occupation is balanced by a heavy price levied on Lebanon, devastating many aspects of Lebanese society and the lives of its citizens. Foremost on the list of damages are human rights abuses, ranging from illegal wire tapping to torture and disappearance. Syria has methodically gone about enforcing control over what were once respected government bodies and societal institutions. Lebanon's democratic foundations and its diverse political landscape have all but crumbled as a result of Syrian tampering with parliamentary elections and other rampant forms of corruption. The Lebanese military is gradually becoming relegated to an appendage of its Syrian counterpart stripped of both its patriotism and ability to effectively stand alone. The independent media in Beirut was a rarity in the Arab world and so its downfall is particularly disheartening. Other subjugated institutions include the Lebanese judiciary, schools and labor unions which are all shadows of their former selves having been forced to bow to Syrian manipulation.

Syria's impact on Lebanon does not bode well for American efforts in the Middle East. Lebanon is a significant and forceful presence in the Arab world and a beacon capable of leading its fellow Arab nations in the direction of religious tolerance, democracy and greater economic and social freedoms. Instead, Syrian ascendancy has brought about just the opposite. Syria's systematic alteration of Lebanon's character deprives the Arab world of the single, even if flawed, indigenous example of religious coexistence as well as political and personal freedom. Until Damascus removes its heavy-handed influence re-deploying its forces in accordance with the Ta'if agreement, endorsed by Syria in 1989, there will be no real and lasting peace in the region.

U.S. foreign policy has demonstrated signs of recognizing this reality. With the outbreak of war in 1975 that set the stage for Lebanon's current situation, Washington officially supported "the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Lebanon" and even went so far as to call for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon's borders. When Syria failed to live up to its repeated promises to comply, the U.S. government refrained from backing its policy with tangible operational measures. On the contrary, American officials indicated their tacit acquiescence to continued Syrian rule in Lebanon.

Accordingly, U.S. policy has been soft on Damascus despite the latter's excesses in Lebanon, its official rogue status, and its troubling history with the United States (evidenced by its direct or indirect involvement in probably more American deaths than any other adversary since the Vietnam war). Both the United States and Israel have turned a blind eye to these offenses in an attempt to seduce Syria into a peace treaty. Addressing Syrian hegemony in this context has instilled Asad with the hope that he might not only avoid reprisal but achieve the tangible gains of Western aid, Israel's departure from Lebanon and the Golan Heights, and even possible approval of his regime and occupation of Lebanon.

We believe that American foreign policy strategy must be refined to reflect a commitment to affecting a profound change in Lebanon. U.S. actions taken on behalf of Lebanon must aim to salvage the country's

precious freedoms and anchor its regained sovereignty instead of continuing the course of recent decisions - to send an ambassador, to lift the travel ban, to have Secretary of State Albright visit - that have been small in scope and only designed to alleviate its suffering. Instead, the U.S. government must make the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon a top priority.

Toward this goal, we present several specific policy recommendations in graduated order of severity:

*Statement of policy.* It is time for the Executive Branch openly and unambiguously to call on Damascus to end the occupation of Lebanon, perhaps with the following six words: "All Syrian forces must leave Lebanon." Such a declaration would hardly break new ground but would only catch up with numerous congressional resolutions. It would also underscore the spirit of U.N. Resolution 425 as well as the letter of U.N. Resolution 520.

*Press Damascus on promises made.* The Syrian government has, on three occasions, concurred with decisions made by others that Syrian troops should leave Lebanon. First, as part of the Riyadh-Cairo accords, it agreed to leave Lebanon in October 1976. Second, it signed the Fez Declaration in September 1982. Third, it in October 1989 accepted a provision that Syrian troops would be re-deployed from their positions in Beirut to the Bekaa Valley two years after four conditions had been met. U.S. officials need forcefully to remind the Syrian government and the world of these multiple promises.

*Aid for Syria.* Not a penny to Damascus until it has completed the evacuation of its forces (uniformed and not, intelligence agents, too) from every square inch of Lebanon. This applies even should it conclude an agreement with Israel that allows Syrian forces to remain in Lebanon.

*Aid for Lebanon.* All appropriations for Lebanon should be directed away from the Syrian-controlled government and in favor of credible private organizations and institutions - universities, schools, hospitals, and groups working in the areas of human rights, environmental issues, and so forth.

*South Lebanon.* A solution for the festering sore in south Lebanon requires a level of seriousness equal to that afforded to Sinai and the Golan - ideally an international resolution within the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli agreement.

*Lebanese sovereignty.* Considering that the Ta'if agreement, initially launched as an "Arab solution" for Lebanon, was subsequently Syrianized, the United States should work to reengage independent participation by moderate Arab regimes in restoring Lebanese sovereignty, accelerating political reconciliation, and promoting peaceful communal coexistence.

*Encourage Israel to include Lebanon in negotiations with Syria.* The Israeli authorities need to be reminded of the dangers Lebanon presents to them, in terms of Katyusha rockets raining down on their northern towns and more, unless the Syrians fully disengage their forces from Lebanon.

*Tighten the screws.* Should the above steps prove futile in budging Syria from Lebanon, the U.S. government can avail itself of a battery of steps to increase the pressure on Damascus: recall the U.S. ambassador and freeze diplomatic relations; suspend whatever trade exists between the two countries; terminate other forms of bilateral dealings. It can seek to oust Syria from international fora, prevent Syrian officials or students from coming to the United States; reach out to Lebanese democrats and other figures (such as the Maronite patriarch), and convene an international conference of free Lebanese.

*Congressional action.* If the administration is unwilling to take these steps, Congress ought to close the existing "national interest" loopholes that the Executive Branch usually invokes in order to disregard regulations. For example, it can extend to Syria the sanctions in the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (which prohibits any investment of over \$20 million a year in Iran's or Libya's petrochemicals sectors). It can take other steps, too, such as funding a Radio Free Lebanon.

*Military force.* Finally, the use of force needs to be considered. The Gulf War of 1991 and the war over Kosovo of 1999 demonstrated that the United States can act to defend its interests and its principles without the specter of huge casualties. But this opportunity may not wait, for as weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities spread, the risks of such action will rapidly grow. If there is to be decisive action, it will have to be sooner rather than later.

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On October 13, 1990, as international attention was focused on the Kuwait crisis, Syrian military units forced their way into east Beirut, routed Lebanese Army troops, and ousted the last remnant of Lebanon's beleaguered constitutional government. This event completed a Syrian occupation that began over a decade earlier and continues to this day.

Concerned by the many implications of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and worried that American policy toward Lebanon has been adrift, the Middle East Forum has convened a varied and distinguished group of Americans to consider these questions. The members of the Lebanon Study Group, individuals both knowledgeable and concerned about the situation, met three times in Washington and then reached consensus on a draft report. They have analyzed the situation in Lebanon and proposed steps toward improving it. The result is a brief, informative review, with specific policy recommendations, that we hope will guide all Americans who wish to improve the unhappy circumstances in Lebanon.

We begin with an explanation of why Lebanon matters to Americans, then survey the Syrian motives for occupation and the damage this has done, and conclude with steps the U.S. government can take to end a bad and potentially tragic situation.

## **WHY CARE ABOUT LEBANON? - [return to top](#)**

At first glance, there would seem to be little reason for Americans to pay much attention to Lebanon, a geographically slight and remote country with a population of just 3.8 million. Worse, since the mid-1970s, the country's always-fragile status has been saddled with a series of unattractive associations: internecine violence, indiscriminate carnage, terrorism, hostage-taking, religious militancy, not to mention drug-trafficking, smuggling, and counterfeiting. These negative evocations-coupled with the bad memories stemming from 243 deaths in the 1983 Beirut U.S. Marine barracks explosion-have prompted American policy-makers generally to avoid thinking about Lebanon.

Yet the country has a number of abiding features that make it a significant place worthy and requiring of American attention. The reasons span the spectrum from the nineteenth century to the present, from the sentimental to the hard-headed, from hydraulics to freedom of speech. In combination, they make for a compelling argument.

### ***Personal and Cultural Ties***

America's friendship with the people of Lebanon spans almost the entire history of the American republic and includes historical, cultural, and educational dimensions.

Americans have flocked to the Levant since the 1820s, where they took up residence mostly in the hills and mountains and along the coastline of Lebanon. The "pioneers East" tended to be both skilled and motivated, and they established a number of institutions that to this day flourish and continue to exhibit a distinct mixture of American character blended with the finest of Lebanese culture. The American University of Beirut with its prestigious medical school and hospital, the Lebanese American University, International College, the American Community School, and a number of high schools in scattered Lebanese cities and towns-all testify to a deep and continuing connection between Lebanon and the United States.

American education in Lebanon has drawn Westerners and Arabs from across the Middle East attracted to the distinct offerings of its schools and colleges. Lebanon's institutions of learning have become a cross-cultural meeting ground and living laboratory where intellectual and cultural interactions occur without compromising the civilizational authenticity of the participants. Only in Lebanon (even at the high-school level) can one study, in addition to an in-depth exposure to Arab and Islamic culture, the classics of Western civilization, the canon of world literature, the basics of modern science. Moreover, instruction of these subjects takes place in the original languages. A Muslim coming from as far as Indonesia can learn in Lebanon's classrooms about the Puritans of New England or the writings of Dostoyevsky without losing touch with his rich Islamic heritage. Similarly, a Westerner in Lebanon has the chance to become thoroughly immersed in the Islamic and Arabic traditions without severing himself from his own culture and values. Can anyone doubt that the continuation and reinforcement of liberal education in Lebanon, a phenomenon rare in the Arab world, is in the best interests of the United States and all free and open societies?

The cumulative impact of these institutions ought not to be underestimated. They have also served as gateways for American ideas to the wider Arab world. For example, many prominent leaders throughout the Arab world graduated with an American education from Lebanon. In a famous demonstration of American University of Beirut prowess, no less than nineteen of the delegates at the founding conference of the United Nations during 1945 in San Francisco were alumni of that university-far more than its nearest rival.

Side-by-side with American liberal education, numerous American businesses, companies, and banks have flourished in Lebanon. Prior to the outbreak of war in 1975, American businessmen working in the region would settle their families in Lebanon where their children could receive a superior education in a multicultural setting with a mild climate. Even a quarter century later, despite revolutionary improvements in communications and an integrated global economy, Americans accustomed to such amenities prefer to live in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Lebanon rather than in artificial compounds in the middle of the desert or the largely sterile setting of the Gulf cities.

In the other direction, a steady stream of Lebanese immigrants began to arrive in North America in the 1870s, and today close to three million Americans claim some degree of Lebanese heritage. The great majority of these maintain ties not only of a nostalgic nature, but also, through concrete connections involving periodic trips, cross-Atlantic marriages, and even commercial ventures. It is common for second- and third-cousins to stay in touch with each other over decades. Though poorly organized for political action, American Lebanese have kept abreast of developments during the prolonged ordeal of their ancestral homeland, organizing demonstrations throughout the war years and engaging in impressive letter-writing campaigns.

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Despite the ravages of fifteen years of war and destruction followed by persisting occupation and gross economic mismanagement, the Lebanese economy remains impressive in regional terms. Lebanon's gross national product (GNP) today is \$15 billion, and per capita income is just under \$4,000. Income in Lebanon is twice that of Jordan, a country that has been at peace, and about five times that of Syria. That Lebanon-lacking petroleum or mineral resources, instead relying solely on its heritage of mercantile and entrepreneurial talent-has been able to maintain such a GNP in the face of overwhelming odds is remarkable; had it avoided the devastation of the last quarter century, Lebanon might today be one of America's larger trading partners in the Middle East.

Further, Lebanon has a commercial significance beyond its borders. Lebanon serves as an arena for what is sometimes referred to as the "demonstration effect," and so its American orientation has far-ranging consequences. During the good times, Lebanese society was famous as a regional trendsetter in areas ranging from journalism and publishing to entertainment, dress, cuisine, and taste; creativity and

innovation have been its historical trademarks. Even today, important aspects of this influence remain. What catches on in Beirut is quickly imitated in Cairo, Amman, and Dubai.

The Lebanese tradition of free market enterprise and the spirit of private innovation are not easily copied but do offer a model for the wider region. In this light, the United States has an interest in encouraging Lebanese to resist the corrosive effects of a foreign hegemon that encourages stifling monopolies. Americans hope that the Lebanese economic model might spill over to infect neighboring Syria instead of the reverse process, which is in fact underway today. Neither free trade nor creative entrepreneurship, nor, for that matter, individual initiative, can survive for long in a Syrian-occupied Lebanon.

### ***Civil Society***

Lebanon's unique and homegrown version of democracy, though different in appearance and spirit from its American counterpart, does share important qualities and values. In both cases, the state remains relatively unintrusive, the parliament has deep roots, and the individual has unusual freedoms.

Indeed, Lebanon's freedoms set it apart from other Arab states and constitute the country's most distinguishing trait and its overriding source of attraction for the United States. The war of 1975-90 and the continuing Syrian occupation have greatly damaged the country's traditional freedoms, yet despite the beating it has received, Lebanon continues to harbor the freest society in the Arab world. It does so because of the presence of a highly developed civil society not possible in the region's many assertive states with dominant military establishments. Lebanon hosts surprisingly durable and resilient institutions, individual and group initiatives, deep patriotism, accumulated historical experiences, a mixture of local grounding and cosmopolitan orientation, and the free flow of ideas—all expressing a living multicultural spectrum. This civil society, built upon religious diversity, invariably outlasts any political configurations at the top. If nothing else, the 1975-90 war proved the resilience of the country's civil society.

Still, Lebanon's civil society is today locked in a life-and-death struggle with Syria's efforts at expansion, occupation, and assimilation. Should Lebanese civil society be eroded to an unrecoverable point, this will negatively affect the possibility of introducing free political life and democratic institutions in the rest of the Arab world.

A decade ago, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Kuwait war, Westerners spoke increasingly about democratization in the Arab world. But this effort aborted as soon as they realized that this would destabilize relations with authoritarian regimes. In the long term, however, if the United States wishes to help bring real peace to the region, it must find a way for peace to transcend mere signed agreements between leaders or deals forged between states. Only if peace touches peoples and societies of the region will it become meaningful and lasting. And that means fostering democracy. When the very nature of the peace to come and advancement of democracy is at stake, the question ceases to be one of altruism; it becomes a basic American national interest.

The fate of Lebanon's embattled civil society touches the core of this issue: the kind of Arab world that will emerge following a peace between Israel and its neighbors. If the ongoing erosion of freedoms can be reversed, Lebanon's historical experience with freedom can offer great hope for the whole Arab east. It is clearly in America's strategic interest to promote Lebanese democracy as a seed and model for the rest of the Arab world.

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The Middle East faces the looming problem of water shortages because of both the area's hot and arid climate and its huge population growth. Aside from Turkey (which controls the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) and Iraq (through which those two rivers flow), the only Middle Eastern country

blessed with a substantial supply of fresh water is Lebanon. Its high mountain ranges capture and retain impressive amounts of snow and moisture for several months, much of which eventually feeds subterranean aquifers and artesian wells. The landscape is dotted with springs, small streams, rivulets, and several sizable rivers like the Litani. Between 80 and 90 percent of Lebanon's flowing water, though, is lost for that which is not absorbed into underground storage, ends up in the sea. Assuming all of Lebanon's future water needs can be met using half of this wasted amount, harnessing and distributing the remaining half to neighboring countries like Israel, Syria, and Jordan would be a significant step in alleviating the impending regional water shortage.

Thus, could the responsible regulation and scientific management of Lebanon's naturally abundant water supply be a major contributor to regional stability. Any Syrian attempts to gain leverage over Lebanon's water supply can only serve to undermine regional peace and stability, and so the United States strategic interest to ensure that this precious commodity not fall under the control of hostile powers.

### ***Threats - [return to top](#)***

Lebanon occupies an important place in a strategically vital corner of the world. Regional harmony demands that Lebanon's heterogeneous religious communities maintain a stable relationship with one another. Lebanon's historical status as a sanctuary for persecuted minorities is reflected in her eighteen officially recognized religious denominations-nearly all of which connect to significant populations outside Lebanon's borders. The Sunnis have ties mainly to the Arabian peninsula and Egypt; the Shi'a to their communities in Iran and Iraq; the Druze to theirs in Syria and Israel; the Greek Orthodox Christians to the Greek and Slavic worlds as well as to their communities in Syria and other Arabic-speaking countries; the Maronites to Cyprus and Syria; and the Catholic world at large; the small Coptic community to Egypt; the Chaldaeans and Assyrians to Iraq; the Syriacs to northern Syria and southern Turkey; the Melchites (Greek Catholics) to Egypt, Syria, and among the Palestinians. In addition, all these communities have ties to Lebanon's émigré communities in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Australia, and beyond. Only if the members of each of these eighteen denominations are free to remain true to their deepest values and maintain creative interaction with the others will Lebanon cease to be a flash point for conflict which easily generates repercussions beyond its borders.

For Lebanon to be sub-contracted to Syria, with American and Israeli acquiescence, is to bask in the illusion of stability. As custodian of Lebanon, Damascus gains a vast array of cards to use at will to bolster its prestige or derail regional settlements. The Syrians have repeatedly shown a propensity to practice divide-and-rule tactics by playing one Lebanese faction off against another to suit their foreign policy objectives. Thus, when the Syrians wish for greater attention from Saudi Arabia, they engineer a squeeze on Lebanon's Sunni leadership. If Syrian relations with Iran are souring, they pressure Iran's Shi'a clients in Lebanon. Through their influence on Hizbullah and their ability to stop the flow of Iranian arms to the group through the Damascus airport, they ultimately control the temperature of the last active frontier with Israel. Depriving Syria of this undeserved power in Lebanon is a primary American strategic interest.

Lebanon has unwittingly become a breeding ground for terrorist organizations aiming to undermine American and Western interests in the Middle East since the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) set up shop in the country in the mid-1960s. When large parts of the country fell under Syrian aegis after 1976, this pattern accelerated. Lebanon's agriculturally fertile Bekaa Valley, for example, was transformed into a notorious training ground for terrorists and a place to plan their operations. Many leading terrorist groups at one point had a base of operations in Lebanon, including Abu Nidal, Carlos, the Japanese Red Army, the Baader-Meinhof Gang, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, and the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK). The principal beneficiaries of this controlled anarchy over the years have been the PLO, Syria, and Iran, all of which have used terrorism to try to pressure the United States, other Western powers, and Israel.

Lebanon also offers lucrative opportunities for drug cultivation, narcotics trafficking, and the counterfeiting of Western currencies. In recent years, these highly profitable criminal activities were systematically overseen by the Syrians. Under considerable pressure, Syrian forces did crack down on drug dealers and cultivators, though this remains reversible.

### **SYRIAN MOTIVES FOR LEBANON'S OCCUPATION - [return to top](#)**

Since the outbreak of war in 1975, many external players have involved themselves in Lebanon's affairs. These included Palestinians, Libyans, and Somalis serving as mercenaries, Kuwaitis and Saudis in the so-called Arab Deterrent Force, and Americans, British, French, and Italians in the multinational force. The United Nations peacekeepers of in south Lebanon (UNIFIL) come from around the world and other elements came from the Soviet Union, Iraq, Egypt, and Algeria. With time, however, all but two states departed, Syria and Israel. Israel controls a sliver of land in south Lebanon and has indicated a willingness to leave this territory in return for a peace treaty with Lebanon. In contrast, Syria occupies over 90 percent of Lebanon militarily and controls the Beirut government politically. Although Asad in 1989 (in the so-called Ta'if Accord) accepted a redeployment of Syrian troops from Beirut to the Bekaa Valley within two years, he did not withdraw the troops.

Beyond brute force, Damascus has anchored its hegemony through a series of bilateral treaties the most prominent of which are the "Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination" and the "Defense and Security Agreement," both in 1991. These wide-ranging accords tie Lebanon ever more closely to Syria in all fields-military, political, social, economic, educational, and cultural-and constitute the backbone of Syria's incremental annexation of Lebanon. No Lebanese parliament since the conclusion of the Ta'if agreement has ever questioned, let alone debated, the legality or desirability of any of these treaties and agreements.

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In a sense, Syria's occupation of Lebanon is no surprise, for Damascus never reconciled itself to the emergence of an independent Lebanese republic on its western doorstep in 1943, and Syrian politicians meddled in Lebanon's internal affairs decades before the outbreak of hostilities in the mid-1970s. The authorities in Damascus publicly signaled their displeasure with a sovereign Lebanon by refusing to establish official diplomatic relations with Beirut; there has never been an exchange of ambassadors between the two states. The Syrian regime accounts for this odd situation between two neighboring states by invoking "brotherly ties" and the oft-repeated slogan "one people in two statelets." At times it is more explicit, flatly stating that Lebanon does not deserve independence and should be no more than a province of Syria.

All governments in Damascus since independence have propagated the concept that Syria in its present borders is a rump state. Whether it is the "Greater Syria" ideal or an enhanced regional role for the "throbbing heart of Arabism" (as Damascus sometimes portrays itself), dominating Lebanon is the first step of all such ambitious enterprises.

Lebanese history can plausibly be read as a series of carefully calibrated encroachments by Syria to eat away at Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Prominent milestones in this saga included an unsuccessful attempt in 1949 to foment civil unrest; Syrian collusion with Egypt in 1958 to absorb Lebanon into the United Arab Republic; and a steady supply of Syrian weapons and logistical support, first to Palestinian guerrillas beginning in the late 1960s, then to a Palestinian-leftist Lebanese coalition after 1973. This last bout of Syrian interference in Lebanon's internal affairs led to the breakdown of the Lebanese state in 1975, a power vacuum which Syria's military soon filled. A quarter century later, Syria still controls Lebanon through a direct military presence and indirect political hegemony. Repeated and official Lebanese government calls for Syria's departure have not reduced this hegemony, nor did the

Israeli invasion of 1982, nor the aborted "war of liberation" waged in 1989 by Lebanon's then-prime minister Michel Aoun.

Observers have compared Lebanon's predicament with other cases around the world, either Finland vis-à-vis the Soviet Union or an East European satellite state or the Baltic states once part of the USSR. More benignly, perhaps, it is also compared to Hong Kong with respect to China. All of these comparisons contain a measure of truth. Two features, however, mark Lebanon under Syrian occupation: that it enjoys the infamous distinction of being the only remaining satellite state in the world and that its plight appears open-ended.

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As with any two contiguous states, Syria and Lebanon have legitimate mutual interests that define their relationship. The problem resides in the fact that Syrian objectives in Lebanon have, over the years, greatly outstripped the limits of anything approaching acceptable interests. These objectives are several-fold:

*Suppress an open society.* The deep-seated fear every totalitarian regime has with respect to an adjacent free and thriving open society stands as a primary motivation. For example, the Syrian ruling elite cultivates the belief that every one of the many coups in Damascus prior to 1970 was masterminded in Beirut. Thus has the regime in Damascus convinced itself that it must control Lebanon if it is to survive.

*Protecting a flank.* Syrian strategists have developed the notion, which has attained the stature of sacrosanct military doctrine, that controlling Lebanon, especially the Bekaa Valley, protects Syria's vulnerable western flank from an Israeli ground invasion. This doctrine is, however, both misplaced and ineffective-not because an Israeli ground invasion is unlikely (it could happen) but because events have proven since the Israeli-Syrian confrontation in 1982 that Syrian control in any part of Lebanon is not sufficient to stave off a determined Israeli push.

*Foreign policy tool.* In the domain of foreign policy, no Lebanese decision is arrived at and no step taken without a green light from Damascus. This is particularly evident in regard to negotiations with Israel, where the Beirut government adamantly refuses to take a stand that deviates in any fashion from the one propounded in Syria. Being maestro in Lebanon also provides Damascus with a number of tactical cards to improve its standing with the United States, increase its cash inflow from Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Gulf states, or solidify its ties with Iran. Conversely, it can use Lebanon to sabotage deals not to its liking. At will, Syria can turn the heat up or down in south Lebanon to apply or reduce pressure on Israel while at the same time hiding behind the thin veil of deniability afforded by the fiction of a sovereign Lebanon.

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The asymmetrical power equation between Syria and Lebanon eliminates all traces of reciprocity in the economic arena. Syria regularly invades Lebanon's markets - through the unregulated intrusion en masse of Syrian taxi cabs, trucks for the transport of goods, or imported labor - thus rendering nearly all economic traffic in one direction.

*Workers.* Lebanon has a need for cheap labor; the Syrian occupation ensures that all the available jobs - over a million at last count, a huge number for a country of 3.8 million total population - go to Syrian nationals, who send something in the order of \$3 billion a year in hard currency to their families in Syria.

*Water.* The diversion stipulated in an imposed bilateral treaty for Syrian use of over three quarters of the waters of the 'Asi River has much benefited Syrian agriculture but harmed Lebanon's beleaguered farmlands.

*Dumping.* Control of Lebanon provides the Asad regime with the opportunity, in classic colonial fashion, to export without limit the often substandard products of Syria - fruit, poultry, and dairy products; plastics, clothing, and shoes - on the Lebanese market. That this harms Lebanese farmers and manufacturers hardly concerns Damascus.

*Smuggling.* The side-by-side existence of an open economy (Lebanon's) and a closed one (Syria's) inevitably entails smuggling from the first to the second. By controlling Lebanon, members of Syria's ruling and military elite enrich themselves with this movement of goods, mostly foreign-produced luxury items (such as stolen cars) but also illegal foreign workers, by pocketing the proceeds of the illegal trade. Cross-border mafias operate under the direct supervision of Syrian intelligence and involve corrupt local officials and an assortment of shadowy middlemen.

*Hidden partners.* Syrians impose an intricate network of silent partners on Lebanese business enterprises, thereby harvesting huge revenues. Syrian intrusion into the nooks and crannies of the Lebanese economy has become so pervasive that hardly any new business venture is launched without eventually taking on board the unavoidable, concealed Syrian partner. One notorious example of this involves the lucrative monopoly of cellular telephone services by leading figures in the Syrian regime and their Lebanese fronts. Syrians also profit extensively from such high-revenue sectors of the economy as the Beirut Port, the newly reconstructed and enlarged Beirut Airport, Lebanon's famed Casino overlooking the waterfront, petroleum imports and refining, and all facets of the reconstruction and building sector, especially the cement producing factories and stone quarries.

*Money laundering.* Lebanon has become an important haven for money laundering operations, with Syrian officials taking the lion's share of the illicit proceeds. Syrian officers and top officials regularly deposit undisclosed amounts of money in Lebanese banks and earn at times up to 35 percent annual interest.

*Extortion.* Extortion is a widespread and sophisticated racket in occupied Lebanon. Syrians regularly canvass the streets of Beirut knocking on the doors of businesses and companies to impose exorbitant subscriptions to Syrian publications of a propaganda nature; they clearly imply that not subscribing will lead to "unidentified elements" targeting one's livelihood. Revenues from these sales invariably end up in a few pockets of the Damascus regime's upper echelons.

### ***A Force for Stability? - [return to top](#)***

An argument frequently cited in favor of Syria's continued presence in Lebanon holds that by halting the internal violence in an otherwise divided and fractious land, Syria's imposed status quo has helped to promote stability and has the virtue of keeping the peace. But this is an affront to truth; Syria's role as the principal instigator of violence throughout Lebanon's war years is well documented, as is its current control over the tap of violence in Lebanon. As evidenced by the ongoing violence in southern Lebanon, the country remains an explosive powder keg.

A profile of Syria's clients in Lebanon reveals a heterogeneous assortment of groups - Palestinians, Shi'a, Sunnis, and Druze - rarely in harmony with one another. Each group competes viciously with the others for Syrian favor and the discourse among their leaders is marked by acrimony. However, several factions in Lebanon, and especially the Palestinians and Hizbullah (but most distinctly not the Christians), remain in full possession of their weapons and ready to use them the minute they perceive their interests differing from those of Damascus. None of these armed groups is in any way sympathetic to the United States.

Lest it be forgotten, some 370,000 Palestinians remain in Lebanon at present, amounting to roughly 10 percent of Lebanon's total population. The vast majority still reside in refugee camps that are off limits to the Beirut authorities and their security forces. On more than one occasion, criminal perpetrators have

sought sanctuary inside these camps. Within the camps live some of the fiercest and most seasoned of Palestinian fighters. The Syrians, through the rejectionist Palestinian leadership headquartered in Damascus, have some influence over these Palestinian guerrillas in Lebanon, but they certainly do not have the playing field all to themselves. Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Yasir Arafat, for their part, exercise a significant degree of control inside Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps.

Depicting a ruthless totalitarian regime as the harbinger of stability is odd by any standard. Despite decades of surface calm enforced brutally by a savvy leader, Syria today stands at a delicate crossroads and faces an uncertain future. As the critical time of power transition approaches, worries about stability will shift from Lebanon to Syria proper. Saddled with the heavy burdens of a backward economy showing negative growth, a population explosion, internal discontent, and surrounded on all sides by a ring of unfriendly states, Syria is least qualified to bear the torch of Lebanese or regional stability.

Whatever truth resides therefore in the notion that a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon would cause internal conflict to flare up again in that country—an idea nurtured by Damascus—can be ascribed in the first instance to the Syrian regime's reluctance to assist in the process of national reconciliation.

Asad's Syria represents a glaring anachronism at the dawn of the third millennium. As with all outdated entities, time will ensure they wither away, probably sooner rather than later. However, this process of atrophy may take longer than the expectations of Middle East diplomacy can afford. Measures to accelerate change for the better in Syria do exist and they must begin with the easing of Syria's stranglehold on Lebanon.

### **THE COSTS OF SYRIAN OCCUPATION - [return to top](#)**

In addition to its costly human toll, Syrian heavy-handedness in Lebanon has inflicted great damage on Lebanon's political, socio-economic, environmental, and cultural life.

#### ***Human Rights Abuses***

In human terms, the fallout from Syrian occupation has had a devastating effect on personal and political freedoms. Syrian domination has made multiple human rights violations a staple of daily life. The list of abuses amounts to a veritable catalogue: illegal wire tapping, unlawful detentions and incarceration, arrests without probable cause, kangaroo court trials, arbitrary prison sentences, torture and disappearances. Many organizations have meticulously documented these terrible misdeeds, including the U.S. State Department, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, among others. These human rights violations are not only an expression of Syrian fears of dissent or political intrigue emanating from Beirut; they also signal how jittery the Lebanese government is about criticism of its policy failures.

Even though Damascus allows Lebanon's Christians a modest and largely rhetorical margin of dissent, Lebanon's Muslims by contrast enjoy no such luxury. They live in constant fear of Syrian retribution should they attempt to express their true feelings regarding the occupation. Damascus demands that the Muslims at all times toe the Syrian line without the slightest deviation. Indeed, outspoken Lebanese Muslim leaders have paid an even heavier price - including death - than Christians whenever they dared to voice displeasure at Syrian conduct in Lebanon. Examples over the years abound and include the Sunni mufti, Sheikh Hasan Khalid; the editor and publisher Salim al-Lawzi; head of the newspapers syndicate Riad Taha; the renowned religious figure Sheikh Subhi as-Salih; and member of parliament Nazim al-Qadiri. The same also applies to Druze, such as the political leader Kamal Jumblatt.

#### ***Political Disarray - [return to top](#)***

The normal political life that once existed in Lebanon - where a plethora of diverse political parties competed peacefully and democratically for power according to constitutional rules within a clearly

defined legal framework - has all but disappeared from the country, replaced by a set of self-promoting cliques whose only competition is to win the most favor with Damascus.

Syria clearly tampered with the parliamentary elections of 1992 and 1996, either directly or through hand-picked Lebanese intermediaries. The electoral laws in both instances, which delineated the voting districts and laid down the intricate procedures of the election, were rigged in a way to guarantee results favorable to Syria. The parliaments that emerged represented classic examples of rubber-stamp bodies under totalitarian rule. The seemingly vigorous legislation emanating from these parliaments, for its part, had only one objective: to hand Lebanon over to Syria on an ever-more polished silver platter. It did so by taking steps principally in two areas: absorption by Syria and absolving corruption by Lebanese government officials.

Two examples illustrate these trends: ad-hoc modifications to the constitution extended the presidential tenure of Elias Harawi by two years, followed by a concocted amendment allowing Emile Lahoud, commander of the Lebanese army, to become president; and parliament repeatedly passed questionable budgets with only token debate, in spite of the gaping holes in their provisions that facilitated side deals and covered up a wide range of illegal activities. Syrian intelligence also uses its clients in the Lebanese parliament to remove the immunity of dissident parliament members.

If the Ta'if agreement was intended (among other things) to promote genuine national reconciliation in post-war Lebanon, the opposite has in fact occurred. Syrian occupation has created paralysis at the top, encouraged political disarray, and aggravated infighting among the leaders of Lebanese factions.

### ***An Economy of Impoverishment - [return to top](#)***

Misplaced priorities and economic mismanagement have deepened the woes of Lebanon's society and people. Since 1990, and particularly during Rafiq al-Hariri's tenure as prime minister (1992-98), Lebanese government policies created an "economy of impoverization." The stable middle class has been largely decimated while cash-strapped ordinary Lebanese citizens find themselves spending the better part of each day trying to secure basic necessities - running water, electricity, food, and shelter.

The economic policies of the post-Ta'if regime in Lebanon have proven disastrous. Under the much-flaunted banner of reconstruction, the government set about borrowing huge amounts of hard currency, both internally and externally, thereby swelling the national debt by the government's own admission from less than \$1 billion in 1990 to nearly \$22 billion at the close of the decade. For the first time in Lebanon's history, the national debt has surpassed the GNP, and it has done so by an alarming stretch. It takes nearly all the government's revenues just to service this monster debt.

Mayhem on the financial front has had a spiraling destructive effect. Most of the government's allocations are financed by further borrowing. The remainder is squeezed out of the population through progressively higher taxation. The vicious circle subverts the chances for Lebanon to serve as a tax haven that attracts both raw and investment capital. As a direct consequence of the combined weight of taxation and inflation, the purchasing power of the Lebanese consumer has shrunk along with opportunities for employment. Meanwhile, the government bureaucracy expands every year thanks to an entrenched system of patronage.

For such a colossal price tag, the accomplishments of "reconstruction" over a ten-year period have been meager at best. Reconstruction funds went into showy but unproductive grandiose projects - the building of an expensive sports stadium and the enlarging of Beirut International Airport - leaving only small amounts for cleaning the debris of the war that was littering Beirut's downtown area and running a few highways, overpasses, and tunnels in and around the city. Also, over-attention to infrastructure in the greater Beirut area left the outlying regions of the country bereft of much-needed development. This

"high-gloss, high-debt strategy" adopted by Hariri produced a legacy whose dire consequences future generations of Lebanese will have to suffer.

Unfortunately, the greater part of the borrowed money was not used for reconstruction but ended up mostly in the secret bank accounts of a handful of Lebanese wartime tycoons and their Syrian partners. This points to the fact that wealth in recent years has been increasingly concentrated in a tiny and self-perpetuating plutocracy that constitutes no more than 1 percent of the population; is closely allied with key figures in the Syrian ruling elite; and spends hardly any of its enormous wealth in Lebanon itself.

The government's inverted priorities have led to a persistent neglect of the economic base. With a modest infusion of start-up capital, Lebanon has the human skills that can develop some environment-friendly light and medium consumer-oriented industries as well as venture into limited areas of high-tech. Instead, bright college graduates find themselves seeking employment opportunities outside the country. Agriculture has not fared any better. The Bekaa Valley used to be Lebanon's bread basket, with plenty left over for a lucrative export trade. A combination of neglect, military occupation, lawlessness, and drug cultivation has been poison to Lebanon's agricultural sector. Mismanagement of the country's water supplies exacerbates the problem. In any event, given the abnormally high returns on Lebanese government bonds—once hitting a record of 37 percent—that in turn are used to service the country's growing debts, it is no surprise that Lebanese banks do very little lending to any industrial or agricultural projects.

Governmental oversight has marred Lebanon's proverbial attraction as a coveted tourist destination. Once a chief source of livelihood, tourism of both the archeological and recreational varieties has suffered incalculably. The authorities made no concerted effort to clean up and properly maintain Lebanon's once scenic but now polluted coastline. Moving inland and up the slopes of Lebanon's once pine-covered hills and mountains, one sees gaping chasms in the valleys and hillsides excavated by the indiscriminate blasting of stone quarries, often transforming the landscape into barren wasteland; the government only curtailed this mindless destruction when the permanent damage was already done. Another inexcusable assault on the environment goes back to the war years when various militia leaders raked in huge payoffs by importing thousands of barrels of toxic waste from Europe and burying them in scattered locations throughout the countryside without making any provisions for safe disposal and storage of such hazardous material. These same militia chiefs, who later became prominent members of post-Ta'if cabinets, have done little to address this problem which threatens the country's artesian wells, its agricultural soil, and its habitable lands. Needless to say, none of those responsible for precipitating this potential catastrophe has ever been prosecuted. The combined damage brought on by a polluted environment, rising inflation (Beirut is far more expensive than Athens, Cairo, and Tunis), inadequate infrastructure, and lingering insecurity due to a low-intensity war environment in the south, makes it no surprise that all but the most resolute tourists stay away from Lebanon.

Corruption is rampant both high and low in the government. Major contracts usually include payoffs, while the simplest transaction (renewing a driver's license or completing a vehicle inspection) entails the paying of bribes, at times exorbitant. Lebanon has long suffered from corrupt officials, but the era of *pax Syriana* has made things much worse, with embezzled amounts these days reaching the hundreds of millions of dollars. The much ballyhooed but very selective anti-corruption campaign has three ulterior motives. First, the transfer of the "Lebanon portfolio" to Hafiz al-Asad's son Bashshar, the heir-apparent, (who inherited it from Vice President `Abd al-Halim Khaddam and Chief-of-Staff Hikmat Shihabi) permits Bashshar to project a clean image. Secondly, this also weakens Bashshar's rivals inside Syria by cutting off their income from Lebanon. Thirdly, it milks some untapped coffers in Lebanon belonging to individuals who had managed to elude sharing their gains with a Syrian guardian.

Lebanon's economic deterioration virtually destroys all hopes that it can be used to reform Syria's state-centered economy. The optimistic Hong Kong-China parallel depicts both countries over time as

benefiting from their mutual intertwining. The reality is quite different. If anything, it is Lebanon that is moving (quickly) in Syria's outmoded direction, namely that of elevated government intervention in all aspects of economic life.

In all, Syria's systematic alteration of Lebanon's character deprives the Arab world of the single, even if flawed, indigenous example of religious coexistence as well as political and personal freedom. Today's Lebanon continues to make positive contributions to the Middle East, but because of the effects of Syria's occupation, it also offers the region a most suitable location breeding ground for extremism and regional instability.

### ***Subjugated Institutions - [return to top](#)***

As in the case of other totalitarian occupations, that of Syria's implies the systematic penetration and subversion of Lebanon's leading institutions. Here is a quick summary for four of them: the military, the judiciary, the schools, and the labor unions.

Lebanon's military establishment has been integrated in training, equipment, weapons, and even dress into the ways of its eastern neighbor. Thus, at military checkpoints and roadblocks in Lebanon, Lebanese soldiers have become nearly indistinguishable in appearance from their Syrian counterparts - which was not the case as recently as the early 1990s. The Lebanese army, which traditionally received all its training and equipment from American and West European sources, now uses Soviet-vintage weaponry originating from Syrian stockpiles. Patriotic elements in the Lebanese army chain of command have been purged through demotion or outright expulsion. Those officers who undergo training tours in Syria usually stand a better chance of promotion when they return to Lebanon.

Lebanon's judiciary system, once independent of the state, has over time succumbed to the stifling embrace of Syrianization and increasingly is a clone of its counterpart in Syria. Top judges regularly confer with and receive instructions from Syrian intelligence officials such as Ghazi Kan'an. Military officers have in most cases replaced civilian judges in Lebanon's courts throughout the 1990s where they engage in rough justice, holding summary trials, reaching quick verdicts, and meting out harsh sentences with little regard for the rights of defendants to obtain fair legal representation.

In recent years, Lebanon's famed educational diversity has been exposed to a concerted onslaught that has aimed at Arabizing curricula and reducing, if not eliminating altogether, any Western or universal linguistic and cultural input. This trend threatens to transform liberal education in Lebanon into a monochromatic shadow of itself thereby draining it of everything that upbuilds and enriches. Should this come about, it would be a significant loss not just for Lebanon but for America and the West; a rare educational outpost serving as a genuine conduit to and from other cultures will have perished.

Lebanon's labor unions had been a constructively effective platform for the articulation of economic interests, the airing of grievances, and the expression of popular dissatisfaction with the Syrian-inspired government. These roles caused the Beirut authorities to devise methods of confronting, degrading, and ultimately taming the country's labor unions. Union elections were orchestrated through a combination of intimidation, bribery, and the fomenting of internal divisions. When this proved insufficient to rein in an intrepid union leadership, a parallel body was created with leaders wholly subservient to the authorities. Ensuing demonstrations were violently suppressed and arrests of the democratically elected labor union leaders followed. They were not released until the government made sure they had either been co-opted or neutralized.

### ***Squeezed Media - [return to top](#)***

An independent media, critical at times to the point of irreverence, represents the most poignant outward expression of Lebanon's carefully nurtured freedoms; and so its subversion calls for special note.

For over a century, Beirut has been (along with Cairo) one of the Arab world's two centers for free expression, information, and dissent. It prolifically produced newspapers, magazines, and books of every variety and distributed them profusely throughout the Arabic-speaking countries. With the onset of the war in Lebanon resulting in Syrian occupation of that land, virtually all manner of free expression has been silenced. This was formalized in 1991, when the Syrian-Lebanese "Security Agreement" contained a provision effectively prohibiting the publication of any information viewed as harmful to the security of either state, ushering in a brutal era of censorship and near-total state control over the media, particularly television. The Surété Generale (the Lebanese government's internal security apparatus) now has authority to disapprove all foreign publications and non-periodical works (including plays, books, films, and other productions of a cultural or artistic nature) before they can be distributed locally. Select journalists and newspaper editors are often required to submit their materials for screening prior to publication. This pressure eventually eased as intimidated Lebanese journalists and editors began to practice self-censorship.

Thus has the Arab world's least inhibited press been domesticated and rendered a pathetic image of its former glorious self. In one ten-day period in 1996, for example, three dailies and two weeklies were charged with defaming both the president and the prime minister and with publishing materials deemed provocative. Temporary closings followed, and in one case, the owner and editor-in-chief of one newspaper faced sentences of between two months and two years imprisonment and fines equivalent to \$60,000. The Beirut authorities show close to zero tolerance for free expression when it comes to the opposition distributing politically oriented leaflets.

Under the pretext of punishing the defamation of public officials or the incitement of disorder, Syria (through its agents in the Beirut government) cracks down on embarrassing free expression and the potentially damaging exposure of the realities of Lebanese life under occupation. In September 1996, the Beirut government precipitated widespread citizen protests when it suddenly implemented a controversial Media Law. The stated purpose was to impose order on the largely unregulated airwaves and reduce political and religious tensions, cutting down fifty-two television stations to four (later five) and approximately one hundred radio stations to eleven, only three of which would be permitted to broadcast news programs. All five approved television stations happen to be owned by, or closely associated with, top government officials and other luminaries of the post-Ta'if regime. In addition to establishing a monopoly over information and opinions, members of this Syrian-controlled Lebanese political establishment have reaped enormous financial rewards from the advertising revenues of these stations. Attacks on members of the press corps, including assassination attempts, have openly taken place with almost no law enforcement efforts to punish the perpetrators.

Pressures on Lebanon's media need not take such stark form. More subtle squeezes have included tax auditing of businesses and companies that advertise in opposition-leaning newspapers, usually resulting in the sudden termination of advertising contracts. Vigorous prosecution of troublesome newspapers for minor infractions of the restrictive Media Law have at times replaced the threat of physical violence. In times of meager financial means, the media in Lebanon have bent over backwards to satisfy the local authorities, and behind them, the Syrians. On July 29, 1999, the Lebanese cabinet relicensed to pro-Syrian groups two television and four radio stations that had been closed under the Hariri government, thereby further consolidating Syria's grip on the media. It appears that the Syrian authorities have plans to restrict Internet access in Lebanon.

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Perhaps the most delicate issue has to do with the religious make-up of Lebanon, home to the Middle East's only remaining free, native, enterprising, and relatively secure Christian community. It was the Christians of Lebanon who were the first and quickest in the Middle East to absorb Western ways, so freedom in Lebanon owes its existence in the first instance to this Christian community. Take away

Lebanon's Christians and the rest of the country, too, is almost automatically deprived of its freedoms. The country is then *ipso facto* transformed into just another Middle Eastern state. Preserving Lebanon's free Christian community therefore becomes the cornerstone for safeguarding the country's special freedoms that uplift all its communities and offer a much-needed breathing space for the entire Arabic-speaking world.

This will not be easy, as the carnage of the war years coupled with the escalating Syrianization of Lebanon have led hundreds of thousands of Christians to leave the country. While the percentage of Christians in pre-war Lebanon hovered around the 50 percent mark, by the late 1990s it had dropped a good 10 percentage points due to the combination of Christian emigration,<sup>1</sup> a higher Muslim birth rate, and wholesale naturalizations of non-Lebanese.

As to the last point, in a 1994 "Naturalization Decree" issued by the Lebanese government, under the guise of addressing the anomaly of stateless persons in Lebanon, a long-standing problem dating back to the 1920s, the Syrian-inspired authorities waived their magic wand and in a brief (two-line) decree increased the total population of Lebanon by 8 to 10 percent. Around 300,000 people (two-thirds of them Syrian Muslims) received Lebanese citizenship and were naturalized. This arbitrary naturalization upset the delicate demographic balance among Lebanon's various religious communities, played havoc with the balance of electoral voter lists during the parliamentary elections of 1996, and helped pro-Syrian candidates to victory.

The perception that the accession of Emile Lahoud to the presidency in 1998 reversed the diminished Christian role in Lebanese politics needs to be noted; thus, the Sunni mufti of Lebanon, Muhammad Rashid Qabbani, has said that the attention currently being directed at Lahoud (as always, a Christian is president) points to the reemergence of pre-Ta'if Christian prominence in Lebanon; he found this development very disturbing and even raised the possibility of renewed conflict among Lebanese - a viewpoint echoed by the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and others. But Lahoud neither embodies Christian aspirations nor is regarded by most Christians as representing Lebanon's national interests, let alone theirs. In fact, Damascus chose Lahoud to reduce the Christian anger that had grown during the years of his predecessor's tenure, without giving him real power. Talk of revived Christian participation in the Lebanese body politic is unwarranted so long as the Syrian occupation continues, for Ta'if effectively neutered the position of the president. The Syrians have become masters of the illusion that one or other community is gaining political prominence at the expense of the others; further examples of such manipulation are sure to follow so long as the occupation continues.

### ***Why No Challenges to Syrian Control? - [return to top](#)***

The peoples of eastern Europe eventually rebelled against Soviet rule; why has the erosion of Lebanon's freedoms not yet inspired a popular insurrection? War weariness affects Lebanese of all political colors, but there are other factors that mitigate against the rise, let alone the success, of open resistance. For one, ordinary Lebanese realize they lack a reliable external ally. Second, the Syrian leadership has cleverly ingested Lebanon at a step-by-step pace just below the threshold that would set off violent reactions. Third, the inevitability of a brutal Syrian response all but stunts a sustained challenge from within. Fourth, international attention is simply not focused on the Lebanese plight, permitting Syria's takeover to proceed with near-impunity; the timing of the final stage in the takeover, in October 1990, was especially acute (the Bush administration was devoting all attention to building an anti-Iraq coalition at that time). So long as the eyes of the international community remain averted from the Lebanese scene, not even the most impulsive of Lebanese nationalists would embark on challenging the Syrian hegemony. The Lebanese, clearly, have not been as lucky as the Kosovar Albanians.

Fifth, the nature of the Syrian regime permits it easily to sustain guerilla-style attacks against its civilian and military presence in Lebanon. Unlike a democracy, where public opinion goes into an uproar every

time one or two soldiers are killed or even injured, Damascus is able to withstand a high number of casualties and exploit its losses to justify heavy reprisals against the perceived attackers and their community at large. Damascus is willing to replenish quickly whatever human losses it endures in Lebanon and no one dare gainsay it.

Sixth, a situation fraught with internal divisions along political and religious lines, as exists in Lebanon, and compounded through constant meddling by an external occupying power, is hardly conducive, at least in the short run, to concerted rebellious opposition. A popular refrain among observers of the Lebanese scene is that Syria, through its divide-and-rule tactics, "plays Lebanon like an organ." A quick survey of the successive phases of the war in Lebanon reveals the Syrians at one point or another siding openly with every faction against every other faction. Whenever the internal power configuration in Lebanon tilted in favor of one faction, Damascus swiftly stepped in to rearrange the balance by strengthening the weaker side. Whenever it was opportune, Damascus fueled the grievances of one side against the other - only to intervene at a later time and perform the reverse. Can anyone blame the Lebanese for weighing with extreme care their every move when it comes to wiggling out of Syria's tight grip?

### **THE UNITED STATES AND LEBANON - [return to top](#)**

The subject of Lebanon has atrophied somewhat among top decision-makers in Washington. Thinking on Lebanon needs to be moved forward, particularly after the prolonged silence of recent years.

#### ***Background***

It was not always so. Indeed, there was a time when Lebanon received much more direct and substantive attention in Washington. The golden years of U.S.-Lebanese relations existed between the establishment of Lebanon's embassy in Washington in 1945 and the earliest inception of Palestinian guerrilla activity in Lebanon in the mid-1960s. Having Lebanon firmly allied with the West was such an important priority for the Eisenhower administration to warrant even direct military intervention buttressed by sustained political involvement. In 1958, U.S. Marines landed on Lebanon's beaches and ended the brewing sectarian strife in the country brought on by a clash between Gamal Abdel Nasser's Soviet-supported expansionist brand of Arabism on the one hand, and on the other, a U.S.-Western counter-drive to maintain the Baghdad Pact and include Lebanon in it.

Then the Vietnam experience radically altered U.S. strategic thinking regarding military intervention in small conflicts entailing unclear national interests and necessitating the sacrifice of American lives. This qualitative shift in American foreign policy has had a global impact, Lebanon not excepted. The outbreak in 1975 of war in Lebanon involving a number of non-Lebanese regional participants did not precipitate an American military response as in 1958. Washington limited its involvement to diplomacy and, through the activities of such special envoys as Dean Brown, Philip Habib, and Morris Draper, remained politically engaged in all subsequent phases of the unfolding breakdown of Lebanon. American troops did return to the Lebanese theater in 1982, as part of a multinational peacekeeping force initially introduced with the limited objective of evacuating the PLO from the country. Their objective was to shore up the Lebanese government. An explosion in October 1983 at the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 243 soldiers, then ended a U.S. military option in Lebanon. Enthusiasm for a direct American involvement in the country waned even more after a series of abductions of American and other Western hostages that began in 1983 and lasted until 1991.

#### ***An Appendage to Syrian-Israeli Negotiations? - [return to top](#)***

Official American statements on Lebanon have gone through an evolution since the outbreak of war in 1975. At the start, the U.S. position was represented by the assertion that Washington supported "the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Lebanon." This formulation became a much-

repeated mantra through succeeding years, with an occasional bolder statement favoring the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon. But at no time did the U.S. government back its policy with tangible operational measures; on the contrary, it seemed tacitly to acquiesce to continued Syrian ascendancy in Lebanon. By late 1989, the U.S. position, as enshrined in the Saudi-sponsored and U.S.-supported Ta'if agreement, had in fact given way to an "Arab solution" for the Lebanese problem. This presumed Arab role was soon overtaken exclusively by Syria, and the "Arab solution" was thereby Syrianized. U.S. statements continued to stress the need for adhering to both the letter and the spirit of the Ta'if agreement, which includes the call for redeployment of Syrian forces, but these became increasingly meaningless words.

Following repeated instances of Syrian non-compliance with Ta'if, American officials began to envisage the solutions to Lebanon's predicament emerging in the context of a concluded Middle East peace. In fact, Washington changed approach and after September 1991 (when Syrian troops were supposed to re-deploy and did not) it saw fit to hitch Lebanon's fate to the Arab-Israeli peace process, which Asad had joined two months earlier. That Lebanon for years now has been a hostage to Syria is something well known. But that Lebanon should become a hostage to the Arab-Israeli peace process is both new and ominous.

And now that Damascus has made it clear that it does not intend to end the occupation, only the prospect that the country's misery will be eased with the successful conclusion of the Arab-Israeli peace process has prevented popular demoralization in Lebanon from turning into utter despair.

In this light, American decisions of recent years concerning Lebanon - to send an ambassador, to lift the travel ban, to have Secretary of State Albright visit - have been small in scope and limited in ambition, not affecting the larger circumstances of Lebanon or closing off any alternatives.

### ***U.S. Policy toward Syria - [return to top](#)***

Asad has played a complicated game during the on-again, off-again peace negotiations with Israel in which he has signaled a number of goals: to secure the survival of his regime; to obtain U.S. and Israeli approval of his domination over Lebanon; and to ensure Israel's departure from both southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights. Spin-off gains from this Syrian gamble also include increased influence for Damascus, a financial aid package from the West, and more Arab oil money. These objectives, although perhaps appearing over-ambitious when listed in this fashion, are in fact not that remote from fulfillment because the United States and its Western allies have acquiesced to the point that they are now playing the game according to Asad's rules; and Asad himself appears confident that the attainment of all his ends is only a matter of time.

More generally, it is arresting to see how many breaks Washington cut Damascus in Lebanon - breaks neither Tehran nor Baghdad would dream of receiving. Although Syria has been involved, directly or indirectly, in probably more American deaths than any other adversary since the Vietnam war,<sup>2</sup> American officials soft-pedal Syria's record on terrorism and its acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. The inconsistency of American policy regarding Syria lies in labeling it officially as a rogue state while at the same time continuing to try to seduce it into signing a peace treaty with Israel; so far, this approach has had very limited success. It reflects the two competing goals of U.S. policy: compel behavioral change in Syria through sanctions and other tough measures while helping Israel (where successive governments, both Labor and Likud, have determined that its interest lies in seeking a land-for-peace deal with Syria). Over time, the desire to assist Israel has won out, leading to a soft policy toward Damascus.

The Syrian regime has also worked to this end by showing an unusual ability to manipulate Washington. Hafiz al-Asad has managed to shield himself repeatedly from U.S. wrath. Up until the breakdown of the Soviet Union, he was a staunch ally of Moscow then swiftly took advantage of the Kuwait crisis to

change camps in 1990. Following the Madrid peace conference in October 1991, Asad emerged, chameleon-like, as a potential partner for peace. Since then he has appeared to be more interested in the process itself - having American secretaries of state visit, having his weapons of mass destruction winked at, getting investment in oil and gas infrastructure - than in any peaceful outcome it might yield. The United States possesses enormous leverage over Syria that it does not seem willing to use.

Strangely enough, Israel mimics the United States in turning a blind eye to Syrian-orchestrated excesses in Lebanon. In a policy that follows from its wish to avoid a direct military confrontation with Damascus, Jerusalem holds Lebanon (not Syria) responsible for attacks on Israeli soldiers and on Israeli towns. Whether in the 1996 "Grapes of Wrath" operation, the June 1999 paring shot by Netanyahu, or the early 2000 operation of the Barak government, it is the Beirut electrical grids and other Lebanese infrastructure that suffers from decisions made in Damascus.

It bears noting that an alternative does exist, as exemplified by actions taken by the Republic of Turkey in late 1998 in response to repeated provocations by the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party). This terrorist organization was offered sanctuary inside Syria and Lebanon, from where it launched violent attacks against Turks for nearly fifteen years, killing tens of thousands. Ankara in October 1998 issued an unambiguous ultimatum to Damascus: deport the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, or be prepared for war. The ever-cautious Asad gingerly unburdened himself of Öcalan (whom the Turks a few months later arrested and put on trial). This incident suggests that a credible threat to use force does not fall on deaf ears in Damascus and may well yield swift results.

### ***Policy Recommendations - [return to top](#)***

Understanding that there will be no real and lasting peace in the Middle East if Syria stays in Lebanon and the United States and other governments look the other way, all U.S. actions taken on behalf of Lebanon must aim to salvage the country's precious freedoms and anchor its regained sovereignty. Ultimately, this can only be achieved when all foreign forces, especially the Syrian army and intelligence units, quit Lebanon.

Toward this goal, we present several specific policy recommendations in graduated order of severity addressed to the Executive Branch and the Congress.

*Statement of policy.* It is time for the Executive Branch openly to call on Damascus to end the occupation of Lebanon. This should be dealt with in an unambiguous way. It need not be complex. Indeed, a six-word statement would suffice: All Syrian forces must leave Lebanon. Such a declaration would hardly break new ground but would only catch up with numerous congressional resolutions calling unequivocally for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. It would also underscore the spirit of U.N. Resolution 425 as well as the letter of U.N. Resolution 520 that calls for "the strict respect for Lebanon's sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence under the sole and exclusive authority of the Lebanese Government through the Lebanese Army throughout Lebanon."

*Press Damascus on promises made.* The Syrian government has, on three occasions, concurred with decisions made by others that Syrian troops should leave Lebanon. First, as part of the Riyadh-Cairo accords, it agreed to leave Lebanon in October 1976. Second, it signed the Fez Declaration in September 1982, that committed it to "start negotiations" with the Lebanese government about "an end to the mission of the Arab deterrent forces in Lebanon [i.e., the Syrian troops]." Third, to win Lebanese Christian support for a revision of the Lebanese government structure (the Ta'if Accord). Asad in October 1989 accepted a provision that Syrian troops would be redeployed from their positions in Beirut to the Bekaa Valley two years after four conditions had been met. Those conditions were indeed fulfilled in September 1990; but September 1992 came and went without any change. Contrary to the letter and spirit of Ta'if - and the American interpretation of that document - the Syrian armed presence in the

country throughout the 1990s has been steadily deepening. U.S. officials need to remind the Syrians and the world of these multiple promises.

*Aid for Syria.* Not a penny to Damascus until it has completed the evacuation of its forces (uniformed and not, intelligence agents, too) from every square inch of Lebanon.

This applies even should it conclude an agreement with Is-rael that allows Syrian forces to remain in Lebanon.<sup>3</sup>

*Aid for Lebanon.* All appropriations for Lebanon should be directed away from the Syrian-controlled government and in favor of credible private organizations and institutions - universities, schools, hospitals, and groups working in the areas of human rights, environmental issues, and so forth. The Lebanese army presents a special case: an autonomous Lebanese army motivated primarily by genuine concern for Lebanon's national interests would be the country's greatest potential source of stability. But it is now virtually an appendage of the Syrian military. Unfortunately, Washington has chosen to treat it as independent of Syrian control, which is emphatically not the case, and to provide it with aid. This is a mistake so long as the Syrian occupation continues.

*South Lebanon.* A solution for the festering sore in south Lebanon requires a level of seriousness equal to that afforded to Sinai and the Golan - ideally an international resolution within the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli agreement. This will likely entail the introduction of a multinational force (not necessarily including Americans) with a mandate and capability to secure the border between Lebanon and Israel and to protect the civilian population of the south and that of northern Israel. Such a force would gradually hand over security duties to a beefed-up Lebanese army according to a carefully laid out timetable.

### **From the Ta'if Agreement**

"Whereas the aim of the Lebanese state is to reinstate its authority over the entire Lebanese territory by means of its own forces, which are represented primarily by the internal security forces, and out of the brotherly ties that bind Syria to Lebanon, Syrian forces shall, with due thanks, assist legitimate Lebanese forces in reinstating the sovereignty of the Lebanese state within a maximum of two years after the ratification of the National Reconciliation Charter, the election of the President, the formation of the government of national reconciliation and the adoption of political reforms in a constitutional manner. At the end of this period, the Syrian government and the Lebanese government of national reconciliation will decide on the repositioning of Syrian forces in the Bekaa area and the access to western Bekaa in Dahr-Elbeidar up to the Hamana-Mdeirej-Ein Darah line and, if necessary, other points to be decided by a joint Lebanese-Syrian military committee. Also, an agreement shall be signed by both governments which determines the size and duration of the presence of the Syrian forces in the above areas and the relation of these forces with the Lebanese state authorities present in these areas. The Tripartite Supreme Arab Committee is ready to assist the two states in reaching this agreement, if they so desire."

*Lebanese sovereignty.* Considering that the Ta'if agreement, initially launched as an "Arab solution" for Lebanon, was subsequently Syrianized, the United States should work to reengage independent participation by moderate Arab regimes in restoring Lebanese sovereignty, accelerating political reconciliation, and promoting peaceful communal coexistence. This greater Arab role, supplementing rather than diminishing American involvement, must act concretely to pressure Damascus to remove its forces from Lebanon.

*Encourage Israel to include Lebanon in negotiations with Syria.* Although Syrian-Israeli negotiations are complex and difficult enough without freighting them down with more issues, the fact remains that these represent the single best source of leverage on Damascus to pull back from Lebanon. The Israeli authorities need to be reminded of the dangers Lebanon presents to them, in terms of Katyusha rockets raining down on their northern towns and more, unless the Syrians fully disengage their forces from Lebanon.

*Tighten the screws.* Should the above steps prove futile in budging Syria from Lebanon, the U.S. government can avail itself of a battery of steps to increase the pressure on Damascus: recall the U.S. ambassador and freeze diplomatic relations; suspend whatever trade exists between the two countries; terminate other forms of bilateral dealings. It can seek to oust Syria from international fora, prevent Syrian officials or students from coming to the United States; reach out to Lebanese democrats and other figures (such as the Maronite patriarch), and convene an international conference of free Lebanese.

If the Administration shows reluctance to impose sanctions on Syria, Congress ought to close the existing "national interest" loopholes that the Executive Branch usually invokes in order to disregard regulations. For example, it can extend to Syria the sanctions in the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (which prohibits any investment of over \$20 million a year in Iran's or Libya's petrochemicals sectors). It can take other steps, too, such as funding a Radio Free Lebanon.

*Military force.* Finally, the use of force needs to be considered. The Vietnam legacy and the sour memories of dead American Marines in Beirut notwithstanding, the United States has entered a new era of undisputed military supremacy coupled with an appreciable drop in human losses on the battlefield. The Gulf War of 1991 and the war over Kosovo of 1999 represented watersheds, not only in the annals of military history, but also because they demonstrated that the United States can act to defend its interests and its principles without the specter of huge casualties. This opens the door to a similar decision to act for Lebanon's endangered freedoms and pluralism. But this opportunity may not wait, for as weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities spread, the risks of such action will rapidly grow. If there is to be decisive action, it will have to be sooner rather than later.

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1 The Christians who left the country because of the war still retain their Lebanese citizenship and in many cases still carry valid Lebanese passports. Many continue to own property back in Lebanon and make periodic trips to visit relatives and take care of business. It is a burning issue in Lebanon today, as well as being a Christian demand, that these people continue to be counted in any census and that they be allowed to vote regardless of where they reside.

2 Its support for the 1983 bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 243, and its likely role in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am 103 in which 270 died, 175 of them American, led to the deaths of over four hundred Americans. Damascus was also complicit in the seizure of over two dozen Americans in Lebanon and continues to profit from the smuggling of drugs into the United States and the counterfeiting of U.S. currency.

3 By way of background, it bears note that back in 1979, coming on the heels of heightened Syrian misconduct in Lebanon, the Derwinsky amendment to the following year's foreign aid budget cut all funds - some \$90 million - earmarked for Syria. Up to that point, Syria had been receiving regular annual aid packages since the 1974 Disengagement Agreements with Israel brokered by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

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