

# Lebanon, the Peace Process, and U.S. Policy

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## Brief Analysis

**T**he current standstill in the peace process has created a situation where Lebanon's problems might be viewed as one of the most important components to the overall conclusion of the Middle East peace process. Lebanon now holds the dubious distinction of being the last "satellite" state in the world. Today, Syria occupies 90 percent of Lebanon although this receives far less media attention than the 10 percent of Lebanon occupied by Israel. The reason for this tacit acquiescence to Syrian suzerainty over Lebanon is the prevailing sentiment in the international media that "as long as Lebanon is quiet, we don't have to deal with them."

Syrian Neo-Colonialism. Damascus has used the bi-lateral agreements it imposed on Lebanon (The Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination of May 1991, and The Defense and Security Agreement of August 1991) to cement its control over all aspects of Lebanese government and society. From politics and security to economics and culture, the heart of what was once an open and free democracy is now being threatened by Syrian occupation. These agreements were forced through the parliament of Lebanon, which has become nothing more than a rubber stamp sanctioning the whims of the men in Damascus. The motive behind these agreements is the total absorption of Lebanon by Syria. Of greatest concern, the Syrian-Lebanese security agreement asserts that "subversive" elements in one country are to be arrested and handed over to the authorities of the other upon request. This language legitimizes regular Syrian intervention in Lebanese internal affairs.

Two other manifestations of Syrian colonization are threatening Lebanon's delicately calibrated demographic equation and have the potential to create what might be called a "demographic time bomb." First, the Naturalization Decree of 1994 naturalized a huge number of non-Lebanese amounting to another 10 percent of the population. Virtually all of these people are Muslims, and two-thirds are Syrians. The second threatening demographic development has been the opening of the Syrian-Lebanese border to a massive influx of Syrian labor. At any given time, there are close to one million Syrian workers inside Lebanon. If these people decide to stay in Lebanon, settle, marry locally or bring in their families from across the almost non-existent border, the face of Lebanon will be altered forever.

The status quo in Lebanon is not a pleasant one. It leaves the country without a ruling majority that represents the will of the Lebanese people. Instead, the government tries to rule by consensus, and the results have proven very unsatisfactory. Violations of personal freedom exist in almost all areas of Lebanese society. The Lebanese press, once free and irreverent, has now been muzzled to the point where it has resorted to the odious practice of self-censorship. The fact that Lebanon, despite the lifting of the travel ban by the U.S. government, remains a haven for a wide assortment of international terrorists and has contributed to a feeling of fear that prevails there. Because Lebanon essentially remains a nation under occupation, the current issue of individual freedom is essentially moot.

Sustained Incrementalism. Probably the only way that Lebanon will be able to throw off the Syrian yoke and regain its former status as a free nation in a mostly "un-free" region is for the United States to adopt a policy of "sustained incrementalism." Washington's serious and sustained involvement in Lebanese issues promises to be a low-cost, but effective policy. The overall objective would be to de-couple the stranglehold that Syria now has on Lebanon. The

result will be to return a once free and prosperous land to its own people and to make it clear to the international community that a neo-colonialist policy such as the one imposed on Lebanon by Syria will not be tolerated. Possible courses of action the U.S. government might adopt under a policy of "sustained incrementalism," might include:

- Fostering a credible and responsible Lebanese opposition.
- Avoiding a repeat of the farces that have passed for parliamentary elections in 1992 and 1996.
- Making further foreign aid to Lebanon contingent on tangible improvements in human rights violations.
- Lending support to institutions that strengthen Lebanese civil society.
- Building up the Lebanese armed forces as an independent and patriotic institution capable of taking responsibility for security.

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The Role of Lebanon in U.S. Foreign Policy. Although the situation of Lebanon is tragic, the idea that the solution to the Syria-Lebanon problem comes from Washington is fundamentally problematic. The idea that the Madrid process condemned the Lebanese people to servitude is also basically unsound. Simply put, there is a basic lack of U.S. policy toward Lebanon. While it is not in Washington's interest that Lebanon remain subjugated to Syria, the question is how vital is the interest in the first place. Although it is clearly favorable to the national interests of the United States for Lebanon to be free of Syrian hegemony, it is not essential to the long-term national security interests of the United States Government. In addition, the idea of a "sustained approach" toward Lebanon is unrealistic because the US political and bureaucratic systems do not lend themselves to this kind of a patient, gradualist policy with any nation.

The Role of Lebanon in the Middle East Peace Process. The role of Lebanon in the Middle East peace process is, probably unavoidably, uncertain and dependent on other regional factors. Ultimately, the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, and its impact on Lebanese society will not make or break the peace process. The current struggle now taking place in Lebanon over its self-determination and national freedom are peripheral to the main issues that will ultimately determine the final result of the Middle East peace process.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Stuart Frisch. ❖

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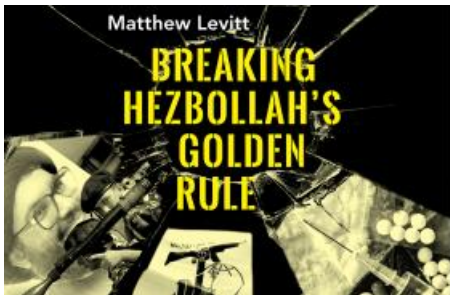
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