

It's Moscow's Weapons Fighting Lebanon's War, So Moscow Must Step In

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In the summer of 1982, as Israeli troops and artillery laid siege to Beirut, the international community wasted no time in demanding that the United States act to restrain its ally. Now, seven years later, with Syrian troops inflicting what is by all accounts a much more devastating horror on Beirut, world opinion should act with equal haste and call to account Syria's paymaster, the Soviet Union.

Whatever view one takes of the current conflict in Lebanon, which pits Syria and its Muslim proxies against the Christian forces of Lt. Gen. Michel Aoun, one thing is indisputable: No outside power -- not the United States, not the United Nations, not the Arab League, not Israel, not France -- has more leverage to achieve an immediate cease-fire than the Soviet Union.

Syria's military is almost totally dependent on arms and funding from the Soviet Union. Before Mikhail S. Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985, Moscow supplied Syria with about \$3 billion worth of weapons annually. Since 1985, with the advent of Soviet "new thinking" and Syria's economic collapse, a greater austerity has been introduced to the relationship, though Soviet arms continue to flow to Syria at the impressive rate of \$1 billion per year.

Syria's military dependence on Moscow represents the Kremlin's most significant lever of influence on the fighting in Lebanon, but not its only one. The Soviets are also the main arms supplier and superpower patron of Iraq, whose massive weapons transfers to Lebanon's Christian forces have buttressed the ill-considered belligerency of Gen. Aoun. As it does with Syria, Moscow maintains a so-called treaty of friendship and cooperation with Iraq, a long-term political/military agreement that borders on a formal alliance.

In short, the carnage in Beirut is being carried out almost entirely on behalf of parties that are, in one form or another, allied with and armed by the Soviet Union. Under the circumstances, Moscow's unique responsibility to play a leadership role in efforts to halt the bloodshed cannot be overlooked.

This is not to say that the United States has done everything in its power to alleviate Lebanon's suffering. It has not. But given Moscow's ties to Syria, and the fact that the war is being waged with Soviet weapons, the Kremlin has both a greater capability and moral duty to affect the situation.

Nor is it to say that the Soviets have been unhelpful in recent attempts to end the fighting. Quite the contrary. In May, the Soviet Union joined the United States in a statement that urged all of Lebanon's warring factions to agree to an

immediate cease-fire. In July, a similar call was issued by Gorbachev and French President Francois Mitterrand. Moscow backed the mediation efforts of the Arab League (which failed) as well as last week's Security Council cease-fire appeal, which produced at least a pause in the combat. And a month ago, the Kremlin saw fit to send a deputy foreign minister to Damascus and Baghdad on a mission of quiet diplomacy aimed at de-escalating the crisis.

Consistent with the changes that he has wrought in Soviet foreign policy more generally, Gorbachev's actions in Lebanon have clearly been in support of efforts to ameliorate the conflict. But alas, to date, these have been the actions that one would expect from a medium-size power. They have not been the actions of a superpower whose military and political weight with the main combatant in Lebanon's civil war, Syria, far outstrips that of any other possible mediator. Even more to the point, they have not been the actions of a superpower that claims a responsibility equal to the United States' for maintaining and enhancing international peace and stability.

With all other attempts to stem the fighting in Lebanon having foundered, and with Syria posed to impose a final solution on Christian East Beirut, the international community should now call on the Soviet Union to step up to the challenge of world leadership. Moscow must be urged to act, forcefully and without delay, by bringing the full weight of its political leverage to bear on Syria to agree to a cessation of hostilities.

This is no more than the United States was asked to do vis-a-vis Israel in 1982. Today, when the Soviet Union is demonstrating itself to be a far more responsible international actor, it would be a shame if a double standard were employed and less was expected of the Kremlin when its ally flouts international sensibilities.

Seven years go, President Ronald Reagan telephoned Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and demanded that the Israeli assault on Beirut be brought to a stop. President Gorbachev should now be urged to place a similar call to Damascus. Lebanon's survival depends on it.

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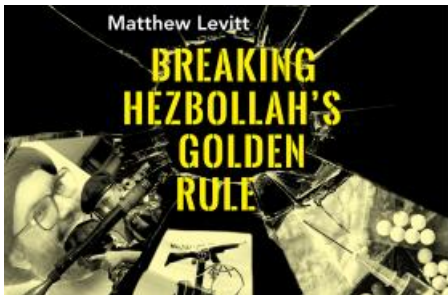
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