

# Lebanon's Moment to Regain Control

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In 1975, Lebanese President Suleiman Franjeh warned Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat that failure to discipline Palestinian radicals in the southern outskirts of Beirut would exploit Lebanon's hospitality and plunge the country into civil war. These were famous last words. Within months, a civil war broke out that engulfed Lebanon and continued over the next 15 years.

Looking back over the past 30 years, we can see the profound consequences that emerged since Mr. Franjeh's warning. Central authority lost was never restored.

As difficult as the hour is for both Lebanon and Israel as the tragic violence now rages, this is Lebanon's moment to regain what was lost in 1975. The Lebanese government needs to fulfill its sovereign duty by extending control into southern Lebanon.

It has been a long time since Lebanon has had an opportunity to control its own destiny. The current Lebanese government can turn crisis into opportunity. This could be Lebanon's opportunity to heed the international call for its own army to retake its border by marginalizing Hezbollah.

Lebanon's own history is a cautionary tale of the lessons that need to be learned today. Given the preexisting enmity that existed between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon in 1975, the Palestinian unrest made the situation in Lebanon even more delicate. Despite the urgings of aides to remain neutral, Mr. Arafat openly backed the Muslims.

This alliance provoked intervention from an unlikely place: Damascus. Viewing Mr. Arafat's challenge to the balance of power in Lebanon as a threat to its interests in the region, Syria decided to intervene. It stayed for the next 29 years, positioning some 40,000 occupying troops in the country until it was ousted in 2005.

Moreover, Mr. Arafat's alliance earned the lasting animosity of the Christians, and set the stage for an Israeli-Christian alliance that led, seven years later, to the PLO leader's ouster at the hands of his nemesis, Ariel Sharon.

The loss of Lebanese central authority is what gave the Palestinians a base in southern Lebanon, which they used to fire rockets against into Israel (sound familiar?). Israel would expel the Palestinians from Lebanon, but the 1982 war heralded Israel's 18 years of unhappy ground involvement in that country. Israel learned the lesson that permanent ground deployment in Lebanon is something it does not want to repeat.

Yet Lebanon's fortunes ultimately began to turn around. What was critical in ending the civil war—and is no less critical today—was Arab leadership. Without Saudi Arabia giving its sponsorship to the Taif Agreement, the civil war in Lebanon would not have ended in 1990.

Interestingly, Saudi Arabia, whose caution in inter-Arab politics is legendary, took a very rare step during the last few days and publicly blamed Hezbollah for instigating the current crisis with Israel. Egypt and Jordan have also raised voiced rare public criticism of Hezbollah. Arab leadership again is critical in getting Hezbollah to halt its militarization of southern Lebanon.

Another lesson of the past that needs to be learned revisited was is the role of the international community in starting a dynamic that led to the end of Syrian occupation in 2005.

While they could famously agree on little else, President Bush and France's President Jacques Chirac made common cause at the Group of Eight meeting two years ago as they agreed to join hands to press for Syrian expulsion from Lebanon. This call became codified in U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, and involved the disarming of Hezbollah and the Lebanese government's deployment in the south of the country.

South Lebanon is pivotal. After Israel's incursion in 1982, Hezbollah has asserted its need to control the area in order to function as a "resistance force" against Israel. It should be noted that while it may be understandable that Hezbollah does not want Israel in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah negates Israel's very existence. Israel left Lebanon in 2000 after the United Nations demarcated the border and verified Israel's exit. Hezbollah—much to the approval of Syria, which wanted Israel to bleed—never left. The international community needs to be active again and insist that Security Council Resolution 1559 is enforced.

Like virtually all governments, the Lebanese government would like sovereignty over its borders. It knows that there will be no stability in that country, nor will there be neither national stability nor foreign investment in southern Lebanon unless it gains firm control.

It is interesting that shortly after the current crisis began, the Lebanese government issued a communiqué saying that it knows it has responsibilities in southern Lebanon. The international community could ensure that this vague notion becomes a reality. It should assist the Lebanese Armed Forces. The LAF demonstrated its independence by not backing the Syrians in the face-off in 2005. Its officer corps comes from across the sectarian spectrum. Mediation would keep Hezbollah away from the border and ensure the LAF is deployed instead.

However, because of the vicissitudes of Lebanese politics, Lebanon has refrained, until now, from a political confrontation with Hezbollah. A military confrontation might not be needed, because Hezbollah knows its Lebanese credentials would be damaged in the eyes of the Lebanese public if it tangled with the LAF.

Hezbollah must answer to three different masters. As a proxy of Iran, it is a beneficiary of receiving at least \$100 million in annual assistance, including thousands of rockets and the training of its fighters by dozens of Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Hezbollah also benefits from Syrian weaponry and the Damascus airport, which acts as a transit station for Iranian missiles to southern Lebanon. At the same time, Hezbollah realizes that its Lebanese identity is important as well. Hezbollah may believe that the public will not mind its control of the south, if it does not pay a penalty for the stand. However, to plunge Lebanon into a war with Israel after Israel already ended its occupation six years ago is another matter.

It has been 15 years since the end of the Lebanese civil war. The PLO militants, Israel and Syria have all left Lebanon. This is the first crisis of the post-Syrian era. Now is the time for Lebanon to act. History does not always provide a second chance, but this chance now exists for the Lebanese government. If not now, when?

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