

# US / ME POLICY BRIEF

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## LEBANON: WHAT SHOULD U.S. POLICY BE ?

BY FREDERIC C. HOF

**A**lthough fully stabilizing Lebanon while regional conflicts rage around it and inside it is “mission impossible,” surely we can be helpful to the Lebanese people and help our own reputation within the country in the process.

### Background

As we discovered 25 years ago, Lebanon is not an easy country to help. The state and its central government are largely illusory. Lebanon inherited sectarianism and feudalism from the Ottoman Empire without getting a sultan of its own. Citizenship is a legal formality with little political significance. Most Lebanese identify themselves politically by sect, making national unity a function of sectarian compromise and consensus. Such compromise and consensus is all but impossible in a region constantly roiled by the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and newer confrontations involving Iran. Lebanon’s political class – while not without talent – has long exhibited an easy willingness to seek partisan, personal advantage through external patronage.

In the early 1980s we became part of Lebanon’s internal struggle without realizing it until it was too late. While there is probably no prospect now of American military forces operating in Lebanon, we still run the risk of creating unintended consequences if we try to manipulate forces we do not fully understand. Murphy’s Law may not have been invented in Lebanon,

but in some respects it is the law of the land. And those who have tried to manipulate the Lebanese almost invariably wind up being the manipulated.

The beginning of wisdom about Lebanon is to recognize that it is a sectarian non-state. If we insist on seeing it instead as a functioning, fighting democracy under siege or as a battleground in the global war on terrorism, our actions may inadvertently convert the debilitating disease of sectarianism to a fatal illness. If we are not extremely careful about how we try to help we could end up helping Lebanon plunge into chaos. If we fail to appreciate that renewed civil war could benefit our adversaries while the best and brightest of Lebanese head for the exits, we may again reap the consequences of Murphy’s Law.

### Current Challenges

We are faced now with a challenge brought about by two developments:

- Lebanon’s imported sultan – the President of Syria – lost his suzerain status in the spring of 2005 by alienating a majority of Lebanese along with two major external powers. Our government hailed the election of a new government as evidence that Middle Eastern transformation was on track. But the ex-sultan in Damascus is making a determined comeback.

- Hezbollah ignited a 33-day war in July 2006 by unashamedly exercising the prerogatives of statehood in attacking Israel at a point not disputed by the central government. Israel destroyed a significant amount of Lebanese infrastructure. Hezbollah was left with an expanded UNIFIL and 15,000 Lebanese soldiers between it and Israel. Frustrated by this challenge to its resistance status, Hezbollah has tried since December to bring down or neutralize the prime minister whose offer of Lebanese soldiers helped to create UNSCR 1701.

Clearly the U.S. does not wish to see Syria running Lebanon. No American wants to see Hezbollah's pro-Iranian leadership cadre undermine UNSCR 1701. While the rank-and-file of Hezbollah focuses on the defense of the Shiite community in a Lebanon where sect still trumps everything, the leadership cadre is part and parcel of the Iranian Islamic revolution. Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah would happily fight to the last Lebanese in defense of Iran. While neither he nor his colleagues in Tehran wish to resume fighting now, they most definitely want a trap door in place under 1701 so that Iran will be positioned to employ Hezbollah military capabilities in a deterrent mode against Israel.

My sense is that there are things we can do and ways we can behave to stave off a restoration of Syrian suzerainty and obstruct Hezbollah from resuming its resistance kabuki along the "blue line" with Israel. Indeed, our humanitarian assistance efforts have been praiseworthy, and we have a very effective American Ambassador. But there are no grand American gestures – short of achieving a détente with Iran and an Arab-Israeli peace settlement – that can truly bring calm to Lebanon and give Lebanese an opportunity to build a modern, democratic state. In a violent, unstable region a stateless, sectarian Lebanon will always be storm-tossed, penetrable and vulnerable.

### Recommendations Going Forward

Let us assume, however, that these regional conflicts will continue to roil. What can we do to mitigate the damage to Lebanon while complicating and frustrating the efforts of the Syrian big brother and the Iranian proxies?

- First, do no harm. If aid to the Government of Lebanon is translated on the ground as helping one sectarian group at the expense of another, it will backfire. The chances of making a mistake in this regard will increase exponentially if we insist on seeing today's problems in Lebanon through the prism of the global war on terrorism. If, after all, Hezbollah is seen as nothing but a Shiite Al-Qaeda, then why not provide arms to other Lebanese factions? Likewise if we view Hezbollah – not just its leadership cadre but the entire organization – simply as an Iranian proxy, then why not try to use Lebanese to fight it? The issue is not whether Hezbollah operatives have used terrorist tactics or whether Hassan Nasrallah is an Iran-firster. Both are true. The problem is that playing a sectarian card, or being seen as playing one, ultimately throws the baby out with the bathwater. In a sectarian fight most Shiites will unite behind Hassan Nasrallah in defense of their community and increasing numbers of Lebanese will leave the country. A civil war fueled by misguided "assistance" would make renewed Syrian suzerainty an attractive option for many Lebanese, just as it was in 1989.
- Second, adhere to a modest, low-key and balanced approach toward mitigating Lebanon's internal political crisis. We should bear in mind that many Lebanese (not just Hezbollah) blame us for not restraining Israel last summer. Many Lebanese took issue with the description of the pounding they took as "the birth pangs of a new Middle East." We must recognize, like it or not, that the American flag is not the most admired gift-wrap in today's Lebanon. That said, the Paris III pledge of \$770 million in aid for Lebanon can help.

Support for the Lebanese Armed Forces – the one institution in the country that promotes the concept of “One Lebanon” for its members – is essential. In a peaceful region this army can be an essential building block for a modern, democratic Lebanese state. But while we support this frail government and its institutions, we must do so in the name of helping the Lebanese people. While the March 14th Movement contains many decent people, so does the opposition. While the opposition includes members of Lebanon’s dysfunctional political elite, so does March 14th. We should recognize that Lebanese politics are very personal and that Lebanese politicians – with few exceptions – are very adept at manipulating outsiders. If we wish to avoid inadvertently fanning the flames of sectarianism and finding ourselves playing the role of the dog in someone else’s hunting party then we should keep some distance between ourselves and Lebanese politics. We should speak with everyone, with one exception: there is no point in speaking with Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon when there are more important people with whom to speak in Tehran.

- Third, we can press quietly for a Lebanese-Israeli arrangement short of a peace treaty. If ceding the Shebaa Farms to Lebanon, swapping prisoners and enacting an updated Israel-Lebanon armistice are not enough to get Mr. Nasrallah and company out of the resistance business with their heavy weapons neutralized, then let Hassan Nasrallah explain to his long-suffering constituents why they are not enough. It would be very regrettable if the U.S. cannot devise – or at least support – a diplomatic approach aimed at either ending the so-called resistance or demonstrating its bankruptcy for the edification of all Lebanese.

- Fourth and finally, while we work to stabilize Lebanon we should help Lebanese lay the groundwork for a modern, democratic state. We should encourage democracy-building organizations to help Lebanese form cross-confessional organizations of all types, some of which might eventually morph into national political parties. Perhaps this aid could be best rendered through organizations not flying the American flag, as we currently suffer from an image problem in Lebanon. But Lebanon has the human capital to create a modern, democratic state. More and more Lebanese of all sects are coming to the conclusion that it is sectarianism that renders the country defenseless. Lebanon can actually become what it once thought it was: the Arab world’s first democracy.

Whatever we do in Lebanon or in the region beyond, we should do it with caution, modesty and a full appreciation of the provisions of Murphy’s Law. Any temptation to create, encourage or exploit sectarianism in the hope of separating “good” Muslims from “bad” ones should be resisted. A Lebanon mired in sectarianism has no worthwhile future in a region roiled with conflict. A region where sectarianism exacerbates conflicts unresolved for decades can be deadly for Lebanon. It will take years of patient diplomacy to calm and heal this region and protect its most vulnerable constituencies. We should, at the very least, do as little harm as possible in Lebanon while we try to calm the seas that threatened to sink it once and for all.

*Frederic C. Hof is the CEO of AALC Ltd., an Arlington, VA international business consulting firm. He was chief of staff of the Sharm el-Sheik (Mitchell) Fact-Finding Committee in 2001 and has written extensively about Lebanon over the past 20+ years.*

## U.S. / MIDDLE EAST PROJECT

641 LEXINGTON AVENUE, SUITE 1500, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10022 TEL: (212) 634-6378 • FAX: (212) 634-6377

E:MAIL: USMEP@USMEP.US / HENRY SIEGMAN, DIRECTOR / BRENT SCOWCROFT, CHAIRMAN, INTERNATIONAL BOARD