

The lessons of Lebanon

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People cheered when the US marines marched into the capital. At last someone would restore order, remove the thugs and murderers from the streets, and force an end to the chaos. Then a new government arrested and tortured dissidents. The US ordered the dissidents' outside backers, Syria and Iran, to stay away. Britain joined the US in policing the streets. With Washington supporting the government and training its army, the opposition strategy meant removing the Americans and the British. Syria and Iran helped the rebels. American soldiers shot and killed Shia Muslims. American and British planes bombed their neighbourhoods. Soon, the American embassy and the marine headquarters were rubble. American and British civilians were taken hostage and displayed on television. Then, the American warships sailed away and took the marines with them. The experiment in nation-building was over.

This has already happened. The time: August 1982 to February 1985. The place: Lebanon. Can it happen again, on a larger scale, in Iraq?

The forces that drove the conflict in Lebanon are duplicated in Iraq. About 40% of Lebanon's three million people were Shia Muslims, the poorest and most desperate people in the country. Of Iraq's 24 million people, 60% are Shias. Most of them, after Saddam Hussein's discrimination against them and 12 years of sanctions, are also impoverished and angry. Shia Muslims of both countries look to their clergy for leadership in troubled times. There are strong family links between the Shias of Iran and of Lebanon. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Lebanon's Hizbullah, was born in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf. The mother of Mohammed Bakr al-Hakim, who heads the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, is from a prominent south Lebanese family. Mullahs from both countries receive spiritual guidance, financial aid and military support in Iran.

In Lebanon, the United States antagonised Iran and Syria. In Iraq, the US appears to be doing the same, with American officials suggesting that both Iran and Syria are ripe for American-sponsored

changes of regime. In Lebanon, the Lebanese — as well as the Americans, French, British and Italians of the multinational force — paid for US foreign policy errors in blood.

Iran is, if anything, closer to the Shias of Iraq than it was to those in Lebanon. Iran has a long border with Iraq, all the way from the Gulf up to Kurdistan. Iran's leadership knows the country intimately. Iraqi exiles, some of whom worked with the CIA for years, said they were impressed on a recent visit to Tehran that the Iranians' knowledge of Iraqi society and culture was far superior to the Americans'. The US, they said, had a few agents in Iraq. The Iranians, on the other hand, had allies among both the Kurds and the Shias.

To understand how America became involved in Lebanon, we must recall the summer of 1982. The Israeli army was bombing and besieging Beirut. Philip Habib, the diplomat sent by President Reagan to negotiate between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel, believed that the only means to save Beirut from total destruction was to arrange the evacuation of PLO fighters. Israel demanded that the US oversee the evacuation. Thus, marines came to Beirut to guide the Palestinian fighters on to ships and to protect the unarmed Palestinian civilians left behind in the refugee camps. The PLO withdrew. A short time later, the marines left under a banner that proclaimed "Mission Accomplished".

In September, after the assassination of the Lebanese president-elect whom General Ariel Sharon had imposed by force in an earlier instance of regime change, Israel violated its undertakings to Habib and invaded defenceless west Beirut. Its army delivered Christian militiamen under a thug named Elie Hobeika (assassinated in 2001, one week before he was due to give testimony against Ariel Sharon in a Belgian court) to the gates of the Palestinian Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

The ensuing massacre, condemned by an Israeli commission of inquiry, forced the US to return the marines to Beirut. Britain, France and Italy joined them. There, they all became pawns of US policy and hostage to anyone who wanted to attack the United States.

Hizbullah did not exist when Israel in-

vaded Lebanon. Within a year, it had become the most powerful guerrilla force in the Middle East. It became the first Arab armed force to drive the Israeli army out of occupied territory. Israel took almost 20 years and many casualties to discover that the expense of occupying Lebanon was too high to pay for ever. Hizbullah's expulsion of the marines and the Israelis from Lebanon relied on Iranian and Syrian help.

In 1990, the first Bush administration put the final touches to Syria's domination of Lebanon when it agreed — in exchange for Syrian participation in the war over Kuwait — not to oppose Syria's entry into Christian east Beirut and its takeover of Lebanon's governing institutions. Lebanon has been effectively a Syrian colony ever since. The younger Bush, however, could not persuade Syria to support a new American coalition against Iraq.

Among the more outspoken, and thus more frank, proponents of regime change in both Iran and Syria are Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute and Richard Perle, recently discredited associate of the Defence Policy Board. Perle has said again and again that Syria should be next on the American hit list. Ledeen calls Iran "the creator of modern Islamic terrorism". In *The Australian* newspaper, Ledeen writes: "We are in a regional struggle, and we are compelled to deal with it. Now what? The short answer is: regime change." But is it only democracy that the US seeks to impose? If so, what about the un-elected governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and a hundred other countries around the world?

The characteristic that distinguishes Syria and Iran from the rest is their effective opposition to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in the early 1980s and their half-hearted support of Palestinians under occupation now. They are also supporting Iraqis who do not want America to become a long-term occupying power in the country. Just as Israel urged Washington to undertake regime change in Iraq, it is the loudest cheerleader for repeating the operation in Syria and Iran. In the end, the cost of this policy will be borne by the American military and the people of Iraq, Syria and Iran.

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