

WORLDVIEW

EXCURSUS 2

Mark A. Bruzonsky on FOOL'S PARADISE IN THE MIDEAST

The resemblance was uncanny, haunting. It was as if one had been propelled a decade backward to another war, in another land, over far different issues.

Then it was the young Asian girl, arms in the air, fright in her eyes, napalm covering parts of her body, fleeing from the battles in which America was so painfully entrapped. That single picture came to symbolize Vietnamese suffering and American guilt.

Now, on page one of the *International Herald-Tribune* as I flew to Khartoum in mid-July, it was a young Lebanese girl, hands in the air, tears in her eyes, fleeing from the fighting between the Lebanese Army, backed by the U.S. and Israel, and Muslim fighters in Beirut.

There are differences, of course, in the backdrops of these two photos. But the human misery is much the same; and American complicity is undeniable and escalating, although its precise nature is unclear.

No doubt inter-Arab sectarian struggle in Lebanon—as elsewhere in Arabdom—is largely indigenous and only partly stimulated by Israeli involvement in regional affairs. Still, last year's Israeli invasion of Lebanon has altered the very character of Lebanon's misery, transforming the conflict through a brutal assertion of Israeli hegemony that had American acquiescence. Furthermore, the U.S. aid and encouragement that buttress Israel's imperial aims, if sometimes reluctantly, have escalated dramatically since the Reagan administration took office.

There can be no real doubt that, at minimum, it was an American wink that preceded the Israeli invasion and an American nod that allowed the occupation to continue. Moreover, it is American involvement that today both masks and legitimizes Israel's hold on southern Lebanon despite a multitude of protestations last year that it would withdraw quickly from all Lebanese territory. And so long as U.S. Marines maintain their uneasy presence in Beirut, such pictures as that of the terrified girl should have a desperate symbolism for Americans.

The Reagan administration-inspired "peace treaty" in Lebanon has now revealed itself to be hardly more than a temporary public relations fix through which the current Washington players may have hoped to sneak by next year's November election. It now appears an excuse for installing U.S. Marines as "peace-keepers"—though, in truth, they have always been partisans.

The "treaty" could in fact be termed a farce but for the magnitude of the dangers it holds. Having at first conspired in Israel's assertion of force in Lebanon, and then having no effective policy (and perhaps not even the desire) to stand up against Israel's relentless absorption of the West Bank in blatant violation of the Camp David arrangements, the Reagan administration has acted meekly at best. Some would say contemptuously, and others would add duplicitously.

Secretary of State Shultz, in effect, chose to cooperate with rather than confront the Israelis. But in return, and against American pleadings, the Israelis have moved their forces out of the major fighting zone, and Washington has become the protector of the Phalange/Maronite government. Unable to make real progress in solving Lebanon's problems or pushing forward the badly conceived "Reagan Plan," Shultz used subterfuge and diplomatic magic. He proclaimed a peace treaty that was in reality a plot by those who had conspired in war—Washington, Jerusalem, and the Phalange in Beirut—totally excluding Israel's actual enemies, the PLO and Syria. By doing so, he exacerbated tensions already existing between Lebanon's Christian, Druse, and Shiite communities, creating the conditions for a renewed civil war and for the American military intervention that began in mid-September.

These misguided efforts Shultz has sold to an often-gullible press and a befuddled public as an American accomplishment. But all the while Lebanon suffers de facto partition, the West Bank heads for the point of no return, and a Syrian-Israeli arms race threatens a wider war—this one with direct Soviet and U.S. involvement a more serious possibility than ever before. Even more ominous is the increasing U.S. military role. Between the time of writing this piece and its appearance in print, the likelihood of a major clash involving American arms will probably grow—a clash that may well be viewed as Washington doing Israel's bidding and Washington asserting its power against the Muslim world.

While American involvement further escalates the tragedy of Lebanon, it should be recalled that the Reagan administration has utterly failed in its responsibilities to push for full implementation of the Camp David Accords, including the "legitimate rights of the Palestinian people." It has been unable to assert American national interests ahead of Israeli imperial designs. And it has seriously eroded U.S. credibility throughout the Middle East, weakening a number of key client regimes—especially those in Cairo, Riyadh, and Amman. Trapping ourselves in Lebanon will hardly help the situation.

The Reagan-Shultz team has brought us to a diplomatic fool's paradise in the Middle East and could be heading us toward a major explosion, pitting American-backed Israeli and Phalange forces against Soviet-backed Syrian and Muslim armies. We are in the eye of the hurricane, impotent in our meek pretense that the worst is over. The only reasonable policy is to refuse to be drawn further into the Lebanese civil war on the side of the Phalange and Israelis and to return to the role of peace-maker in the Arab-Israeli dispute, building on the progress achieved at Camp David by firmly refusing to allow Israel to absorb the West Bank and cast itself as regional superpower.

Most dangerous of all for the Middle East, the U.S. has deferred to the Revisionist government in Jerusalem, which is implementing its scheme for a Greater Israel oblivious to the costs to Israel's soul, to the Jewish people as a whole, and to U.S. and Western interests in the Arab Middle East. Sooner or later the United States will pay, and the price may well make the "loss" of Iran seem insignificant.

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