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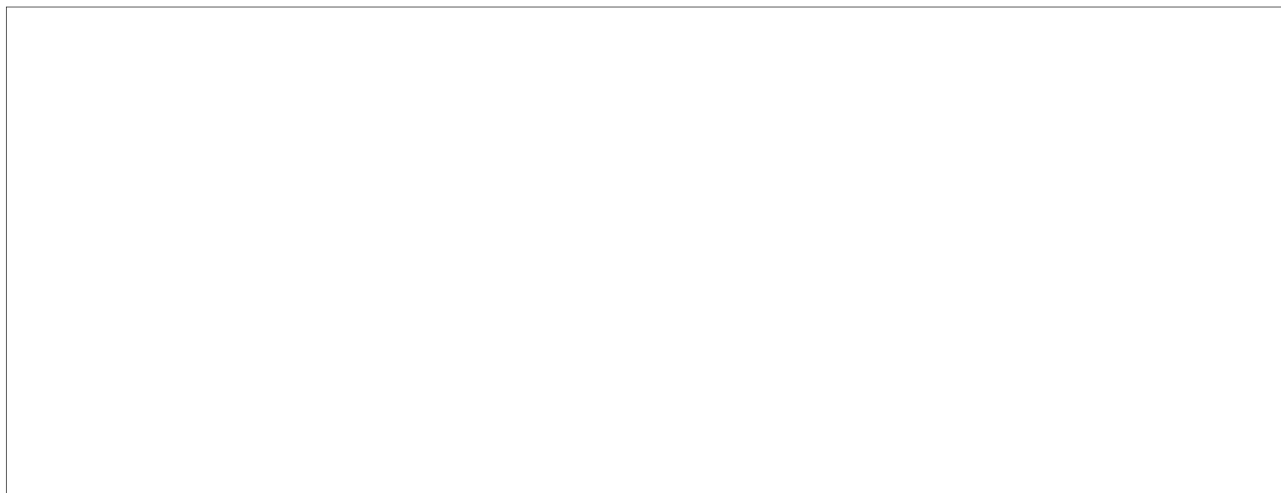
Talking Points on the Lebanese Situation

The Lebanese situation has reached a state of serious impasse which directly threatens the fulfillment of most US goals both for Lebanon and for the region. This impasse contains the seeds of another serious round of fighting between Syria and Israel -- with implications of superpower involvement. This situation will probably not improve and will move in directions undesirable to US interests and policy goals.

Syria

Assad has handled Syrian moves with extreme skill, placing himself foursquare in the center of the action, holding most of the cards and sought out by all parties seeking a solution. This is itself a prime goal of Assad: to establish the leadership position of Syria in the Arab world. Assad now enjoys virtual veto power over any diplomatic initiatives.

Syria is not likely to withdraw from Lebanon as part of any agreement relating to the Lebanese-Israeli accords. By remaining in Lebanon Assad maintains his central role in the Lebanese crisis, supports Soviet interests, gains dominance over the PLO and maintains Syria's image as the sole supporter of the Arab cause. His only incentive to withdraw is fear of Israeli attack.



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The Soviet Union is clear in its support to Syria [redacted]

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[redacted] suggests blanket Soviet support to Syria as long as Syria does not attack Israel first. [redacted] suggest that the Soviets would be cautious to distinguish between a skirmish on Lebanese soil as opposed to a direct attack upon Syrian soil. In any case, there is no question that Soviet support has emboldened the Syrians and given them a sense of confidence that they now possess major new resources in any air battle with Israel. Syria is probably taking the policy lead, however, and is not simply acting in response to Soviet behest. Even without the USSR Syrian behavior would be similar, although less confident if it lacked the weapons recently provided by the Soviets.

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Syria in the meantime is able to watch Israeli troops suffer regular casualties from Lebanese and Palestinian guerrilla and terrorist groups. Syria believes that Israel is therefore now on the defensive, facing political problems at home, and under some pressure to redeploy from the present confrontation. Although Syria welcomes these attacks, they do not spring all from Syrian direction. The greater part of Israeli casualties have been sustained in the south -- from Lebanese rather than Palestinian elements.

Israel

Israel is thus faced with a dilemma. Begin is sensitive to political charges that a Peace for Galilee offensive has not made most of the gains originally sought by Israel and that casualties continue without hope of relief. Labor has skillfully seized the initiative to call for phased -- but complete -- unilateral withdrawal. Labor thereby appeals to those who wish to see Israel extricate itself from the Lebanese morass while suggesting that Begin has gained almost nothing through his campaign. By taking this position, Labor has ironically made it much more difficult politically for Begin's government to accept the concept of complete unilateral withdrawal without seeming to accede to Labor's position on the war.

Israel looks to the US to bring about a Syrian withdrawal. If this is not possible, Begin will almost surely undertake a partial withdrawal to placate his critics and in the hope that casualties will be reduced. In fact, however, there is serious doubt that casualties will be reduced within a new south Lebanon enclave since the population there -- mainly Shia -- will continue to employ terrorism against Israeli troops. Begin in any case is not likely to unilaterally withdraw prior to his visit to Washington so as not to upset his dramatically improved relations with Washington. Israel's decision is likely to be made within the next 8 to 12 weeks.

Lebanese Domestic Scene

A partial withdrawal by the Israelis would be a critical test of President Gemayel's ability to expand the Lebanese Government's area of control. The prospects for renewed factional fighting remain high and would increase, particularly among the Druze and Christians who have been battling for control of the Shuf and Alayh districts.

- The Druze are particularly leery of the ability of the Lebanese Armed Forces to control the region. Some fear that the LAF would provide support to the Phalange-dominated Lebanese Forces militia.
- Unless Gemayel works out an agreement beforehand between Druze and Christian leaders for a peaceful deployment the LAF will be hard pressed to contain new outbreaks of violence. If serious fighting develops, the LAF might break down along confessional lines as it did during the 1975-76 civil war.

Unrest among the Shia population in the south will continue as they increasingly fear that Beirut does not care about their fate and will sacrifice them to a permanent Israeli occupation. The Shia are likely not only to continue attacks against Israeli forces but against the Gemayel government as well which it blames for the continued Israeli presence.

Israeli efforts to reorient south Lebanon's trade patterns away from Beirut and toward Israel increases the southerners' fears about Israeli intentions.

An Israeli withdrawal is likely to have little impact on the situation in Syrian-controlled Tripoli. The current violence there appears to be part of the continuing struggle between Syrian-backed Alawites on the one hand and a melange of Sunni fundamentalists, Lebanese nationalists, Iraqi Baathists, and Palestinians on the other.

- Syria, however, has frequently sparked civil disorder in Tripoli to exert pressure on the Lebanese government.
- With Gemayel preoccupied in the Shuf and Alayh areas, Damascus might again heat up the situation in Tripoli to demonstrate the costs of ignoring Syrian interests.

At the present, Lebanon looks to the US for a way out of the present impasse and considers the US, as architect of the accords, as responsible for its outcome. It has no realistic proposals to bring about Syrian withdrawal but ultimately could be tempted to instigate war between Syria and Israel in the hopes that it would lead to the punishment and departure of Syrian forces in Lebanon.

If Gemayel cannot gain Syrian withdrawal, he will be faced with semi-permanent occupation of south Lebanon, Syrian control over the Bekaa and much of the north, and his credibility as a national leader will be severely damaged. He will be increasingly tempted to look to a "Maronite state" as a solution to the de facto partition of the country. Such a state would look to the US and/or Israel for support against Syria, creating a pattern for civil war which would resemble the anarchy and bloodshed of the 1975-1981 period.

The Palestinians

Israel, of course, entered Lebanon to expel the PLO. An Israeli withdrawal to the Awwali river could provide the PLO with new opportunities to revive some of its influence in Lebanon. The Palestinians would be pleased with such a step.

- They would portray the move as a "victory" for the Lebanese and Palestinian guerrillas that have attacked Israeli forces.
- The Palestinians would view a partial withdrawal as a step toward permanent, de facto partition of Lebanon that would leave them free to remain in northern Lebanon and even expand their presence there.

The Palestinians would continue efforts to mount operations against the Israelis. [REDACTED]

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- An Israeli withdrawal to better defensive positions behind the Awwali would make operations in western Lebanon more difficult, but Israeli forces in the Bekaa would remain at risk.

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- The Palestinians' efforts to infiltrate through the area evacuated by the Israelis, moreover, would increase the risk of clashes with whatever forces filled the vacuum.

The Soviets

Future Soviet strategy will be aimed at:

- Maintaining Syria's resolve not to acquiesce to a US-sponsored agreement for peace in the region.
- Rallying a leftist coalition of PLO, Syrian and Lebanese leftist forces against the agreement.
- Maintaining Soviet military support to Syria.
- Attempting to forge a cooperative relationship between Syria and Iraq along earlier rejectionist lines -- although such agreement currently seems rather remote.
- Seeking to avert hostilities between Syria and Israel while keeping tensions relatively high.

The Soviets, however, realize they have in effect ceded much of the war-or-peace decision to Syria's own initiatives and are therefore likely to prefer the status quo to a policy involving a high risk of war.


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