

# Lebanon's endless war

A few years ago I was talking in New York with one of the leaders of Lebanon's Christian Phalange movement. "When you come to Beirut next time," he said to me, "you must see my collection of Muslim ears. I have cut each one off personally."

This gruesome little story tells us a great deal about the 13-year-old civil war in Lebanon that is now entering an even bloodier stage. It also says a great deal about the leaders of the Phalange, most of whom, before the war, were wealthy merchants selling perfumes and blouses on Beirut's chic Hamra Street.

Lebanon's civil war started in 1975 when armed gangs of Phalangists began attacking Muslims in Beirut. In spite of a veneer of religion, the war was really the continuation of the struggle by Lebanon's Muslim majority to gain access to the economic and political power that was monopolized by the minority Christians.

For 13 years a kaleidoscope of shifting alliances between Christian private armies, religious sects, Syrian peacekeeping troops, PLO fighters, and Muslim militias battled over this land, once called the Switzerland of the Middle East.

Last year, sensing an opportunity to destroy the PLO and forever secure its hold on the West Bank, Israel invaded Lebanon, killing some 20,000 civilians in the process. Israel's strategy, formulated by its intelligence service, the Mossad, was to crush the PLO and make its Phalangist allies into the rulers of a Lebanon dependent on Israel. The alliance between the Phalange and Israel was, to say the least, curious, since the Phalangists had been founded by Pierre Gemayel as Lebanon's fascist party.

The assassination of the Phalange's brutal leader, Beshir Gemayel — a man who had cheerfully massacred his own erstwhile Christian allies in order to gain supreme power — ruined Israel's plans for establishing a protectorate over Lebanon. Intense armed resistance from Lebanon's Muslim fighters finally caused Israel to decide to pull back into southern Lebanon in the face of mounting casualties. Today, Lebanon is effectively partitioned between the Israelis, Syrians, Muslims and the Phalange.

The latest entrant into this chaotic mess is the United States. Last year, the Reagan administration plunged into the Lebanese quagmire by throwing its support behind the regime of Amin Gemayel, the feckless and not very bright leader of the Phalange. The U.S. government apparently decided, along with Israel, to impose the Gemayel

ERIC  
MARGOLIS



regime on Lebanon as a means of bringing order, forcing out the Syrians, and eliminating the PLO for good.

While the Western media consistently refers to Gemayel's regime as "the government of Lebanon," the majority of that nation's citizens regard it as little more than a rump government imposed on them by Israel and the United States. In fact, the rule of the Gemayel regime, created under Israeli guns last summer, hardly extends beyond East Beirut and those areas controlled by the Phalange.

The Lebanese army, recreated thanks to American aid, is seen by the Muslims as a police force for the hated Phalange party. This view has been recently reinforced by the army's campaign against Beirut's Muslim militias and its assault on the Druze-controlled Shouf Mountains. In no case has the army ever attempted to disarm or even curtail the Phalange militias; all of its military efforts have been directed against the Muslims.

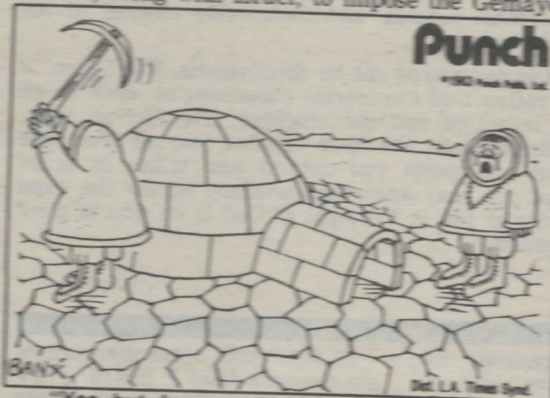
Lebanon's Muslim forces have just formed the National Salvation Front, designed to oppose the government in Beirut. Lebanon's Muslims and Palestinians, the latter who comprise 20% of the population, can hardly be expected to forget last year's savage massacres at the Shatilla and Sabra camps, or the continuing Christian campaign of murder and terror aimed at driving the Palestinian civilians out of Lebanon.

The United States has now managed to entrench itself in this growing civil war. President Reagan has just announced the dispatch of another 2,000 Marines who may shortly find themselves combatants on the side of the Phalange. Many observers fear that this growing American involvement with the Phalangists, a group that has displayed stunning savagery, will only drag the United States into a war against the very same Arabs whom it seeks to maintain as allies.

The real tragedy in Lebanon is that the United States is the only power that can impose a genuine peace on the warring country — Lebanon's combatants clearly cannot. The United States should disarm all militias and create a truly representative government through supervised national elections. For once, America should practise the democratic ideals that it preaches.

But instead, the United States, oblivious to the political realities in Lebanon, appears determined to continue backing the Phalangists. The inevitable result of this policy will be a growing war, another intractable crisis to further distract Washington, and the deepening involvement of Syria and the USSR. Securing a lasting peace in Lebanon is an essential American goal; yet through ignorance or error, the Reagan administration appears bent on prolonging and accelerating Lebanon's tragic civil war.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)



"Yes, but do we really NEED crazy paving?"