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ERIC MARGOLIS

More salt for Lebanon's wounds

The Reagan administration, sinking ever deeper into the morass of Lebanon's civil war, is loudly blaming its woes on Syria. Now the U.S. Navy has begun expressing Washington's frustration by shelling areas of Lebanon controlled by Syria. American and Syrian air patrols are dangerously close to an armed clash.

Is Syria really the villain in Lebanon's war and is she, as Washington claims, acting as a proxy for the Soviet Union? Many Mideast observers see Washington's view of the situation as at best, simplistic, and, at worst, dangerously in error.

Lebanon was an integral part of Syria for over 1,500 years until detached in 1926 and made independent by Syria's then colonial ruler, France. The French, using divide-and-rule tactics, gave a virtual economic and political monopoly to Lebanon's Maronite Christians. The Syrians never recognized this colonial act and still consider Lebanon to be part of their country.

When Lebanon's civil war erupted in 1975, Syrian troops first intervened in order to protect the Maronites who, after starting the war, found themselves losing to the Muslim factions. In this process,

Syria fought the PLO. Then, when the Maronite Phalange allied itself to Israel, Syria sided with the Muslims. Today, Syrian troops occupy one-third of Lebanon while Israel occupies another third. The rest of the country is divided between warring Christian and Muslim sects.

Israel's invasion of Lebanon, we now know, was designed to establish a client Christian government under the influence of Jerusalem. When Israel failed to impose Amin Gemayel's Phalangist regime on Lebanon's fiercely resisting Muslim majority, it withdrew south, leaving this unpleasant task to the United States.

But Israel continues to threaten Syria's capital and the bulk of the Syrian Army from two sides: On occupied Golan, 18 miles from Damascus, and in the Bekaa Valley. Syria, aware of this great military threat, is determined to somehow force Israel to withdraw from Lebanon. Syria's ruler, Hafez Asad, is just as determined to see that Lebanon does not become an Israeli or American protectorate.

Syria considers itself not only as the bulwark of Arab resistance to Israel but also as the true champion of the Palestinians.

Having fought four wars with Israel, Syria feels itself gravely threatened by the overwhelming military superiority of the Jewish state. Consequently, Syria has had to rely increasingly on the Soviet Union for military and diplomatic support as a counter-weight to almost unlimited American support for Israel.

Syria's objectives are clearly to get the Americans and Israelis out of Lebanon and to see a friendly government established that reflects the Muslim majority while protecting the Christian minority.

It should not be forgotten that Syria, like Lebanon, is a composite of religions and sects who bear each other considerable animosity. President Assad's minority Alawite sect now dominates the Syrian government and military. He faces occasional armed resistance from Muslim fundamentalists, Shi'ites, Sunnis and Christians. He does not want to see Lebanon's tragedy repeated in fragile Syria.

Like it or not, Syria is the principal player in Lebanon. If any nation does have a legitimate interest in Lebanon it certainly is Syria.

The Syrians are not going to leave Leba-

non until a Muslim majority, and likely pro-Syrian regime is established there. America's belligerent actions may only cause a mini-war with Syria that will inevitably cause the Russians to support Syria. Such a confrontation has the makings of a very dangerous international crisis.

This explosive situation could probably be defused if Washington would seriously negotiate with Syria and stop its support of the minority Christians. But the U.S. shows few signs of seeking a settlement that would lessen American and Israeli influence in Lebanon. Instead, for the second time in a month, it is threatening military action against an Arab nation. These threats against Libya and Syria are only opening the door to the Russians.

If Washington can send troops to Central America to "defend pro-American governments," why can't Syria try to protect its interests in neighboring Lebanon? Casting Syria as the sole villain in Lebanon's drama ignores the roles played by the fractious Lebanese factions, the remaining PLO force, and the Israelis. The Reagan administration is desperately searching for simple answers in Lebanon. Unfortunately, there are none.