Lebanon continues to suffer "a permanent though low-profile conflict involving Lebanese, Syrians, Iranians, Palestinians, Israelis and United Nations forces."

Paralysis in Lebanon

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Political events in Lebanon during 1989 were governed by the failure to elect a successor to President Amin Gemayel in September, 1988. That failure resulted in a further exacerbation of the Lebanese crisis, drove the country closer to partition and led to a fierce round of fighting between Syria and the Christian-Maronite camp. Toward the end of 1989, a presidential successor, René Moawad, was elected. On November 22, the President-elect was assassinated in a car bomb explosion. A new President, Elias Hrawi, was elected on November 24, but his election did not stabilize the situation. At the end of November, the new President was seeking to impose his authority on the Maronite community and its armed forces and the militias, while Syria was preparing to invade and subdue Lebanon's autonomous Maronite territory.

The stalemate of September, 1988, was symptomatic of the larger paralysis in Lebanon. After 15 years of crisis, war and civil war, the Lebanese state and its political system had been reduced to a partial existence. The central government's authority was limited to a very small area, while most of the country was either under Syrian control or divided among several "autonomies": Christian-Maronite, Shiite and Druse, and the Israeli "security belt" under General Antoine Lahad's South Lebanon Army in the south.

Yet the framework of the state and its central institutions as well as Lebanon's "rump Parliament" were kept not only as symbols of lingering Lebanese entity and legitimacy, but as the basis for a prospective resurrection of the state. The precondition for such a resurrection had been a redefinition of the national consensus, but it was precisely on this issue that the two contending camps in Lebanese politics could not reach an agreement. The political reforms that the Muslim communities viewed as minimal were considered unacceptable by the effective leaders of the Maronite community.

Most of the Maronite community has been concentrated in East Beirut and in the autonomous area east, northeast and north of the city. The Maronite leadership in that area (excluding Maronite politicians living in the areas under Syrian control or influence) consisted in 1988 of four elements:

- President Amin Gemayel and his entourage, which included part of the Kataeb (Phalangist) party and his own small militia;
- the Lebanese Forces militia under Samir Geagea, which was the effective government in the autonomous Maronite region;
- General Michel Aoun, the commander of the Lebanese army, who commanded six brigades numbering about 15,000 men;
- the Patriarch and several independent or unidentified leaders and politicians, who tended to take a softer line compared with the radical position normally held by the Lebanese Forces and General Aoun.[1]

The Muslim communities based in East Beirut and in the areas of Shiite and Druse autonomy formed a still more heterogeneous camp, riddled with inter- and intra-communal rivalries and divided by divergent orientations toward Syria and toward other political issues.

In 1984, Syria reestablished the hegemony in Lebanon that had been shaken in 1982. In the mid-1980's, it took full advantage of this recovery and of the centrality and saliency of the Lebanese issue to enhance its regional position. But by 1987, Lebanon had once again become a Syrian liability as a result of several developments:

- the difficulties inherent in the tasks of keeping order and establishing a political settlement in the complex Lebanese arena;
- the limitations of Syria's freedom of action in Lebanon. While the importance of the American and Israeli constraints declined, the importance of Iranian influence increased and, in 1988, Iraq reappeared as an actor in Lebanon;
- the difficulty of building and maintaining a pro-Syrian coalition. The Shiite community has been divided into supporters of the pro-Syrian Amal and the pro-Iranian Hezbullah; the Amal has often proved to be the less effective ally. Syria's relations with the Sunni community have been bedeviled by its conflict with the Palestine Liberation

[1] See William Harris, *The Christian Camp on the Eve of Lebanon's Presidential Elections* (Tel Aviv: The Dayan Center Occasional Paper Series, 1988).

Organization (PLO) which, in the Lebanese context, has acted and has been perceived as a Sunni force. (The Sunnis have no militia.)

• the general decline of the regime of Syrian President Hafez Assad. The Baath regime's economic difficulties and its inability to sustain casualties and the political costs of a full confrontation with its rivals in Lebanon seriously constrained its conduct in Lebanon in the late 1980's.

Against this background, in the summer of 1988 Syria tried to impose on Lebanon a staunchly pro-Syrian President—at first, Suleiman Franjieh and then (with American connivance) Michel Daher. Both attempts were foiled by Syria's Maronite opponents, who prevented members of Parliament living in the areas under their control from attending parliamentary sessions, thus denying a quorum.

Under these circumstances (and having failed to make his own deal with Syria), before he stepped down from the presidency Amin Gemayel appointed Michel Aoun as Prime Minister. Thus the Maronites' position at the head of the government was to be maintained.

The formation of Aoun's government drew Lebanon closer to the partition that had been avoided during the years of the protracted crisis. Under Gemayel, there had been a government headed by a Sunni Muslim—Salim Hoss. Hoss continued to view himself as the legitimate Prime Minister and viewed Aoun as an illegitimate pretender. With Syrian support, Hoss appointed a Muslim commander of the Lebanese army. Politicized and fragmented as the Lebanese army had been, it had remained a national institution, but after September, 1988, it split into two rival organizations.

The central bank, once perhaps the most solid national institution in Lebanon, also became a victim of the aggravated polarization. General Aoun, for instance, took the bank to task for having allocated money to "the other army's" budget.

Syria's failure to impose its candidate was immediately exploited by its Arab enemies and rivals. Iraq extended open political support to General Aoun and his government, and supplied money and arms to him and to the Lebanese Forces, the other pillar of the Maronite opposition to Damascus. For Aoun, Iraqi recognition of his government was an important legitimizing measure. Other Arab states headed by Saudi Arabia saw a golden opportunity to enhance their role and that of the Arab League in the Lebanese arena at the expense of Syria.

In the spring of 1989, a six-state Arab League committee launched still another effort to seek a solution to the Lebanese crisis. The committee held meetings with Lebanese religious and political leaders in and outside Lebanon. It failed to make any progress, but its very activity was significant. Since October, 1976, Syria's hegemony in Lebanon has been exercised under a vague umbrella of an Arab endorsement. That endorsement, coupled with the notion (sustained or at least not dispelled by the successive Lebanese governments) that Syria's troops in Lebanon were there at Beirut's invitation, were important legitimizing elements in Assad's Lebanese policy. Earlier, he had invested considerable effort in warding off attempts made at the Arab summit conferences to reopen the Lebanese file. In 1988 and 1989, Assad's difficulties gave his Arab rivals further opportunities to interfere.

Aoun's new prominence led to a conflict between his army and the Lebanese Forces. The potential for that conflict had been apparent for some time. Aoun and his army and the Lebanese Forces had been competing for the role of the Maronite community's effective protector. Aoun's presidential ambitions, evident in 1986, marked him as a potentially dangerous rival. Amin Gemayel's dissappearance from the scene removed an important insulating element; Aoun subsequently acquired an official political title and the Lebanese Forces took over Gemayel's private militia and the vestiges of his influence over the Kataeb party organization. On February 15, 1989, fighting broke out between Aoun's army and the Lebanese Forces. Aoun, who conducted his campaign in the name of Lebanese legitimacy, chose to focus his offensive on the Lebanese Forces' control of illegal private ports in Junieh and Beirut.

The phenomenon of illegal private ports had been a curious dimension of the Lebanese crisis almost from its inception. The collapse of state authority had led in the 1970's to the establishment of private ports along the Lebanese coast, which were used for arms shipments and to generate income for various parties and militias. After the 1976 invasion, it did not take long for Syrian army officers to become integrated into this network. Lebanon's private ports flourished largely because they serviced not only Lebanon's parallel economy but Syria's much larger economy. Aoun's bid to deprive the Lebanese Forces of their hold on the fifth basin of Beirut's port was designed to deprive them of a major source of income. As such, it was also supported by Salim Hoss's Muslim government.

But what appeared briefly to be a matter of intercommunal consensus soon turned into yet another bone of contention between the Muslims and the Christians. The attempt, at the end of February (joined by Hoss and his government) to extend the campaign and to bring under control Muslim private ports as well angered the Druse leader, Walid

Jumblat. The private ports south of Beirut provided the Druse community with revenues and with access to the outside world free of Syrian control. Jumblat wore several hats in March, 1989—he was a leader of his community, the head of a militia-cum-political party and the minister of transport and public works in the Hoss government. He retaliated by closing the crossing point between Beirut's port and the Christian area and by foiling Aoun's attempt to return some 150,000 Christian refugees (since September, 1983) to the Shouf area. The friction with Jumblat led to a particularly fierce round of Christian-Muslim fighting in mid-March.

The intra-Maronite clash between Aoun's army and the Lebanese Forces was matched on the other side of the dividing line by the intra-Shiite fighting between Amal and Hezbullah. Amal is a communal but secular political movement that seeks a large share of the Lebanese pie for the Shiite community and is politically allied to Syria. Hezbullah is a religious movement that seeks to transform Lebanon into a second Islamic republic. It is not only allied with Iran, but represents an extension of Iranian politics into Lebanon.

Amal and Hezbullah fought bitterly in 1988. That round of fighting ended in Amal's victory in southern Lebanon in April and Hezbullah's victory in the southern suburbs of Beirut in May. Fighting was renewed in January, 1989, focused on the village of Jubah near Sidon. With Syrian and Iranian mediation, a new agreement, based on slight concessions by Amal, was reached at the end of January.

WAR OF LIBERATION

On March 14, 1989, a new chapter in the history of the Lebanese crisis was opened when General Aoun announced that "a war of liberation" had been launched against Syria. As he stated in a news conference:

> Following the indiscriminate bombardment of Lebanese territory by the Syrian occupation army, the Cabinet met to take the necessary measures to bring about the immediate withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. We are now preparing these measures on local, regional and international levels.[2]

Aoun's decision was prompted by the most recent challenge to his authority and was facilitated by the promise of Iraqi support. The general's character and his tendency to resort swiftly to radical measures clearly played a role in his decision to present Hafez Assad with a challenge he was bound to view seriously. But underlying it all was a dilemma familiar to every Christian-Maronite leader in Lebanon since 1975.

Syria's hegemony was limited, but if it went unchallenged it was bound to be consolidated and expanded. In fact, this was the essence of Assad's policy in Lebanon: to avoid confrontation and to work slowly and patiently to grind down the opposition and to build Syria's position in Lebanon brick by brick. A Maronite-Christian leader would probably conclude that, if uninterrupted, Syria was bound to implement this strategy and gain complete control over Lebanon. One could easily reach the conclusion that the process had to be arrested, even at the price of a costly confrontation with Syria.

The confrontation was indeed costly. Throughout the spring and early summer, Syria's artillery pounded East Beirut and other parts of the Christian autonomous area, killing about 1,000 people, wounding many more, causing massive destruction and forcing a significant portion of the population to flee to southern Lebanon, Cyprus or nearby rural areas. If the Syrians expected to generate a popular rebellion against Aoun (who would be perceived as responsible for all this suffering), they were disappointed. Aoun encountered some criticism but, more significantly, a wave of popular support was generated for a man who, at least briefly, was seen as a popular anti-Syrian hero.

Aoun and his policies also won unexpected support in France. "France's historic ties with the Maronites" has become a meaningless phrase. In fact, since French President Charles de Gaulle's change of orientation in the Middle East, France has tended to veer toward Islam and Arab nationalism rather than relying on its traditional Catholic connections. It was thus surprising that a tide of pro-Maronite and anti-Syrian sentiment emerged in France. It began in right-wing circles, but acquired proportions that led Socialist President François Mitterrand to issue a supportive statement. French support was not a substitute for the loss of American support but, given France's international standing, it could not be ignored by Syria.

Of more direct bearing were the repercussions in the Arab world. The Lebanese issue was raised at the Casablanca Arab League summit in May, 1989. Syria succeeded in preempting an explicit anti-Syrian statement but was unable to prevent the formation of a more effective three-state committee (Morocco, Algeria and Saudi Arabia) to replace the original six-state committee that had been seeking a solution to the Lebanese crisis on behalf of the Arab League.

During the summer, Assad decided that he had to force a decision. A Syrian ground attack on the Christian autonomous area was not feasible for a

[2]Voice of Lebanon (in Arabic), March 14, 1989, quoted in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Near East/South Asia Daily Report* (hereafter cited as FBIS), March 15, 1989.

number of reasons—the fear of American and Israeli reaction to such a radical measure, the anticipated casualties, and the fear of domestic Syrian reaction to casualties and other difficulties in Lebanon. Assad therefore preferred to continue to intensify direct Syrian shelling with a ground attack by Syria's proxies, spearheaded by Jumblat's Druse militia. The main battle was fought in Suq al-Gharb, an arena familiar in earlier rounds of Maronite-Druse fighting. Suq al-Gharb is situated just east of Beirut and controls access to Baabda, the seat of Lebanon's President. On August 13, 1989, the Druse assault on Suq al-Gharb was broken.

THE TAIF CONFERENCE

It was against this background that the three-state Arab commission was finally able to arrange a cease-fire (August 29) and to organize the unusual Taif conference in Saudi Arabia (September 30-October 22, 1989). The Saudis managed to bring their political and financial influence to bear on most of Lebanon's surviving Parliament members, convincing them to come to Taif to discuss (and endorse) the political reforms that might finally lead to a solution of the Lebanese crisis. They were also able to obtain Syria's cooperation.

Syria found itself in an awkward corner. It resented Arab interference in what Damascus preferred to view as a Syrian preserve and was criticized from the wings by Iran. The Iranians invited Jumblat and Amal's leader, Nabih Berri, to Teheran during the Taif conference in order to embarrass Damascus and to display their displeasure with the fact that their Syrian allies were willing to cooperate with their Saudi foes. But in the event, Syria's decision paid off. An agreement was reached in Taif, and it reflected Saudi-Sunni achievements.

On October 23, 1989, Lebanon's Parliament met for an eleventh closed session in Taif and approved the text of the Lebanese National Reconciliation Charter.[3] The reforms were not far-reaching—the number of parliamentary deputies was increased from 99 to 108 and divided evenly between Christians and Muslims (in contrast to the 6:5 proportion favoring the Christians). The power of the Maronite President was to be reduced, while the power of the Sunni Prime Minister was to be increased. Political secularism was to be abolished over time. The charter contained a long list of additional principles and specific reforms.

Two groups in Lebanon were displeased with the document and with the broader political trends it represented. Hezbullah and other radical Shiites argued that the reforms were too moderate. Moderate reforms suited the Sunnis, but the Shiites hoped for radical reforms. Michel Aoun resented the reforms, criticizing the concessions made by the Christians as well as the gains made by Syria. Syria, indeed, succeeded in turning a serious challenge to its position in Lebanon to its advantage. It drove a wedge between Aoun and the moderate Maronites and capitalized on the tension between Aoun and the Lebanese Forces. It also secured a paragraph in the document, under the title "Lebanese-Syrian Relations," that stated:

> Lebanon, which is of Arab identity and belonging, is linked by sincere fraternal relations with all countries. There are special [literally, distinguished] relations which draw their strength from the roots of neighborhood, history and joint strategic interests between Lebanon and Syria. This concept is the base of coordination and cooperation between the two countries and it will be manifested by joint treaties in all fields, which will serve the two sister countries within the framework of mutual independence and sovereignty.[4]

Syria took advantage of the momentum created in Taif and encouraged the Lebanese Parliament to elect (this time in Lebanon) a new President—René Moawad, a Maronite politician from Zugharta, Suleiman Franjieh's home town. Moawad was a scion of one of Zugharta's five leading Maronite families. Politically, he was identified with Franjieh's pro-Syrian political orientation. But he was not perceived as an outright Syrian proxy and he maintained enough links with other wings of the Maronite political spectrum to make him a palatable President.

The fact that (unlike September, 1988) a quorum could be guaranteed, and the participation of Georges Saadee, the Kataeb's leader, indicated that the Lebanese Forces had decided to go along with the Syrian move. The rivalry with Aoun overshadowed all other considerations, at least temporarily. Moawad's election was also acceptable to the United States. This was hardly surprising, given the fact that the United States had been willing, 14 months earlier, to accept Michel Daher as a presidential candidate. A solution or stabilization of the Lebanese crisis based on Syrian hegemony and limited political reform was acceptable to United States President George Bush's administration.

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[3]Riyad Domestic Service (in Arabic), October 23, 1989, quoted in FBIS, October 24, 1989.
[4]Ibid.

this appeal, an accident of literature strengthened the hands of the so-called radicals in Iran, who still included Khomeini. A novel written by an Indian Muslim living in Great Britain, Salman Rushdie, gained widespread prominence. When it first appeared, *The Satanic Verses* had been condemned as blasphemous by many Muslims, Sunni and Shiite alike, especially in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Yet it was only in February, 1989, when a minor cleric in Iran called for a death sentence for Rushdie—and when Khomeini took up the standard—that the issue took on international proportions.

The Western rejection of threats against Rushdie had a significant political impact. For radicals in Iran, the pace of reconciliation with the West was slowed. Ironically, the summer crisis over the murder of Colonel Higgins allowed the subject of United States relations with Iran to reemerge. While many Americans believed that Iran should be held responsible, others believed that Rafsanjani was himself an intended political victim and that Iranian radicals and their allies in Lebanon were using this crisis to undermine him at home. Judging by President Bush's conduct of the crisis, this was apparently his view as well. He exerted enough pressure on Iran—a show of naval force—to permit Rafsanjani to compare it publicly with the accidental shooting down of an Iranian civilian airbus in July, 1988, by the U.S.S. *Vincennes*, an action that helped prompt Iran to accept the cease-fire with Iraq. But the President did not strike Iran. He used the occasion for indirect diplomacy and, at the end of the crisis, the United States government hinted that Iran had been helpful in its resolution.

For the Bush administration, therefore, a strategic course had been set—apparently deriving from the President's vision, not from the bureaucracy. As was implied in Bush's inaugural address, the United States would improve relations with Iran if Iran acted responsibly toward the outside world and, in particular, toward the United States.

For the Bush administration, however, there was a further reason to try to improve relations with Iran—a reason that seemed to be at variance with developments elsewhere in the world: the role of Soviet influence. In the region of southwest Asia and the Persian Gulf, unique among the world's most important areas, the Soviet Union continued to press its advantage—in Afghanistan through massive military aid to the Kabul regime, in Iran through diplomacy. This was made clear, for example, by a visit to Teheran by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, even though he ostensibly focused on Soviet efforts to help resolve the hostage crisis.

In November, President Bush took one more step to show his own goodwill toward Iran and to enter the competition with the Soviet Union. He directed the release from escrow of $567 million in Iranian assets frozen in 1979. He related this act to the continued holding of hostages but also seemed to recognize the limits of Rafsanjani's influence:

> I'd like to get this underbrush cleaned out now. I think they have made some positive statements, but I don't know whether it will work that way or not. I hope that they will do what they can to influence those who hold these hostages.

It was obvious that the United States could not act alone, that Rafsanjani was not master in his own house, that Iran could still move in ways hostile to the United States and to United States interests, that Soviet diplomats were in the game and that American public opinion was still skeptical of reconciliation with Iran.

For the United States, therefore, President Bush's efforts to create more flexibility in dealing with Iran underscored his understanding of the continuing agenda for the United States in this area of the world—an area still in turmoil, awash in modern weaponry, and, in the key country of Iran, still subject to competition for influence between the Soviet Union and the United States. Thus 1989 proved to be a year in which a new administration began to shape its perspectives toward the region, but played a relatively modest role. The year 1990 beckoned as a year in which United States intentions and its ability to affect events in the Middle East would be tested. ■

LEBANON

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But on November 22, René Moawad was assassinated in a car bomb explosion. More than one party could have sought his death, but Syria and its allies had no doubts—they blamed General Aoun. In any event, Syria reacted swiftly and effectively. Without standing on ceremony, the Lebanese Parliament was summoned to elect Elias Hrawi, a Maronite deputy from the Christian (but not Maronite) town of Zahle in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. Hrawi, a landlord who was elected to Parliament in 1972, had served as a minister between 1980 and 1982, and until his election to the presidency he could easily have been defined as a second-echelon politician.

Beyond filling the vacuum created by Moawad's assassination, Syria intensified the pressure begun after his election to delegitimize and unseat General Aoun. Syrians argued that Lebanon had a duly elected head of state, that a process of reform had been launched, and that Aoun was an illegitimate

usurper obstructing the reform process. The argument was backed by a Syrian military build-up suggesting (at this writing) that Syria was about to invade the Christian autonomous area.

But Assad was in no hurry to invade. His tactics, as on earlier occasions in Lebanon, were to avoid head-on collisions. Instead, he chose to wear down his opponents and to accustom public opinion to the prospect of invasion.

The prospect drew several reactions. The first reaction came from Israel, whose leadership tried to walk the tightrope of deterring Syria while avoiding any commitment to come to the aid of the Maronites. Drawing a lesson from the 1982-1985 debacle in Lebanon, the Israeli leadership was determined to avoid any military involvement in Lebanon's national policies and to limit Israel's military interests in Lebanon to the security zone.

Israel's abduction on July 28 of Sheik Abdul Karim Obeid, a mid-level local leader of the Hezbullah, fused some of these issues and generated a brief but intense international crisis.

Obeid was taken by Israeli commandos from his home in the southern Lebanese village of Jibshit. By abducting a fairly significant leader of Hezbullah, Israel tried to break the deadlock in the long and futile negotiations aiming at obtaining the release (or at least establishing the fate) of three Israeli soldiers held by the Lebanese Shiites—an air force navigator captured by Amal and two soldiers abducted by Hezbullah. The timing was apparently determined by the fact that Sheik Obeid, identified by the Israelis earlier as a target, was in Jibshit at that time.

Hezbullah's leadership was clearly embarrassed by the abduction. Sheik Obeid was sufficiently well-placed to have much information about the movement and its activities. Thus Hezbullah tried to obtain his immediate release by threatening to execute United States Marine Lieutenant Colonel William Higgins, who was on loan to the United Nations observer team in southern Lebanon and had been abducted by Hezbullah in February, 1988. It was his abduction that had triggered fighting between Amal and Hezbullah in the late winter of 1988.

Higgins had been killed by his captors well before July, 1989, and their threat to execute him in July was well-calculated. If the Israelis refused to return Sheik Obeid, an old videotape showing the colonel's hanging body would be released and then Israel and not the Hezbullah would be blamed for his death. Furthermore, soon after releasing the tape, Hezbullah issued a second ultimatum—it would execute another hostage, Joseph Cicippio, an American civilian, if Israel failed to release Sheik Obeid. The United States had to threaten military action; Cicippio was spared; and the issue subsided.

Sheik Obeid is still in Israeli hands and Israeli prisoners in Lebanon have yet to be returned. Sheik Obeid's kidnapping may have proved to be more significant in the context of United States-Israeli relations than as a Lebanese event. President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker were incensed by Israel's action. They resented the renewed focus on the hostage issue and its Iranian dimension, as well as the need to contemplate military action. They also argued that if a strategic relationship existed between the United States and Israel, it was the junior partner's responsibility to alert the senior partner to operations likely to affect its interests. This incident reinforced stronger trends that were altering the nature of the United States-Israeli relationship during 1989.

As for Lebanon, Israel signaled Syria that "red lines" (like the lines established in 1976 to limit Syrian military activity) must be observed. For its part, the United States, while acquiescing in Syria's imposition of Hrawi as President, did not want to see a Syrian invasion.

Finally, the Soviet Union, as Syria's superpower patron, was following a complex policy. It did not want to see Syria embroiled with Israel in the Lebanese context. At the same time, the Soviet Union recognized the potential benefits for a superpower seeking recognition of its role in the Middle East as the one power able to restrain Syria in Lebanon. This view should be understood against the background of the Soviet Union's "new policy" in the Middle East. Moscow is trying to reduce the danger of confrontation in that region and is willing to support the status quo, provided that its role is recognized as a part of that status quo.

The Soviet Union's decision to capitalize on its relationship with Syria became apparent during the last week of August when a senior Soviet diplomat Gennadi Terasov, conducted "shuttle diplomacy" in Syria and Lebanon. He met with Syria's Foreign Minister Faruq Shara, Lebanon's two Prime Ministers (Hoss and Aoun), and with Walid Jumblatt and Hussein Husseini (the speaker of Parliament). Terasov failed to achieve a cease-fire, but Moscow's message was clear.

The role sought by the Soviet Union in the Lebanese crisis added another dimension to what has become an all-too-familiar arena for regional and international rivalries. Mention has been made of the Syrian-Israeli and Iranian-Syrian rivalries. The PLO still seeks to reestablish a presence on Israel's borders and the issue of the Western hostages remains unresolved. Israel's "security belt" in southern Lebanon has remained an effective buffer zone but at the price of a permanent though low-profile conflict involving Lebanese, Syrians, Iranians, Palestinians, Israelis and United Nations forces.