

Quelle

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# Don't Grab A Fig Leaf And Run

By Joseph Joffe

WASHINGTON—It is true that the Marines acquired their sitting-duck role at the Beirut airport in a fit of absent-mindedness. It is true that Syria and its motley Lebanese allies hold

the better cards. It is also true that some kind of deal will have to be struck with President Hafez al-Assad of Syria. It does not follow, however, that the United States should pick up the first available fig leaf and run.

There is first of all a matter of principle that great powers can ignore only at their peril: You don't wave a big stick and then slink out after you have been slugged. To cut and run does not exactly boost a nation's reputation — and, alas, "reputation" is not just the figment of a macho imagination. In the affairs of nations, it is an important source of power, crucial for keeping friends and influencing opponents. *DT*

After the Syrian attack last week on two American reconnaissance planes, the Lebanese contest changed profoundly. It is no longer Syrian surrogates who are shooting at Marines and dispatching kamikaze trucks. It is the Syrians, allied with the Soviet Union and Iran, who have thrown down the gauntlet, calculating that the American public has no stomach for fighting on behalf of ambiguous interests in faraway places.

They may well be right, but, if so, no one should delude himself about the consequences of American disengagement. Not only the Syrians but everyone else in the Middle East would gather that the United States is not willing to back up its interests with force.

The first victim would be the Government of President Amin Gemayel — not much of a Government, perhaps, but, unfortunately, the only semi-legitimate source of authority in Lebanon. Farther afield, the American withdrawal would hardly be lost on the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who has already threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, endangering an awful lot of Western oil. Nor would disengagement encourage King Hussein of Jordan to assume any risks on behalf of American peace plans for the Middle East.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the lesser Gulf states would also draw the appropriate lesson: The United States may be an excellent address for arms purchases but a wobbly warrior when it comes to using its own military might. In the future, then, these states could hardly be expected to rally around American interests in the Middle East.

Finally, there is Israel, recently designated as America's trustiest ally in the region. But even the Israelis would be unlikely to fight for American interests once the Marines pulled out. Instead, they would probably dig in behind the Awall River and proceed to cut a silent deal with the Syrians cementing the de facto partition of Lebanon.

Syria is the crux. In the Lebanese melee, there is no way around Mr. Assad: He controls a third of the real estate, has long-standing security interests in Lebanon and has expended too much blood and treasure there to pick up and leave just because the American-brokered Lebanese-Israeli agreement says he should.

But to get him to the negotiating table will require getting his attention first. Right now, the Syrians determine the rules of the game and, unless their position on the ground is made much more uncomfortable, they are highly unlikely to stop battling and start bargaining.

There a number of ways that Washington could change the signals short of sliding into a major war (which Mr. Assad, a consummate pragmatist, is not likely to risk anyway). Instead of offering an immovable target, the Marines could shift toward "aggressive patrolling." Instead of suffering endless casualties at the hands of Syrian surrogates, the United States would hold the Syrians responsible for any attack originating behind their lines in Lebanon.

The United States might also change the composition of its forces. Marines are good at establishing

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beachheads; they are not primarily trained to occupy and hold territory. Inserting armored infantry units, which come equipped with plenty of tanks, would send a twofold message: that American forces are not going to pull out tomorrow and that they have ways of striking out beyond their defensive lines.

At a minimum, there should be no more suicide missions like the one last week, in which the Navy lost two aircraft. To neutralize the thicket of Syrian air defenses in Lebanon, there must be close coordination between strike planes, airborne surveillance equipment and flying radar-fighting gear.

Such a measured escalation is not without risks. But then the stakes are not exactly puny. Now that Damascus has upped the ante, Washington cannot hope to declare "victory" and then set sail without risking weighty interests throughout the Middle East.

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