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International Intervention in Lebanon: Rules for a Dangerous Game

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Nearly hysterical calls to dispatch an international force to quell the conflict in Lebanon are premature. The United States should not send troops to Lebanon or endorse any plan for international engagement that lacks a clear, achievable approach to disarming Hezbollah and building a secure, peaceful, and prosperous nation.

Learn the Lessons

U.S. forces are not appropriate for this multinational mission, but U.S. experience in Lebanon offers valuable lessons. Of the past three U.S. operations in Lebanon, two were successful and one was an abject failure. Eisenhower's 1958 intervention worked well because America sent a strong force to achieve a limited mission of a limited duration. A second intervention after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon successfully separated the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Israeli forces and removed Palestinian fighters from the country. U.S. troops then withdrew. Americans returned shortly thereafter as part of multinational contingent with a vague and open-ended mandate. In October 1983, a suicide truck bombing killed 300 U.S. servicemen, precipitating a withdrawal. The lesson is clear: When numbers are small, tasks unclear, and the force is passive, a U.S. mission in Lebanon becomes a target for terrorists, not a deterrent.

Conditions for Deployment

Lebanon can never be free while armed militias roam the country and provoke wars. No troops should be dispatched until there are real prospects for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1559 by disarming Hezbollah. If an international force were deployed today, it would face a protracted struggle. Hezbollah has been weakened by Israeli military strikes, but it still has staying power and local support. Right now, it will not agree to disarm completely, but military reverses and the growing economic discontent of its supporters might force Hezbollah to accept a face-saving formula for a truce and enter into demobilization talks with Lebanese government. This could be part of a broader agreement that includes Hezbollah's disarmament in exchange for acceptance as a political party qualified to participate in elections.

Rules for Engagement

If Hezbollah stops fighting, introducing international forces might make sense, but only under certain circumstances:

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www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/wm1178.cfm

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- The immediate threat must be disarmed so that an international force can keep the peace. Hezbollah should remove its rockets and heavy weapons from the border and confine them to prescribed areas; all foreign powers should withdraw their military forces from Lebanon; and the Lebanese government should agree to cooperate in preventing, investigating, and prosecuting any future terrorist acts.
- The mission of the international force should be building up Lebanese military capacity so that the Lebanese military can eventually demobilize Hezbollah.
- The force's mandate should include defending itself and targeting Hezbollah forces that attack any country or move heavy weapons out of prescribed areas.
- If NATO participates, its assets should not come at the expense of member country contributions to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.
- Donor countries should agree to a package of assistance to rapidly build-up governance capacity and military capability of Lebanon.

The Bottom Line

No international force should be dispatched to Lebanon until there is a clear understanding of the long-term goals. A force should not have an open-ended mission but a clear mandate to assist in the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559. Finally, any force must be a robust force with robust rules of engagement.

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