

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 6383

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PBOR, PLO LE,
SUBJECT: LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN PROBLEM

1. SUMMARY: THE HEART OF THE "LEBANESE PROBLEM" IS SIZE AND NATURE OF PALESTINIAN PRESENCE IN LEBANON. CONVENTIONAL WISDOM HOLDS THAT IF AND WHEN A PALESTINIAN ENTITY IS CREATED, LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN PROBLEM WILL DISAPPEAR, BUT THIS IS UNLIKELY TO HAPPEN. FOLLOWING MESSAGE DESCRIBES LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN PROBLEM AND DISCUSSES POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. NATURE OF PROBLEM. LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN PROBLEM HAS THREE ASPECTS -- DEMOGRAPHIC, MILITARY, AND ETHNIC.

A. DEMOGRAPHIC. NO ONE KNOWS EXACTLY HOW MANY PALESTINIANS THERE ARE IN LEBANON, BUT AN EDUCATED GUESS IS
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AT LEAST 400,000 (FATAH SAYS 550,000; PRESIDENT SARKIS SAYS 600,000). ROBERT PREVOT, UNRWA DIRECTOR FOR LEBANON, ESTIMATES THERE ARE NOW ABOUT 200,000 PALESTINIANS REGISTERED WITH HIS ORGANIZATION, OF WHOM ABOUT 40,000, OR 20 PERCENT, HAVE LEBANESE NATIONALITY WHICH THEY HAVE ACQUIRED IN THE COURSE OF THE LAST 30 YEARS OR WHICH THEY HELD BEFORE LEAVING PALESTINE

(PRESIDENT SARKIS SAYS FIGURE IS CLOSER TO 10,000). IN ADDITION TO THESE REFUGEES, IT IS GENERALLY AGREED THAT THERE ARE AT LEAST ANOTHER 200,000 PALESTINIANS WHO HAVE ENTERED COUNTRY ILLEGALLY, MOST OF THEM AFTER 1967. THIS TOTAL OF 400,000 OUT OF A TOTAL POPULATION IN LEBANON OF NOT MORE THAN THREE MILLION PRESENTS A TREMENDOUS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEM FOR LEBANESE BODY POLITIC.

B. MILITARY. PALESTINIAN PRESENCE IS COMPLICATED BY THE FACT THAT PALESTINIANS ARE NOT JUST REFUGEES BUT INCLUDE A WELL-ORGANIZED, WELL-FINANCED AND EFFECTIVE MILITARY FORCE. AFTER "BLACK SEPTEMBER" IN JORDAN IN 1970, BULK OF PALESTINIAN FIGHTERS MOVED TO LEBANON. IT WAS THESE PALESTINIANS, AUGMENTED BY PALESTINIAN UNITS FROM OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES, WHO DID MOST OF THE FIGHTING ON THE MOSLEM/LEFTIST SIDE DURING THE 1975/76 LEBANESE WAR AND WHO ARE IN CONTROL OF LARGE AREAS OF LEBANON SOUTH OF THE LITANI. BY CONTRAST, THE LEBANESE ARMY DISINTEGRATED DURING THE WAR AND HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN TO REBUILD ITSELF.

C. ETHNIC. UNLIKE MOST NATIONS, LEBANON HAS NO MAJORITY GROUP WHICH SHARES A COMMON RELIGION OR CULTURAL HERITAGE; RATHER, IT IS A COMPILATION OF DIFFERENT MINORITY COMMUNITIES WHO OCCUPY AN ARTIFICIAL

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POLITICAL ENTITY. THE ONE THING THEY HAVE IN COMMON IS THAT THEY AND THEIR ANCESTORS HAVE LIVED IN THIS PARTY OF THE WORLD FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS AND THAT MANY OF THEM HATE EACH OTHER WITH PASSION. FOR CHRISTIAN LEBANESE, THE PALESTINIAN IS AN ALIEN. HE IS A "PALESTINIAN" REGARDLESS OF WHETHER HE MAY CARRY A LEBANESE PASSPORT, EVEN IF HE IS CHRISTIAN. AS THE LEBANESE CHRISTIANS ARE FOND OF ASKING US, HOW WOULD YOU AMERICANS FEEL IF THERE WERE 30 MILLION SOUTH AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES WHO HAD THEIR OWN ARMED MILITIA, STRONGER THAN THE US ARMY, AND WHO OCCUPIED TEXAS, NEW MEXICO AND ARIZONA?

3. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS. THEORETICALLY, THERE ARE THREE WAYS IN WHICH LEBANON CAN TRY TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM:

A. ASSIMILATION. UNDER A FORMULA THAT HAS BEEN MENTIONED BY ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER BEGIN, LEBANON WOULD BE CALLED UPON TO ASSIMILATE ALL THE PALESTINIANS CURRENTLY LIVING IN THE COUNTRY. (BEGIN'S MENTION OF THIS IS ONE REASON LEBANESE ARE SO WORKED UP ABOUT PROBLEM TODAY.) ALTHOUGH MODERATE MARONITES ARE

PREPARED TO ABSORB ABOUT 10 PERCENT OF THE PALESTINIANS, I.E., THOSE WHO ALREADY HAVE LEBANESE PASSPORTS, TOTAL ASSIMILATION IS ANATHEMA TO ALL OF LEBANON'S CHRISTIANS AND WOULD PROBABLY BE OPPOSED BY A MAJORITY OF THE COUNTRY'S NON-CHRISTIAN POPULATION AS WELL. IF IT APPEARED THAT LEBANON WAS GOING TO BE FORCED TO INTEGRATE ALL THE PALESTINIANS CURRENTLY RESIDENT IN THE COUNTRY, WE WOULD EXPECT THE COUNTRY'S MARONITE POPULATION TO TAKE UP ARMS AND TO FORM THEIR OWN STATE IN MT. LEBANON RATHER THAN AGREE.

B. CO-EXISTENCE. UNDER THIS SOLUTION, THE PALESTINIANS NOW IN LEBANON WOULD REMAIN HERE BUT THEY WOULD NOT ACQUIRE LEBANESE NATIONALITY. THIS WOULD
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PROBABLY BE TOLERATED AS AN INTERIM SOLUTION BY SOME CHRISTIANS AS WELL AS MOSLEMS, PARTICULARLY IF AN EXPANDING ECONOMY INCREASED THE USEFULNESS OF THESE PEOPLE, BUT THE MARONITES PROBABLY WOULD NOT ACCEPT IT BECAUSE THEY WOULD SEE IT AS SIMPLY POSTPONING A DECISION WHICH GETS MORE DIFFICULT DAILY, GIVEN THE PALESTINIAN FERTILITY RATE.

C. EXPULSION. THE EXPULSION, PEACEFUL OR OTHERWISE, OF ALL PALESTINIANS NOW IN LEBANON, INCLUDING THOSE WHO HAVE ACQUIRED LEBANESE NATIONALITY BY IRREGULAR MEANS DURING THE PAST FEW YEARS, IS THE SOLUTION PREFERRED BY THE MAJORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN POPULATION, PARTICULARLY THE MARONITES.

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HOWEVER, MANY MOSLEMS, AND SOME CHRISTIANS, WOULD PROBABLY OPPOSE THIS -- SOME BECAUSE THEY HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT LEBANON IS AN ARAB COUNTRY AND HAS AN OBLIGATION TO THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE AND THE REFUGEES, AND SOME BECAUSE THEY WANT TO USE THE PREDOMINANTLY MOSLEM PALESTINIAN POPULATION AS A MAKEWEIGHT IN THEIR DOMESTIC POLITICAL COMPETITION WITH THE MARONITE HARDLINERS, AS THEY HAVE DONE IN THE PAST. EXPULSION, HOWEVER, IS IMPRACTICABLE AND IS THEREFORE NOT A REALISTIC SOLUTION. THE GOVERNMENT OF LEBANON DOES NOT HAVE THE POWER TO EXPEL THE PALESTINIANS, NO OTHER COUNTRY WILL DO IT FOR THEM, AND AT THE MOMENT AT LEAST THE PALESTINIANS HAVE NO OTHER PLACE WHERE THEY CAN OR WILL GO.

D. AS A PRACTICAL MATTER, THE MOST LIKELY SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM IS A COMBINATION OF ALL THREE; THAT IS, THOSE PALESTINIANS WHO HAVE ACQUIRED LEBANESE
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NATIONALITY WILL BE INTEGRATED INTO THE LEBANESE BODY POLITIC, AND OF THE REMAINDER, SOME WILL STAY ON PERHAPS INDEFINITELY IN A QUASI-REFUGEE STATUS AND OTHERS WILL BE EITHER PERSUADED OR COMPELLED TO LEAVE, DEPENDING ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE OVERALL MIDDLE EAST SITUATION.

4. THE IMPACT OF A PALESTINIAN ENTITY.

A. THE CREATION OF A PALESTINIAN ENTITY AS PART OF A COMPREHENSIVE MIDDLE EAST PEACE SETTLEMENT WOULD HELP TO ALLEVIATE THE PROBLEM, IF IT HAD THE AUTHORITY TO ISSUE PASSPORTS TO ALL PALESTINIANS EVERYWHERE; THUS PALESTINIANS RESIDENT IN LEBANON WOULD HAVE A LEGAL NATIONALITY AND MIGHT BE LESS INTERESTED IN TRYING TO GET LEBANESE CITIZENSHIP. ON THE OTHER HAND, EVEN IF SUCH AN ENTITY EXISTED AND COULD ISSUE PASSPORTS TO ALL PALESTINIANS, ONLY A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF LEBANON'S PALESTINIANS WOULD WANT TO LEAVE. A GREAT MANY OF THEM COME NOT FROM THE WEST BANK BUT FROM WHAT IS NOW ISRAEL

ITSELF. A WEST BANK ENTITY WOULD NOT ATTRACT THEM. IN ADDITION, MANY OF THEM HAVE BEEN IN LEBANON FOR 30 YEARS AND THEY AND THEIR CHILDREN HAVE PUT DOWN ROOTS HERE; THEY ARE MORE AT HOME IN LEBANON THAN THEY WOULD BE ANYWHERE IN PALESTINE. FINALLY, WHETHER OR NOT THERE IS A COMPREHENSIVE SETTLEMENT, THE OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES ARE UNLIKELY TO OPEN THEIR DOORS TO SUBSTANTIAL NUMBERS OF LEBANON'S PALESTINIANS. JORDAN HAS ALL IT CAN HANDLE. SYRIA PERHAPS COULD ABSORB MORE BUT IS UNWILLING TO DO SO, ACCORDING TO FONMIN BOUTROS. THE GULF STATES DO NOT REALLY CONSIDER THE PALESTINIANS TO BE THEIR "BROTHER ARABS" AND THE PALESTINIANS CERTAINLY LOOK DOWN ON THEIR LESS WELL EDUCATED NEIGHBORS. LIBYA'S WELL-KNOWN XENOPHOBIA MAKES IT AN UNLIKELY CANDIDATE.
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B. EVEN FROM A MILITARY POINT OF VIEW, A COMPREHENSIVE MIDDLE EAST PEACE SETTLEMENT MAY NOT SOLVE LEBANON'S PROBLEM COMPLETELY. THE CREATION OF A PALESTINIAN ENTITY WOULD PRESUMABLY MEAN THAT THE BULDOZING OF THE PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS WOULD LAY DOWN THEIR ARMS AND, PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANTLY, THAT MOST ARAB COUNTRIES WOULD CEASE TO FINANCE THEIR MILITARY AND TERRORIST ACTIVITIES. IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE, HOWEVER, A SETTLEMENT THAT WOULD SATISFY THE MORE EXTREMIST PALESTINIAN GROUPS, SUCH AS THE PFLP OR QADHAFI. THESE GROUPS MAY CHOOSE TO FIGHT ON, AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE, EVEN IF A PALESTINIAN HOMELAND IS CREATED. SINCE THE ONLY TERRITORY LEFT TO THE PALESTINIAN REJECTIONISTS IS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON, THAT WOULD BE THE LIKELIEST PLACE TO FIGHT.

5. CONCLUSION. IF THIS ANALYSIS IS CORRECT, LEBANON IS GOING TO HAVE A PALESTINIAN PROBLEM WHETHER OR NOT THERE IS A COMPREHENSIVE MIDDLE EAST PEACE SETTLEMENT. GOL IS ALREADY WORRIED ABOUT THIS AND IS EXPRESSING THAT CONCERN AT HIGHEST LEVELS. PRESIDENT SARKIS SAYS PROBLEM IS RESPONSIBILITY OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND SUGGESTS THAT PERHAPS WITH ENOUGH MONEY PER HEAD THE REFUGEES COULD BE PERSUADED TO EMIGRATE ELSEWHERE IN ARAB WORLD. HE FEELS INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST PUT PRESSURE ON OTHER ARABS TO ACCEPT THEM. WE THINK THIS IS PROBABLY A NON-STARTER, BUT AT LEAST ITS AN IDEA. WE LOOK FORWARD TO DISCUSSING IT WITH UNRWA COMMISSIONER MCELHINNEY ON HIS RETURN.
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