

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 14CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR  
3 October 1984

# Lessons of Beirut

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**A**RE three strikes enough? Is it time to call ourselves "out" and leave Beirut? Just how important is it that the United States maintain a diplomatic presence in Lebanon? What are the long-term implications of how we react to this latest atrocity?

We can only continue to expose Americans there if we tighten security procedures markedly. Thus far we have not been willing to pay the price of the inconvenience involved in rigorous security. Our laxness in this last instance was egregious. We did not take elemental precautions. We sent 90 United States marines home just as the American Embassy was moved to a new building and relied, instead, on Lebanese guards to man the checkpoints where cars and trucks were inspected. We did not employ some barrier as simple as a truck placed sideways across the road that would have stopped any vehicle until it was inspected and the barrier opened. We did not accept the inconvenience of prohibiting any non-US vehicle from entering the compound at all. We're hearing lots of excuses. They are just that.

Why were our people on the spot so indifferent when their own lives were at stake? Because working in a fortress environment is repugnant to Americans. We are accustomed to and love our constitutional freedoms. We will never be very good at living under the kind of constraints that seem necessary in today's Beirut.

We must acknowledge that terrorists can force large numbers of people into considerable inconvenience. We only need to recall the airport security procedures we all accept every time we take a commercial airline. Even if we accept greater inconvenience in Beirut, we may not achieve adequate security. There are practical limits to how much can be accomplished with security procedures. Any fortress can be breached at some cost, e.g., with aircraft or helicopters or missiles, if not with trucks loaded with dynamite. The terrorist group that calls itself the Islamic Holy War is likely to pay a high cost to continue to harass us. The risk of more American casualties in Beirut is very real.

What would we lose by pulling out? Not much by way of diplomatic activity. We have reduced our diplomatic presence to only 20 people. That's barely enough to support an ambassador. He could operate out of Cyprus or some other nearby spot. Besides, most serious negotiations in the Middle East are conducted by special ambassadors who fly in from Washington. To maintain our minuscule presence of 20 in Beirut, we expose 80 more Americans there to support and protect them and to repair our several shattered embassies.

The only reasonable argument for not withdrawing is that doing so could encourage terrorists to attempt to dislodge us elsewhere in the Middle East or elsewhere. That brings us, though, to the crux of the Beirut problem.

We in the US have brought hijacking under control by instituting good security at airports; West Germany took strenuous efforts and subdued the Baader-Meinhof terrorists; and Italy did the same with the Red Brigades. In all three cases the secret of success was that local security forces got serious. It takes local people to set up a network of informants within the indigenous populace to find out who is new to some neighborhood, who is acting in suspicious ways, who is not gainfully employed, or who is behaving unusually. US intelligence can certainly help, but only in the most favorable circumstances is it likely to play the key role.

Until the Lebanese government performs this role, American lives will continue to be endangered in Beirut for little advantage. We should tell President Gemayel that if he wants the privilege and benefits of a continued US diplomatic presence, he must establish adequate internal security. And we should give him our telephone number so that he can let us know when he's ready.

Pulling out of Beirut temporarily would tell the world that the US is not going to sacrifice its people because local security forces are not doing their job. That's a useful message to a number of other countries such as Kuwait, Pakistan, and Libya, where we have had similar problems, and to still others where we might. Let's use this third tragedy in Beirut to push other nations to grapple with the worldwide problem of terrorism.

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