

Editorial

A sense of urgency

If Washington fails to assert itself and secure an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in the weeks ahead, a new Lebanon blow-up leading to a full-scale Middle East war could be unavoidable.

This is the message Lebanese Foreign Minister Elie Salem brought to Washington this month. In his meeting with President Reagan and with other administration officials, Salem spoke plainly. "If the foreign forces do not leave within a week or two weeks, or a maximum of a month, Lebanon will be positioned at a new angle, and I cannot say where it will end. Most likely Lebanon will be so dangerous that it may be ushered into a new war far more destructive, far more regional, far more international in its implications than the [civil] war of 1975."

"I am a son of a bitch who has been burned by history," Salem continued, "and I am afraid of new facts arising as the result of delayed action. It will be horrible. Already some people are referring to the southern part of Lebanon as the North Bank. That is no joke to us."

Salem laid it on the line to Washington: "I think America is in a position to deliver on anything America feels strongly about in the Lebanese-Israeli situation, and nobody's going to convince me otherwise. I was not born yesterday. I would be furious if the United States does not deliver."

Salem shocked official Washington. The approach appears, though, to have had some effect. The day after Salem left the capital, Reagan sent a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin telling him to quit Lebanon immediately. Although the contents of the letter were not publicly released, one senior administration official summed up the sentiment of the President's message: "We want them to do what they represented they would do months ago and that is to get the hell out of there. It is in no one's interest, including their own, for Israel to remain there. Israel, having been the invader, more and more has the appearance of the occupier."

According to White House sources, "a new sense of urgency" has gripped the President and his closest aides regarding the Lebanon crisis. They fear that continued stonewalling on the part of Israel will not only undermine the prospects of peace in Lebanon but will doom the Reagan Plan for a Middle East settlement. They are particularly concerned about the role of Ariel Sharon, Israel's renegade defense minister, who is doing his utmost to defy Washington up and down the line.

Reagan's fears about Sharon are justified. There are reports that Sharon is out to trigger a confrontation with Syria in Lebanon, to shift attention inside Israel away from his role in the Beirut massacre to a new conflagration in Lebanon. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the Reagan administration is suspicious "that Israel is maintaining the Lebanon imbroglio to head off an effort to launch the Reagan proposals for a Palestinian solution, and that Israel is courting a confrontation with Washington as a convenient vote-drawing issue with which the government could fight an early election."

Begin himself may be relenting. Rumor has it that the prime minister will soon back down from his insistence that some of the negotiations with Lebanon on a troop withdrawal be held in Jerusalem, a demand that Lebanon cannot possibly meet at this time given the delicate nature of the Jerusalem question. To undermine the prospects of some kind of Reagan-Begin deal, Sharon says he is conducting his own negotiations with the Lebanese "away from American eyes," with the purpose being to revive Camp David and in that context force Lebanon into a treaty arrangement.

How swiftly Reagan moves will determine whether or not Lebanon explodes again. The Reagan Plan, though in and of itself no solution to the Middle East crisis, given the role that George Shultz and Henry Kissinger played in its conception, could provide a means for the President and his immediate circle to reassert U.S. influence in the region, and circumscribe Ariel Sharon.