

Help Not Wanted

HOW FOREIGN INTERVENTION IMPACTS THE DURATION OF CIVIL WAR

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he ongoing conflict in Syria is the most recent example in a long string of civil wars that have been dominated by competing foreign interventions. From global powers like the United States and Russia, to regional actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia, to local groups like Hezbollah and the Kurds, the Syrian conflict has drawn in a cosmopolitan crowd of pro- and anti-regime forces. This pile-up of rival interlopers dramatically complicates the path toward settlement. But is intervention always counterproductive? To help answer this question, the Lebanese civil wars of 1958 and of 1975-1990 prove deeply illustrative. This paper will argue that the 1975-90 civil war was much longer, more complex, and harder to end than the war of 1958 primarily because of the differing levels of foreign intervention. In the latter war, the external involvement of clashing regional states with a direct stake in Lebanon's politics was a crucial, not

supplemental, part of the conflict that led to more enduring hostilities and greater difficulty establishing peace. By contrast, the first war saw intervention by just one outside actor—the United States—which firmly supported one side and limited its involvement, helping to end the fighting and resolve the crisis.

External Interventions: For Better or Worse?

Leading scholars on foreign involvement in civil wars are divided as to whether intervention is helpful or harmful in ending hostilities, although in general, scholarship supports the latter view. The most popularly accepted reason for this is that when multiple external states intervene to support opposing sides, they allow both sides to continue fighting while failing to provide a decisive advantage to either one, thereby creating a stalemate and lengthening the war.¹ Patrick Regan refers to this pattern as one of “networks of third-party interveners,” concluding that interventions have different outcomes based on the interveners’ interrelations but that it is much more common and likely for the outcome to be negative.² This is because states generally enter civil wars to further their own security interests, which are likely to be contrary to those of other states because of the security dilemma. Thus, they intervene for opposite ends.³ These types of external actors are “balancers” and tend to lengthen the duration of civil wars because in trying to offset the influence of other states, they spoil the chances for peaceful settlement.⁴ Even when states intervene on the same side of the conflict, they must share the same priorities in order to pursue a collective solution and

help end the war.⁵

However, the idea of balancing of external actors necessarily suggests a possibility for beneficial third-party intervention as well: if states with similar preferences coalesce on one side in a civil war and create an unequal balance of power, interveners can have a positive effect and lead to shorter duration of the conflict. Yet despite the potential for more positive outcomes of intervention, evidence shows that there is a greater likelihood that foreign involvement will lengthen civil wars. Out of 190 interventions in 138 intrastate conflicts from 1944-2000, only 57 led to an end in the fighting.⁶ Additionally, “the mean duration of civil wars that were terminated and which had external interventions was nine years; while those wars that were terminated but did not have an intervention had a mean duration of only 1.5 years.”⁷

A one-sided intervention in the absence of external intervention on the opposing side can curtail conflicts by increasing the supported party’s probability of decisively winning the conflict.⁸ This supports Richard Betts’s claim that “limited intervention may end a war if the intervener takes sides, tilts the local balance of power, and helps one of the rivals to win—that is, if it is not impartial.”⁹ In terms of making peace negotiations more likely or effective, third parties can be necessary to secure peace settlements because it is extremely difficult for civil war opponents to guarantee the terms for an agreement, such as a ceasefire, on their own.¹⁰ As Barbara Walter argues, “only when an outside enforcer steps in to guarantee the terms do commitments to disarm and share political power become believable. Only then does cooperation become possible.”¹¹

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Scholars have pointed to additional reasons why foreign involvement leads to longer civil wars and more difficulty in securing peace negotiations. Continuing with the assumption that states intervene to pursue their own agendas in addition to, or rather than, simply facilitating peace, external actors make wars substantially longer because they decrease the “bargaining range” of acceptable agreements for all parties.¹² For peace negotiations to succeed, opposing sides must all agree on terms that are more favorable than continued fighting, and additional combatants with independent agendas complicate this effort by introducing an additional set of issues to be negotiated, along with more parties that must approve a settlement.¹³ Conflicts are also prolonged because outside states generally have less incentive to negotiate than internal actors since they “bear lower costs of fighting and they can anticipate gaining less benefit from negotiation than domestic insurgents,” and so convincing them to stop fighting becomes more difficult.¹⁴

Based on these arguments, it is unsurprising that the 1975-90 Lebanese civil war lasted much longer and proved much more difficult to resolve than the 1958 war. The 1975 war saw a Syrian intervention met by met with fear and distrust of its motives by Israel, leading to Israel’s counter-intervention and a proxy war between the two for the next 15 years. Attempts at negotiations or peace settlements at various stages were prevented or even spoiled by Syria and Israel because of their deep entanglement in the conflict and their significant stake in its outcome. On the other hand, the 1958 war ended after a limited but decisive intervention by the United States. Without facing comparable external support for the

opposing side, this intervention helped the Lebanese government triumph over rebel forces and restore stability to the country.

Varying Interventions and Varying Outcomes in the 1958 and 1975-90 Lebanese Civil Wars

By 1975, a new conflict had broken out along the same sectarian lines, with Muslims—including the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)—pushing for reform and freedom for Palestinians while Maronite Christians seeking to preserve their hegemonic status quo and end the Palestinian armed presence in Lebanon.¹⁵ The civil war became increasingly complicated over its 15-year span, and ultimately involved Syria intervening both on behalf of the Maronites and on behalf of the Muslim-Leftist-Palestinian coalition. Meanwhile, Israel intervened for security reasons to keep the Syrians and Palestinians



A US Marine in his foxhole during the 1958 US intervention. Wikimedia Commons.

out of southern Lebanon. Other external actors were involved as well, including the Arab League and the United States, who acted as an “impartial” peace broker between the Syrians and the Lebanese.

Clearly, a major differentiating factor between these two wars was the level of foreign intervention. Of course, the wars are not otherwise perfectly comparable—1958 was more clearly pro- versus anti-government and Palestinian resistance was not a significant factor yet—but it is an important case vis-à-vis the 1975 war, which saw a much larger and more evenly distributed intervention. Additionally, both occurred during the Cold War and after Israel’s independence.

Syrian Aggression and Israeli Reaction in the 1975 Civil War

Lebanon occupied a unique place in the Middle Eastern world because of its ambiguous national identity. This left the country vulnerable to external forces.¹⁶ The primary actors with an interest in Lebanon were its neighbors Syria and Israel, as well as regional Arab powers. The Arab-Israeli conflict and the pan-Arab movement constituted the two most important elements of this environment, and because Syria and Israel fueled (and at various times, reignited) the Lebanese civil war, this war can ultimately be seen as “yet another chapter in the Thirty Years War between the Arabs and the Israelis that [had] wracked the region since 1948.”¹⁷ This broader conflict underlay both Syrian and Israeli motivations for intervention in the war. Syria has historical ties to Lebanon, through contemporary economic links and the idea of a pre-Sykes-Picot Lebanon and Syria united as “Greater Syria.” With the advent of the Ba’th regime in 1963 and in the context of broader pan-Arab ideology, Syrian interest in its politically precarious

neighbor was especially high.¹⁸ With the outbreak of violence in 1975 and Syria competing against Egypt and Iraq for dominance in the Arab world, Syria saw its chance to enhance its Arab nationalist credentials and influence over Lebanon by successfully intervening in and resolving the crisis.¹⁹ Additionally, with the PLO operating out of Lebanon following its expulsion from Jordan, Syria found an opportunity in the war to show its leading role as an Arab state supporting the Palestinians against Israel.²⁰

The progression of the war demonstrates that Syria’s self-interested intervention became problematic. Its involvement began with small levels of military assistance to the Muslim-Leftist-Palestinian insurgents, increased to indirect intervention through Palestinian guerrilla forces, and then escalated to direct deployment of 30,000 regular Syrian forces.²¹ After a hopeful resolution to the 1975-1976 stage of the conflict, intervention further exacerbated the crisis; Syria ensured that the “peacekeeping” force was made up predominantly of its own troops, thus ensuring Syrian influence. Marius Deeb argues that the force was not designed to ensure peace at all: he contends that Syria deliberately kept Lebanon in an “artificial domestic conflict” for its own regional power interests and ambition, and prevented peace at many junctures throughout the war.²² In this view, the peacekeeping forces were no more than a guise for Syria to prolong the war.²³

The most curious aspect of Syrian intervention in the 1975 war is that Syria shifted its support from the Muslim-Leftist-Palestinian opposition to the Maronite government in the midst of the war and then back to the Palestinians soon afterward. Yet, despite the inconsistent military alignment, the desired outcome remained the same.²⁴ Initially, Syria aligned with its traditional ally, the Muslim coalition, to show its support for the Palestinian resistance

“Without foreign involvement the quasi-proxy war between Syria and Israel, the Lebanese conflict likely would not have continued after 1976.”



The "Green Line of Beirut," dividing Muslims and Christians, at the height of the 1975 war. Case/Wikimedia Commons.

movement. However, once it became clear that Yasser Arafat and the PLO had different ambitions than the Syrian regime and could not be controlled or manipulated, Syria became concerned that a radical change in Lebanon's political structure would not be in its interest, and thus switched to supporting the Christians to preserve the status quo and maintain its influence in Lebanon.²⁵ This is important because the support for the Maronites was purely out of power considerations; Syria still had significant ties to the opposition and only wanted the PLO controlled and de-radicalized, not eliminated. This accounts for its eventual renewal of support for the Palestinians. Syria's tactical maneuvering shows its self-interest in the internal conflict and its reluctance to allow either Lebanese coalition to decisively win, thereby prolonging the war.²⁶ Syria sought not only to restore security, but also to preserve its power in Lebanon and to win Arab support by championing the Palestinians. The Syrian intervention thus actively contributed to the worsening of the conflict.

Israel's involvement in the 1975 war was also based on self-interest: Israel's concern for its security on the northern border and its fear of Syrian overextension and aggression into southern Lebanon.²⁷ Israel, too,

viewed the Lebanese civil war through prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict: it did not want Lebanon to become a part of a war coalition against Israel or to serve as a base for the forces of any coalition state, and it did not want Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israel to be carried out from Lebanese soil.²⁸ As Syria was viewed as the most hostile Arab neighbor, especially after the Sinai II agreement with Egypt, Israel was suspicious of Syrian involvement in the Lebanese

civil war, and thus initially took a very defensive position toward the conflict. Israeli foreign minister Yigal Allon's September 1976 declaration that "we do not have to intervene in what is happening inside Lebanon as long as the conflict is confined to the Lebanese people themselves" demonstrated the country's intention to balance Syrian intervention.²⁹ Even though it became clear in mid-1976 that Syria was actually intervening on the side of the Christians and restraining the PLO, which was in Israel's interests, Israel still valued containment of Syria over a settlement to the Lebanese war.³⁰ Thus when Syria decided to deploy its peace-keeping troops to south Lebanon to disarm the PLO in late 1976, Israel vehemently rejected the move and reignited the conflict by beginning artillery shelling and air strikes after the peace negotiations had already taken place.³¹ This does not only illustrate self-interested external interventions prolonging an internal conflict; it also demonstrates that even when multiple actors intervene on the same side, diverging preferences can negate any potential stabilizing effect.

An account of the "resolution" of the 1975-76 war is now necessary, because the Arab League summit in October 1976 that ended this first phase of hostilities is crucial to a demonstration of the impact of foreign

intervention. The summit in Riyadh was orchestrated by Saudi Arabia, because it felt threatened by the pace of Syria's direct intervention, showing the predominance of external factors over internal Lebanese issues (even the resolution began because of Syria's intervention) as well as the argument that outside forces can be valuable in incentivizing and enforcing peace negotiations. The Saudis persuaded Assad and Arafat to attend, and along with Lebanese President Sarkis and representatives of Egypt and Kuwait, the forum "worked out a series of agreements to resolve the Lebanese crisis."³² The settlement was far from perfect—it was more a Syrian-Palestinian peace accord than an intra-Lebanese one—but it reduced hostilities and ended the overt conflict as it had intended to do.³³ The summit created the Arab Deterrent Force (ADF) to restore security in Lebanon and expanded upon a framework for Lebanese-Palestinian relations, requiring the Palestinian resistance to strictly adhere to the terms of the 1969 Cairo agreement, a previous accord limiting their presence in Lebanon, and facilitating the confiscation of heavy weapons from all Palestinian and Lebanese armed groups.³⁴ Thus the general hostilities of the main war ended in October 1976, and in the first few months, steps were taken toward normalcy in Lebanon.³⁵ There were still clashes and sectarian issues, but since the ADF had "both the power and the will to carry out its responsibilities," it could overpower attempts by Maronite militias or the Muslim-Leftist-Palestinian alliance to move beyond pre-war positions.

The October settlement was hardly perfect, nor was the conflict fully resolved, but ultimately there was little danger of internal adversaries breaking the fragile peace in Lebanon: "After the loss of over 65,000 lives and the breakdown of 55 previous ceasefire agreements, the Lebanese were in no position to resume hostilities without outside assistance."³⁶ However, hostilities did resume after 1976 and the conflict raged on for 13 more years. It is precisely because of outside involvement that the war continued and the Riyadh peace accords failed. Israel was so opposed to Syria's continued presence in Lebanon, and especially the presence of ADF forces in south Lebanon, that tensions reignited once again in 1977 over Syria's perceived security threat to Israel.³⁷ This

escalated once Syria reconciled with the PLO and Israel began to see Syria as even more of a threat. In March 1978, Israel directly intervened in south Lebanon to impose a "security border," an action it repeated in 1982 to destroy the Palestinian presence in Lebanon and impose a new political order on south Lebanon.³⁸ Thus after 1976, Israel pursued a more aggressive interventionist role rather than a reactionary one, spoiling the peace settlement and prolonging the war because of its conflict with Syria and its own agenda seen through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Without foreign involvement and the quasi-proxy war between Syria and Israel, the Lebanese conflict likely would not have continued after 1976.

America's Singular Intervention in the 1958 Lebanese Civil War

Yet foreign intervention is not necessarily a recipe

President Camille Chamoun, who led the country from 1952-1958. Wikimedia



“It is precisely because of outside involvement that the war continued and the Riyadh peace accords failed.”

for disaster. The United States’ limited yet decisive military intervention on behalf of the Lebanese government in 1958 illustrates the potential of decisive foreign involvement to bring civil wars to an end when there is a lack of comparable involvement on the opposing side.

In 1958, American concerns about the Middle East were growing because of Egyptian President Nasser’s tilt toward the Soviet Union and his advocacy of Nasserite revolutions promoting pan-Arabism. To counter, the U.S. put forth the Eisenhower Doctrine in March 1957 to assist any Middle Eastern state “threatened by international communism.” Lebanese President Camille Chamoun was the first—and only—Arab leader to invoke the policy.³⁹ In July 1958, Chamoun began to face violent opposition after proposing to change the nation’s constitution to enable a re-election bid.⁴⁰ The division was primarily along sectarian lines—pro-government Maronite Christians against anti-government Muslims who wanted Lebanon to join with the newly formed United Arab Republic.

The United States was reluctant to involve itself in the civil strife because it did not want to seem too pro-Maronite, and it was not supportive of Chamoun’s unconstitutional political ambition to seek a second term.⁴¹ This is the first of several crucial distinctions between intervention in the 1958 war and intervention in the 1975 war. Syria was eager to enter the conflict in 1975, as was later Israel, but in 1958 the U.S. had very limited interest in Lebanese affairs. It wanted to ensure a pro-Western government, but beyond that it had no real security concerns or ambition in the country. This limited interest thus translated to limited, partial, and decisive intervention, which hastened the conflict’s end.

When they arrived, American troops did not engage in combat against the opposition forces; having landed, they “simply took their positions at the airport and in Beirut and dug in.”⁴² This puts the

interventions in the two wars on different levels and again illustrates the benefits of limited, though partial, military involvement and the drawbacks of external forces becoming primary actors in a nation’s civil conflict. With “Operation Blue Bat,” U.S. Marines landed on the beaches of Beirut and were escorted to designated areas by the Lebanese forces; subsequent troops were “carefully deployed to avert their involvement in hostilities.”⁴³ Military intervention was followed by a “concerted mediatory effort” through a special American envoy, Richard Murphy, and talks between Murphy and Lebanese leaders led to a political compromise that allowed presidential elections to take place at the end of July, effectively ending the crisis.⁴⁴ U.S. deployment of forces peaked at 14,300 men in mid-August, and a phased withdrawal of troops began, with the last soldier leaving on October 25.⁴⁵ Clearly, while American military intervention played a critical role in reducing the hostilities by helping the pro-government side win, its diplomatic intervention was also a crucial factor in helping resolve the conflict.

U.S. involvement was not perfect—the arrival of American troops was met with hostility and frustration from the opposition, and the resolution of the war did not address the basic weakness of the Lebanese state, namely the “divided political loyalties of its multi-religious population”. However, it resulted in a quick end to the fighting and peace negotiations that addressed what they could at the time, demonstrating that limited and partial intervention can shorten conflicts in the absence of competing intervention.

Conclusion

Foreign involvement in civil wars, illustrated by the differences between Syrian and Israeli intervention in the 1975-90 war and American intervention in the 1958 war, generally leads to longer conflicts and more difficult peace settlements. When one external actor intervenes in a civil war with a clearly defined

mission and exit strategy, and avoids getting entangled in the hostilities, it can help bring peace by securing one side's victory. This only holds, however, if there is not a comparable intervention on the opposing side by a different external actor, or intervention on the same side by another foreign power with competing interests. Foreign involvement can also be beneficial in shortening conflicts and bringing peace by providing incentives for settlements or helping with negotiations.

However, this circumstance of limited, partial, and independent intervention is not the norm, and generally external actors do more harm than good, as the 1975 war suggests. When multiple states have a significant stake in the outcome of a civil war and align with different sides to balance each other, their intervention will prolong the war by creating a stalemate—both sides are given the resources to keep fighting, but not to win. As in the 1975 war, when the external states also have their own agenda, the war becomes even more complex and difficult to end. Not only do those states become part and parcel of the conflict rather than supporting allies, but they also make settlements less likely because there are more interests to take into account and more actors that could spoil the peace.

The negative impact of foreign involvement today is profoundly evident in the case of Syria—it exemplifies essentially all of the ways in which intervention prolongs war and prevents peace. There are multiple actors on all sides—Iran and Russia supporting Assad, Turkey and the Gulf states supporting the rebels, and the United States and the Kurds somewhere in the middle—work to balance each other prevent a conclusive end to the conflict. Though it may be too late for Syria—just as it became too late for Lebanon—policy-makers and those who hold them accountable should remember the sobering lessons these indecisive proxy wars when attempting to defuse future conflicts. ♦

ENDNOTES

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