

# 1957-1958, Lebanon: Send in the Marines!

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In Lebanon's recent stormy history, foreign armies have played a prominent role, with Syria, Israel, and the Palestine Liberation Organization controlling parts of Lebanon at various times. But the first foreign military intervention Lebanon experienced after its independence in 1943 was that of the U.S.

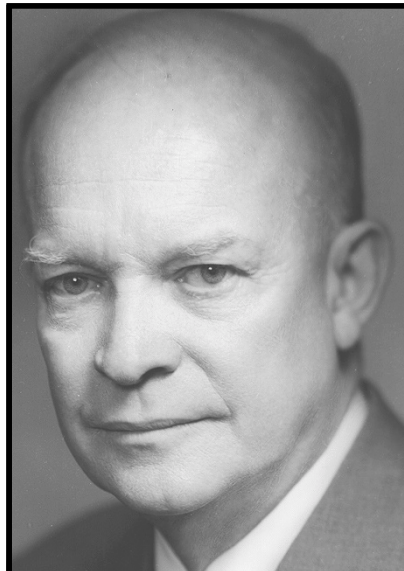
The U.S. intervention resulted from a policy initiated by the Eisenhower administration that held that if Communists tried to take any country in the Middle East, we would stop them. Enshrined in a 1957 joint resolution of Congress, the policy, which came to be known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, was that: "the U.S. regards as vital to the national interest and world peace the preservation of the independence and integrity of the nations of the Middle East. To this end, if the President determines the necessity thereof, the U.S. is prepared to use armed forces to assist any such nation.. requesting assistance against armed aggression from any country controlled by international communism."

After Congress adopted the resolution, the Eisenhower administration approached Lebanon's president, Camille Chamoun, and asked him to "accept" the Eisenhower Doctrine, meaning that he would agree to military intervention if Lebanon were threatened by "international communism." For better or worse, Chamoun conceded. In a country sharply divided between Muslim and Christian communities, Chamoun's government was Christian-dominated, while Lebanon's Christian population had close ties to the West both culturally and politically. But Lebanon's opposition, united as the National Front, was based in the Muslim community, which constituted the majority of Lebanon's population. At the time, the National Front strongly reflected Arab nationalism as espoused by Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser.

In 1956, Nasser had shocked the West by nationalizing the British-

and French-owned Suez Canal. Then Syria, which shared Egypt's Arab nationalist attitude, merged with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR). The Eisenhower administration feared the spread in the region of anti-Western sentiment, which might attract Soviet support.

Chamoun's acceptance of the Eisenhower Doctrine put him at odds with both Egypt and Syria, as well as with Lebanon's own Nationalist Front, which immediately demanded that he renounce it. But Chamoun refused, and to reward him, the CIA secretly funded



President Dwight Eisenhower

pro-Chamoun candidates in parliamentary elections scheduled for 1957, resulting in a heavily pro-Chamoun majority. Deprived of control of the parliament, the National Front was furious. The most serious consequence of this defeat, from its standpoint, was that the new parliament would be selecting a president in July 1958, and Chamoun was seeking reelection. As Wilbur Crane Eveland, the CIA station chief in Beirut at the time, explained it, Chamoun was a shoo-in for the presidency, because the parliament had been "bought" for him by the CIA.

Frustration with this U.S.-bought control, which did not remain wholly secret, led the National Front to move against Chamoun two months before the scheduled election. In May 1958, the Front mounted a military campaign against Chamoun and quickly gained control of most of Leba-

non's territory. Chamoun responded by seeking the aid of the UN Security Council, to whom he complained that the Front was being supplied and trained by the UAR. After the UAR denied the charge, the Council sent an observation mission "to ensure that there is no illegal infiltration of personnel or supply or arms or other materiel across the Lebanese borders." The mission reported "substantial movements of armed men" in Lebanon, but said it could not determine whether they "had infiltrated from outside," or where they had obtained their

## "The Eisenhower Doctrine"

*This policy asserted America's right "to employ the armed forces of the U.S. to assist to defend the territorial integrity and the political independence of any nation" in the Middle East that requested assistance against "communist armed aggression." It was not supposed to be used in response to an internal insurrection or civil war.*

Source: Message to Congress, Jan. 5, 1957 <[www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1957eisenhowerdoctrine.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1957eisenhowerdoctrine.html)>

arms. It said that of those involved against Chamoun in Lebanon, "the vast majority were in any case Lebanese." Rejecting the UN mission's report, Chamoun and the Eisenhower administration pointed out that since the mission had not established good access to border areas, it might have missed acts of infiltration.

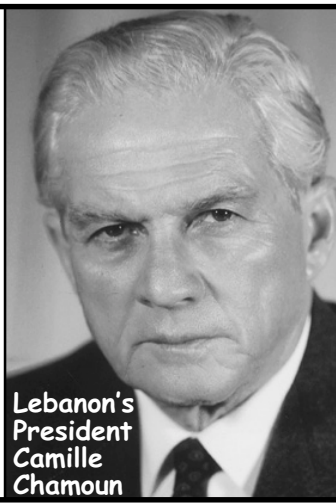
Then, on July 14, the solidly pro-Western government of Iraq was overthrown in a coup. President Eisenhower was concerned that this new development might encourage the Lebanese National Front to engage in a final offensive against Chamoun.

Concerned over both Iraq and Lebanon, Eisenhower decided to send troops into Lebanon. Quickly he landed a force of 10,000 Marines and airborne units, backed up by the 35,000-man Sixth Fleet offshore in the eastern Mediterranean. Eisenhower's

**May-June 1957:** According to Wilbur Crane Eveland, the CIA's station chief in Beirut, the U.S. "bought" the Lebanese election of President Chamoun's parliament using bribes.

**July 14, 1958:** Iraq's pro-Western regime was overthrown. Eisenhower worried that their recently purchased government in Lebanon might be also be overthrown in a popular uprising.

**July 15:** To protect Chamoun's government, the US landed 10,000 Marines and airborne units in Lebanon, backed up by the 35,000-man Sixth Fleet.



Lebanon's President Camille Chamoun

purpose was twofold: to keep the National Front from moving against Chamoun and to have troops close to Iraq in case a similar nationalist threat emerged there.

In the UN Security Council, U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge justified the U.S. intervention by explaining that their purpose in Lebanon was "to stabilize the situation brought on by the threats from outside." President Eisenhower said that the rebellion in Lebanon was "supported by sizable amounts of arms, ammunition, and money and by personnel infiltrated from Syria to fight against the lawful authorities." To bolster its case, the White House held that Lebanon's complaint to the Security Council had charged "indirect aggression." But President Chamoun had not actually charged aggression, direct or indirect.

Two days after the U.S. military intervention, Britain landed troops in Jordan. Britain claimed to have intelligence information that a Syrian-backed coup would form that day in Jordan. Like Lebanon, Jordan had a pro-Western government headed by King Hussein, who received regular subsidies from the CIA.

To scare off the supposed coup plotters in Jordan, Eisenhower sent fifty U.S. jet fighters to fly over Jordan as a show of force. At the UN, the U.S. declared support for Britain's action "in the defense of Jordan's independence and integrity," and called the overflights "a justified exercise of the inherent right of nations to call for assistance when threatened." Whether Syria was actually involved in an anti-Hussein plot was never clarified.

Ambassador Lodge's charge of outside involvement in Lebanon had some basis in fact, as some arms likely

were smuggled to the National Front from Syria, but the Eisenhower administration could not prove aggression. By mid-July, the UN mission set up an extensive network of border checkpoints to watch for infiltration of arms and personnel. Observing by air and on the ground, both during the day and at night, the mission reported on July 30 that infiltration of arms into Lebanon "cannot be on anything more than a limited scale, and is largely confined to small arms and ammunition." As for personnel, it said, "in no case have UN observers, who have been vigilantly patrolling the opposition-held areas and have frequently observed the armed bands there, been able to detect the presence of persons who have indubitably entered from across the border for the purpose of fighting."

Whatever the facts about infiltration, the Lebanese conflict was, as the UN mission stated in its first report, of Lebanese, not Syrian or Egyptian, making. The U.S., as we saw, was a catalyst for that conflict, because by drawing Chamoun into our orbit, and by skewing the makeup of the Lebanese parliament in his favor, we had aroused the National Front to action.

Beyond the alleged UAR involvement, Eisenhower gave an additional reason for the Lebanon landing, namely, that U.S. citizens in Lebanon, whom he estimated at 2,500, were endangered by the hostilities and needed to be evacuated. This justification, however, was a blatant pretext, because in June the State Department had already warned U.S. citizens against travel to Lebanon. By July 15, the date of the landing, most U.S. residents in Lebanon were already gone. After the Marines landed, the administration seemed to forget the issue, because the

Marines did not organize an evacuation and the administration no longer mentioned any endangered citizens.

The Eisenhower Doctrine referred only to opposing communism, but the administration was not alleging any involvement in Lebanon by communist countries or even by local communists. No matter, replied Secretary of State Dulles, the Eisenhower Doctrine could be expanded. The doctrine, he said, meant "that the independence of these countries is vital to peace and the national interest of the U.S.," and that is "a mandate to do something if we think that our peace and vital interests are endangered from any quarter." With this sleight of hand, Dulles broadened U.S. interventionist aims from opposing communism to opposing Arab nationalism.

One way in which the U.S. sought to curb nationalism in Lebanon was to make the Front come to terms with the government. By September, a political compromise was reached when President Chamoun stepped aside and the head of the Lebanese army assumed the presidency.

The Eisenhower administration's stated reasons for the Lebanon intervention, however, did not hold water. There was little to back up U.S. claims of outside aggression, and the asserted need to evacuate U.S. citizens was an obvious afterthought. Once in Lebanon, U.S. forces did little but sit in positions they had established on Lebanon's lovely Mediterranean beach. This deployment was enough to intimidate the National Front from moving against Chamoun, so no military action was needed. Lebanese soft drink vendors on the beach carried on a lively business with the Marines.

Since the U.S. intervention in 1958, Lebanon has found little respite from conflict. Had Lebanon been left to work out its domestic differences without the Eisenhower Doctrine, without the CIA and without U.S. troops, perhaps its recent history would have been less bloody.

**Source:** Excerpts, "Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan: Cokes on the Beach," *Ruses for War: American Interventionism since World War II*, 1992, pp. 82-89.

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