

## Keeping the peace in Lebanon

Beirut, in 1965, was a lovely city. High on a bluff above the Mediterranean, perched on a tiny peninsula, a restaurant offered an almost full-circle view of the horizon. Shimmering seas glowed in the setting sun and the city's heart beat rhythmically.

Beyond Beirut rose the cedar-treed hills of the Chouf Mountains; behind those mountains lay the fertile Bekaa Valley; further east reared the Anti-Lebanon Mountains and, along the Syrian border, camel trains plodded the sands as they have since time immemorial.

Beirut was quiet, a peaceful city in a prosperous land. "We pay no property taxes, no income taxes. Come to Lebanon for the good life," said the Lebanese.

Next day, on tour, our bus skirted a valley near the city limits. Nearly hidden from view sprawled a squalid slum teeming with people living in abject poverty. Families squatted at cooking fires built on muddy ground between running open sewers and packing-crate shelters. Nude children scrambled in the dirt.

"What is that?"

The guide answered, "Oh, that? That's the Druze." His tone expressed his contempt.

"The Druze? Who are the Druze?"

Astonished at such ignorance, "They are nothing." Clearly the subject was closed.

The Druze are no longer "nothing." American marines are in Lebanon, a part of the multinational peacekeeping force that replaces Israelis who are withdrawing to a defensible South Lebanese position. Aboard United States aircraft carriers patrolling the eastern Mediterranean, more American marines await orders.

Druze militiamen, supplied by Syrians, man artillery batteries in the Chouf mountains above Beirut. Their attacks have killed and wounded American marines as well as other members of the peacekeeping forces. Our ships have launched counterfire against this "leftish militia," the Druze.

Who are the Druze? Since the eleventh century A.D. these members of a religious sect, which combines elements of Moslem, Christian, Jewish, and Sufist faiths, have lived near Beirut and Damascus, Syria. Some are Lebanese; some are Syrian. Both countries belonged to the Ottoman Empire from 1517 A.D. until 1918 when they became French mandates.

After World War II, both were declared independent.

Of Lebanon's three million people, one million live in Beirut. Lebanon's area is 4,000 square miles; it is smaller than Connecticut. Syria, with 10,000,000 people, occupies nearly 72,000 square miles. Lebanese are 62% Moslem; 37% Christian. Syrians are 90% Moslem. A year ago, Lebanese Christian militiamen slew an estimated 600 civilians in a Beirut refugee camp. Amin Gemayel's U.S.-backed government represents the Christian element in Lebanon. With arms supplied by Syria, the Druze fight to overthrow the present government in Beirut.

Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona (Republican, hawk, conservative) warns against keeping our forces in Lebanon. He suggests that if there is going to be a Mid-East war, in spite of all the money we have spent there to prevent it, then let them have a war. "Many Lebanese don't care if we are there or not." He is correct.

As long as the peacekeeping force (which does not and cannot keep peace) remains, battles will continue. Our own country is in danger of being drawn more deeply into conflict, a centuries-old conflict. The Druze, the Lebanese, and the Syrians are fighting a religious war, a social war, a war in which all involved seek supremacy over those who espouse faiths different from their own.

What will happen if the peacekeeping force withdraws? Will the Druze prevail? Or the Lebanese? In all probability, Syria (equipped with Russian arms, tanks and planes) will prevail. Unless Israel re-enters the fray, Lebanon will be divided between Syria in the north and Israel in the South. Beirut and its 1,000,000 people may survive as a city-state. Syria already shares its southern boundary with Israel; Lebanon is not a buffer between the two countries.

Poor little Lebanon is but a battleground in a religious war. Long neglected, long despised, the Druze are but a downtrodden minority seizing opportunity now, when the entire countryside is destabilized, to assert rights to existence. The Druze are willing pawns of Syrians, who are willing pawns of Russians, who hope to see Americans embroiled in a Middle East War.

Wars have raged in the Middle East since the birth of civilization on the banks of the Nile River. Our presence at this stage only prolongs the agony. It solves, can solve, nothing.