

16 July 1982

Policy Unit

PRIME MINISTER

THE LEBANESE CONFLICT

I had an hour's talk with Walid Khalidi, arranged by Dennis Walters. Khalidi is one of the leading Palestinian intellectuals, presently Professor of political studies at the American University, Beirut, and holds a chair at Harvard's Centre for Middle East Studies. Although not a member of the PLO, he is an influential adviser to Yassir Arafat. He seemed a thoughtful and straightforward man.

Khalidi believes that the first step in the Lebanon must be a multi-national force to prevent further slaughter of civilians and to begin a process of general disengagement. Sharon, he believes, would never drive his tanks through American, British and French troops. And Israel cannot hope to destroy the 6,000-strong core of PLO (which, he says, is so far intact and in tolerably good heart) without complete control, and in effect virtual demolition, of West Beirut. Once a multi-national force was present, it would be possible to begin reactivating the Fahd plan.

I pointed out that, whatever the humanitarian virtues of this plan, it could be represented as a Western conspiracy to save the PLO. No Western government would be eager to commit troops to keep apart two highly aggressive and well armed adversaries, each of which would gladly fight on to the death. A firm assurance from the PLO that it would withdraw all its men to Syria within a short and specific timetable would surely be a minimal precondition for a multi-national force. Then, and only then, the Syrians could quietly withdraw too, and the Americans would be able to maximise the pressure on the Israelis to pull back, and the reconstruction of Lebanese democracy could begin.

Khalidi agreed, and said that he was sure Arafat would be willing to give such a promise. He had already done so informally. Khalidi said that time was running desperately short, not only for the unfortunate inhabitants of West Beirut, but also for the Middle East in general. The whole region was now threatened by the prospect of fusion between the Arab-Israel conflict and the impact of Khomeini's fundamentalism which has spread far beyond the borders of Iran.

If Arafat and his immediate lieutenants were killed, the hope of an increasingly moderate organisation to speak for the Palestinians would recede for years to come. Arafat dead was a far more potent symbol of Palestinian resistance.

He thought Britain and Western Europe might be able to take a more independent initiative which the US government, particularly with the arrival of George Shultz, would privately welcome, particularly now that there were signs of a change in US public opinion, especially in the Jewish community, as a result of Israeli behaviour in the Lebanon. He agreed, however, that any permanent shift in American public opinion would be a slow process.

I said I would pass on what he had said to me.

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