



## US Can't Save the World: That Includes Lebanon

Doug Bandow

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America exists. Therefore it must save the world. That appears to be the view of *Foreign Policy* columnist Anchal Vohra.

Mixing disappointment and shock, she observed: "Unfortunately for Lebanon, the United States has no active plan to rescue the country – nor is there any indication that one is in the works."

The obvious question is: Why would the US have an "active plan to rescue" Lebanon?

Unfortunately, Lebanon is in great distress – economic, political, social, and moral. Its travails are longstanding and complicated. It is hard to solve any single problem without dealing with the others. Doing so would take extraordinary effort, knowledge, sensitivity, and judgment for anyone, especially an outsider, to develop a plausible solution. As well as substantial resources, enough cash to cover the results of years of corruption, waste, self-dealing, and worse.

All are good reasons for America not to get involved.

Yet that hasn't stopped Lebanese from looking Washington's way. Wrote Vohra: "As the country's economy continues to crash, the hopes of many Lebanese citizens are increasingly invested with the United States. Only Washington, so the prevailing thinking goes, has the power to arrange for an economic lifeline while forcing the political changes Lebanon needs – and the democratic principle to ensure that such changes are truly democratic, by disempowering sectarian political actors and their regional sponsors alike."

This view piles one fantasy atop another. Worst of all, it encourages those who must solve their own problems, the Lebanese, to instead wait for the American *deus ex machina* to magically make their woes disappear. Alas, US miracle workers have not arrived, to the great frustration of the Lebanese people. Vohra noted that "Until now, the United States has only offered ad hoc support, doing the minimum to keep the country from utter collapse. Instead, it has outsourced the Lebanon file to France." However, Paris had no threats to employ, "no stick, no threat of repercussions to encourage a very stubborn – and allegedly highly corrupt – ruling class to change its behavior."

That might be true, but at least France has reason to care about Lebanon since the latter was essentially the former's creation after World War I. Lebanon was designed to be the Christian republic in the Middle East. France retains an interest in its old colonies and other dependencies but has found it hard to save them from themselves. So it is with Lebanon.

In contrast, the US has no compelling reason to step in. Before the civil war, which ran from 1975 to 1990, killing some 150,000 people and driving perhaps a million people from their homes, Lebanon was viewed as the Switzerland of the Middle East. Concern over Israel's involvement brought Washington to Lebanon as part of a nominal "peacekeeping mission" which ended disastrously, with bombings of the US embassy and Marine Corps barracks. In 1984 President Ronald Reagan brought American forces home.

Some Lebanese point to US policy a couple decades later as a model. Political analyst Sami Nader argued: "During George W. Bush's time, mid-2000s, Lebanon topped Washington's agenda, because he saw the first success of his democracy agenda policy in Lebanon, and we saw a lot of hope and support at all levels. Not anymore." Actually, at that time most Americans were focused on the bloody debacle in Iraq, not peripheral dealings with Lebanon.

And whatever Washington did in Lebanon then obviously made no long-term difference. Otherwise Lebanon would not be in crisis today. Lebanon's destiny is in its own hands, not America's.

Yet according to Vohra the Lebanese imagine Americans care about Lebanon and are prepared to divert attention and resources to the failing state. Lebanese "want the United States to stop seeing Lebanon through an Israeli or an Iranian prism and instead hope it will draft a more comprehensive policy centered on cultivating an aspirational democracy."

Lebanese might as well wish for the Tooth Fairy and Easter Bunny to show up bearing gifts. The US cares little about the aspirations of the Lebanese people. Indeed, Washington tolerates the most brutal dictatorships in Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, with but an occasional complaint when the client state goes overboard, such as the Saudi murder plus slice and dice operation on journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Even when the Saudi crown prince kidnapped *Lebanon's prime minister* the Trump administration largely ignored the crime. Moreover, Washington has been fixated on Israel and Iran for decades and isn't likely to change now. These countries matter much more to the US than does Lebanon, which has been in crisis for almost a half century.

Even so, the Lebanese expect not just words of comfort, but serious action. Observed Vohra, protesters wanted the US to "energetically to protect their rights – for instance, by making aid to Lebanon's military conditional on the assurance that it will not target protesters. Furthermore, they say that the United States could easily use its financial prowess to sanction the corrupt and freeze their ill-gotten assets abroad."

Vohra demanded even more, despite how little the US has done in the past. She wrote: "The United States has given just enough aid to keep Lebanon from imploding. But if the country is ever expected to stand on its own feet, it will need the full thrust of US diplomatic and financial power for wide-reaching political reform, perhaps even more than US cash. Lebanon needs America's guarantees to civil society activists that it would raise hell were any of them to be assassinated, its ability to find and punish the corrupt elite who siphoned away people's cash in foreign banks, its threat to use the whip of sanctions that France was too timid to crack, and its insistence on making Hezbollah's disarmament a part of the nuclear negotiations with Iran in Vienna. Absent all that, Lebanon may never recover at all."

Not to be unkind, but how many US policymakers does she imagine wake up every morning thinking about Lebanon? There may be two or three in America, who probably agree with her. Everyone else, not so much. Why would an administration short on confirmed personnel, under fire over Afghanistan, focused on China, more skeptical than its predecessor on sanctions, desperate to escape the Mideast, and in that region interested in little other than Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia devote "the full thrust of US diplomatic and financial power" to ... Lebanon?

This is the moment for a Hollywood laugh-track to play. No administration would do so. Nor should it.

Realistically, what would America likely achieve? Advice is cheap to give, difficult to impose. Washington has "raised hell" about human rights violations variously in China, North Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere, with little effect.

Aid, sanctions, and threats are no panacea. For instance, the US sanctioned Russia, China, Cuba, Venezuela, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Sudan, Syria, Iran, and North Korea, among others. In none did the foreign government surrender on an issue of vital importance. Today Washington is cruelly starving Venezuelans, Syrians, Iranians, and North Koreans attempting of force their governments to comply with American demands. Alas, US officials care nothing about the resulting hardship.

As for Iran and Hezbollah, Washington is most concerned about Tehran's nuclear program while the Saudis, Emiratis, and Israelis demand restrictions on missiles. However, Iran is not going to disarm, including its proxies like Hezbollah, when facing even more repressive and aggressive enemies armed by America, like Saudi Arabia. Nor is it possible for the Lebanese authorities to control that movement without risking renewed civil war.

Lebanon's problems go deep. A sharply divided society burdened by the human carnage of civil war next door in Syria. A thoroughly sectarian and corrupt political system. A territorial battleground between a ruthless ethno-religious state to the south that treats Arabs as second-class human beings and a vicious and virulent Islamist Shia movement acting as a state within a state. A nervous population fearful of any break in the fragile peace established after 15 years of horrendous civil war. An angry, frustrated younger generation without the political heft to overturn a status quo that enriches sectarian elites. A desperate hope for miraculous foreign deliverance from decades of intractable domestic problems.

The US is not Lebanon's answer.

Americans would like to do good in the world. But in truth they have few solutions to offer. For Lebanon the best Washington can do is admit that it possesses no magical powers to dispense with reality.

The Lebanese people deserve a future of hope and opportunity. However, even if Americans try to help, ultimately Lebanon's destiny is only its own. Until that painful lesson is understood and accepted, Lebanon is unlikely to recover.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*