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Lebanon: A Country on Fire

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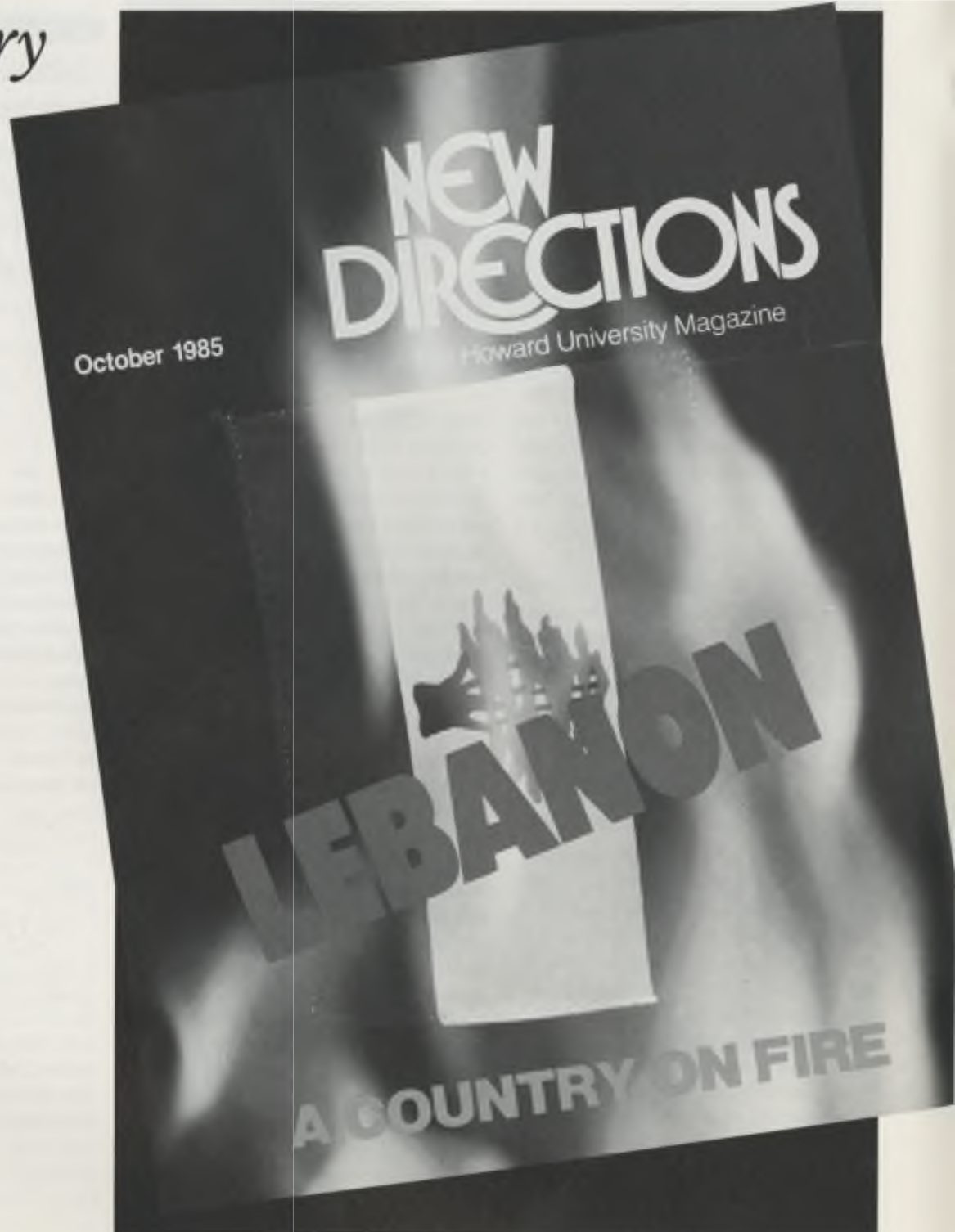## Recommended Citation

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A Country On Fire

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LEBANON

A COUNTRY ON FIRE

L ebanon is literally on fire. Arab blood is spilling across this 120-mile long strip of land along the Mediterranean coast in the Middle East. Six Americans are still being held hostage; many more have been killed. Its population, once about three million, is rapidly dwindling. Its financial and cultural institutions are in ruins. Its once beautiful city of Beirut is divided along religious lines, held under siege by Lebanese Muslim and Christian militas. Its central government has neither the authority nor the power to govern as each warring faction strives to carve out its own territory with the help of regional or external power brokers.

The situation in this once peaceful land is ominous. The impact of the civil war has sent shock waves throughout the Arab world, indeed, throughout the entire world. Closer to home, the bombings of the American Embassy and the Marine headquarters in Beirut, the release from captivity in Syria of Navy Lt. Robert O. Goodman with the help of the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, last year's hijacking of a TWA plane to Beirut and the brutal murder of an American passenger have all been presented dramatically on TV network news and by the print media. Hence the public interest in events occurring thousands of miles away yet touching some of us in one way or the other.

Since 1975, at the start of the current civil war, thousands of Lebanese have died; hundreds more have been maimed for life. Others have been displaced from their communities and those who remained continue to suffer daily bombardments and escalating acts of terrorism. Still more Lebanese have fled from this nightmarish inferno to seek permanent refuge elsewhere in the world, America included.

The conflict in Lebanon, in its pure form, is politics — political power to be precise. One group has it, the others want it. Logical solution has become as elusive as the quest for a lasting peace in the Middle East. The majority Muslim Lebanese are demanding a bigger (fair) slice of the political pie they share with the minority Christian Lebanese. In a sense, the civil war is not exactly a religious conflict — except for the historical accident that the warring factions on each side are Lebanese who happen to be either Christians or Muslims. Inevitably, foreign players — USA, Syria, Israel and others — have been drawn into the conflict to keep Lebanon in the *right* sphere of influence. But the foreign connection in Lebanon, in its historical context, is not a new phenomenon.

The seeds of the current Lebanese civil war were sown at the emergence of Lebanon as a nation after the fall of the Turkish Empire following World War I. The French who were administering the country at the time instituted a territorial change which favored the Maronite Christians. (Once before, in 1861, French influence helped the Maronites win control of the area of Mount Lebanon, then within the Ottoman Empire. The Christian Maronites, followers of a 5th Century monk, settled in Lebanon after fleeing Moslem rule in Syria. Hence the centuries-old Muslim-Christian connection in Lebanon).

Later, a 1943 National Pact *(Mithaq al-Watani)* continued the Christian predominance in government by virtue of a rigid distribution of power that gave the Christian Lebanese six parliamentary seats for every five seats held by the Muslim Lebanese. This formula which the majority population views as unbalanced and outdated — given present realities — has yet to be revised. And herein lies the problem. Hence the violence and mistrust

between the Christians and the Muslims, with each faction holding on to its rigid stance at the cost of near-total destruction of their motherland.

In the 1980s, following the invasion of Lebanon by Israel, the routing of the Palestine Liberation Organization forces from Lebanon, the advent of a multinational force and American Marines, some new elements have surfaced: Religious fundamentalism and the radicalization of the Lebanese, especially the Shiites, who until then had only been spectators to the ugly drama in their country.

As the nightmare, the endemic anarchy and the violence continue indefinitely, with various rebellious Muslim and Christian Lebanese actors vying to impose their own brand of dominion and justice at the barrel of the gun, Lebanon continues to burn. Hence the mounting concern throughout the world.

Starting with the October 1985 edition, we began a series on Lebanon and the genesis of the civil war.

The first installment, "The Politics of Violence," was by Sulayman S. Nyang of Howard University. He presented an overall historical view of Lebanon and the current state of affairs.

In the second installment, Professor Mohamed El-Khawas of the University of the District of Columbia examines the nature and scope of "the foreign involvement" in the Lebanese crisis. He draws special attention to the intervention of Arab states — mainly Syria — as well as Israel and the United States in the decade-old Lebanese civil war.

In subsequent editions, we expect to touch on other key aspects of the Lebanese crisis. Reader comments are welcome.

— Abdulkadir N. Said, editor