“Black May” in Lebanon? US Intervention and the Lebanese Crisis of 1973

Nate George
American University of Beirut, Lebanon
ndg00@aub.edu.lb

This presentation analyzes the role of the United States during a major period of crisis in Lebanon, using heretofore disregarded and recently declassified documents from US Department of State archives. Two armed confrontations in the spring of 1973 viscerally demonstrated the deep political divide in Lebanese society. First, the 10 April Israeli raid on Beirut and Sidon – “Operation Spring of Youth” – in which three top PLO leaders were assassinated. Second, the May battles between the Lebanese army (assisted by Lebanese rightists) and the Palestinian fida’iyyin (joined by Lebanese leftists). New archival evidence shows the US was intimately involved in both crises. US strategy revolved around protecting the precarious regime of Lebanese President Sulayman Faranjiyya against an emerging revolutionary coalition. The Lebanese regime’s inability or unwillingness to defend its national territory greatly fuelled domestic political and social discontent. The crisis accelerated joint US–Lebanese attempts to sabotage the rising Palestinian national movement, whose presence in Lebanon catalyzed the domestic opposition against the sectarian oligarchy. While the US did not intervene militarily, the documents show the US was ready and willing to if necessary, and did much to push its own political agenda as the prime sponsor of the Faranjiyya regime. This presentation argues that this US–Lebanese campaign should be understood as a policy of containment that was directly informed by the experience of Black September in Jordan.