One difficulty the United Nations faced from the beginning was to know whether – or how – to deal with civil wars. Theoretically the organization was not established to deal with domestic conflicts. These appeared to be explicitly excluded from its authority by Article 2(7), prohibiting its intervention in matters within domestic jurisdiction. Yet in a cold war world of diminishing distances, a large proportion of the wars that occurred were civil wars in which there was often some external involvement, overt or concealed. In deciding whether to become involved in such cases one question the organization had to decide was: did the fighting derive only from internal causes, or had there been in addition some intervention from without?

This difficulty, as we saw in Volume 1, had already confronted the organization over Greece, Czechoslovakia and Guatemala. It had occurred over Hungary in 1956 and in some of the colonial conflicts of this decade. It occurred again, in a more difficult form, in relation to Lebanon in the spring of 1958. Here external intervention was strenuously claimed by some members, and as strongly denied by others. The organization had to find, as in Greece, some mechanism for determining which contention was true and, if intervention was occurring, for deterring it.

In early May of that year a situation approaching civil war had arisen in Lebanon. Rioting had first begun as a result of the murder of a newspaper editor who had been critical of the pro-Western policies of the government. This provoked clashes between parts of the Moslem population and those favouring the Christian president of the state, Camille Chamoun, and his government. When it became known that Chamoun intended to seek an amendment to the constitution to enable him to stand for a second term as president, the hostility of the Muslim population increased. Armed bands engaged in confrontation with the police
and the military in a number of centres, especially Tripoli. Cairo radio gave its full support to the anti-government movement. And it was claimed by the Chamoun government that some of those involved in the fighting had come, with the connivance of the UAR Government, from across the border with Syria (recently joined with Nasser's Egypt in the UAR). A Lebanese custom-post had been attacked from Syria, it was said, and boat-loads of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip had been captured.

In the middle of May the Lebanese Government asked the US to send forces to support it against these attacks. The US Government gave a discouraging reply, though units of the Sixth Fleet were sent to the eastern Mediterranean as a precaution. But there continued to be reports in the Western press that US forces might be despatched, and a Tass statement declared that preparations were being made to land US marines in Lebanon under the 'false pretext' that the domestic discontent with the Chamoun government had been inspired by the UAR. In the British parliament Selwyn Lloyd refused to deny that Western governments might intervene in Lebanon if necessary.¹

On 22 May Lebanon appealed to the Security Council, complaining of 'the intervention of the UAR in the internal affairs of Lebanon'. This intervention was said to include the participation of UAR nationals in acts of rebellion against the Lebanese government, a violent press and radio campaign in the UAR designed to overthrow that government, and the infiltration of armed bands and weapons from Syria into Lebanon.

The Security Council twice postponed consideration to allow the Arab League to discuss the matter first. The Arab League, however, was unable to produce proposals that would satisfy the Lebanese Government (which had always expected to find more support in the United Nations). The Security Council therefore began its debate on the matter only on 6 June.

The Lebanese delegate complained that the UAR had supplied arms on a large scale to subversive elements in Lebanon; that it had trained Lebanese nationals on UAR soil; and that members of its armed forces, Syrian and Egyptian, were engaged in terrorist activities in Lebanon. Its radio campaign was clearly designed to bring about the overthrow of the Lebanese Government and to replace it by one subservient to its own views. Its