

# “Leaving them to Stew in Their Own Juice”

*US-Syrian Relations and the Lebanese Civil War, 1981-1984*

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Cover photo: The National Security Planning Group discussing the Beirut barracks bombing, October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1983. Courtesy of Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum

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IV

# Summary

US-Syrian relations in the first half of the 1980's was dominated by the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). US involvement in the conflict started with the 1981 missile crisis in which a stand-off between the Phalange, a Christian Maronite militia backed by Israel, challenged Syria's hold over the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. The Reagan administration saw Syria as a Soviet proxy, but there was no consensus on how to approach Hafez al-Assad's Syria, or the Lebanese conflict. The US entered the stand-off as a mediator, concluding negotiations in late July 1981. But there was little follow-up between Syria and the United States. Instead, the Reagan administration consistently attempted to increase its cooperation with Israel in the Middle East, as well as that of other "moderate" Arab states, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 to combat the PLO, the US again inserted itself into the conflict as a mediator between Syria and Israel, and the PLO and the Lebanese to withdrawal of "all foreign forces" from the country. A multinational force (MNF) consisting US, French and Italian troops was inserted into Lebanon to oversee the withdrawal of the PLO in the summer of 1982. But Syria was deadlocked, refusing to withdraw before the Israelis had. The Israelis for their part refused without a "security zone" southern Lebanon, something which was anathema to the Assad regime.

The US then tried to exclude Syria from negotiations on the future of Lebanon, but from outside the negotiations, the Syrians did their best to "spoil" the US-led mediations that would become the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement in 1983. By September 1983, the US and Syria was on a collision course over Lebanon. The MNF became a target of Lebanese groups backed by Syria, and after a car bomb destroyed the US Marine headquarters in Beirut in October 1983, the Reagan administration was faced with waning Congressional support for their presence in Lebanon. From After a failed air-raid on Syrian positions to "punish" the Syrians for their complicity in the attack on the Marines, Reagan was facing a defeat in Congress in early 1984. Fearing defeat in Congress, Reagan withdrew the Marines from Lebanon, and left the Lebanese civil war under Syrian suzerainty.





# Preface

This is my small contribution to never-ending discussions I've had with friends about the Middle East and United States' role in global politics over the years. Whenever someone has said something to the likes of "the Americans want this..." or "the Americans do this because of that..." I can finally answer confidently that "they did this" because of something I found in a document few people have even laid their hands on since the mid-1980s. When I started this project in 2016 I had no idea how it would turn out, and at the time of writing I still don't.

Without the help of some great people I have come to know, this project would never have been finished. I would first and foremost like to thank my supervisor Hilde Henriksen Waage for having put up with my never-ending questions and late email replies. Without Hilde and Toufoul Abou-Hodeib's seminars what once were overlong and meandering drafts have become slightly less long and hopefully less meandering chapters. I would also like to thank all the other students those seminars as well. I would also like to thank all those who have been struggling with their own master's projects here on the third floor of Niels Treschows hus here at Blindern.

I would also like to thank Jim and Shirley for their hospitality during my stay in Simi Valley, as well as Kelley Gilliland who I randomly met on the bus from LAX to Van Nuys. Originally intent on borrowing a bicycle in the scorching heat of Simi Valley, Kelley took it upon himself to drive me to and from the Reagan Library for almost two weeks.

A debt of gratitude is also owed to Astrid Greve, Martha Holmes and Oda Svisdal who all have jobs and lives of their own, but whose input on my writing has been invaluable.

I would also like to thank my family for, well, being my family.

And finally, I would like to thank Teresa Southwell for making sure that I eat and sleep at correct intervals each day. Without you, I don't even know where to start... Thank you for putting up with my nerdy interests and general weirdness.

Magnus Seland Andersson

Oslo, May 2018







# Table of Contents

1	<i>Introduction</i> .....	1
	Trapped in Rhetoric of Escalation.....	1
	Research Questions and Delimitations: Isolating Syria .....	2
	US Middle East Policy .....	3
	The Institutions of American Foreign Policy .....	6
	Existing Theory .....	7
	Foreign Policy Making in the Reagan Administration.....	7
	Primary Source Material .....	10
	Literature .....	11
2	<i>Hafez al-Assad's Syria</i> .....	15
	From Penetrated State to Mukhabarat State.....	15
	The Challenges of Independence .....	15
	The State Within the State: The Politicization of the Syrian Armed Forces.....	16
	The Muslim Brotherhood and the Ba'ath Party .....	17
	Syria and the Early Cold War .....	19
	Pan-Arab Climax: The United Arab Republic and the Military Committee.....	20
	The Ba'ath Party Seizes Power .....	21
	Jadid's Coup and the "Six Day Walkover" .....	21
	The Rise of Hafez al-Assad and the "Corrective Revolution" .....	22
	The 1973 October War: Assad's Foreign Policy "Realism" .....	23
	"Pax Syriana:" Syrian Intervention in the Lebanese Civil War .....	24
	Outcast: Syrian Relations with the Soviet Union and Iran.....	27
	Going into the 1980s: Challenges at Home and Abroad.....	28
3	<i>The "Strategic Consensus" and the Lebanese Missile Crisis</i> .....	29
	The Phalange Enters Zahleh.....	29
	The "Vicar of Foreign Policy:" Alexander Haig's Troubled Tenure as Secretary of State .	30
	The Situation in Zahleh Seen from Washington .....	31
	Philip Habib Appointed as Special Envoy .....	34
	US Lebanon Policy: "Don't Die, but Don't Get Well Either" .....	35
	Habib in Damascus.....	36
	Contingency Planning in Washington: The "Regionalists" vs. the "Globalists".....	37

Was Assad Signalling Washington? .....	39
The Saudi Backchannel and the Hama Rebellion as Leverage over Assad .....	41
The Road to a Cease-Fire: Was the “War of Katyushas” a Diversion? .....	41
Habib’s Stop-Gap Solution .....	44
Conclusion: Learning by Doing in Lebanon .....	45
4 “Free of all Foreign Forces” .....	47
The Strategic Partnership with Israel .....	47
The Question of a US “Green Light” to Israel .....	48
“Habib the Postman” and the Hama Massacre.....	49
“A Mini-State Department in the Basement of the White House” .....	50
Assessing the Syrian-Soviet Alliance .....	52
“Operation Peace in Galilee” and Habib’s Credibility.....	53
“The Geopolitics of Bechtel:” George Shultz replaces Al Haig .....	55
Mr. Khaddam Goes to Washington.....	56
The Multinational Force: Facilitating the Withdrawal of the PLO from Beirut .....	59
The Negotiating Formula and Lebanon as the “Fifty First State”.....	60
The Reagan Plan and the Assassination of Bashir Gemayel.....	61
The Assassination of Bashir Gemayel and Sabra and Shatilla Massacre .....	62
“Presence” .....	63
Diplomatic Stalemate .....	64
The Soviet Resupply of Syria.....	66
Conclusion: Becoming the “Spoiler” in Lebanon .....	66
5 <i>Entangled in Lebanon</i> .....	68
Into the Quagmire and the “1983 War Scare”.....	68
US-Syrian Dialogue and the Embassy Bombing: “Letting them Stew in their own Juice”. .....	69
The May 17 Agreement and its Discontents .....	73
Israel announces its Withdrawal from Beirut.....	74
“Better than Henry:” Robert McFarlane Replaces Philip Habib.....	75
The Diverging Approaches: Ineffective Diplomacy vs. Gunboat Diplomacy .....	77
McFarlane in the Middle East .....	78
Failing to Avert the “Mountain War” .....	79
The Geneva Negotiations Start and the Role of France .....	81
“Affirmative Action:” McFarlane Lobbies for Direct US Support of the LAF .....	82

	The Battle for Suq el-Gharb: “Aggressive Self-Defense” .....	86
	McFarlane’s Last Meeting with Assad.....	88
	“If Current Concept Proves Inadequate:” Congress and Public Opinion.....	88
	Conclusion: From Spoiler to Adversary.....	90
6	<i>Cutting the Lebanese Knot</i> .....	91
	Introduction: On Collision Course with Syria and Intervening in Grenada.....	91
	The Barracks Bombing: An Attack on the United States and France, not the MNF .....	92
	How to Respond? .....	93
	“Though Oceans Apart:” A Cold War in Lebanon .....	95
	Special Envoy Donald Rumsfeld and the Geneva Conference .....	96
	Retaliation: The Inefficacy of US Airpower in Lebanon.....	97
	Tangled in the Lebanese Knot.....	99
	From “Leaning Somewhat Forward” to “Redeployment Off-Shore” .....	100
	Assad’s “Filibuster” and the the Red-Line Agreement that Never Was .....	104
	“Redeployment Off-Shore” .....	106
	Paganelli Leaves Damascus: Reviewing Syrian-Israeli-US Relations .....	108
	Conclusion: Cutting the Gordian Knot of Lebanon .....	109
7	<i>Conclusion: “Letting them Stew in their Own Juice”</i> .....	110
	The Reagan Administration and Syria after “Redeployment” .....	110
	Explaining the Absence of a “Syria Policy” and the US-Syrian-Israeli “Strategic Triangle” .....	111
	Why US Lebanon Policy Failed: Syria as a “Spoiler” .....	114
	Conclusion: The Inefficacy of Punishing Syria and other Rogue Nations .....	118
	<i>Litteraturliste</i> .....	<b><i>Feil! Bokmerke er ikke definert.</i></b>
	<i>Vedlegg</i> .....	<b><i>Feil! Bokmerke er ikke definert.</i></b>



# 1 Introduction

*If President Obama had crossed his stated Red Line In The Sand, the Syrian disaster would have ended long ago! Animal Assad would have been history!*<sup>1</sup>

*President Donald Trump, April 2018*

## ***Trapped in Rhetoric of Escalation***

On September 5<sup>th</sup> 2013, Donald J. Trump tweeted that “the only reason Obama wants to attack Syria is to save face over his very dumb RED LINE statement.”<sup>2</sup> In 2012, US President Barack Obama had called the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war his “red line” triggering “enormous consequences” for Assad’s regime.<sup>3</sup> “Enourmous consequences” implied military enforcement of the “red line.” Defiantly, the Assad regime had pressed ahead and gassed a part of Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus in August 2013.

In 1983, as the US attempted to negotiate the withdrawal of “foreign forces” from Lebanon, the Reagan administration found itself in a similar position. The defiant opponent was again Syria. A car bomb had killed 241 US Marines stationed in Beirut as part of multinational peacekeeping force. US intelligence pointed to Syrian complicity and Reagan vowed publicly that “this despicable act will not go unpunished.”<sup>4</sup> In 1983, the US response to Syria came in the form of an airstrike on Syrian positions in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon on December 4<sup>th</sup>. For the Reagan administration the air raid became a public relations disaster as two US fighters were shot down and one of the pilots captured by Syrian forces. When faced with the dilemma of escalation – retaliating for the failed retaliatory strike – or backing down, the Reagan administration, chose the latter option. Under pressure from Congress, Reagan withdrew from Lebanon on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984.

As President, Trump would in April 2018 find himself facing this dilemma a second time. On April 4<sup>th</sup> 2017, chemical weapons were again deployed at Khan Shaykun. While Trump had criticised Obama for his “red line” and had campaigned on a campaign of keeping

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<sup>1</sup> (sic) Donald Trump, Twitter Posts, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2018, 6:12 AM, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/982969547283161090>

<sup>2</sup> Donald Trump, Twitter Post, September 5<sup>th</sup> 2013, 1:13 PM, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/375577511473983488>

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” August 20<sup>th</sup> 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>

<sup>4</sup> William E. Farrell, “Unanswered Question: Who Was Responsible?,” October 25<sup>th</sup> 1983, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/25/world/unanswered-question-who-was-responsible.html>

the US out of Middle East conflagrations, Trump now made a U-turn, blamed Assad for the attack, and decided strike a Syrian airbase with cruise missiles. But, as political scientists Brett Edwards and Mattia Cacciatori argues, the “limited nature” Trump’s missile strikes has rather asserted that “persistent and credible accusations (of chemical weapons use) have been of limited direct consequence for the broader war-effort of the [Assad] regime and its main ally Russia.”<sup>5</sup> When yet again chemical weapons were used in Douma on April 7<sup>th</sup> 2018, Trump to took to Twitter to denounce “animal Assad” and his backers, Russia and Iran, tweeting that there was a “big price... to pay” for their support of Assad.<sup>6</sup> After a week of consternation and threats of Russian retaliation, Trump again ordered a missile strike this time against another airfield and the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile, but if this strike is enough to deter Assad from using his chemical stockpile again remains uncertain at the time of writing.

### ***Research Questions and Delimitations: Isolating Syria***

The scope of this study is limited to the time period 1981-1984 focusing on US mediation in the Lebanese civil war. In Lebanon, the Reagan administration attempted to negotiate the withdrawal of “foreign forces” from the country; Syria, the Palestianian Liberation Organisation, and Israel. When examining US-Syrian relations during the Reagan administration several key factors have to be taken into account, while others, due to length requirements have to be precluded from this study. One such factor is the “western hostage crisis” aspect of US-Syrian relations, in which Syria would work as a go-between between the US and various guerrilla groups in Lebanon, such as Hezbollah which had taken western hostages.

In their efforts to negotiate Syrian-Israeli withdrawal the US would become increasingly embroiled in the internal politics of Lebanon, and its relationship with Israel and Syria became strained. But while the Reagan administration consistently tapered over its differences with Israel, US-Syrian relations would by 1983 deteriorate into a potential showdown with Hafez al-Assad and his Soviet backers, before the Reagan administration unceremoniously backed down and withdrew from Lebanon in February 1984.

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<sup>5</sup> Brett Edwards and Mattia Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice: The Case of Syria, 2011–2017," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (2018), p. 291-292.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Trump, Twitter Posts, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2018, 6:00 AM, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/982966315467116544>; Twitter Post, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2018, 6:04 AM, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/982967389028569088>



It is important to note at the outset that the US did not at any point during the Reagan administration had anything which we concretely can call a “Syria policy.” In this study, US-Syrian relations are analysed as two thirds of a “strategic triangle” consisting of the United States, Syria, and Israel. To the Reagan administration, the cold war dominated their outlook, and they approached the Middle East through the “lens” of the cold war.<sup>7</sup> As the only major Soviet ally in the Levant, the Syrians were clearly on the other side. This hostile disposition was exacerbated by Syria’s history of belligerence toward Israel. Historian Robert Rabil’s argues on the US position in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process from the early 1990s and onwards, has “been closer to the Syrian position regarding resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict [but that] Congress has always greatly supported Israel.”<sup>8</sup> This study argues that during the Reagan administration’s first term both the White House and Congress staunchly supported Israel to the detriment of its mediating role in the Lebanese civil war. The Reagan administration revered Israel as a “strategic partner” in the Middle East. But as the Israelis, repeatedly, rejected US peace proposals and cooperation on regional and global issues, Reagan’s White House consistently “turned the other cheek” and re-approached the Israelis with new suggestions of cooperation. To explain why the United States would, consistently, ignore, exclude, and in two instances attempt to bomb Syrian positions in Lebanon, this study is centred around the following research questions:

How did the Reagan Administration perceive of Syria as an actor in the Middle East?

Was there a unified view of Syria? Multiple views? What factors determined the Reagan Administration's approach to Syria as part of the Lebanese civil war? What restricted US policy in Lebanon as Syria became more of an adversary to the US? Why was the Reagan Administration so consistent in its portrayal of Syria as a Soviet client/in a Soviet sphere of influence, and how did this impact US approaches to Syria?

### ***US Middle East Policy***

The threat of Soviet designs on the Middle East after World War II lead to substantial American involvement in national and regional conflicts in the region. The Cold War was a global competition of and for power and influence between the two superpowers that emerged victorious from the second world war, the Soviet Union and the United States. As US diplomat Robert Hare remarked, the end of World War II was to become “the great divide

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<sup>7</sup> Peter L. Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Washington D.C: Potomac Books, 2005), p. 77-78.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Rabil, "The Ineffective Role of the Us in the Us-Israeli-Syrian Relationship," *The Middle East Journal* 55, no. 3 (2001), p. 416.

between our traditional national position of rejecting responsibility in the Middle East, and our post-war acceptance of responsibility on a global or great power basis.”<sup>9</sup> From 1945 to 1980 US policies can be characterized by three interrelated interests: containing Soviet influence in the Middle East, continued access to the region’s vast oil reserves, and the “special American commitment to Israel” and its defence.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the Cold War *containment policy* was the mainstay of US grand strategy.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, from 1945 to 1989 the United States would approach and face conflicts all over the globe in the context of US-Soviet rivalry. It was in this global competition of influence and ideology a decolonizing Middle East became a theatre of great power competition. The following section will give a short summary of how these interests developed from the late 1940s to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

In theory, containment policy meant incorporating Middle Eastern states into Anti-Soviet alliance structures akin to NATO in Western Europe that would deter Soviet encroachment. Alliance structures, like President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s proposed Middle East Command and the realized Baghdad Pact with several Arab states, was to serve this end. Under President Richard M. Nixon, a policy of bilateral treaties was to create a framework of states allied to the United States, and President Ronald Reagan would attempt to forge a “strategic consensus” in the region.<sup>12</sup> In countries the US was unable to influence through diplomatic overtures, the early Cold War was characterized by US-backed political subversion in states like Iran and Syria, and, globally, Washington would go on to back authoritarian anti-communist regimes aimed at preserving stability such as in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In practice, however, the Middle East, a mosaic of ethnic and sectarian tension disguised by seemingly stable dictatorships and conservative monarchies, was a difficult region to manage. As historian John Lewis Gaddis writes: “The very compulsiveness with which the Soviet Union and the United States sought to bring those states within their orbits wound up giving those states the means of escape” as “the dominoes found it, from time to time, useful to advertise a propensity to topple.”<sup>13</sup> In this way the geostrategic logic that

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<sup>9</sup> Michael C. Hudson, "To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of Us Policy toward the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 3 (1996), p. 330

<sup>10</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process : American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), p. 12-14.

<sup>11</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (Penguin, 2006), p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire*, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, p. 128.

guided US policy did not account for the geopolitical realities within which the Cold War was fought, and it proved difficult to reconcile rivalries and conflicts into workable alliances and partnerships.

A stable oil price was a key interest of United States, and US strategic interest in the Middle East originated during the Second World War as policy makers recognized the importance of keeping Middle Eastern oil out of the hands of the Axis Powers. In the post-war era, US economic interest in the Middle East was primarily concerned with access to oil imports (literally) fuelling the post-war economic boom in the United States and Western Europe.<sup>14</sup> The 1973 oil shock, in response to the 1973 October War, accentuated the need for stable oil prices, its connection to economic stability in the West, and continued growth in a sluggish economic environment. As political scientist and former member of Jimmy Carter's National Security Council William B. Quandt writes: "the stability and predictability of oil supplies have been seen as more important than a specific price [...] Still, price cannot be ignored."<sup>15</sup> Fearing the USSR was moving toward the Persian Gulf through Afghanistan in 1979, US President Jimmy Carter announced the "Carter doctrine" under which the US would intervene in the Middle East if the Soviet Union or Iran closed the Gulf off to the global energy market.<sup>16</sup>

Another major US interest in Middle East has been, and still is, a commitment to Israel. Since its establishment in 1948, US aid to Israel has enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress and the White House. Complicating US-Israeli relations was concurrent rhetoric in support of the independence of Israel's Arab neighbours, ostensibly meant to keep them out of the Soviet orbit as the US wanted to distance its presence in the region from the retreating colonial powers of the United Kingdom and France.<sup>17</sup> In Washington this balancing act was thought a cure-all to American objectives in the region: "If Arab-Israeli peace could be achieved, it was thought, Soviet influence in the region would decline, Israeli security would be enhanced, and American relations with key Arab states would improve."<sup>18</sup> However, after the Six-Day War of 1967, US support for Israel increased.<sup>19</sup> And as Israel occupied territories of defeated neighbours, it became increasingly difficult to balance support for Arab states' foreign policy autonomy and Israeli security. Consequently, a peace process between the Arab

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<sup>14</sup> Hudson, "To Play the Hegemon," p. 332.

<sup>15</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Strieff, *Jimmy Carter and the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Yakub Halabi, *US Foreign Policy and the Middle East* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire*, p. 50-57.

states and Israel became more pressing as Washington was unable to effectively project a conciliatory stance. On the other hand, as Soviet-Egyptian relations soured after the 1973 October war, US interlocutors could begin the negotiations leading to the Camp David accords in 1977 in which Egypt concluded a peace treaty with Israel and in return had the Sinai Peninsula returned.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to these three primary interests (fears of Soviet encroachment, oil and Israeli security), others accrued: access to base facilities, ports and other military installations; stability around strategically important sea-lanes such as the Suez Canal, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Hormuz, and cultural and political influence in the Muslim world in general.<sup>21</sup> To conclude, the US has pursued a policy aimed at promoting “stability.” However, different administrations have defined and promoted stability in different ways. And as means and ends have changed because of developments Washington has been able to shape, but only to an extent, US involvement in the Middle East is a complex history that has produced a complex legacy.

### ***The Institutions of American Foreign Policy***

As the chief diplomat of the US, foreign policy is the prerogative of the president. The Secretary of State is the President’s chief foreign policy advisor. But the two of them alone are not responsible for formulating foreign policy. After the establishment of the National Security Council in 1947, the role of Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, more commonly known as the National Security Advisor, has become a significant arena of foreign policy making, often creating rivalries in administrations. In addition, as US foreign policy can also involve matter of national security, the views of the intelligence community as well as the Department of Defence are also taken into account.

Another aspect is the role of Congress and interest groups which can influence political decisions and limit an administration’s political clout. With the adoption of the 1973 War Powers Act, Congressional approval is required for long-term deployment of US forces abroad, as well as passing the military’s budget. Congress also needs to approve of international treaties the United States signs. Interest groups can also influence foreign policy, primarily by lobbying Congress. In relation to the Middle East, many commentators, perhaps best known is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Political scientists John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen L. Walt argue that AIPAC, or “the Israel lobby,” “has convinced

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<sup>20</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, p. 204-206.

<sup>21</sup> Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire*, p. 7-13.

Americans that US and Israeli [national] interests are essentially identical.”<sup>22</sup> Another aspect to also consider is the effects of a sluggish, and at times unwilling, bureaucracy where politically appointees and career bureaucrats can butt heads over policy implementation. But, as political scientist Steven L. Spiegel argues, “[...] the bureaucracy, Congress and interest groups account for the constant picture, but they limit policy; they do not define it.”

### ***Existing Theory***

To understand and make sense of the internal dynamics of US foreign policy-making, theory can provide useful insight. *Neoclassical realism*, a combination of different strands of *realist* theories of international relations provides an ample framework in understanding processes behind US foreign policy formulation and the outcomes it produces. Realist theories treat states as “black boxes” subject only to the pressures exerted by the international system; acting rationally within its de-facto lawless anarchy; governed by the equilibrium produced by the balance of power.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, neoclassical realism argues that “foreign policy choices are made by actual elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matters” and the ambitions of world leaders to influence international events correlates to how they perceive themselves able to do just that.<sup>24</sup> But how “elites” do this is not uniform or necessarily “rational.” This allows for misperceptions and gross underestimates of one’s own capabilities. Neoclassical realism opens the “black box” of policy-making processes to account political infighting, ideology and personal/collective ambition. As Spiegel writes:

“Power [in a presidential administration] is measured by access to and influence with the president. Therefore, when personnel changes within a presidency, the difference can greatly affect the conduct of foreign affairs. The greater the status and influence of the departing official, the more important the change.”<sup>25</sup>

In this way, neoclassical realism recognises the a-historicism that troubles purely theoretically guided approaches, while retaining a realist ontology in which states’ fear other states result in a competition of and for power. With neoclassical realism as a point of departure, one can now look more specifically at how the Reagan administration’s foreign policy process developed.

### ***Foreign Policy Making in the Reagan Administration***

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<sup>22</sup> John J Mearsheimer and Stephen M Walt, "The Israel Lobby and Us Foreign Policy," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 3 (2006), p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr. and David A. Welch, *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: Intro to Theory and History* (Boston: Pearson-Longman, 2014), p. 93-94.

<sup>24</sup> Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998), 167.

<sup>25</sup> Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 393.

The world-view of Ronald Reagan can be described as Manichean or black-and-white.<sup>26</sup> As Robert McMahon comments on Reagan's autobiography *An American Life*:

There is no subtlety [to Reagan's world view]. The rulers of the Kremlin were simply "evil men" with evil intentions... In Reagan's rendering, US-Soviet relations resemble George Lucas's popular Star Wars films in which the forces of light will valiantly battle the forces of darkness...<sup>27</sup>

This "black and white" view of international relations was supplemented by Reagan's Presbyterianism. Reagan was fiercely pro-Israeli and regarded the country as "a strategic bulwark against Soviet intervention in the Middle East."<sup>28</sup> As Reagan's Secretary of State (1981-1982) Alexander Haig wrote in his memoirs, "Israel has never had a great a friend in the White House as Ronald Reagan."<sup>29</sup> Reagan was also dismissive of the Palestinian cause proclaiming in 1977 that "historically [there] was no nation called Palestine."<sup>30</sup> On conflicts which did not neatly fit with his narrative, Reagan often appeared flummoxed. On the civil war in Lebanon an aloof Reagan told an advisor in 1980 that he did not understand why the Lebanese were fighting, lamenting that "After all, they're all Lebanese."<sup>31</sup>

The Reagan administration also struck a hard line on international terrorism. Beginning in the 1970s a slew of nationalist and Marxist groups – or a combination of the two – made their marks in the Middle East, threatened US allies and interests in the region. The Reagan administration believed that the preceding Carter administration had been "soft" when it came to dealing with the Iranian hostage crisis. During the 1979 Iranian revolution, crowds of Iranian demonstrators had stormed the US embassy in Tehran taking its employees hostage. President Jimmy Carter attempted to negotiate their release (as well as organising a failed military raid), but the Reagan administration promised to be tougher. The Reagan administration would follow a "two pillar" strategy. The first "pillar" was that if Americans were targeted in a terrorist attack, the administration would respond with force – the State Department's official policy was to "make state sponsors of terrorism pay a price for their

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<sup>26</sup> Political scientist Betty Glad argues that Reagan's world-view came from an inability to express doubts and anger about his political convictions, and that as a consequence he overcompensated by categorising and projecting his own biases on political opponents regardless of their status; be they Soviet leaders or rioting students. See Betty Glad, "Black-and-White Thinking: Ronald Reagan's Approach to Foreign Policy," *Political Psychology* 4, no. 1 (1983), p. 52-69.

<sup>27</sup> Robert J McMahon, "Making Sense of American Foreign Policy During the Reagan Years," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (1995), p. 381.

<sup>28</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991): 341-342.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander M. Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Policy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1984), p. 167.

<sup>30</sup> Reagan quoted in Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 75.

<sup>31</sup> Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 397.

actions.” The second pillar was to not negotiate with terrorists, and Reagan criticised Carter for offering frozen Iranian assets in return for hostages’ release.<sup>32</sup>

Uninterested in the specifics of policy, Reagan sought to run a “cabinet government.” As chief executive Reagan wanted to outline broad objectives, but he would leave the implementation to experts, and he was himself rather passive in meetings – rarely objecting or speaking up.<sup>33</sup> Cabinet secretaries were the principal advisors on their respective areas, and the National Security Council was “the principal forum for consideration of national security policy issues requiring presidential attention.”<sup>34</sup> In this system, the Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig – later George P. Shultz – was the principal advisor on foreign policy; Caspar W. Weinberger, the Secretary of Defence, was the chief advisor on matters of the military (including the Joint Chiefs of Staff); The Director of Central Intelligence, William Casey, on intelligence matters.<sup>35</sup> On paper this might seem ideal, but in practice meetings in the NSC were unstructured – not helped by Reagan’s passivity.<sup>36</sup> Reagan biographer Lou Cannon writes that this allowed “skilled subordinates [to learn] how to manipulate Reagan by framing their advocacies to activate the response they wanted to produce.”<sup>37</sup> This problematic feature of Reagan’s managerial style was compounded by the machinations of Reagan’s inner circle, colloquially known as “the troika.” Consisting of White House Chief of Staff James A. Baker, his deputy Michael Deaver, and Edwin Meese III, Counsellor to the President, “the troika” worked as a filter between President and his subordinates controlling the stream of information and people into the Oval Office. They were Reagan’s chief advisors and trusted friends. But, as political scientist William Newman argues, since “none of them had foreign policy experience, decision making drifted into disarray.”<sup>38</sup>

As National Security Advisor, Reagan appointed Richard V. Allen. Unlike the three preceding administrations, in which Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski arguably eclipsed their Secretaries of State’s influence, the role was scaled down. The National Security Advisor was instead to “concentrate on inter-agency coordination and ‘long-range

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<sup>32</sup> David C. Wills, *The First War on Terror: Counter-Terrorism Policy During the Reagan Administration* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p. 3-5.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher Maynard, "The Troika: James Baker Iii, Edwin Meese Iii, and Michael Deaver," in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. 529-530.

<sup>34</sup> National Security Decision Directive 2, January 12<sup>th</sup> 1982 , *RRPL-Dig*, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd2.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> William W Newmann, "The Structures of National Security Decision Making: Leadership, Institutions, and Politics in the Carter, Reagan, and Ghw Bush Years," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2004), p. 282.

<sup>37</sup> Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 250.

<sup>38</sup> Newmann, “The Structures of National Security Decision Making,” p. 283.

thinking” and the formulation of policy was to be the purview of the Secretary of State.<sup>39</sup> Allen was to be an “honest broker” between Interagency Groups (IG) and Senior Interagency Groups (SIG) which would draft policies for the President to approve. But unlike other National Security Advisors, Allen reported to Meese, not the President.<sup>40</sup> This system would change when Allen was replaced by William Clark in January 1982, a man Reagan knew and trusted. But Clark, also inexperienced with matters of international crisis, would be replaced by his deputy William McFarlane in October 1983. Under McFarlane’s leadership the NSC would become increasingly closed off to the rest of the administration, and their project to fund the anti-communist Contra guerrilla in Honduras, had, arguably, its origins in their experiences of Lebanon.

### ***Primary Source Material***

The primary source material used in this study was found at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Museum and Library in Simi Valley, California. The archives contain documents that passed through the White House and the executive branch, but other material, such as foreign policy, as well. This becomes especially relevant as one of the central contentions of this study is that US foreign policy is spoken by many voices, and formulated at several different levels. In an administration so fraught with personal politics as the Reagan administration, this becomes especially important, as well as creating methodological problems.

On the source material, three factors should be noted. Firstly, much of the documentary record remains classified. While one can make inferences based on circumstance, this is at best imprudent, and a worst outright distortive. Sources from boxes marked “RAC” means that they were in Remote Archives Captures Program (RAC). This means that they have been scanned and partially declassified.<sup>41</sup> All partially redacted documents used are highlighted in their respective footnotes with an asterisk (\*). As a rule of thumb for this study, the reader has to be able to understand what the document is observing/arguing for it to be used as a primary source. While some may object to writing history without complete access to the source material, one can on the other hand argue that history and historical inquiry is a continuous work-in-progress, and as more documents become available, the story should be rewritten accordingly.

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<sup>39</sup> Kevin V Mulcahy, "The Secretary of State and the National Security Adviser: Foreign Policymaking in the Carter and Reagan Administrations," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1986), p. 291

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> See the US National Archives for more on RAC, no author, “The Remote Archives Capture Program (RAC),” RRPL-Dig, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/declassification/rac.html>



Secondly is the issue of bureaucratic politics. When reading the biographies of Reagan administration officials, as well journalistic and scholarly accounts, one is left with the impression that a lot of the deciding factors in shaping US foreign policy is to be found in the documentary record they left behind. On the one hand, ideology can serve to explain this, but, more crucially, as the bureaucratic politics of the administration was so fraught with personal conflict, one needs to look at other contextual factors. And thirdly, that the Reagan Library has organised its archive around topics, such as Lebanon, the White House staff, or an office. As an example, a large portion of the documents used have been archived under Geoffrey Kemp, Senior Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs and later Special Assistant to the President on National Security Affairs on the National Security Council. As a consequence, one should be reflective of this “personalised” sorting can, though not necessarily, serve to narrow one’s overview to what “landed” on their desk.

### ***Literature***

There exists a vast body of literature on US foreign policy in general and focusing on the Middle East. However, literature dealing specifically with the Reagan administration’s Middle East policies, its strategic and moral reasoning, is lacking. This can probably be explained by two factors: first, as many of the internal documents are still under review for declassification and remain secret, and second compared to other aspects of the Reagan era, the Middle East has not been given as much attention as the Strategic Defence Initiative and Iran-Contra by both the media and historians. This study will therefore highlight an under-researched part of the literary canon on the Reagan Presidency.

As mentioned above, there exists an array of literature on US-Middle East policy, and its complex legacy. Peter L. Hahn’s *Crisis and Crossfire* provides the reader with an excellent jumping off-point, as well as its many appendices of primary source documents.<sup>42</sup> Another contribution focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict comes from political scientist and former member of the National Security Council, William B. Quandt’s *Peace Process*.<sup>43</sup> Large in scope, Quandt argues that as the Arab-Israeli conflict became increasingly volatile in the late 1960s and 1970s, the US inserted itself into the conflict, while straddling contradicting stances on the conflict. Another contribution is that of Palestinian-American historian Rashid

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<sup>42</sup> Peter L. Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Washington D.C: Potomac Books, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process : American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

Khalidi's *Brokers of Deceit: How the US Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East*.<sup>44</sup> Rashidi argues that in the Arab-Israeli peace process, the United States has landed itself in the position of "Israel's lawyer," arguing its case to the international community, as well as consistently shielding it from international scrutiny.

Several works have been written on US-Syrian relations during the early cold war, but, past the 1970's, none has been written with that focus, conveniently skipping the Reagan administration. One of the more recent contributions to US-Syrian relations is J.K. Gani's *The Role of Ideology in US-Syrian Relations*. Gani, though extensive in its scope, covers the cold war until 1975, before, for unstated reasons, jumping to the post-cold war era.<sup>45</sup> The absence of the Reagan administration's intervention in Lebanon and its relationship with Syria goes unmentioned in her account, and she does not explain this matter either. Other accounts of US-Syrian relations are framed within a broader dimension. On the one hand there are those who portray Reagan's foray into peace-making in Lebanon as the as the "first war on terror." Three examples of this trend are Gary C. Wills' *The First War on Terrorism: Counter-Terrorism Policy during the Reagan Presidency*, Robert G. Rabil's *Syria and the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East*, and Marius Deeb's *Syria's Terrorist War on Lebanon and the Peace Process*. Of these three, Wills' *The First War of Terrorism* is the most interesting one. Wills also employs source material used in the Reagan Library, and his focus is on the institutional factors in decision-making, such as the endemic turf wars Reagan's cabinet government produced.

Another recent contribution is Corrin Varady's *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon: Vigorous Self-Defense*.<sup>46</sup> Varady uses some of the same source material as this study, gathered from the Reagan Library, and some of her analysis overlaps with this study. Varady argues that the Reagan administration failed to adequately understand the internal dynamics of Lebanon, as well as the regional dynamics of the Levant, contributing to the Reagan administration's intervention ending in failure. This thesis shares Varady's conclusion, but expands on the Syrian dimension, which is central to understanding this failure. Another important contribution is Fadi Esber's "The United States and the 1981 Lebanese Missile Crisis." Esber, who also uses source material from the Reagan Library, cites Reagan's praise of Habib as "miracle worker" and concludes that "the conclusion of the

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<sup>44</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Brokers of Deceit: How the US Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> JK Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations: Conflict and Cooperation* (New York: Springer, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Corryn Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon: Vigorous Self-Defense* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017)

Lebanese missile crisis cannot be separated from the unique work of Habib.”<sup>47</sup> In this study, Habib’s role is downplayed, and his mediation – effectively a go-between for two intractable opponents, Syria and Israel – Habib’s diplomacy and mediation subject to the pace of events as they unfolded.

This study also uses biographical literature. While Reagan’s subordinates tended to share his world-view, they tended to have very different visions of how to implement it. It is therefore worth noting whose biographies are used in this present study, and how they are used. Political memoirs tend to have an ambition – and title – derived from that to “set the record straight.” Another reason for using biographies is that they give historical actors an avenue to explain their actions – even though their explanations can be self-serving, especially with the benefits of hindsight. The most blatant example of a heavily skewed memoir used in this study is Alexander Haig’s 1984 memoir *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy*. In *Caveat*, Haig writes that he wrote “the truth as [he] saw it” and leaves “those who read what I have written to make their own judgements...”<sup>48</sup> Taking this at face value, historians are not to make judgement of the past – history is not a trial – but, when there exists testimony, we should allow historical actors to testify on their own behalf. And as much of the documentary record on the Reagan administration remains classified, Robert McMahon argues that “[The] memoir literature cannot be ignored” as “it would be foolish to overlook books that draw heavily from that [still-classified] record – at times even quoting liberally from it.”<sup>49</sup>

*Cursed is the Peacemaker: The Diplomat Vs. the General* by John Boykin is a biography of US diplomat Philip Habib. It is framed as a battle of wills between US diplomat, and Reagan’s Special Envoy to the Middle East, and general, Minister of Defence (1981-1983), and later prime minister of Israel (2001-2006), Ariel Sharon. While the book is well sourced (its archival material is accessible from the National Security Archives in Washington D.C.), it has a clear bias in favour of Habib. While biased, the book has been described as the “definitive account” of Habib’s tenure in two contemporary reviews.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Fadi Esber, "The United States and the 1981 Lebanese Missile Crisis," *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 3 (2016), p. 455.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander M. Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Policy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1984), p. 358.

<sup>49</sup> McMahon, "Making Sense of American Foreign Policy During the Reagan Years," p. 369.

<sup>50</sup> Philip C Wilcox Jr, "Boykin: Cursed Is the Peacemaker: The American Diplomat Versus the Israeli General, Beirut 1982," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 3 (2004), p. 122; Richard B Parker, "Modern History and Politics: Cursed Is the Peacemaker, the American Diplomat Versus the Israeli General, Beirut 1982," *The Middle East Journal* 57, no. 3 (2003), p. 520.

Raymond Tanter's *Who's at the Helm: Lessons of Lebanon* is kind of pseudo-biography of the US policy on the Lebanon conflict during his tenure as a senior staff member of the Reagan National Security Council.<sup>51</sup> Tanter argues that the Reagan administration was divided between a "globalist" and "regionalist" factions which competed in influencing an absentee Reagan. The "regionalists" saw US foreign policy from a local perspective, preferring diplomacy and dialogue as their primary tool of US foreign policy. To "globalists" cold war concerns overshadowed all other factors. In the case of US-Syrian relations, as the Soviet Union was Syria's main arms supplier, Tanter writes that "a traditional globalist position is that Soviet-origin weapons should not be used against America's friends."<sup>52</sup> *Who's at the Helm?* is in many ways a critique of the Reagan administration's policy process, but Tanter, worked on the Political Affairs Directorate on the National Security Council (1981-1982), conveniently excises himself from the narrative, though based on the available documentary record as well as later actions, Tanter can be labelled as a "globalist." While some of Tanter's criticism is charged against Reagan, the main culprit in Tanter's narrative is National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane. Tanter charges McFarlane with manipulating intelligence in Lebanon setting precedent for the Iran-Contra scandal and draws a direct line between McFarlane's role in Lebanon and his role in the Iran-Contra.

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<sup>51</sup> Raymond Tanter, *Who's at the Helm? Lessons of Lebanon* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20-21.

## 2 Hafez al-Assad's Syria

*"You can't make war in the Middle East without Egypt, and you can't make peace without Syria."*<sup>53</sup>

*Henry Kissinger*

### ***From Penetrated State to Mukhabarat State***

In 1970 Hafez al-Assad assumed power in Syria, and his rule effectively ended 24 years of political instability. Assad was able to transform Syria from what political scientist Raymond Hinnebusch calls a "penetrated state," with a weak government, easily manipulated and dominated by outside actors, to what historian Andrew Rathmell calls a "mukhabarat state" (intelligence state), a polity dominated by a small clique at the top with military and intelligence backgrounds.<sup>54</sup> These political developments were, on the one hand, a result of sectarian tensions and poorly developed political institutions. As Nikolaos Van Dam writes there was:

A clear relationship between political stability and the degree of sectarian, regional and tribal factionalism among the political power elite: if these factions showed great diversity, the result was political instability.<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, the development of authoritarianism in Syria was a consequence of great power rivalry over the country's cold war alignment and the establishment of Israel on Syria's southern border which was combined with a sense of imperial victimhood. The Assad regime came to reflect these developments in its foreign policy. Assad pursued autonomy from his great power patron in the Soviet Union and his ally-cum-rival Egypt. After the 1973 October war, Assad adapted and sought to put his thumb on the scale in neighbouring Lebanon's civil war to maintain leverage over Israel in the Arab-Israeli peace process from a position of military weakness.

### ***The Challenges of Independence***

In May 1946 Syria gained its independence as the last French troops left Damascus. Since 1920 Syria had been a *League of Nations Mandate* administered by France. The French

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<sup>53</sup> Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations: Conflict and Cooperation*, p. 122.

<sup>54</sup> Rathmell likens "Mukhabarat State" with Latin American *Security States*, seeing Syria as analogous to Chile and Argentina in terms of repression: see Andrew Rathmell, "Syria's Intelligence Services: Origins and Development," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 16, no. 2 (1996), p. 1; Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 143.

<sup>55</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'ath Party* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 71.

mandate in Syria was ill-defined, being “neither a colony nor a protectorate.”<sup>56</sup> The French had “sought to concretize religious divisions” in Syria, giving sectarian minorities legal privileges, guaranteed representation in the French-established parliament and awarded prominent positions in an unpopular regime, especially in the army, to play the minorities up against a resentful Sunni Muslim Arab majority.<sup>57</sup> The sectarian composition of Syria on the eve of independence heavily tilted in favour of the Arab Sunni Muslim majority (69%). Other major demographics were a large (mostly Arab) Christian population (14%), Alawites (11%), Druzes (3%), and Jews and Yazidis (1%).<sup>58</sup> The impact of the “divide and rule”-strategy was exacerbated by France’s vacillations between the extremes of “civilizing” Syrians, through education and social programmes, and violently “disciplining” the population.<sup>59</sup>

In its immediate post-independence years, any semblance of political cohesion dissolved. Before independence, the National Bloc, which represented the interests of wealthy landowning Sunni nobility, dissolved. Its only unifying feature was its opposition to French rule.<sup>60</sup> Politically, Syria had no centre and the polity decayed. Regionalism and personal politics resulted in weak governments which had difficulties enacting nation-wide policies.<sup>61</sup> The cabinet of Syria’s first president, Shukri al-Quwattli of the National Party, held only 24 of 135 seats in the legislature, and Quwattli, a wealthy Sunni landowner, was suspicious of the army’s political role.<sup>62</sup> However, the Sunni elite’s hegemony was faltering, gradually being replaced by mass parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Ba’ath Party, as well as ambitious “strong men” in the army.

### ***The State Within the State: The Politicization of the Syrian Armed Forces***

In 1948 the state of Israel was proclaimed, starting the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflict. For Syria, the 1948 War was a disaster militarily and politically. Animosity between Syria and Israel would come to dominate Syria’s foreign policy as Ba’ath and Muslim Brotherhood activists incited riots protesting the civilian

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<sup>56</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 44-45.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin White, "The Nation-State Form and the Emergence of 'Minorities' in Syria," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 7, no. 1 (2007), 70.

<sup>58</sup> Table 1.3 in Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, p. 15.

<sup>59</sup> Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 7-9.

<sup>60</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, p. 525-527.

<sup>61</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 5-6.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949-1961* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p. 23; Hilde Henriksen Waage, *Konflikt Og Stormaktspolitikk I Midtøsten* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2012), p. 256.

government's lacklustre performance.<sup>63</sup> Popular anti-Zionist pressure on the civilian government emboldened elements within the army led by Husni al-Za'im to organise a coup d'état in March 1949, which is widely held to be backed by the CIA.<sup>64</sup> Za'im's regime lasted only until August when his subordinate, colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, overthrew him, though Hinnawi's rule would itself end in December when he was ousted by his subordinate and co-conspirator Adib al-Shishlaki.

In power, Shishlaki enacted wide-ranging reforms including economic reform and the abolishment of sectarian privileges. Shishlaki's rule was harshly authoritarian, and he banned the political parties and exiled their leaders.<sup>65</sup> However, Shishlaki's rule came to an end in 1954, when, he himself became a victim of conspiracies among his subordinates. After his removal, democracy was restored, and elections were held. Under French rule the armed forces were dominated by sectarian minorities, but after independence its upper echelons were Sunni Arab, including Za'im, Hinnawi, and Shishlaki, who all had gone to extensive lengths to maintain Sunni supremacy.<sup>66</sup>

Ironically, the "strong men's" political machinations and their post-coup purges expunged high-ranking Sunni officers. Vacant positions were filled by minority officers who quickly rose in the military hierarchy as a result of successive purges.<sup>67</sup> For minority families, the army remained one of few arenas of social mobility.<sup>68</sup> Prominent positions also entailed political and economic benefits for minority communities. Sectarian clientelism allowed powerful individuals, such as future president Hafez al-Assad, to build loyalties and relationships entirely within the army along sectarian and ethnic lines.<sup>69</sup> The army had become a state within the state.

### ***The Muslim Brotherhood and the Ba'ath Party***

The Muslim Brotherhood was one of largest parties in democratic Syria, and it was one of few political forces able to elude persecution under Shishlaki. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria

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<sup>63</sup> Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East*, p. 24

<sup>64</sup> For discussions of CIA complicity in the coups see Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East*, p. 35-60; Douglas Little, "Cold War and Covert Action: The United States and Syria, 1945-1958," *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 1 (1990); "Mission Impossible: The Cia and the Cult of Covert Action in the Middle East," *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 5 (2004).

<sup>65</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), 47.

<sup>66</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 28-29.

<sup>67</sup> Moshe Ma'oz, "The Emergence of Modern Syria," in *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. M. Ma'oz and A. Yaniv (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 1986, 24.

<sup>68</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 38.

<sup>69</sup> Eyal Zisser, "The Syrian Army: Between the Domestic and the External Fronts," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2001), p. 5-7; Ma'oz, "The Emergence of Modern Syria," p. 23.

was founded in the mid-1940s by Mustafa al-Siba'i and Muhammed al-Mubarak al-Tayyib. It was one of many Sunni Muslim welfare organisations of the era modelled after its Egyptian forebear. After independence the Brotherhood quickly developed into a parliamentary party. The Brotherhood participated in several governments in the 1950s as it supported the military's moderate social policies, but rejected a secular Syria.<sup>70</sup> Ideologically the Brotherhood promoted an Islamic state in which the Ulama, a body of Muslim scholars, was to be the centre of a "true democracy," a notion that alienated many of the country's non-Sunni Muslims.<sup>71</sup> The Brotherhood was supported by large numbers of urban Sunnis and conservative peasants in and around the city of Hama.<sup>72</sup> Repeatedly the Brotherhood rebelled against the central government in Damascus. Most notably in 1964 and again, as the largest threat to Hafez al-Assad's rule, in the Hama Rebellion from 1976 to 1982.

The Ba'ath Party, or the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party, was founded in 1941 by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. Its ideology centred on pan-Arab nationalism, seeking to unify all Arabs in a nation-state. The party "preached a national renaissance – Ba'th – to be achieved through the overthrow of the decadence and social injustice of 'feudal' society" demanding a state-centred economy, social welfare, and agrarian reforms. The party was secular, but Islam was seen as an inherent cultural characteristic of the Arab nation.<sup>73</sup> Ba'athists rejected the established territorial states in the Middle East. Consequently, every "national" Ba'ath Party (Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese etc.) labelled themselves as a "regional branch" of a unified Ba'ath Party, but it never developed into a cohesive transnational party.<sup>74</sup> Instead of operating in solidarity, the different "regional branches" became rivals, competing for the authentic Ba'ath Party brand.

Ba'athi influence extended into the army, dominated by poor minority officers, and civil society. In Syria, support for the Ba'ath Party was in large a combination of minority supporters (Alawis, Druzes, Isma'ili), often in urban centres, and the peasantry in the country side, but also educated young professionals. These groups were all segments of the electorate that were alienated by the personal politics of the Sunni aristocracy, and/or the proselytism of Muslim welfare organisations. Gradually, intraparty tensions between the military and civilian

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<sup>70</sup> Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the 'Struggle for Syria', 1947–1958 between Accommodation and Ideology," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2004), p. 139.

<sup>71</sup> Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 35

<sup>72</sup> Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945–1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology," *The Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011), p. 221-222.

<sup>73</sup> Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, p. 30.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*



wings of the party would, in the long term, lead tension and denunciations of party members, eventually pushing out party founders Bitar and Aflaq in 1965.<sup>75</sup> However, combined, the civilian and military wings of the Ba'ath party built a durable coalition. As Raymond Hinnebusch writes, this nationalist-populist coalition would amass "enough brains (intellectuals), guns (the army), and numbers (peasants) to challenge the oligarchy" of the Sunni landowners.<sup>76</sup>

### ***Syria and the Early Cold War***

The 1948 war with Israel alienated Syrians from the United States and the West, who backed Israel. Both the Ba'ath Party and the other radicals such as the Communist Party, and the conservative Islamic groups, foremost the Muslim Brotherhood, all rejected western influence in Syria.<sup>77</sup> Popular opinion constrained the military regimes of Za'im, Hinnawi, and Shishlaki who all, initially, saw cooperation with the US as a source of revenue (through aid) and security (through arms deals) from Israel and their own subjects.<sup>78</sup> After the cessation of hostilities between Syria and Israel in 1948, a de-militarized zone was established on Syrian-Israeli border, over which Israel was gradually able to assert sovereignty over occupied territories.<sup>79</sup>

By the mid-1950's, even before the fall of Shishlaki, US-Syrian relations were characterised by misreading of and mistrust in each other's intentions.<sup>80</sup> Syrian public opinion of the United States became rapidly strained because of US support of Israel and rumours of complicity in the coups in 1949. Syria rejected both the Middle East Command and the Baghdad Pact, two US-led regional defence pacts in 1955, and looked to the Soviet Union and Egypt as patrons. Egypt's charismatic President Gamal Abdel Nasser, hugely popular in Syria, also rejected how US aid came with caveats. In 1954 Syria secretly secured arms from the Eastern bloc. Between 1954 and 1957 Syria would receive more than £100 million in arms from the Soviet Union.<sup>81</sup> In 1955, Egypt secured its own deal with Moscow, acting officially through Czechoslovakia. In this way, the Soviets had "leapfrogged" US containment.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 64-65; Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 60.

<sup>76</sup> Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, p. 35-36.

<sup>77</sup> Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the 'Struggle for Syria', 1947-1958 between Accommodation and Ideology," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3, p. 147.

<sup>78</sup> Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations*, p. 41.

<sup>79</sup> Hilde Henriksen Waage and Petter Stenberg, "Cementing a State of Belligerency: The 1949 Armistice Negotiations between Israel and Syria," *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 1 (2016), p. 88.

<sup>80</sup> Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations*, p. 41-44.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>82</sup> David W Lesch, "When the Relationship Went Sour: Syria and the Eisenhower Administration," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1998), 98.

In the aftermath of the 1956 Suez Crisis, in which Nasser successfully nationalised the Suez Canal Company and fended off a British-French-Israeli attempt to unseat him, the Eisenhower doctrine was announced: US would give military and economic aid to states combatting international communism.<sup>83</sup> This policy directly influenced Syria when in 1957, Syrian counterintelligence uncovered a US-backed plot overthrow the Syrian government, leading to the “Syrian crisis” in August 1957. Only a few weeks before Syria’s defence minister Khalid al-‘Azm had visited Moscow. All states in the region, except for Syria and Egypt, were consulted and courted by Washington in this effort and Turkey and Jordan would potentially support the coup in Syria militarily. In the US-Syrian diplomatic row Syria expelled three US diplomats, the US reciprocated, and (again) the Syrian army was purged. Syria also replaced the military’s chief of staff with a vocal pro-Soviet colonel and Moscow warned the Turks not to interfere in Syria.<sup>84</sup>

Syrian-Soviet relations were, however, not without its own complications. In approaching the Soviets, Syria sought great power protection and weapons, but in return Moscow wanted political influence in Damascus. However, Moscow found little support for a “world proletarian revolution,” a notion that conflicted with Arab nationalism, and the Ba’athists saw Syrian communists more as rivals, than as allies. Instead, as Patrick Seale notes, it was a “relationship of convenience, with little depth or conviction to it. At no point was Syria a Soviet Cold War pawn.”<sup>85</sup>

### ***Pan-Arab Climax: The United Arab Republic and the Military Committee***

The “Syrian Crisis” contributed to a widespread belief among Syrians that Syria would always be a victim of imperialist aggression.<sup>86</sup> And again it was the army that took the initiative, initiating political union with Nasser in 1958 creating the United Arab Republic (UAR) without consulting the civilian government.<sup>87</sup> Nasser, initially reluctant, but assured that he would be the union’s undisputed leader, accepted. Because of Nasser’s leadership style, Syria was relegated to junior partner, and Syrian enthusiasm for the union quickly abated.<sup>88</sup> By 1960, Syrian officers stationed in Cairo created the secret Military Committee, a

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>84</sup> Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations*, p. 57-59.; Lesch, "When the Relationship Went Sour," p. 102-104.

<sup>85</sup> Patrick Seale, "Syria," in *The Cold War and the Middle East*, ed. Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 56.

<sup>86</sup> Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations: Conflict and Cooperation*, p. 59; Lesch, "When the Relationship Went Sour," p. 104.

<sup>87</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 54.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

tight-knit group of Ba'athi officers that would come to dominate Syrian politics for the next decade. Among its founding members were Muhammed Umran, Salah Jadid, and Hafez al-Assad.<sup>89</sup>

### ***The Ba'ath Party Seizes Power***

In 1961, a military coup marked Syrian secession from the United Arab Republic. The period from 1961 to 1963 was one of political instability. A stable government lead by the Ba'athist National Revolutionary Council was not in place until March 1963, piggybacking on the political ambitions of General Ziyad al-Hariri. Hariri was dependent on Ba'athist support, but within a year Hariri was purged, replaced with Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni Arab and a political dupe to be dominated by the (still secret) Military Committee.<sup>90</sup>

Now ascendant, the Military Committee's nascent rivalries came to the fore. The unity of the Military Committee itself was threatened as Muhammed Umran, the only Sunni of the Military Committee and the Minister of Defence, mounted a campaign of sectarian fearmongering for which he was expelled in 1966. Key positions in the army were gradually becoming more Alawi as Sunnis and members of the other religious minorities were gradually outmanoeuvred.<sup>91</sup> In power, the Ba'ath Party was quickly challenged from both outside and within the party. The Sunni majority was unreceptive to Ba'athist nationalisation of industry and finance. Other political parties, rejected single party rule. Intra-party tensions were further accentuated by the 1964 Islamic uprising in Hama, the Muslim Brotherhood stronghold. After some consternation and deliberation, the military crushed the rebellion.

### ***Jadid's Coup and the "Six Day Walkover"***

In 1966, Salah Jadid executed another coup d'état unseating president Amin al-Hafiz and jailing Muhammad Umran. Jadid did not take any formal position in government, cementing an impression that the army was now the only institution that mattered in Syrian politics.<sup>92</sup> Jadid's rule was more authoritarian than his predecessors, and his radicalism more pronounced. He promoted land reform and state ownership. In foreign policy Jadid was uncompromising towards Israel, and sought more Soviet military aid.<sup>93</sup> By the spring of 1967 Syrian-Israeli relations was reduced to increasingly violent rhetoric, escalating into an air battle over Syrian territory, leading into war in June 1967.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p 62.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

<sup>91</sup> For an extensive account of sectarianism in the army see Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 38-41.

<sup>92</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 105.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 108; Waage, *Konflikt og Stormaktspolitikk*, p. 267.

The June 1967 War with Israel was a massive defeat for Syria, ending with the strategically vital Golan heights on its southern border occupied by Israel after only six days. To regain lost territory, Jadid sought closer cooperation with the Soviet Union and from 1967 a massive armaments program was enacted, enlarging the army from 50 000 troops to 225 000 in 1973 equipped with modern Soviet weaponry. Syria was completely dependent on Soviet material, but it would still not, much to Moscow's chagrin, give it any say in policy.<sup>94</sup>

The diplomatic fallout from the war left Syria isolated, but firmly within the Arab camp. Syria did not sign the Khartoum Resolution along with the other Arab belligerents that stated that there would be "no recognition, no negotiations, no peace agreement, and no abandonment of Palestinian rights," and would not open any back channels with Israel or the US like its allies would.<sup>95</sup> At the resumption of UN talks in October 1967, United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, was passed. It called for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories and an end to Arab belligerency. The resolution was refuted by the Syrian government, but Jadid's leadership was severely weakened by Syria's performance in the Six Day War which would contribute to his downfall.<sup>96</sup>

### ***The Rise of Hafez al-Assad and the "Corrective Revolution"***

As mentioned above, the French Mandate empowered and mobilized Syria's minorities politically and economically and gave minorities privileged access to the military. One of the many that would benefit from this policy was Hafez al-Assad. Born in Qordaha in north-western Syria in 1930 to a poor Alawi family, Assad was the first in his family to attend school in Latakia. In Latakia, the young Assad joined the Ba'ath Party, regularly clashing with their rivals in the Muslim Brotherhood. Assad aspired to become a doctor, but with his family unable to pay tuition, he joined the then-infant Syrian Air Force in 1950.<sup>97</sup> Ascending the ranks rapidly, he was sent on a six-month training mission to the Soviet Union in 1955, and was stationed in Cairo during the short-lived union with Nasserite Egypt. In Egypt, Assad became a founding member of the Military Committee. By the 1963 coup d'état Assad was a "full time political conspirator".<sup>98</sup>

The events of "Black September," the Palestinian Liberation Organization's attempted take-over of Jordan in 1970, hastened Jadid's downfall when he attempted to assist the PLO.

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<sup>94</sup> Seale, "Syria," p. 64.

<sup>95</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 46.

<sup>96</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 145.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 6-7, 24-26, 35-40.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

But with the support of Israel, King Hussein expelled the Palestinians. Assad had supported the radical faction of Jadid, but Assad became disillusioned with Jadid's political project and fomented the tension between the civilian and military branches of the party. Formally in charge of the army and its intelligence apparatus, Assad replaced Jadid loyalists with his own. At the Ba'ath Party conference that same autumn, the leadership struggle came to a boiling point. When the congress ended, Assad arrested his opponents and assumed power in Syria.

Assad's coup was bloodless, and he referred to it as the "Corrective Movement," ostensibly to rehabilitate the unpopular Ba'ath party in the eyes of the public. He liberalized the economy, stopped promoting class warfare, relaxed censorship (at least initially), and he publicly embraced an Islamic identity. As a result, he enjoyed the support of many Syrians, including a growing number of the Sunni bourgeoisie. In control of state and with the (tacit) consent of the people, Assad built a more durable government than his predecessors. Already in his first year he appointed several Sunni ministers, among them his military compatriots and long-time followers like Mustafa Tlass, who became chief of staff of the army, and Abdul Halim Khaddam who became Assad's foreign minister. The key to Assad's rule was not sectarian affiliation, but personal loyalty to the man himself. Among them, was also Assad's younger brother Rifaat al-Assad who became the leader of the regime's defence companies.<sup>99</sup>

### ***The 1973 October War: Assad's Foreign Policy "Realism"***

Assad's regime was less responsive to popular pressure or ideological blinkers, and his foreign policy outlook can be described as "realist."<sup>100</sup> To defend his regime and reclaim the Golan Heights, Assad needed more Soviet-made arms and military support from Egypt. But while the Russians were hesitant, Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat closely coordinated with Assad.

On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1973, the joint forces of Egypt and Syria struck Israel, and while the initial phase was a success for the Arab armies, the Israelis repelled the advance and counter-attacked into Syria. A UN-negotiated cease fire, United Nations Security Council Resolution 338, took effect on the 25<sup>th</sup> October.

The October War produced mixed results for Assad. He kept control of the country, his regime unshaken, but Egypt, began negotiations with Tel Aviv and the US much to Assad's chagrin.<sup>101</sup> Sadat however, demanded that a disengagement agreement also be signed

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<sup>99</sup> Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (London: NYU Press, 2001), p. 8; Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 119; Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p. 182.

<sup>100</sup> Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, p. 151.

<sup>101</sup> Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations*, p. 119.

with Syria so as not to isolate Egypt in the Arab world. With negotiations with Egypt underway, the US sought to placate Syrian demands vis-à-vis Israel. Thus, the October War ended Syria's diplomatic isolation from the west and in 1974, after a visit by President Richard Nixon, full diplomatic relations between Washington and Damascus were restored. The US-mediated talks quickly arrived at an impasse: Syria was in no position to make any serious demands of the Israelis or Washington, but a potentially renewed Arab oil embargo restrained the Americans.<sup>102</sup> Eventually, after six months of shuttle diplomacy, the Syrian-Israeli Disengagement agreement, which included UN observers on the Golan, was signed. During his shuttle diplomacy, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Advisor, remarked that "you can't make war in the Middle East without Egypt, and you can't make peace without Syria."<sup>103</sup>

Rejecting the peace process, as domestic opinion already constrained Assad's bargaining position, but incapable of challenging Israel, Assad adopted a covert approach to impacting US-brokered initiatives. The Syrian President employed an extensive network of paramilitary and so-called "fedayeen" ("those who sacrifice themselves"), to put pressure on Israel.<sup>104</sup> Syrian Air Force Intelligence, which Assad had controlled since becoming Defence Minister in 1965, coordinated the groups' activity on the Golan Heights and Israel's northern border.<sup>105</sup> For his harbouring of PLO affiliates Syria on the US State Department's newly created "State Sponsors of Terrorism" list in 1979, severely restricting any economic relations with western countries.<sup>106</sup> As the Disengagement Agreement curbed Syrian-Israeli tensions on the Golan Heights, Lebanon was descending into civil war that would soon pose a dilemma for Assad.

### ***"Pax Syriana:" Syrian Intervention in the Lebanese Civil War***

The French Mandate in the Levant had parcelled out Lebanon from Syria as a Christian Maronite majority country in 1920. In 1958, sectarian and political tensions, chiefly that of Lebanese Muslims who wanted Lebanon to join the short-lived UIR with Syria and Egypt, challenged the rule of Lebanese President Camille Chamoun, who appealed to the Eisenhower

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<sup>102</sup> Lars Hasvoll Bakke and Hilde Henriksen Waage, "Facing Assad. American Diplomacy toward Syria, 1973–1977," *The International History Review* (2017), p. 4-10

<sup>103</sup> Gani, *The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations*, p. 122.

<sup>104</sup> Diane Tueller Pritchett, "The Syrian Strategy on Terrorism: 1971-1977," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 8, no. 3 (1988), p. 36.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Rathmell, "Syria's Intelligence Services: Origins and Development," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 16, no. 2 (1996), p. 2-3.

<sup>106</sup> Rabil, "The Ineffective Role of the Us in the Us-Israeli-Syrian Relationship," 416.

administration for assistance. Eisenhower sent in 14 000 US troops in a successful intervention, Eisenhower later described as having “without [leaving] a nasty aftertaste.”<sup>107</sup>

The Jordanian Army’s ouster of the PLO in 1970 had them to evacuate to Lebanon. As the PLO asserted itself in the country supporting Kamal Jumblatt’s Druze militias, it complicated the precarious sectarian balance in Lebanon’s political system. In Syria, the two countries were seen as bound by what the Syrian government called “distinct relations... a “thinly veiled euphemism” for Syrian interference and subversion. To Syrian nationalists Lebanon was part of “Greater Syria,” an idea Assad publicly paid lip-service to.<sup>108</sup> However, as Raymond Hinnebusch concludes, “Geopolitics, not domestic politics, offer the best explanation of Syrian intervention in Lebanon.”<sup>109</sup>

In 1974 Assad began negotiations with Lebanon to allow for Syrian early warning air defence systems in the Beqaa Valley to protect Syria’s western flank from the Israeli Air Force.<sup>110</sup> As the political situation in Beirut deteriorated in the winter of 1975-76, Assad faced a dilemma. As Seale writes:

As the violence [in Lebanon] grew [Assad] envisaged two possible outcomes, both equally horrendous: either the Maronites would set up a separate state, which would bring in Israel as its protector, or the radicals with Palestinian backing would beat the Maronites which would bring in Israel as punisher. If Syria intervened it faced defeat; if it remained on the side-lines, Lebanon would fall to the enemy.<sup>111</sup>

The strength of the PLO provided another incentive for Syrian intervention in Lebanon. A too-powerful PLO might demand a seat at the table in a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. De facto control over the PLO could give Assad a prestige boost in the Arab world as an anti-Zionist bulwark, and at the same time it would strengthen Syria’s position in negotiating with the Israelis.<sup>112</sup> Intervention, while costly, would therefore solve two of Assad’s problems: it would protect his investment in the Lebanese status quo (forward bases in Lebanon) and assert his leadership as an anti-Israeli bulwark, effectively giving Assad a veto in a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement unfavourable to Syrian interests. In control of a large section of Eastern Lebanon and an intelligence network connecting it to the major non-state factions and militias in the country, Syria could tip the balance of power in the Levant,

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<sup>107</sup> Douglas Little, "His Finest Hour? Eisenhower, Lebanon, and the 1958 Middle East Crisis," *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 1 (1996), p. 53.

<sup>108</sup> Bassel Salloukh, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," *Middle East Report* 236 (2005), p. 14.

<sup>109</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "Pax-Syriana? The Origins, Causes and Consequences of Syria's Role in Lebanon," *Mediterranean Politics* 3, no. 1 (1998), p. 139

<sup>110</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), p. 182.

<sup>111</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 276.

<sup>112</sup> Salloukh, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," p. 15.

allowing Assad to potentially dictate a settlement on Syrian terms, establishing a Syrian peace, a *Pax Syriana*.

Having sensed a burgeoning crisis in Lebanon that could derail Israeli-Egyptian negotiations, Henry Kissinger, now-secretary of State in the Gerald Ford Administration, warned that a “Syrian defeat in Lebanon would be a disaster” for the region. Kissinger further argued that a defeat could derail the progress of the Egypt-Israeli talks, and potentially destabilise Syria.<sup>113</sup> The Syrians were also eager to extract a “green light” from Kissinger to guarantee that Israel remained on the side-lines. And while such an agreement might seem likely, given that the Israelis did not intervene (at that point), actual documentary evidence of the so-called “Red-Line Agreement” in which US pressure stymied Israeli military action is scant. As historian James S. Stocker writes:

[US] leaders thought that the Israelis were likely to forcefully oppose any Syrian deployment to Lebanon. There was thus no green or yellow light from the United States to Syria. [The] red lines given by Israel were not nearly as clear as many have assumed. Although the US role in influencing events in Lebanon was important, the Red Line Agreement is a historical red herring.<sup>114</sup>

It is however noteworthy that the Red Line, a lateral line from the city of Sidon in southwestern Lebanon in the direction of Damascus,<sup>115</sup> demarcated Syrian and Israeli spheres of influence in Lebanon, a de-facto partition of Lebanon, undercutting the authority of Lebanon’s embattled political institutions.

On May 31<sup>st</sup> 1976, on the invitation of Lebanese Maronite President Suleiman Frangieh, the Syrian army crossed into Lebanon. Syria’s intervention was widely condemned in the international community and especially in the Arab world. The Syrian-Christian offensive against the PLO proved to be a military setback for Assad. Unable to curb the Palestinians quickly, Assad sought to secure the support of the Arab League for his intervention, granting it some inter-Arab legitimacy. The League’s support was conditioned on the continued presence of the PLO and a ceasefire in Lebanon. Anticipating that the League members would be hard-pressed not to send more than “token numbers” as part of an “Arab Deterrent Force” to Lebanon, Assad accepted. The League’s support *de facto* recognised Syrian hegemony in Lebanon.<sup>116</sup> The ADF mandate called for 30 000 League soldiers – partly to allay criticism of a Syrian occupation. The member states were unwilling

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<sup>113</sup> Bakke and Waage, “Facing Assad,” p. 19.

<sup>114</sup> James R. Stocker, *Spheres of Intervention: US Foreign Policy and the Collapse of Lebanon, 1967-1976* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 171.

<sup>115</sup> Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall* (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), p. 344.

<sup>116</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, “The Changing Prism: Syrian Policy as a Mirror, an Issue and an Instrument,” in *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. M. Ma'oz and A. Yaniv (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 182-183; Stocker, *Spheres of Intervention*, p. 213.



to contribute to the ADF. In the end, the League agreed to let the newly elected pro-Syrian Lebanese President Sarkis settle the issue. The PLO on the other hand had demanded the Syrian contingent not exceed 10 000 soldiers in total. Assad's gamble had paid off: Sarkis' 1976 election victory was secured by Syrian backing and now Sarkis reimbursed Assad by inviting 25 000 Syrian soldiers.<sup>117</sup> Inter-Arab negotiations would on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1976 produce a lasting cease-fire, the Riyadh Agreement, "allegedly the fifty-seventh since fighting [in Lebanon] began in April 1975."<sup>118</sup> Assad's position in Lebanon was secure.

An irony of the "Red Line" was that Syrian troops would not pursue the PLO into southern Lebanon. This produced what Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1977 called the "absurd situation" in which "PLO terrorists, Israel's sworn foes, found asylum under an Israeli 'deterrent umbrella' intended against the Syrians."<sup>119</sup> After a PLO terrorist attack in Israel on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1978, the Israeli forces crossed the Litani river into southern Lebanon to quell the PLO insurgency. The Israeli campaign occupied southern Lebanon, creating a "security zone," to be administered by the South Lebanese Army, a Maronite Militia, a close ally of the Israeli government.<sup>120</sup> After five days of fighting, UN resolutions 425 and 426 established *United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon* (UNIFIL) to oversee the Israeli withdrawal.

### ***Outcast: Syrian Relations with the Soviet Union and Iran***

The Soviet Union, Syria's great power ally, had been highly critical of the Syrian intervention in Lebanon. Moscow feared a renewed Syrian-Israeli war. Moscow was also highly suspicious of the new regime in Iran. The lack of other workable clients in the region would eventually sway Moscow back into supporting Syria's position in Lebanon.<sup>121</sup> In 1980 Syria and the Soviet Union signed Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.

In January 1979, revolution in Iran toppled the regime of the US-backed Shah. The revolution, and the new government of Ayatollah Rohallah Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran, was "a timely gift" for Assad.<sup>122</sup> The Camp David Accord signed in 1978 had left Syria isolated in the Middle East, but Assad and Khomeini had common enemies: Israel, the US and

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<sup>117</sup> Taku Osoegawa, *Syria and Lebanon: International Relations and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (IB Tauris, 2013), p. 30-31.

<sup>118</sup> Stocker, *Spheres of Intervention*, p. 213.

<sup>119</sup> Rabin quoted in Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, p. 347.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 414.

<sup>121</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Moscow, Damascus and the Lebanon Crisis" in M. Ma'oz and A. Yaniv *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 227.

<sup>122</sup> Yair Hirschfeld, "The Odd Couple: Ba'athist Syria and Khomeini's Iran," in *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. M. Ma'oz and A. Yaniv (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 120.

Iraq. When Iraq invaded Iran in August 1980, Assad condemned Saddam Hussein's belligerence and the Syrians went to great lengths to disrupt an "Arab unity" meeting convened in Amman in November 1980. Assad amassed 30 000 troops on the Syrian-Jordanian border to dissuade attendance and a united anti-Iranian Arab response, alienating Syria from Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, as the Islamic Republic came under US sanctions after the revolution, and as its ideology alienated the Soviet Union, Syria became the conduit of illegal weapons sales to Iran, often purchased in Syria's name from the Eastern bloc.<sup>123</sup> Syrian-Iranian bonds grew closer and their alliance was formalized in 1982.

### ***Going into the 1980s: Challenges at Home and Abroad***

Assad had ascended the ranks of the military as his commanders embroiled themselves in deadly games of conspiracies and counter-conspiracies - shrewdly waiting out his rivals. Before stepping into the limelight, Assad had cultivated a network of personal alliances and his Corrective Movement's ease at capturing the Syrian state. What the Ba'ath Party lacked in legitimacy it compensated for with repression. From 1976 the Muslim Brotherhood again challenged the regime in a prolonged campaign of assassinations and bombings, able to reach far into Damascus, the heart of Ba'athist Syria. Assad's leadership style also changed as well. He became reclusive, his health declined, and "by the 1980s [Assad] had become a disembodied voice on the telephone."<sup>124</sup>

Assad and his predecessors feared Israeli military power. Constrained by a fervent anti-Zionist public opinion, which they themselves had undoubtedly encouraged, Syria never pursued a diplomatic relationship with Israel. After the 1973 War, military confrontation with Israel had proved futile, and accordingly, Assad changed his strategy, rejected the US-peace process. Assad's 1976 intervention in Lebanon strengthened his hand vis-à-vis Israel, but his campaign of terrorism in the Golan and Lebanon, as well as his harbouring of PLO affiliates and the Abu Nidal Group would land Syria on the US State Department's newly created "State Sponsors of Terrorism" list in 1979, severely restricting any economic relations with western countries.<sup>125</sup> Diplomatically, Syria was isolated from the west and especially the US. By making Syria indispensable in settling the Lebanese civil war, Assad would come to embody Kissinger's truism: That in the Middle East "you can't make peace without Syria."

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<sup>123</sup> Mohsen Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2013), p. 79-81.

<sup>124</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 341.

<sup>125</sup> Rabil, "The Ineffectiveness of the US in the US-Israeli-Syrian Relationship," p. 416.

### 3 The “Strategic Consensus” and the Lebanese Missile Crisis

*The situation in Lebanon looks as if it could lead to a war no one wants. It reminds me of World War I crisis that resulted in a war no one wanted. Anyway, it is my understanding that Syria cannot defeat Israel.*<sup>126</sup>

*President Ronald Reagan*

#### ***The Phalange Enters Zahleh***

In December 1980 the Phalange militia, the military wing of the Christian Maronite Kataeeb Party, entered Zahleh in the Bekaa Valley. Syrian forces in Lebanon had positioned themselves in the Bekaa Valley in central Lebanon. In Damascus, the valley was seen as an invasion route from Northern Israel directly into Damascus. It was paramount to keep it under Syrian control, directly or by proxy. However, after Assad had scuttled the Arab Unity meeting in 1980, Arab League subsidies of the Syrian-led ADF ended and Syrian forces were regrouped in the Bekaa Valley, including Zahleh, the regional capital. In place was an understanding that the Phalange was not to move into areas that the Syrians withdrew from.<sup>127</sup>

Bashir Gemayel, the commander of the Phalange, violated this agreement, and in April 1981 he started the construction of a new road into the Zahleh to fortify his position. Assad saw this as an intolerable provocation and besieged the city occupying the Sannine ridge surrounding the city.<sup>128</sup> When the Syrian Army fortified its positions outside of Zahleh with Soviet-made SA5 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) at the end of the month, it instigated a three-way show between the Syrians, the Phalange, and the Phalange’s backer, Israel. This was the background for the Lebanese missile crisis of 1981.

The crisis came upon an unprepared Reagan administration which focused on the global cold war and the Iran-Iraq war. This unpreparedness, combined with the ideological bent of the new Reagan administration, an absentee President when it came to decision making, and the different and conflicting agendas in his cabinet, it produced a muddled response to a crisis, which by summer 1981 was spiralling out of control. In this way, the

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<sup>126</sup> Reagan quoted in MemCon, Summary of President’s meeting with Special Emissary Philip Habib, Former Undersecretary of State, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Memorandums of Conversation, President Reagan (8) May 1981,” ExSec-Sub, Box 48, RRPL, 44.

<sup>127</sup> Esber, “The United States and the 1981 Lebanese Missile Crisis, p. 444.

<sup>128</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 368-371

Lebanese missile crisis was a process of “learning by doing” for the Reagan administration, both when it came to the intricacies of Lebanon, and how to effectively respond to foreign policy crisis which did not correspond to its preconceived cold war logic clear-cut proxy wars.

***The “Vicar of Foreign Policy:” Alexander Haig’s Troubled Tenure as Secretary of State***

Alexander M. Haig might seem an ideal candidate for the Reagan administration’s Secretary of State. Haig had served in the US Army, eventually becoming a four-star general. He had worked on the National Security Council under Richard Nixon as Henry Kissinger’s deputy before he was appointed Supreme Allied Commander Europe in 1974 serving a five-year term. Like Reagan, Haig was an ardent anti-communist, and in an off-the-cuff comment Haig had suggested the US should turn Castro’s Cuba into “a fucking parking lot.”<sup>129</sup> He also gave credence to 1981 bestseller *The Terror Network* by Claire Sterling. *The Terror Network* made vivid claims of the Soviet Union’s complicity in terrorism all over the world, from Northern Ireland, to the Middle East, and Latin America. And if was not the Kremlin itself pulling the strings it was its surrogates in Cuba, Libya, and Syria. Both Haig and newly appointed Director of Central Intelligence William J. Casey, “preferred [Sterling’s] findings to [their] own analysts” in Foggy Bottom and Langley.<sup>130</sup>

Haig’s foreign policy brainchild was a “strategic consensus” in the Middle East. Haig outlined his views of the Middle East as the basis of the “strategic consensus” as following:

Three great fears ran through the [Middle East]: fear of terrorism, which was endemic; fear of Islamic fundamentalism, which had broken out in Iran in fanatical form; and fear of the Soviet Union. [This] was one consolidated fear: that terrorism and fundamentalism would so destabilize the region that the Soviets would either subvert the Islamic movement for their own purposes or seize control of Iran and possibly the gulf in a second revolution after the Iranian revolution collapsed under the political and economic weight of its own excesses.<sup>131</sup>

To Haig, the Camp David Accords was living proof that Israel’s neighbouring states could be coaxed into a broad overarching anti-Soviet alliance with the right leadership and the right incentives, such as financial aid and arms sales.<sup>132</sup> Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and the Gulf States were labelled as “moderates” – allies of the US. Opposing these states were the “radical regimes” of Syria, Libya, and North Yemen supported by Soviet Union, as well as the PLO. As the alignment of Syria had shifted from the Maronites to the Lebanese National Movement and the PLO over the course of the Lebanese civil war in 1977, this seems to have confirmed Haig’s notions that the PLO was doing the Soviet’s bidding.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Haig quoted in Rossinow, *The Reagan Era*, p. 71.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>131</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 170.

<sup>132</sup> William B. Quandt, "Reagan's Lebanon Policy: Trial and Error," *Middle East Journal* 38, no. 2 (1984), p. 238

<sup>133</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 171-172.

Haig's brash behaviour won him no favours and he saw himself isolated from policy processes. Haig had set out to make himself "the vicar of foreign policy," but exactly what Reagan was supposed to be in this metaphor was unclear. Several times, his requests to see the President went unanswered.<sup>134</sup> When Reagan appointed Vice President Bush to head his Crisis Management Centre in January 1981, which included the important National Security Planning Group (NSPG), Haig awkwardly started a two-month public feud with the Vice President.<sup>135</sup> By March 1981, after less than two months in office, Haig was convinced that someone in the White House was waging a "guerrilla campaign" against him.<sup>136</sup>

As Haig left for the Middle East in April 1981 to launch the strategic consensus, the flaw of his designs became apparent: there was no basis for a consensus in the Middle East. Neither Syria, in Haig's view a Soviet client, nor Lebanon, the battleground for the burgeoning showdown between Assad and Bashir, was on Haig's itinerary. The trip, however was not without its difficulties. While Haig was welcomed by an enthusiastic audience – and customer – in Saudi Arabia, his arrival in Jerusalem was mooted. In Tel Aviv, Haig met with Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir just after the sales of F-15s and AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia were announced to the US public. The Israelis were furious, and Haig found little sympathy for his geostrategic chess game. When Haig referred to Israel as a "strategic asset" to the US, Shamir rebuffed him.<sup>137</sup> In the weeks before his arrival, Haig had been told that the Israelis were already preparing for war in Lebanon, the IDF was being mobilized. During a meeting with Menachem Begin, the Israeli Prime Minister, described the ongoing situation in Lebanon as "a matter of conscience" to the Israelis.<sup>138</sup> The Reagan administration had barely conceived of Lebanon in these terms, and no contingencies for a potential crisis in the small country wedged between Israel and Syria had been made.

### ***The Situation in Zahleh Seen from Washington***

As Haig was out of Washington, it was the National Security Council which took the lead on the burgeoning crisis in Lebanon. Gary Sick, a National Security Council (NSC) staffer with his expertise on the Middle East, summarized the situation for the National Security Advisor Richard V. Allen on April 6<sup>th</sup>. Fighting around Zahleh had picked up again after a short lull. "Neither the Phalange nor the Syrians is in full command of the high ground. The terrain

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<sup>134</sup> Rossinow, *The Reagan Era*, p. 70.

<sup>135</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "Haig says Furor over Bush's Role should Now End," *The New York Times*, March 27<sup>th</sup> 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/27/us/haig-says-furor-over-bush-s-role-should-now-end.html>

<sup>136</sup> Mulcahy, "The Secretary of State and the National Security Adviser," p. 291.

<sup>137</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 180.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p. 180-181.

around Zahleh is jumbled and each side holds some positions around the city.”<sup>139</sup> As Sick saw it, it was the Phalange that got “the worst” of the shelling, but the intelligence community could not confirm “how bad the situation might be” for Bashir’s forces.<sup>140</sup> In Sick’s view the situation in Zahleh left the Israelis four options going forward; diplomatic (disavowing the Phalange publicly), reconnaissance (which the Israelis were already conducting, and known to the Syrians), demonstrations (of military capabilities), or intervention. Furthermore, Sick outlined to Allen what he believed was the “Israeli calculus of decision:” While the Israelis had no interest in letting the Phalange bait them into a fight with Assad, they could not stand on the side-lines; they could not accept defeat, nor stalemate. If fighting did not escalate, nor calm, the Israelis would escalate, but most likely wait until Haig had left Tel-Aviv – where he still was – but if the Syrians moved “to teach [the Phalange] a lesson,” the Israelis “may act first and ask questions later.” But “at the moment, it is very probable that neither Syria nor Israel wants a direct military clash.” Sick concluded that this situation could well be another in the long series of examples of an escalation which stops short of the brink... We can expect some angry rhetoric and military posturing but no major military clash.<sup>141</sup>

Sick’s April 6<sup>th</sup> account served as the basis for Allen’s memo to the Vice President on April 8<sup>th</sup>. Allen outlined what US ambassadors in Syria and Lebanon already had communicated to President Assad and President Elias Sarkis, as well as the range of US diplomatic options. Allen wrote that “the situation in Lebanon remains tense, though [the Syrian army appears] to be ready for a major assault.”<sup>142</sup> The main concern was Israeli involvement: “From the outset of the crisis we have been concerned that Israel may intervene in defence of the Christians” and the US Embassy, as well as Haig in his meeting with Begin, all urged restraint, something to which Begin had agreed to.<sup>143</sup> The Israelis, Allen wrote, were reluctant to engage the Syrians on behalf of the Phalange – Zahleh was outside the Israeli sphere of influence in southern Lebanon. A solution to lessen the tensions in the Bekaa Valley, Allen noted, could be the replacement of the Phalange with the Lebanese Armed

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<sup>139</sup> Sick, who would have served on the NSC under President Carter would later claim, though unable to prove, that representatives of the Reagan administration had organised the release of hostages held in the US Embassy in Tehran to win the 1980 presidential election. See Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Gary Sick, Discredited but Honored," *Middle East Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>140</sup> Memorandum, Gary Sick to Richard V. Allen, April 6<sup>th</sup> 1981, folder “Lebanon January 1981-April 1981 (1),” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

<sup>142</sup> Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to Vice President George H. W. Bush, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1981, 1843, folder “Lebanon January 1981-April 1981 (1),” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>143</sup> Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to Vice President George H. W. Bush, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1981, 1843, folder “Lebanon January 1981-April 1981 (1),” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 4.

Forces, under Sarkis' control.<sup>144</sup> The US short-term goals in the crisis, outlined by Allen, were: "1) to obtain a cease-fire in order to end the bloodshed and to diminish the likelihood of regional conflict; and 2) do so in a manner which bolsters, or at least does not undercut, Sarkis' authority."<sup>145</sup> To strengthen the Lebanese government would remain the core of US Lebanon policy for the next three years.

As Allen saw it, there were two "key players" in the drama that was unfolding in Zahleh. Bashir Gemayel was "young, determined and unafraid to inflict and accept casualties in his goal of an unquestionably Christian – read Phalange – dominated Lebanon free of Palestinian and Syrian influence and presence." The other major player, Assad, was a "bloodied and determined adversary."<sup>146</sup> To Assad, Zahleh was a

key defensive position against a potential Israeli strike against Syria from southern Lebanon, and it is also seen as essential to maintaining Syrian influence in Lebanon in general. The importance of Zahleh and Assad's resoluteness most probably account for the intensity of the Syrian response to the Phalange provocation, including in Beirut.<sup>147</sup>

US Ambassador to Damascus, Talcott Seelye, had already made three demarches to the Syrian government and "forcefully made the point" that the Syrian shelling of civilians in Zahleh and Beirut was unacceptable to the US.<sup>148</sup> A demarche was also sent to the Soviets "pointing out Syria's overreaction" in Zahleh and urged the Kremlin to restrain its ally.<sup>149</sup>

To help calm the situation, Allen sought the help of Arab states, especially Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Fahd, who potentially could organise an effort through the Arab League.<sup>150</sup> As noted in the preceding chapter however, as Syria supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, Arab League support for the ADF had been cut off, but Syria was now supported by Iran.<sup>151</sup> Paradoxically Saudi Arabia had to resume its financial support of Assad's troops in Lebanon to reassert its leverage over Syria. Other actors in the civil war, such as the Druze militias of Walid Jumblatt, nominally pro-Syrian, stayed neutral. Yassir Arafat insisted that in the siege of Zahleh, the PLO were "innocent bystanders" while at the

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<sup>144</sup> Special Envoy Philip Habib would in May suggest this as a solution, though Assad would reject it.

<sup>145</sup> Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to Vice President George H. W. Bush, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1981, 1843, folder "Lebanon January 1981-April 1981 (1)", Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 4.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>149</sup> Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to Vice President George H. W. Bush, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1981, 1843, folder "Lebanon January 1981-April 1981 (2)", Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 4-5.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," p. 80.

same time insisting, to which Allen agreed, that the Palestinian Liberation Army, was “entirely controlled by the Syrians.”<sup>152</sup> Intentionally, or not,

By the end of April 1981, the situation remained tense. In an April 27<sup>th</sup> memorandum to President Reagan, Haig reported that “Syrian forces had successfully attacked three key Phalange positions” and noted that if this move “represents a grander plan” to oust the Phalange, “a vigorous Israeli intervention is inevitable.”<sup>153</sup> One day later, on April 28<sup>th</sup>, Haig had his confirmation when Israel shot down two Syrian army helicopters that were sent in to reinforce the Syrian position on the Sannine ridge. The stakes of the crisis were raised: To defend his troops in the Bekaa Valley, Assad’s forces fortified their position with Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin demanded the missiles removed. On April 30<sup>th</sup>, the Knesset ordered the missiles destruction, but due to poor weather it was postponed.

### ***Philip Habib Appointed as Special Envoy***

On Haig’s recommendation, Reagan appointed retired Foreign Service Officer Philip Habib as “special envoy” to the Middle East. An experienced diplomat, Habib had worked on the Paris negotiations to end the Vietnam War and served as US ambassador to South Korea. He had a long working relationship with Henry Kissinger. While “Kissinger was the grand strategist, Habib [was] the nuts-and-bolts tactician.”<sup>154</sup> Habib was carried over into the incoming Carter Administration, and continued as Undersecretary of State, which is unusual for a politically appointed post. Habib, as Haig undoubtedly knew, was well suited for the job of defusing the crisis in the Bekaa Valley. He understood Arabic, he was of Lebanese descent, and Habib had diplomatic experience in both Syria and Israel, having been a part of Carter’s Secretary of State Cyrus Vance’s 1977 delegation to the Middle East.<sup>155</sup>

On May 5<sup>th</sup> the President met with Philip Habib in the Oval Office. Reagan told Habib that before the 1980 election he had been called out by a group of Lebanese who claimed that the world’s response to the war in Lebanon amounted to “don’t die, Lebanon, but don’t get well either.” Habib urged clarity of intentions. Allen was clear in his assessment of Syria if

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<sup>152</sup> Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to Vice President George H. W. Bush, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1981, 1843, folder “Lebanon January 1981-April 1981 (1)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 4.

<sup>153</sup> Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig Jr. to the President, folder “Lebanon January 1981-April 1981 (1)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>154</sup> John Boykin, *Cursed Is the Peacemaker: The American Diplomat Versus the Israeli General, Beirut 1982* (Belmont: Applegate Press, 2002), p. 34.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37-38.



war broke out: “Let there be no doubt about the consequences of escalation; the Syrians would be decidedly clobbered.” Habib however, suggested another solution:

One approach for a cooling off the situation is the interest Israel and Syria have in borders; Israel wants its northern border to be quiet and secure; Syria moreover, wants its border with Central Lebanon quiet and secure... this might be a basis for negotiations.<sup>156</sup>

But Habib would not promise success, and warned that getting embroiled in Lebanese internal politics would be time consuming and unproductive.<sup>157</sup> Three hours later, Reagan met with the Israeli ambassador, Yair Evron who applauded the appointment of Habib, but stated that “Syria must be moved back, and the status quo ante must be restored.”<sup>158</sup>

### ***US Lebanon Policy: “Don’t Die, but Don’t Get Well Either”***

On May 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> 1981, Habib went on a round tour of Beirut meeting notables such as President Sarkis and Prime Minister Shafiq Al-Wazzan. On the 9<sup>th</sup> Habib also met with Bashir Gemayel. In general, the participants “welcomed US efforts.”<sup>159</sup> On request from Republican Senator John Danforth of Missouri, a meeting between the President and the Maronite Patriarch was scheduled for “some time after May 3rd.” A meeting between the two, it was thought, would “reaffirm US policy and support for the central government of President Sarkis.”<sup>160</sup> The meeting however had to be rescheduled, and they did not meet until September 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>161</sup> However it was part of what would become a pattern in US posture towards Lebanon; to favour Christian Maronite institutions.

Calls for national unity under a Maronite president was not a neutral statement and visits by the Maronite Patriarch, a deeply political one. The political system in Lebanon was codified in the National Pact in 1943 and based on a fragile power-sharing scheme between the country’s confessional groups. In accordance with the pact the presidency had to be a Christian Maronite, the Prime Minister Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament Shia Muslim.<sup>162</sup> But by the time of the “missile crisis,” the Lebanese government and army, the Lebanese Armed Forces, had broken down along sectarian lines. When US policy was to

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<sup>156</sup> MemCon, Summary of President’s meeting with Special Emissary Phil Habib, Former Under Secretary of State, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “President Reagan (8) (May 1981)”, ExSec-Sub, Box 48, RRPL, p. 12.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>158</sup> MemCon, Meeting of the President with Ambassador Evron, file “President Reagan (8) (May 1981)”, ExSec-Sub, Box 48, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>159</sup> Situation Report 22 – Lebanon Working Group, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1981, folder “Lebanon May (2 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1-2.

<sup>160</sup> Memorandum, Raymond Tanter through Charles Tyson for Richard V. Allen, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1981, folder “Lebanon May 1981 (2 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>161</sup> No Author, “Reagan and Maronite Meet,” *The New York Times*, September 17<sup>th</sup> 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/17/world/reagan-and-maronite-meet.html>

<sup>162</sup> For a discussion of the William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 197-198.

support the central government of Lebanon, it was actually was supporting the Maronites – who in turn was supported by Israel. As historian James S. Stocker notes, US policy toward Lebanon in the 1970s, given its proximity to other theatres of the cold war and the Arab-Israeli conflict was that Lebanon was simply neglected.<sup>163</sup> To support the Lebanese government was a fall-back solution ill-suited for a sectarian conflict in Lebanon.

### ***Habib in Damascus***

On May 10<sup>th</sup> 1981, Habib arrived in Damascus to meet with Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam. Habib described their two hours and forty-minute meeting as “full of give-and-take,” but Habib was able to focus his dialogue with Khaddam to “devising pragmatic solutions to specific and discrete elements of the Bekaa and Sannine Ridgeline instead resorting to standard rhetoric on global problems.” Khaddam was to have responded with “qualified interest.”<sup>164</sup> The night before Habib landed in Damascus a Soviet-made SA-2 missile battery were placed on the Syria-Lebanese border – to compliment the SA-6 missiles already in Lebanon. UNIFIL could also confirm “two IDF artillery batteries” had moved into the Kelea Khorbe area” of southern Lebanon.<sup>165</sup> Neither the Syrians, nor the Israelis were sitting idle while Habib was shuttling between capitals.

In meeting Assad later that same day (May 10<sup>th</sup>), Habib reiterated what he had said to Khaddam to Assad and presented his solution to the crisis: The Syrian army would leave Zahleh to the Maronite-controlled Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) – just as Allen had suggested. If Assad accepted, his forces could stand down and the Israelis would have no reason to intervene in the conflict. But to Assad the issue was not the Phalange in Zahleh as such that constituted the main issue. What Assad wanted was the informal red-line agreement restored. As Fadi Esber writes: “Syria... had not entered Lebanon to attack Israel, it was the Israelis who had crossed the red-line by shooting down the helicopters... a restoration depended on Israel” and Habib told Assad he would relay this to the Israeli government.<sup>166</sup> US Ambassador to Israel, Samuel S. Lewis noted that “for several weeks, Habib played the role of an excuse for Begin not to bomb the missiles [and] Begin clutched to Habib like a life-line.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Stocker, *Spheres of Intervention*, p. 9.

<sup>164</sup> Situation Report 23 – Lebanon Working Group, May 10<sup>th</sup> 1981, folder “Lebanon May (2 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Esber, “The United States and the Lebanese Missile Crisis,” p. 450.

<sup>167</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 46.

### ***Contingency Planning in Washington: The “Regionalists” vs. the “Globalists”***

While the first round of the Habib mission was getting started, contingencies were being drawn up in the interagency process, coordinated from the White House. A US response to the crisis was needed as the Habib mission might fail, and the Administration had to prepare for such an outcome. But without hands-on leadership, Raymond Tanter argues that the interagency process devolved into a dispute between “regionalists” and “globalists” where an absentee president allowed the “regionalist” to gain ground in the interagency process. Its informal leader was Philip Habib, and Al Haig emerged as leader of the “globalists” with Reagan as a tacit ally.<sup>168</sup>

The NSC contingencies envisioned several scenarios for US action if the standoff developed into a Syrian-Israeli confrontation. The contingencies focused on the US-Israeli relationship almost exclusively. It was clear that the NSC staff wanted to avoid conflict, and if fighting broke out, to limit it as much as possible.<sup>169</sup> Geoffrey Kemp, Raymond Tanter, and Robert Schweitzer of the NSC staff drafted six diplomatic options, complimented by two military options, all with pros and cons. The diplomatic options ranged from staying neutral, to supporting, or on the opposite end, sanctioning Israel. Of the scenarios, only one option was directed at Syria: an ultimatum to Assad to remove the missiles. This course however, was extremely risky. An ultimatum would “allow Syria to rally Arab support;” a potentially costly Israeli intervention without dividends; it could “lead to a general Middle East war;” jeopardise the still-ongoing Israeli withdrawal in accordance with the Camp David; as well as dividing NATO on the issue.<sup>170</sup> Military action to enforce such an ultimatum was also precluded by Kemp, Tanter and Schweitzer.<sup>171</sup>

The military contingencies focused on how a Syrian-Israeli war might develop, but neither involved direct use of US military power in any but logistical capacity. Syrian-Israeli war could take on two different forms. It could come in the form of a *limited confrontation*, under which “the primary US objective should focus on a rapid termination of fighting” and the “minimization of Soviet propaganda gains.” The other contingency, *expanded hostilities*, envisioned a general war between Israel and Syria in Lebanon, the Golan Heights and the Syrian interior – the implication being that the IDF would defeat the Syrian army and threaten

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<sup>168</sup> Tanter, *Who’s at the Helm?*, p. 14.

<sup>169</sup> Memorandum, Geoffrey Kemp, Robert Schweitzer, Raymond Tanter, Christopher Shoemaker and Doug Feith through Admiral Nance to Richard V. Allen, May 13<sup>th</sup> 1981, folder “Lebanon May (2 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

the Syrian state itself.<sup>172</sup> Both contingencies presented US options in terms of either restraining or enabling the Israeli freedom of action.

What is notable about the contingencies is how the NSC perceived the US role vis-à-vis Syria. Three conclusions can be drawn from them: 1) US policymakers were not eager for a US role in the conflict (on the contrary, the US in these scenarios would only adhere to formal obligations – economic and diplomatic); 2) that US leverage over Israel was limited at best and ineffective at worst; and 3) that US leverage over Syria was almost non-existent, except the issuing of an ultimatum to Assad to stand down. However, this would commit the US to an unprecedented escalation of the conflict as the Soviet Union was, at least publicly, was committed to Assad's regime. It is also likely that an ultimatum to the Syrians would bring the Russians closer to the Damascus as well. In the international community such an escalation from Washington might seem utterly unreasonable, and it could split NATO on the issue. US military pressure on Syria seemed impotent due to its many constraints.

By May 20<sup>th</sup> the focus of interagency discussion had shifted, and in the absence of any definite solutions from the Habib mission, it shifted toward the evacuation of Beirut. The prospect of a unified Arab response, such as the 1973 oil embargo, against Western Europe and the US was seen as unlikely, as well as unable to produce the same “shock” as in 1973. Hence the potentials of an oil embargo were dismissed. “This is true even if major hostilities break out between Syria and Israel” wrote NSC staffer Douglas Feith. Instead, Feith noted that upheaval in the Middle East since 1973 had not produced oil shocks: as importing nations had developed reserves and sharing schemes, fears of “the oil weapon” were now overblown.<sup>173</sup> Concurrently the NSC staffers were also pondering on the dividends of an Israeli military victory. Douglas Feith proposed a scenario: a decisive Israeli victory would not be limited to a Syrian-Israeli confrontation but that Israel would dispense with the PLO in Lebanon as well. “What is bad for the PLO cannot be bad for the US” and “though the Saudi's may hate to see Israel triumph, they would not mourn Syria's loss (or that of the PLO).”<sup>174</sup> Feith suggestion was that an Israeli victory would redraw the geostrategic map in the Middle East: the Soviets would abandon Syria, not rebuild it; and if Assad saw that the US

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>173</sup> Memorandum, Douglas Feith to Richard V. Allen, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon May 1981 (2 of 2), Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1-3.

<sup>174</sup> Memorandum, Douglas Feith to Richard V. Allen, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon May (2 of 2), Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

would not restrain Begin “he would be much more inclined to bend.”<sup>175</sup> Tanter and Kemp concurred, but Feith stressed that this was not a green light to the Israelis.<sup>176</sup>

### ***Was Assad Signalling Washington?***

Meeting with the President, the Vice President, Secretary Haig and “the troika” on May 29<sup>th</sup>, Habib gave a summary of his negotiations so far. The Syrians remained intransigent, exacerbated by a new Israeli demand that the Syrians would also have to remove air defences far into Syrian territory. Begin had however, backed off on this.<sup>177</sup> The situation worried Reagan: “[It] could lead to a war no one wants. It reminds me of the World War I crisis that resulted in a war no one wanted,” though he did not think the Syrians had a chance against the IDF. To Habib, that analysis missed the mark. As Habib told the President:

Assad... would rather that the Israelis take out the missiles by force than for him to remove them voluntarily. Withdrawal... in response to Israel’s threats would be a moral defeat... The Arabs know the importance of casualties to Israel. Therefore, even if the Israelis used military force, the Syrians or the PLO could absorb a temporary setback until the time is ripe for taking military initiatives themselves. Although the two most potent military forces in the area may be the IDF and the Christian militias, the Syrians and their allies are less fearful of casualties than are the Israelis.<sup>178</sup>

If the Israelis wanted to take out the missiles, Assad wanted them to pay a heavy price for it. The special envoy warned against becoming “too involved in the internal jockeying for power in Lebanon” as “Assad and Begin, more or less for but for different reasons tend to favor an independent unified Lebanon.”<sup>179</sup>

There was however, an alternative view of the crisis to the NSC contingencies. An anonymous document titled “United States Policy in Lebanon” dated the same day (May 29<sup>th</sup>) provides another perspective on the crisis – a perspective which lines up with what Habib told Reagan on May 5<sup>th</sup> and his debrief on May 29<sup>th</sup>. The paper was decidedly “regionalist” in its outlook. The paper argued that in engaging Syria’s interests in Lebanon, Assad might open for renewed dialogue with the United States. “[The Lebanese missile crisis] did occur,” it was “indicating that the status quo ante could no longer necessarily provide a basis for containing similar confrontations in the future.”<sup>180</sup> Assad’s negotiating position vis-à-vis Israel was weak, but by raising the stakes in Lebanon, his position improved. What Assad sought in engaging the Phalange, and the Israelis by proxy, was to make the standoff in the Bekaa

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>177</sup> Non-paper, “United States Policy in Lebanon,” May 29<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon May 1981 (1 of 2),” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1-2.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>180</sup> United States Policy in Lebanon, no author, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon May 1981 (1 of 2),” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

Valley produce an international crisis to “get [the US’] attention.”<sup>181</sup> Might the missile crisis be for Syrian cold war alignment what the 1973 October war was to Egypt? By engaging militarily in the Bekaa, was Assad jumpstarting a US-mediated “comprehensive settlement” to the Arab-Israeli conflict? Was history repeating itself? Israeli historian and diplomat Itamar Rabinovitch suggests this, arguing that Haig’s visit made this likely.<sup>182</sup>

Assad was isolated from the rest of the Middle East after rejecting US-mediation with Israel and his pro-Iranian stance on the Iran-Iraq War won him few friends. The Soviet-Syrian “Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation” was only signed in October 1980 – and Soviet-Syrian relations were never enthusiastic. Sadat had become disillusioned with lacklustre Soviet material and diplomatic support. In 1972 Egyptian President Anwar Sadat expelled 15 000 Soviet advisors from Egypt. Sadat’s about-face was a signal to the Nixon Administration that Egypt wanted to switch sides. And while Sadat lost the 1973 October war, he started negotiating with the Americans and the Israelis and by 1977 he concluded the Camp David Accords and in return, the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt.<sup>183</sup> The “United States Policy in Lebanon” paper suggested the same recipe for Assad and the Golan Heights:

The key for [the US mediation effort], therefore, is to ensure that Assad learns the right ‘lesson’ – not that a close relationship with Moscow confers benefits for him, but that a renewal of ties with us offers the best hope (however distant) of a peace process that ultimately could benefit Syria (on the Golan Heights). Otherwise he will only be confirmed in his wisdom of his relationship to Moscow.<sup>184</sup>

Syria was heavily invested in Lebanon since 1976 – and Assad would not retreat on his own volition. US policy toward Syria should be to “help Assad find an alternative to his current stance in order to achieve basic goals.” In descending order, Syria’s interests in Lebanon were thought to be: 1) to secure the Syrian-Lebanese border; 2) setting itself up in Lebanon to increase Syrian prestige in the Arab world; and 3) make its presence in Lebanon permanent.<sup>185</sup> The paper suggested supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces – including US funding; efforts to bolster UNIFIL “informally” by inviting more NATO countries, such as France; encourage dialogue and power-sharing mechanisms in Lebanon; explore practical alternatives to Israel’s “un-restrained pre-emptive policy” in Lebanon; rally the Saudi Arabian government to put

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1983* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 118-119.

<sup>183</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p. 204.

<sup>184</sup> United States Policy in Lebanon, no author, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon May 1981 (1 of 2),” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>185</sup> United States Policy in Lebanon, no author, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon May 1981 (1 of 2),” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

pressure on Syria; and exclude (as much as possible) the Soviet Union in Lebanon.<sup>186</sup> As Habib had told to Reagan during their May 29<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Syrians remained intransigent.

### ***The Saudi Backchannel and the Hama Rebellion as Leverage over Assad***

To influence Syria's behaviour in Lebanon, Allen had enlisted Saudi Arabia. The US had a long-standing alliance with the Kingdom, and as the largest financial contributor to the Arab Deterrent Force, Riyadh had leverage over the Syrians. But the Saudi Arabian government was in an awkward diplomatic position. On the one hand, it was a wealthy oil country with close relations with the west, closer still after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war. But on the other hand, Saudi Arabia did not recognise Israel as a state. There was also the prospect of being isolated in the region if one were to be seen colluding with the Israelis. The US sale of AWACS to the Saudis, announced in March 1981, constrained US-Israeli relations.<sup>187</sup>

The Saudis were in agreement with US policy in the Bekaa Valley – a return to status quo ante. The Saudis had also suggested applying pressure on Assad within Syria. Habib however, had rejected the idea. Referring to the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Hama, Habib noted that “Interestingly, Assad's problems with the Brotherhood have declined as his confrontation with Israel became more acute... in short, the crisis has strengthened Assad's domestic political base.”<sup>188</sup> Applying pressure on Assad directly would just strengthen his appeal. Habib also worried about the Saudi's sustained commitment to the US position. At the May 22<sup>nd</sup> Arab League summit in Tunis, the Arab League had resumed its subsidies of the ADF in Lebanon. Tanter asked rhetorically “how much confidence should the USG have in the Saudi effort...? Very little... [As] Saudi diplomacy provides Syria with convenient cover with which to cloak its military reinforcements in Lebanon.”<sup>189</sup>

### ***The Road to a Cease-Fire: Was the “War of Katyushas” a Diversion?***

Developments on the ground in Lebanon dictated US diplomatic responses. Before Habib left the Middle East after his first round of shuttle diplomacy, Lebanon was relatively calm. But the situation would not last. On May 28<sup>th</sup> Begin renewed the anti-PLO campaign in southern

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>187</sup> Avner Yaniv, *Dilemmas of Security: Politics, Strategy, and the Israeli Experience in Lebanon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 89.

<sup>188</sup> Habib quoted in MemCon, Summary of President's meeting with Special Emissary Philip Habib, Former Undersecretary of State, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1981, Memorandums of Conversation, President Reagan (8) May 1981, ExSec-Sub, Box 48, RRPL, p. 46.

<sup>189</sup> Memorandum, Raymond Tanter to Richard V. Allen, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon June-July 1981 (2 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

Lebanon.<sup>190</sup> By early June 1981 the PLO ramped up its rocket attacks into northern Israel beginning the so-called “war of the Katyushas”.<sup>191</sup> Retaliatory Israeli air strikes and commando raids in Lebanon hardened the Syrian negotiating position. Ambassador Lewis had already made demarches to Begin not to escalate the situation, but had been rebuffed. In Washington however, this demarche was seen negatively. Not only did the NSC staffers disagree as to who started the conflict in Lebanon, the NSC staffers worried that Begin’s “strong negative reaction” to the ambassador was jeopardising US-Israeli relations.<sup>192</sup>

When Habib flew back to the Middle East on June 5<sup>th</sup>, his priority was to de-escalate the brewing PLO-South Lebanese Army conflict in southern Lebanon, but tensions kept rising in the region. On June 7<sup>th</sup>, the Israeli Air Force attacked the Osirak nuclear reactor in central Iraq. The attack was intended to halt Saddam Hussein’s nuclear weapons ambition, but internationally it was condemned, and the US announced a moratorium F-16 fighter jets to Israel.<sup>193</sup>

Habib returned to Damascus on June 9<sup>th</sup> where Assad presented his ultimatum to Habib: Bashir and the Phalange had to reject their pact with Israel. Habib went to Israel to report Assad’s demarche to Begin. On June 13<sup>th</sup> a Syrian fighter jet shot down an unmanned IAF drone flying over Syria. On the 15<sup>th</sup> Habib returned to Damascus. The same day, Pierre Gemayel (Bashir’s father) renounced the Israeli-Maronite pact and announced that the Phalange would be leaving Zahleh. On June 30<sup>th</sup> Assad lifted the siege. And on July 6<sup>th</sup> Bashir rejected his pact with the Israelis.<sup>194</sup> The exact course of events here remains unclear, but what transpired give an indication: the Israelis (likely) threatened to back down over Zahleh, leaving Bashir without his protector, and he saw no choice but to back down. Instead, Bashir would focus on his presidential ambitions and returned to Beirut. But while the situation in Zahleh was cooling down, the war in southern Lebanon was not.

On July 14<sup>th</sup> the IAF shot down a Syrian MIG-23 intercepting IAF fighters over Lebanon. As the Israelis were attacking Palestinian targets, the US publicly condemned the

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<sup>190</sup> Yair Evron, *War and Intervention in Lebanon: The Syrian-Israeli Deterrence Dialogue* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 99.

<sup>191</sup> A Katyushah is Soviet-made multiple rocket launching system often mounted on trucks.

<sup>192</sup> Memorandum, Raymond Tanter to Richard V. Allen, file “Lebanon June-July 1981 (2 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>193</sup> The moratorium on the sales of F-16 was lifted in August 1981. The moratorium was in accordance with the 1952 Mutual Logistics Support Agreement, part of an attempt by the Eisenhower Administration to distance itself from Israel in the early 1950s. In the context of containment of the Soviet Union, the rise of Arab nationalism, and decolonization, the Eisenhower administration’s view was that too much support for Israel would alienate Arab states such as Egypt. See Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, “The United States and Israel since 1948: A “Special Relationship”?”, *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 2 (1998), p. 233-235.

<sup>194</sup> Esber, “The United States and the 1981 Lebanese Missile Crisis,” p. 452.



PLO and urged restraint from the Israelis. The PLO offensive was supplied in part by Syria. In a July 14<sup>th</sup> memo, Haig argued to Reagan that PLO rocket attacks “justifies Israeli actions in Lebanon.”<sup>195</sup> As Haig noted to the President, Syria, as well as Libya and eastern bloc countries (Haig does not specify which countries) had supplied “about” 100 T34 tanks and armoured personnel carriers, artillery, and surface-to-air missile systems to the PLO. This was gradually making the PLO into a conventional fighting force in Lebanon. This was also a violation of a “pledge” Arafat had made to the UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim.<sup>196</sup> Still, as Haig noted the PLO’s “conventional military threat... to Israel remains negligible.”<sup>197</sup>

Could the arming of the PLO be a part of a deal to divert attention from the Bekaa, to allow the Syrians to pull back from the brink? As noted, the Syrians were happy with Habib’s mediation, he “was a convenient excuse” to ward off what seemed like an impending Syrian-Israeli war. On the one hand, this was in violation of Arafat’s “pledge” to the Waldheim to remain neutral in the crisis, and it exposed the PLO to Israeli reciprocation. But on the other hand, could Arafat refuse an influx of arms such as what he had just gotten? If the PLO had built a parallel state within Lebanon, providing social services and political leadership, it now also had a conventional (though small) army. This is especially significant considering the information that came out of Damascus. A “well-connected journalist in Damascus” contrasted the Syrian posture in the current crisis with the Israeli intervention in 1978, arguing that the Syrians would continue to aid the PLO’s efforts, “but the PLO was on its own in confronting Israel. Syria realized its military inferiority vis-à-vis Israel.” Other informants in Damascus concurred, having reported that

[Israeli] pressure reduces Arafat’s freedom of manoeuvre and increases his dependence on Syria, an important policy goal for Assad. The Israeli campaign against the PLO...undercuts Arafat and the moderate Fatah elements position, thereby pushing the movement toward a more rejectionist policy.<sup>198</sup>

The presence of heavy weapons systems, and in large quantities such as this, Israeli retaliation against the PLO must have seemed inevitable. This could, at least partly, explain why Arafat

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<sup>195</sup> Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig to President Ronald Reagan, July 18<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon June-July 1981 (2 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>196</sup> UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim was an “ally” of the United States in the UN Security Council seeking re-election for an unprecedented third term. During the Lebanese missile crisis, Waldheim acted as a go-between between the US Government and the PLO during the missile crisis. Waldheim “pledged” to keep the PLO neutral. Under-Secretary-General of the UN (1971-1985), Brian Urquhart, argued that Waldheim would have been elected if it were not for China’s veto – which was then reversed – Waldheim would have been re-elected with the support of the US, Western European states, and the Soviet Union. See Brian Urquhart, “Selecting the World’s CEO: Remembering the Secretaries-General,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995), p. 25.

<sup>197</sup> Memo, Haig to Reagan, July 18<sup>th</sup> 1982.

<sup>198</sup> Embassy Damascus to Secretary of State, July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1981 (230824Z/2952), file “Lebanon June-July 1981 (2 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

broke his pledge to Waldheim – he had to play his cards before he lost them altogether. The Syrian government had, by supplying outdated heavy weapons to Arafat, duped the PLO into creating a second front in southern Lebanon to alleviate the tensions the missile crisis in Bekaa had created.

### ***Habib's Stop-Gap Solution***

The “war of katyushahs” provided Habib with a diplomatic opening. After the Israeli parliamentary elections on June 30<sup>th</sup>, the same day the siege of Zahleh was lifted, the Likud government was weakened. It won a majority of one seat in the Knesset. The Israeli Prime Minister was ready for a truce. Begin “authorized Habib to ‘establish peaceful relations between Israel and Lebanon,’ a rather broad mandate.”<sup>199</sup> Habib, with Saudi support, managed to secure an informal understanding between the PLO and Israel, that ended the war of katyushahs. But the understanding also had implications for the missile crisis.

The compromise Habib worked out between Israel and Syria was, in the end, relatively simple, but it did not solve the underlying issue for the parties involved. From the documentary record it is not clear as to when an agreement was reached, but by the time of the crisis’ end on July 24<sup>th</sup> (when the Israeli-PLO ceasefire took effect) Habib had found a “stop-gap solution” to the crisis.<sup>200</sup> He had adjusted the unwritten Red-Line Agreement. The solution Habib arrived at was an informal understanding that Assad could keep his missiles in the Bekaa, but that they could not be fired. At the same time, Assad would allow the Israeli Air Force to enter Lebanese air space.<sup>201</sup> This was a precarious balance act, and it was meant to save face for all parties. That the missiles could stay, was a win for Syria; that the missiles were not be fired, was an assurance Begin’s cabinet. With remote prospects for escalation Habib’s mediation was a win for US Middle East diplomacy. As Esber writes: “Habib had rewritten the Red Line Agreement to incorporate the missiles factor and ensured that Syria and Israel could peacefully operate in Lebanon for the foreseeable future.”<sup>202</sup>

When summarising the negotiation process to Reagan and Haig on July 28<sup>th</sup>, Habib noted that there was now a ceasefire in Beirut, the siege of Zahleh was lifted, and the Syrians were taking their chances in keeping the missiles in the Bekaa, which the Israelis (at least for

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<sup>199</sup> Memorandum, Norman A. Bailey to Richard V. Allen, July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon June-July (2 of 2), Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>200</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 46.

<sup>201</sup> Esber, “The United States and the 1981 Lebanese Missile Crisis, p. 454.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

now) tolerated. “In short, its not too bad, although we have to keep our fingers crossed for the future,” Habib told the group.<sup>203</sup> The problem now was the Palestinian state-within-the-state in Lebanon. If Arafat could not keep up his end of the ceasefire, the deal would collapse, and the Israelis had a free hand. If this was the case argued Habib, the US would also loose the Saudi backchannel to influence the Syrians.<sup>204</sup>

### ***Conclusion: Learning by Doing in Lebanon***

The US approach to the Lebanese missile crisis of 1981 was a product of learning to navigate the complexities of the Middle East. And as the crisis came upon an unprepared administration, and US strategy and tactics developed simultaneously as the US was responding to the ever-changing situation. By the outbreak of the missile crisis, Secretary of State Haig’s “strategic consensus” was already unravelling. It was more of a geopolitical fantasy than a political reality: Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt all sought to court Washington, but that did not mean that they had common interests that matched the US’ global cold war needs. The fact that the only way Saudi Arabia could be utilised in the crisis was due to its splay between its role in the Arab League which legitimised Syria’s presence in Lebanon, and its security relationship with the United States. Haig would however still claim his consensus was “still in embryo, but nonetheless existent” in September 1981.<sup>205</sup>

The US handling of the crisis and the policy debates it sparked also show how Reagan’s ideological approach to international relations was hard to translate into policy. Anti-Soviet ideology was not a valid strategy in the complexities of the Lebanese Civil War, and as the situation developed, the “globalists” were deferring to the “regionalist” approach to the crisis. To the administration Syria was a “radical” state, but seemingly not much else. While an anonymous dissenting voice – “US Policy in Lebanon” – argued that the Syrians might be signalling the US, this signal never became part of US policy. The contingencies developed by the National Security Council show how the Reagan administration approached the crisis as one of cold war propaganda victories, and in that calculus, a Syrian victory was, by proxy, a Soviet victory as well. While the US posed as mediator between Syria and Israel, as well as when Habib mediated between Israel and the PLO, the criteria of success, as measured in Washington implied Syrian and Palestinian defeat.

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<sup>203</sup> Memcon, Meeting of President Reagan, Philip Habib and Alexander Haig, July 28<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Memorandums of Conversation, President Reagan (July 1981),” ExSec-Sub, Box 49, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Haig quoted in Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 400-401

As Special Envoy, shuttling between the regional capitals, Habib became the voice of the Reagan administration in the Middle East. And due to Habib's success in defusing the crisis, Special Envoys would remain the mainstay of the US diplomatic effort in Lebanon until Assad declared him persona non-grata in May 1983. That Lebanon had been low on the US agenda can also serve as a partial explanation as to why Philip Habib became the crux of US policy toward Lebanon over the next two years. Lebanon simply was not important to US interests in the Middle until the missile crisis flared up. And when the July 24<sup>th</sup> ceasefire was agreed to, the US 'lost' interest again. Habib's stop-gap solution was nothing more than that, a stop-gap, and it would hold for 11 months, until the Israelis no longer saw it beneficial to maintain it.

## 4 “Free of all Foreign Forces”

*The Syrian presence in Lebanon is not equal to the Israeli presence. Syria entered Lebanon for reasons that are well known and Syria will go out as it came in. But to link Israeli withdrawal to the Syrian withdrawal is unacceptable.*<sup>206</sup>

*Ali Halim Khaddam*

### ***The Strategic Partnership with Israel***

The sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia was approved by the US Senate in October 1981. It had met fierce opposition in Congress and from the Israelis. But for all the political drama surrounding the AWACS deal, the United States and Israel were closer than ever by the end of November 1981. As Al Haig wrote in his memoirs, “Israel has never had a great a friend in the White House as Ronald Reagan.”<sup>207</sup>

On November 30<sup>th</sup> 1981, the United States and Israel signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) formalizing their strategic cooperation. In Israel, the MoU was controversial. The MoU outlined a strategic partnership aimed against the Soviet Union and its subsidiaries in the Middle East. The MoU also established formal channels for military cooperation and coordination, prepositioning of US military hardware in Israel, and cooperation in defence research.<sup>208</sup> But already on December 14<sup>th</sup> 1981, the relationship became strained. Israel annexed the Golan Heights from Syria. And mere two weeks after it was signed, the Reagan Administration announced that it had suspended the agreement due to the annexation. But enthusiasm for strategic cooperation was greater in the Reagan administration than in Israel. Instead of moderating, Begin saw the MoU’s suspension as akin to its cancellation and “welcomed the opportunity to reassert Israel’s freedom of action.”<sup>209</sup> This dynamic created an asymmetry in US-Israeli relations which influenced the course of the war in Lebanon, and the US negotiating role: The US was, essentially, reacting to Israeli actions before then attempting balance Israeli and Arab demands to little effect.

The 1982 Lebanon war, on which there was no consensus on in the Reagan administration, posed the White House with several dilemmas. After the June 6<sup>th</sup> Israeli

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<sup>206</sup> MemCon, “Summary of the President’s Meeting with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Saud and Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, July 20<sup>th</sup> 1982,” file “President Reagan (July, 1982),” ExSec-Sub, Box 50, RRPL, p. 7.

<sup>207</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 167.

<sup>208</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, p. 392.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid*, p. 391-395.

invasion Lebanon, the US objective in Lebanon was to secure the withdrawal of all foreign forces – Israeli, Syrian, and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. When Israeli forces besieged Beirut and trapped the PLO within the city, Reagan introduced the Multinational Force (MNF) to Beirut. The MNF, consisting of French and Italian troops as well as US Marines, were to act as peacekeepers in Beirut overseeing the withdrawal of PLO from the city, effectively removing the Israeli *casus belli* for invading Lebanon in the first place. When the brunt of the PLO left, so did the MNF. However, September 1982 saw the assassination of Bashir Gemayel as well as the Sabra and Shatilla massacres, which prompted Reagan send the MNF back into Beirut. But profound differences in the administration, especially between Secretary of State George Shultz, Al Haig's successor, and Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger, meant that the MNF's role was ill-defined. On the one hand, MNF gave the diplomatic effort prestige, power and a "presence" on in Beirut. But on the other hand, "presence" entailed putting US soldiers in harm's way. And as negotiations dragged on, Syrian obstructionism threatened to derail the entire US *raison d'être* for the MNF being in Lebanon. As journalist Robert Fisk writes on US policy in the autumn of 1982: "How were the 'foreign armies' to be persuaded to leave Lebanon? And how could America cajole the Syrians into withdrawing when one of the parties of the Lebanon war – Israel – was openly acknowledged to be America's friend?"<sup>210</sup>

### ***The Question of a US "Green Light" to Israel***

Philip Habib had retired after his tenure as Special Envoy ended in July 1981. But as autumn 1981 turned to winter 1982, US officials became aware that the Begin Government were planning a military solution to remove the PLO as a political factor in Lebanon, and Habib was called on once again.

On December 5<sup>th</sup> 1981, a week before Israel annexed the Golan Heights, Habib arrived in Jerusalem to meet with Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon and Prime Minister Begin. After 1981 Knesset election, Menachem Begin had reshuffled his government and appointed Sharon as Minister of Defence. When Habib arrived in Tel Aviv to continue bolstering the July 24<sup>th</sup> ceasefire, Sharon told Habib that "if the terrorists continue to violate the ceasefire, we will have no choice but to wipe them out completely in Lebanon." According to Habib, Sharon "punched at [maps] with his fist here and there, to show where he planned to destroy the PLO and sweep the Palestinians out of Beirut, if not out of Lebanon altogether."<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon* (New York: Nation Books, 2002), p. 445.

<sup>211</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 375.

Meeting with Reagan on December 11<sup>th</sup> 1981, Habib told Reagan that the Syrian missiles in the Bekaa Valley and the Israel-PLO ceasefire were connected by “implicit linkage.” “As long as hostilities do not resume,” Habib told Reagan, “Israel should be constrained from using military force to take out the [the Syrian] missiles.” However, Habib warned Reagan of what Sharon had told him six days before: “If there is sufficient provocation by the Palestinians,” Sharon “would like to use this occasion to ‘clean up Lebanon’ i.e., to destroy the PLO and perhaps also to force a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon... [and then] create a rump state over which Israel could exercise suzerainty.”<sup>212</sup> “Wiping out the PLO would have serious effects on US-Israeli relation as well as on US-Arab ties,” Habib told the President. The President opined that Sharon was a “talks like he’s a loose cannon.”<sup>213</sup>

Another potentially “loose cannon” was Secretary of State Haig who has been accused of giving Sharon a “green light” to invade Lebanon when they met in Washington in May 1982.<sup>214</sup> Haig denies this.<sup>215</sup> But regardless of a green light from US representatives to Israel, tacit or emphatic, it seems unlikely that any US demarche would have stymied Sharon and Begin. If Begin and Sharon could not extract an unequivocal “yes” from the Reagan Administration, a muffled “no” would be good enough.

### ***“Habib the Postman” and the Hama Massacre***

As part of his tour of Middle Eastern capitals, Habib arrived in Damascus on March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1982. But Habib was not given much of a purview other than maintaining a US-Syrian dialogue.<sup>216</sup> Less than a week before, on February 28<sup>th</sup>, the Syrian army had completed its campaign to crush the Muslim Brotherhood stronghold in Hama. The rebellion had started in 1976, as a series of attacks against the Ba’ath Party infrastructure. But in 1981, the conflict escalated. The Brotherhood had called for a Jihad against the Assad regime and their propaganda denounced the Assad regime’s Alawism for its heresy. Responding to the Muslim Brotherhood’s sectarian provocation, the regime responded in kind with an almost exclusively

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<sup>212</sup> Memcon, “Summary of the President’s Meeting with Special Emissary Ambassador Philip Habib,” file “Memorandums of Conversation – President Reagan (January 1982),” ExSec-Sub, Box 49, RRPL, p. 2

<sup>213</sup> Memcon, Summary of the President’s Meeting with Special Emissary Ambassador Philip Habib (116709), file “Memorandums of Conversation – President Reagan (January 1982),” ExSec-Sub Box 49, RRPL, p. 2

<sup>214</sup> This claim originated with journalist Zeev Schiff, “The Green Light,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 50 (1983). See also Shlaim., 400-401.

<sup>215</sup> Haig claims to have rejected Begin when he suggested this at Anwar Sadat’s funeral in October 1983. Sadat had been assassinated by his bodyguards on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1981. Haig, *Caveat*, p. 326.

<sup>216</sup> Tanter, *Who’s at the Helm?*, p. 78.

Alawi army composed of the regime's elite soldiers. The army Hama on February 9<sup>th</sup> and engaged in indiscriminate killings. As Nikolaos Van Dam writes:

The Battles in Hama raged for almost a month and could be distinguished from earlier [Ba'athist-Muslim Brotherhood] confrontations by their unprecedented levels of violence. Estimates of numbers killed vary between 5000 and 25,000 [inhabitants]...Whole densely populated districts, including their mosques, suqs and networks of traditional streets, were heavily shelled and later levelled to the ground.<sup>217</sup>

The administration had pondered if the Hama rebellion could be used as leverage on the Assad regime. Now, however, that option was dead.

An issue that troubled Habib's shuttle diplomacy was its lack of stated strategy or goal. The purpose of the Habib's mission itself was questioned by King Hussein of Jordan who felt little progress was being made. The King told the New York Times on March 19<sup>th</sup> that US policy in general, and the Habib mission in particular, had "eroded to the point where it has now adopted the role of a postman, a carrier of messages."<sup>218</sup> To understand the inefficacy of US diplomacy in the spring of 1982, one has to take into account an attempted power-grab in Washington as well as the continued juggling of the "regionalists" and "globalists" in the State Department.

#### ***"A Mini-State Department in the Basement of the White House"***

The administration was aware of Sharon and Begin's designs in Lebanon, but US policy remained unchanged. The main point of concern in US Middle East policy was still the implementation of the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty.<sup>219</sup> Instead of a cohesive Levantine policy to deal with Syria, Lebanon and the Begin Government's ambitions in Lebanon, US Lebanon policy remained unchanged: to strengthen the Lebanese central government.

The policy process on Lebanon was a continuation of the 1981 NSC-led contingency planning effort during the missile crisis.<sup>220</sup> But again it became an object of bureaucratic rivalries. Vice President George W. Bush and National Security Advisor William "the Judge" Clark sought to exclude Secretary of State Haig from the process. The Lebanon portfolio was seized by the Crisis Pre-Planning Group (CPPG), chaired by Bush. The CPPG was a part of the Crisis Management Centre (CMC) which was also headed by Bush. The CMC had been

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<sup>217</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 111.

<sup>218</sup> John Kifner, "King Hussein Warns of New War; Says the U.S. is Just 'a Postman,'" *The New York Times*, March 19<sup>th</sup> 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/03/19/world/king-hussein-warns-of-new-war-says-the-us-is-just-a-postman.html>

<sup>219</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 250.

<sup>220</sup> Both the JCOS cables and troops estimates, as well as the CIA report are all dated in February 1982, but filed as part of the "Lebanon May 1981 (1 of 2)," Kemp Files RAC Box 4. Numbers, such as troop levels, were updated but the assumptions from the missile crisis remained roughly the same.



an object of contention between Bush and Haig – a feud Haig, with his rancorous demeanour made public.<sup>221</sup> This won Haig few favours, further isolating him from the rest of the cabinet.

Clark had been appointed National Security Advisor after Richard V. Allen became embroiled in a corruption scandal in the autumn of 1981.<sup>222</sup> With Allen's exit, the National Security Council's role was again redefined. With direct access to the President, Clark main responsibility was to mediate between cabinet members on matters of national security, and operational responsibility in inter-agency coordination. These wide parameters made the NSC a "Mini-State Department in the basement of the White House."<sup>223</sup> While Clark had no experience in foreign policy, his relationship with the President went back to Reagan's days as Governor of California, where Reagan had appointed Clark to the California Supreme Court. Being an outsider in Washington when elected in 1980, and inexperienced in foreign policy, Reagan harboured a suspicion toward the State Department. He appointed "Judge" Clark to head what Reagan called "the America desk" in the State Department, partly to maintain oversight over the department, and partly to maintain oversight over Haig who was an "unknown quantity to Reagan."<sup>224</sup> As National Security Advisor, Clark's relationship with Haig deteriorated. By June 1982, meetings between them devolved into "shouting matches."<sup>225</sup>

Bush and Clark delegated Lebanon to Special Situation Groups (SSG) to be chaired by assistant-secretaries (notably below Haig at *cabinet level*) and chaired by the NSC staff. As Tanter, who at this point had left the NSC writes, "the White House simply seized the occasion that the Lebanon crisis afforded to enhance its role to the detriment of [the] State [Department]" still divided into "regionalists" and "globalists."<sup>226</sup> As a result of the Haig-Bush feud, SSGs would rarely meet during Reagan's tenure.<sup>227</sup> Instead, nascent rivalries resulted in several highly publicised leaks of secret documents, including on Lebanon. Clark's

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<sup>221</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "Haig says Furor over Bush's Role Should End Now," *The New York Times*, March 19<sup>th</sup> 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/27/us/haig-says-furor-over-bush-s-role-should-now-end.html>

<sup>222</sup> In late 1981, it was discovered that Allen had accepted a \$1000 honorarium which he failed to disclose. Mulcahy however argues that this was just a pretext; the actual reason behind Allen's firing was "poor management of the NSC staff." Mulcahy, "The President and the Secretary of State," p. 291-292.

<sup>223</sup> Paul Kengor and Patricia Clark Doerner, *The Judge: Ronald Reagan's Top Hand* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 147.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105.

<sup>225</sup> Mulcahy, "The President and the Secretary of State," p. 292.

<sup>226</sup> Tanter, *Who's at the Helm?*, p. 70.

<sup>227</sup> Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, "Transformation," in *Fateful Decision: Inside the National Security Council*, ed. Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 75.

focus for his first few months was to curb this urge in the foreign policy establishment – going as far as to attain warrants for polygraph tests of officials.<sup>228</sup>

### *Assessing the Syrian-Soviet Alliance*

One of the major concerns in Washington was the risk of Soviet involvement in a Syrian-Israeli war. The Joint Chiefs of Staff was tasked with military contingencies as well as mapping out the military capabilities of Levantine states, Syria, Lebanon and Israel, as well as the predicted resupply needs of the IDF.<sup>229</sup>

Up until the 1973 October war the USSR had sought to bolster an “anti-imperialist bloc” against Israel – “the ‘linchpin of Western imperialism in the Middle East.’”<sup>230</sup> The “loss” of Egypt had precipitated an unravelling of the Soviet strategy in the Middle East. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was widely unpopular in the muslim world, and the Iran-Iraq war was also impossible to incorporate into an Arab-Israeli conflict narrative. The Soviets had never been enthusiastic about Syria’s intervention in Lebanon. The Kremlin’s only effective allies in the region was Syria and the PLO.<sup>231</sup> It was not until the – when the US became involved in Lebanon as a mediator – that the Kremlin endorsed Syria’s presence in the country. Syrian military and economic dependence was meant to make Syrian policy in Lebanon “compatible with Soviet interests.”<sup>232</sup> This was in line with Moscow’s general objective in the Middle East.

The CIA anticipated that Soviet planning mirrored the US’ contingencies from 1981. And much like the NSC had pondered the efficacy of restraining Israel in 1981, Syria posed the USSR the same strategic dilemma. According to the CIA “Moscow’s ability to influence events in Lebanon is constrained by the need to protect its relationship with Syria. The Soviets have only limited leverage on Damascus’ actions in Lebanon without damaging their close ties to Assad.”<sup>233</sup> On Lebanon, the general Soviet attitude, the CIA assumed, was tensions should “remain at a manageable level and do not escalate into a crisis serious enough to draw the into a confrontation with Israel or the US.”<sup>234</sup> In the event of Syrian-Israeli war,

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<sup>228</sup> Kengor and Doerner, *The Judge*, p. 154-155.

<sup>229</sup> Memorandum, L. Paul Bremer to William Clark, February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1982 (8201141), file “Lebanon May 1981 (1 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, p. 1-8.

<sup>230</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Moscow, Damascus and the Lebanon Crisis," in *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. M. Ma'oz and A. Yaniv (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 226.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229-231.

<sup>232</sup> Directorate of National Intelligence, “The USSR and Lebanon,” February 9<sup>th</sup> 1982, file “Lebanon May 1981 (1 of 2)”, Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

the CIA assumed that in the event of a limited war the Soviets would be content with resupplying the Assad regime. However, given their standing in the region the Soviets were anticipated to support Assad militarily if his state was threatened. “This could include placing some Soviet airborne units on alert, providing more sophisticated arms to Syria, or introducing Soviet SAM crews and fighter pilots into Syria.”<sup>235</sup> With the exception of sending airborne troops, this was exactly what the Kremlin would do after the initial Syrian-Israeli confrontation in the Bekaa in June 1982.

### **“Operation Peace in Galilee” and Habib’s Credibility**

On April 26<sup>th</sup> the last phase of the Israeli-Egyptian peace process was completed with the redeployment of Israeli soldiers in the Sinai to the Israeli-Lebanese border.<sup>236</sup> Throughout May, though tense, the situation in southern Lebanon remained unchanged and PLO actions did not warrant the massive military campaign Sharon had planned for. Instead it was the Abu Nidal group’s failed assassination attempt on Israeli ambassador to London Shlomo Argov on June 3<sup>rd</sup> that provided the *casus belli* for Israel. Israeli hardliners paid no heed to the fact that it was the Iraqi-sponsored Abu Nidal group, sworn rivals of the PLO, that had attempted to assassinate Argov.<sup>237</sup> Rafael Eytan, chief of staff of the IDF, dismissed the distinction: “Abu Nidal, Abu Shmidal, we have to strike at the PLO!”<sup>238</sup>

On June 6<sup>th</sup> the IDF crossed the Israeli-Lebanese border on June 6<sup>th</sup>. “Operation Peace in Galilee” had begun. That same day the UN Security Council adopted resolution 509, “demanding that Israel withdraw all its military forces forthwith and unconditionally...”<sup>239</sup> The IDF moved swiftly through central Lebanon, attempting to cut off the PLO before it could retreat into Beirut. A large section of the Israeli army moved into the Bekaa Valley, intent on cutting off Syrian forces and inflicting either a military defeat on the Syrians or a humiliating withdrawal, but Sharon lacked a pretext to attack Assad’s forces. But the “fog of war” in Lebanon clouded US’ mediation efforts which the Israelis exploited, arguing that Habib was not mediating in “good faith.”<sup>240</sup>

Differences in opinion in the US diplomatic and foreign policy establishment sent out mixed signals to the Middle East and Habib was often instructed in conflicting ways.

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>236</sup> Helena Cobban, *The Making of Modern Lebanon* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. 178.

<sup>237</sup> Abu Nidal was a Palestinian nationalist-cum-mercenary and rival of the Yassir Arafat. From 1983 he sponsored by Ri’faat al-Assad and allowed to have offices in Damascus. In 1986 his organisation would be expelled from Syria. See Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 436, 465-467, 482.

<sup>238</sup> Eitan quoted in Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, p. 404.

<sup>239</sup> Resolution 509 (1982), *United Nations Security Council*, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1982, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/509\(1982\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/509(1982))

<sup>240</sup> Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1983*, p. 137.

“Washington didn’t know what to do half the time, so they accepted Phil’s views,” Morris Draper, Habib’s deputy, told Boykin in an interview. Boykin continues:

Habib would call the State Department and relate what was happening. Habib usually called Charles Hill in the Near East Affairs bureau, roar about whatever the latest problem was and say what he thought he ought to do about it. Hill would then typically say, ‘OK. Go ahead and do it.’ Hill had no such authority, but he was rarely overruled by his superiors [Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Nicholas] Veliotes, Undersecretary Larry Eagleburger, or Haig.<sup>241</sup>

Philip Habib wanted to avert a Syrian-Israeli war. Habib’s position was supported by the Crisis Management Group in Washington, headed by Bush and Clark.<sup>242</sup> Haig, on the other hand, advocated a PLO and Syrians defeat at the hands of the IDF. “With the ‘military option’ gone, Israel’s arguments against granting a wider measure of autonomy to the Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza would be negated” argued Haig.<sup>243</sup> In this way, with no one in control of the US diplomatic process, Habib, the symbol of US diplomatic investment in Lebanon, also became the source of US policy. And over the next few days, the Israelis manipulated Habib’s attempts to secure an Israeli-Syrian cease fire to gain a military advantage in Lebanon.

On June 9<sup>th</sup>, the Israeli Air Force began operation Mole Cricket 19 aimed at securing dominance in Lebanese air space. This meant the destruction of the Syrian SAM sites in the Bekaa Valley. At the same time Habib arrived in Damascus from Tel Aviv where Begin had promised to hold off on attacking the Syrians. In Damascus Habib was met with a newspaper headline which read that the Special Envoy was in Damascus to negotiate the missiles’ removal, settling the 1981 issue in the Bekaa. This false story was leaked by the Israelis to make Habib look like an Israeli pawn. This was not helped by Assad’s quirks when receiving foreign dignitaries. To assert his superiority over his guests, Assad made his guests wait for him – often for hours – and this time was no different. However, by the time Habib met with Assad, the Israelis had destroyed the SAMs. For the duration of their meeting, neither Assad nor Habib knew of their destruction.<sup>244</sup>

For Syria the engagement in the Bekaa Valley was an unmitigated disaster. Attempting to challenge Israeli air superiority, the IAF claimed to have shot down 87 Syrian fighters within 2 hours.<sup>245</sup> The Syrian Air Force was in shambles, and Assad accused Habib of colluding with the Begin Cabinet after the meeting.<sup>246</sup> A similar incident happened again on June 11<sup>th</sup>. Habib managed to secure new ceasefire. Reagan had implored Begin to accept it.

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<sup>241</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 91.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>243</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 318.

<sup>244</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 64-65.

<sup>245</sup> Rebecca Grant, "The Bekaa Valley War," *Air Force Magazine* 85, no. 6 (2002), p. 61.

<sup>246</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 64-65.

But instead of maintaining their pre-ceasefire position, the IDF flanked the Syrian positions along the Damascus-Beirut Highway, and attacked the Syrians unawares. Habib was furious as a ceasefire, unless otherwise stipulated, was *ceasefire in place*. Assad saw the ceasefire violation as a “trojan horse” and blamed Habib personally for its abrogation.<sup>247</sup> The road to Beirut was now open to the Israelis. In the city, the Phalange was waiting for the retreating PLO, and the IDF would encircle the city. The siege of Beirut had begun.

***“The Geopolitics of Bechtel:” George Shultz replaces Al Haig***

As the siege of Beirut was starting, problems of Haig’s solo performance in the administration continued. One of his last acts as Secretary of State was to instruct Habib in his mediations as the IDF was nearing Beirut. His instructions however, was not approved by the President. Reagan was at Camp David and had not read Haig’s proposals, but Haig, assumed that Clark was stonewalling him.<sup>248</sup> Circumventing the Reagan, Haig instructed Habib to tell the PLO (through the Lebanese) to “essentially surrender and leave Lebanon.”<sup>249</sup> Haig disputes this account.<sup>250</sup> But Habib also got another telegram from Washington with instructions. This one came from Judge Clark. Habib knew that Haig was on his way out, and Habib ignored his Secretary of State’s orders. However, Clark’s instructions were the same as Haig’s: negotiate the withdrawal of all foreign forces; Israeli, Syrian and the PLO.<sup>251</sup> In this way, Haig had laid the foundation of US policy for the next two years of US engagement in Lebanon, but as Corryn Varady argues, “[it] created unrealistic expectations as it did not fully comprehend the reasons for Syrian and Israeli interventions...”<sup>252</sup> Regardless of who said what and when, Reagan had not approved Haig’s instructions, and fired Haig for insubordination on June 25<sup>th</sup> 1982. When Haig was fired there “was cheering in the halls in Lebanon.” The US ambassador to Jordan, Richard Noyes Viets, uncorked champagne, and Habib and Draper reportedly danced in the US Embassy in Beirut (they would later deny this).<sup>253</sup>

Haig’s replacement would be George P. Shultz. Until his appointment and confirmation as Secretary of State in June 1982, Shultz had been the president of Bechtel, a

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> According to Lou Cannon, Reagan had simply not read the instructions, but Haig saw all forms of delays and miscommunication as part of the very real tensions between him and Clark. See Cannon., 167-171.

<sup>249</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 90-93

<sup>250</sup> In his autobiography, Haig writes that he instructed Habib to what do what had essentially been US policy all along: withdrawal of foreign forces, strengthened central government and security agreements for Israel. See Haig, *Caveat*, p. 310

<sup>251</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 90-93.

<sup>252</sup> Corryn Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon: Vigorous Self-Defense* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), p. 90.

<sup>253</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 97.

large construction company with projects in the Middle East – especially in Saudi Arabia – and Shultz was questioned with charges of “pro-Arab bias” during his Senate confirmation hearing. But Shultz was not the only former Bechtel executive in the administration. Another fellow Bechtel alumni was Secretary of Defence Caspar W. Weinberger. With two former Bechtel executives in the administration, many pondered if there could be potential conflicts of interest.<sup>254</sup> As a 1982 Rolling Stone article phrased it:

The geopolitics of Bechtel... will have a fundamental impact on American policy... Defense Secretary Weinberger has already been accused of tilting against Israel as he hustles arms sales to the Arab nations. Shultz's appointment makes the same point more strongly... The essential point, however, is not that Bechtel is anti-Israel or pro-Arab. It is that Bechtel is for doing business. Anywhere anytime.<sup>255</sup>

In the private sector Shultz had been Weinberger's superior, but as equals in Reagan's “cabinet government” they became bitter rivals. The cause of their discord lay in their different attitudes on the use of force as an aspect of US foreign policy. Schultz had a pragmatic attitude toward the use of military force, such as surgical strikes, “often as a pre-emptive ‘first resort.’” Weinberger on the other, the civilian head of the defence bureaucracy, was consistently against deploying US Marines to Lebanon. Weinberger advocated the use of “overwhelming force,” and he decried what he saw as the “short war fallacy.”<sup>256</sup> In control of two large bureaucracies, their rivalry also trickled down into their departments. Haig had left a legacy which was detrimental burdened the interagency process as his attitude toward interagency cooperation had trickled down into the bureaucracy. As historian Andrew Preston writes: “Shultz and Weinberger did not instigate the discord, but rather exacerbated it, often sending national security policy askew in unpredictable directions.”<sup>257</sup> And as a consequence of Reagan's quiescence, “too often, issues were discussed in terms of ‘keeping George happy’ or of ‘finding a formula that Cap could accept.’”<sup>258</sup>

### ***Mr. Khaddam Goes to Washington***

Assad fashioned himself an arbiter of Lebanese politics, and only a president he approved of could rescind the Arab Deterrent Force mandate. On June 20<sup>th</sup> the Syrians turned down such a

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<sup>254</sup> A minor controversy arose in late July 1982, when it became public that Philip Habib also had worked as a consultant for Bechtel. Habib was personally hired by Shultz for a project in Southeast Asia. Senator Larry Pressler called for Habib's resignation, but the administration voiced their confidence in the Special Envoy. See No Author, “Bechtel Asia Unit Habib Employer,” *The New York Times*, July 26<sup>th</sup> 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/26/world/bechtel-asia-unit-is-habib-employer.html>

<sup>255</sup> William Greider, “The Boys from Bechtel,” *Rolling Stone*, September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1982, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-boys-from-bechtel-19820902>

<sup>256</sup> Andrew Preston, “A Foreign Policy Divided against Itself: George Schultz Versus Caspar Weinberger,” in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 554-555.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 552.

<sup>258</sup> Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 350.

request from Lebanese President Elias Sarkis. Syrian Information Minister Ahmed Iskander Ahmed told the press that the request had been made “under duress.” Furthermore, Syrian forces would remain in Lebanon along the Beirut-Damascus Highway. Syria would not attack the Israelis unless fired upon.<sup>259</sup> But after the loss of a sizeable part of his air force, Assad needed some respite.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, Assad sent Reagan a telegram congratulating the US President on Independence Day. But Assad also used the occasion to call Israel’s incursion into a “war of genocide” which the US had a “special responsibility” to stop.<sup>260</sup> The siege of Beirut was now underway and the US approach had turned to getting the PLO out of the city – removing the Israeli pretext for the siege. As the effort to find a haven for PLO evacuees started, no Arab state would take them. One of Haig’s last contributions to the Reagan administration was to suggest the evacuation of the PLO to Syria.<sup>261</sup> In order to get the mediation effort going, the administration sought direct contact with the Assad regime. Reagan implored Assad to accept “those PLO leadership and fighters departing West Beirut into Syria, at least for a temporary period.” Reagan also welcomed Syrian Foreign Minister Ali Halim Khaddam as well as Prince Faisale of Saudi Arabia to Washington to discuss “mutual concerns for peace and security in the Middle East”<sup>262</sup> Assad replied that “the forced removal of the PLO from West Beirut... [was] against [Syrian] national and human conviction” as it was the Israelis which had made them refugees in the first place.”<sup>263</sup>

On July 11<sup>th</sup>, Habib had arrived in Damascus to request that the Syrians take a portion of the PLO. But Assad wanted to talk about the June 11<sup>th</sup> ceasefire violation and charged that the United States could not be trusted. The Syrian president did however accept the Palestinian Liberation Army, a Palestinian guerrilla.<sup>264</sup> Assad publicly rejected the PLO on July 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>265</sup> The meeting being planned would therefore, in large, be a US request to have Assad backtrack on his pronouncement. But the July 20<sup>th</sup> meeting between the Reagan

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<sup>259</sup> Henry Tanner, “Syrians Refuse Lebanon’s Plea on Withdrawal,” *The New York Times*, June 21<sup>st</sup> 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/21/world/syrians-refuse-lebanon-s-plea-on-withdrawal.html>

<sup>260</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, July 7<sup>th</sup> 1982 (DTG: 0701728Z/PSN: 050607) (86492), file “Syria President Assad Cables,” ExSec-HS, Box 33, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>261</sup> Yaniv., 145; Cannon.,

<sup>262</sup> Cable, Washington to Damascus, July 16<sup>th</sup> 1982 (DTG:130136Z/PSN 0011235) (86497), file “Syria President Assad Cables,” ExSec-HS, Box 33, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>263</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1982 (DTG: 150807Z/PSN: 004471) (86489), file “Syria President Assad Cables,” ExSec-HS, Box 33, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>264</sup> The Palestinian Liberation Army was originally the military wing of the PLO, but the organisation had been coopted by the Syrians. Boykin., 221-222.

<sup>265</sup> Marvin Howe, “Assad Said to Reject Request by Reagan to Admit PLO,” *The New York Times*, July 16<sup>th</sup> 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/16/world/assad-said-to-reject-request-by-reagan-to-admit-plo.html>

administration, Prince Saud of Saudi Arabia and Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam, was officially a meeting between the US Government and the Arab League. This meant that the meeting did not involve any tangible commitments from any side as Syria and Saudi Arabia. The delegation could not make any commitments on behalf of the Arab League, without the member states consent, and as they were there representing the League, they deferred to it, not committing to anything concrete.

The Saudi prince summarised the Arab League view on the situation in Lebanon: “There was no difference between the US goals and Arab League goals” i.e. the removal of foreign forces from Lebanon to which Khaddam agreed.<sup>266</sup> Khaddam held a lengthy monologue on how Arabs did not trust US mediation and Reagan should play the “historic role such as that played by President Eisenhower in 1956” and moderate the Israelis as Eisenhower had done during the Suez Crisis. Shultz asked that that Syria to accommodate some the 1500 PLO fighters. Khaddam responded, as Assad had, that the Syrians were only prepared to take the PLO leadership.<sup>267</sup> “This will be the fourth time that [the PLO] have been kicked out of a state. Syria has security reasons for not allowing the Palestinians in” was Khaddam’s response. The Syrians feared that if the PLO in its entirety was moved to Syria it would be used as a pretext for attacking Syria warned Khaddam: “The Israelis are not natural people. They are worse than Nazis. The television has shown the extent of the destruction and injustice faced by the Arab world.”<sup>268</sup> Reagan responded that this was not what the US was asking of Syria. Instead, the idea of dispersing the PLO to other Arab states, was conceded, but Saud and Khaddam stressed that they could not speak on behalf of other League states.<sup>269</sup>

The Arab delegation was under the impression that the PLO would be evacuated at the same time as the Israelis. But Shultz told the two Arab statesmen to “face facts:” the PLO would have to leave before the Israelis. To Khaddam this was unacceptable: “The Syrian presence in Lebanon is no equal to the Israeli presence. Syria entered Lebanon for reasons that are well known and Syria will go out as it came in” said Khaddam, referring to the ADF mandate. “But to link Israeli withdrawal to the Syrian withdrawal is unacceptable. The US role must go beyond that of mediator. Were it not for US military assistance, Israel could not have entered Lebanon or anywhere else” charged Khaddam. Prince Saud concurred: “The

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<sup>266</sup> MemCon, Summary of the President’s Meeting with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Saud and Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, July 20<sup>th</sup> 1982, file “President Reagan (08/04/1982-08/06/1982),” ExSec-Sub, Box 50, RRPL, p. 3.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. p. 3

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. p. 6.



Syrian presence is not a stumbling block.” To Saud, the key issue was what the Lebanese Government would ask of the Israelis, asking “will Israel withdraw?” Reagan replied that the US position was not to equate Syrian and Israeli withdrawal: “We are speaking of a time when the Government of Lebanon asks all others to leave.”<sup>270</sup>

On July 24<sup>th</sup>, Syrian officials had called on the US to explicate its “firm commitment” to a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Syrian officials said that the US could “not expect any real movement on the Lebanon crisis... until it spells out its overall position the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, and on... [the] Israeli occupation of Lebanon.”<sup>271</sup> As the Israelis refused to allow for the safe passage of the PLO, an outside military force was needed to oversee their withdrawal. US Ambassador to Beirut, Robert S. Dillon told the New York Times on August 20<sup>th</sup> that “The presence of such an American force will in this way facilitate the restoration of Lebanese Government sovereignty over the Beirut area.”<sup>272</sup>

### ***The Multinational Force: Facilitating the Withdrawal of the PLO from Beirut***

The US had become disillusioned with the UNIFIL mandate and the UN’s failure to extend the UN Emergency Force (UNEF) had halted the creation of an observer force in the Sinai Peninsula. Going around the UN, the US established the ‘Multinational Force of Observers in the Sinai’ (MFO) without a UN mandate in December 1981. This set a precedent for Lebanon. Poor relations between Israeli and UNIFIL provided another incentive to work outside the UN. George Shultz was the proponent of the Multinational Force’s creation, but Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger was the source of its limitations. Enlisting the help of 800 French soldiers and 400 Italians, the bulk of the MNF was 1200 US Marines. Its mandate was to oversee the withdrawal of the PLO, and once complete, to withdraw.<sup>273</sup>

The PLO was exhausted after a monthlong siege Beirut, and the main elements of the Palestinian guerrillas were evacuated by sea to Tunis, except the PLO leadership which would remain in Tripoli. A detachment of the Syrian army was also in Beirut, and along with the PLA, they were evacuated to Syria by the Beirut-Damascus Highway on August 21<sup>st</sup>. The Israelis, though uncooperative, eventually accepted the MNF’s role in facilitating the

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>271</sup> Marvine Howe, “Syria Presses U.S. on Wide Mideast Issue,” *The New York Times*, July 25<sup>th</sup> 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/25/world/syria-presses-us-on-wide-mideast-issue.html>

<sup>272</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, “Reagan orders Marines to Beirut to Oversee Withdrawal by PLO,” *The New York Times*, August 21<sup>st</sup> 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/08/21/world/reagan-orders-marines-to-beirut-to-oversee-withdrawal-by-plo.html>

<sup>273</sup> Varady., 94-98.

organised evacuation. By September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1982, all Syrian (controlled-) forces and most of the PLO had left Beirut. The MNF's mission was a success, the mandate completed, and the French, Italian, and American forces departed.

### ***The Negotiating Formula and Lebanon as the "Fifty First State"***

Withdrawal of "all foreign forces" would be accomplished in two phases: Phase I had been the insertion of the MNF into Lebanon to facilitate and verify the evacuation of the PLO, effectively removing the Israeli *casus belli*. Phase II was the evacuation of "all foreign forces" from the country. However, this would be difficult. The Syrians insisted on a legitimate right to be in Lebanon. And the Israelis would not withdraw without security arrangements on the Israeli-Lebanese border. If US mediation could not carry out a mutual withdrawal, American credibility would be severely weakened. As US Ambassador to Tel Aviv Samuel Lewis noted to Shultz on August 27<sup>th</sup>:

[The] fact remains that US policy, stated both publicly and privately in our talks here, has called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon. Realistically, the only way to realize this objective will be in devising some formula which will provide for the mutual and simultaneous withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon...<sup>274</sup>

But Habib had already provided that formula. The US effort to strengthen Lebanon would hinge on Bashir Gemayel's presidency. As Habib noted to Shultz on August 25<sup>th</sup>:

With Bashir Gemayel as president and a Lebanon prepared to have good relations with Israel, it will be important for the Israeli presence to be used as a lever to get the Syrians out. Dealing with the PLO will be easier with the Syrians out of the way and a Lebanese Government more sure of itself. Getting the Syrians to agree to withdraw their forces is technically simple but politically difficult to arrange. An official Lebanese demand supported by Arab League concurrence, plus the linkage of Israeli simultaneous withdrawal, should provide the impetus for ending the Syrian military presence which is in Lebanon under the cover of the Arab Deterrent force.<sup>275</sup>

However, not all in the administration agreed with Habib's assessment of Bashir. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, Defense Secretary Weinberger arrived in Beirut to congratulate the US Marines for having accomplished their mission. To Weinberger, already sceptical of direct US involvement in Lebanon, Bashir suggested the US to be the guarantor of Lebanese sovereignty, giving the American "a blanc check." As the Defense Secretary saw it, what Bashir suggested was that "Lebanon was not quite to be our fifty-first state, but its relationship with us might not have been altogether dissimilar from that condition..." Bashir's idea was rejected out of hand by Weinberger who also communicated this to the rest

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<sup>274</sup> Cable, Tel Aviv to Washington DC, August 27<sup>th</sup> 1982 (DTG: 271801Z/PSN: 007580), file "Lebanon Israel Phase II 1982 Folder 1", Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>275</sup> Cable, Beirut to State, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1982 (DTG: 291322Z/PSN: 009769), file "Lebanon Israel Phase II 1982 Folder 1", Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1-2.

of the administration.<sup>276</sup> With the diplomatic success of negotiating the evacuation of the PLO, the US focus would now shift from the minutiae of Beirut to the broader issues in Lebanon, and then the Middle East.

### ***The Reagan Plan and the Assassination of Bashir Gemayel***

With the relocation of the PLO to Tunisia, Shultz sought a “fresh start in the Middle East,” and called for a renewed effort in settling the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>277</sup> In July Shultz had established a working group with the purpose of coming up with proposals. One official told the New York Times that Shultz had “the strong sense that patterns were shifting in the Middle East and we’d be pretty dumb if we got stuck in the day-to-day muddle over Lebanon and watched the chances drift by.”<sup>278</sup> On September 1<sup>st</sup> Shultz’s group unveiled its defining contribution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – the Reagan Plan.

The Reagan Plan had its basis in the UN resolution 242, which did not recognise Israeli settlements on the West Bank and the annexation of the Golan Heights. As Palestinian “self-determination” was anathema to the Israelis, the Palestine was to become an autonomous region of an enlarged Jordan. The plan was panned in the Middle East – by both the Israelis and Arab governments. It is especially notable that Syria was not a part of the plan as it was clearly envisaged an extended use of the Camp David process model: “land for peace.” However, by annexing the Golan Heights, Begin had precluded such a negotiating formula with Syria. In Syria itself the initiative was denounced as “just more Camp David, fits in with U.S. policy to expand American influence in the area.”<sup>279</sup> While the Reagan Plan was a failure – it never really became the basis of any serious negotiations – it set off a “debate” in which it was challenged by other peace plans. In its failure to account for several regional sensitivities, especially when it came to the role of the PLO, the Reagan Plan and the Fez Plan, in opposition to each other, “at least gave the United States and the Arabs something to talk about.”<sup>280</sup>

On September 9<sup>th</sup>, the Arab League concluded its summit in Fez, Morocco, which included resolutions on the Arab Israeli conflict and the war in Lebanon. The Fez Plan, unlike

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<sup>276</sup> Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the White House* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), p. 146-147.

<sup>277</sup> George P. Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), p. 85-87.

<sup>278</sup> Marvine Howe, “Syrian on Way to U.S. to Seek Lebanon Peace, *The New York Times*, July 19<sup>th</sup> 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/19/world/syrian-on-way-to-us-to-see-lebanon-peace.html>

<sup>279</sup> Cable, Damascus to State, September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1982 (DTG: 031419Z/PSN017221), file “Middle East – Reactions to the President’s Peace Initiative (1 of 4),” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>280</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 255.

the Reagan plan, included specific provisions for resolving the crisis in Lebanon. In what appears to be a trade-off, the Syrians endorsed a resolution condemning Iran's behaviour in the Iran-Iraq war. In return the Arab League endorsed what would become the Syrian position in negotiations on Lebanon. The Arab League resolution stated that "the summit was informed by the Lebanese Government's decision to put an end to the mission of the Arab deterrent forces in Lebanon" and that "to this effect, the Lebanese and Syrian Governments will start negotiations on measures to be taken in light of Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon."<sup>281</sup> The Syrians had now publicly committed to a withdrawal, but it had to be after the Israelis left Lebanon. And Assad would, as his rejection of Sarkis' plea in June showed, be the judge of what Israeli withdrawal meant.

### ***The Assassination of Bashir Gemayel and Sabra and Shatilla Massacre***

US Lebanon policy coming in early September was hitched on two components: the PLO was out of Beirut (only residual elements remained), and Bashir Gemayel would be elected president of Lebanon.<sup>282</sup> Bashir was elected August 25<sup>th</sup> 1982, but he would not become President of Lebanon. On September 14<sup>th</sup> Bashir and his lieutenants were assassinated. The bombmaker, Habib Shartouni, was a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). The SSNP was a pan-Syrian nationalist party advocating for a "Greater Syria" encompassing the entire fertile crescent. It was founded and based in Beirut and its links with the Lebanon's many militias, worked as a conduit for Syrian intelligence in coordinating the many Lebanese militias.<sup>283</sup> With the death of Bashir Gemayel, the crux of Sharon's vision for a Christian, pro-Israeli Lebanon collapsed.<sup>284</sup>

The assassination became the pretext by the Israelis to move into West Beirut, which until then had been PLO territory. On September 17<sup>th</sup> the IDF surrounded and cordoned off the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Satilla. Bashir's death had unleashed the Phalange's revenge-fuelled terror on the camps inhabitants, killing more than 1000 Palestinian over the course of three days. The massacre strained US-Israeli relations and

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<sup>281</sup> No Author, "Text of Final Declaration at Arab League Meeting," *The New York Times*, September 10<sup>th</sup> 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/09/10/world/text-of-final-declaration-at-arab-league-meeting.html>

<sup>282</sup> It should here be noted that the President of Lebanon is elected by Parliament and has to be Christian as per the 1943 National Pact. For discussions of the National Pact see Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, p. 196-198

<sup>283</sup> Carl Anthony Wege, "Hizbollah-Syrian Intelligence Affairs: A Marriage of Convenience," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 3 (2011), p. 4.

<sup>284</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, p. 415.

Reagan issued a statement condemning the massacre with “outrage and revulsion over the murders,” which contributed to the reintroduction of the MNF to Beirut.<sup>285</sup>

### ***“Presence”***

With the passing of Bashir, his brother Amin, received parliamentary assent on September 21<sup>st</sup> becoming President of Lebanon. In congratulating the newly elected Amin Gemayel, Reagan wrote that Amin’s election set Lebanon “on a firm path to national reconciliation behind a strong government with a broad mandate from the people of Lebanon.”<sup>286</sup> Amin Gemayel was Bashir’s younger brother, but he lacked his older brother’s charisma and popularity in the Phalange militia.<sup>287</sup> Amin believed that a US presence would deter all foreign armies (PLO, the Syrians and the Israelis) as combined they constituted an “alliance” that was destroying Lebanon.<sup>288</sup> And as the situation in Beirut deteriorated, there was renewed worries that the Israelis might not withdraw. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, Reagan decided to send the multinational force back into Beirut.<sup>289</sup>

The MNF forces landed in Beirut on September 26<sup>th</sup>. When announced, the administration expected the press to be critical – the marines had left less than three weeks before. “What if there are snags and the foreign forces don’t withdraw,” the press guidance, drafted by the NSC staffers asked, and confidently answered the question themselves: “[The President] expects them to withdraw promptly. Period.”<sup>290</sup> But by the end of October, the situation had not improved. In an October 30<sup>th</sup> speech in the UN, Amin called on the MNF to be expanded to 30 000 troops.<sup>291</sup> If Amin had gotten his way, the MNF would, essentially, become the Lebanese Army. Shultz saw their presence as a stepping stone to a durable peace, while Weinberger saw it as an endless undefined mission. However, the President sided with Shultz and approved of their insertion.<sup>292</sup> Reagan approved the extension of the MNF mandate.<sup>293</sup> In public, the administration denied that this was an extension of the original

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<sup>285</sup> Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 356.

<sup>286</sup> Letter, President Reagan to President Amin Gemayel, September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1982, file “Lebanon Phase II 1982 Folder 2,” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1

<sup>287</sup> Cobban, *The Making of Modern Lebanon*, p. 190-192

<sup>288</sup> Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon*, p. 121.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>290</sup> Memorandum, William P. Clark to Vice President George H.W. Bush, Secretary of State George P. Shultz, Secretary of Defence Caspar W. Weinberger, UN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John W. Vessey Jr., September 30<sup>th</sup> 1982, file “Lebanon Phase II 1982 Folder 2,” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>291</sup> Fisk, *Pity the Nation*, p. 446.

<sup>292</sup> Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon*, p. 124.

<sup>293</sup> Memorandum, William P. Clark to President Ronald Reagan, October 30<sup>th</sup> 1982 (23597), file “Middle East – MNF (Multinational Force) 1982,” Kemp Files, RAC Box 6, RRPL, p. 1.

mandate. It argued that the MNF “has the mandate to facilitate the assertion of by the government of Lebanon of its authority of all of Beirut... This function is fully within the mandate of the MNF as originally conceived.”<sup>294</sup> The MNF mission was to

provide an interposition force at agreed locations and to provide appropriate assistance to the Lebanese Government and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in the Beirut Area in their efforts to restore their sovereignty and authority over the Beirut area and thereby to assure the safety of persons in the area and bring an end to violence that has occurred.<sup>295</sup>

However, “interposition” meant nothing more than establishing a “presence.” The reintroduction of the MNF in Beirut raised spectres in Congress of a prolonged conflict and the dreaded “Vietnam syndrome.”<sup>296</sup> However, Congress had approved of the administration’s policy in Lebanon and supported (for now) the reintroduction of the MNF. But the fear of Congressional disapproval loomed. Without Congressional support, the MNF could be subject to an early withdrawal without having completed its mission – a blow to US prestige in the region. As the MNF mission might be subject to Congressional review, the Reagan administration, would bypass Congress as best it could – both when it came to MNF mandate itself, regulated by the War Powers act, and military aid to the LAF.<sup>297</sup> The MNF soldiers were to assist LAF restore order, but the mandate did not change their rules of engagement. The French and Italians had set up in the centre of Beirut where fighting was much fiercer. The US Marines took up their positions in at Beirut International Airport and in a few nearby Druze villages. Paradoxically, these areas had been fairly quiet after the Israelis had pulled out a few days before, but the situation deteriorated again with US “presence.”<sup>298</sup>

### ***Diplomatic Stalemate***

In early October Habib returned to Damascus for further talks. Assad’s position in Lebanon had been severely weakened by the Israeli decimation of his air force. As Seale writes: “Never had [Assad] felt more isolated and unfairly maligned as in the autumn of 1982... the only thing to cheer him was that by September 1982 the IDF had suffered some 350 men dead and 2100 wounded and he knew how sensitive Israel was to casualties.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> NEA Press Guidance, file “Middle East – MNF (Multinational Force) 1982,” Kemp Files, RAC Box 6, RRPL, p. 20.

<sup>295</sup> Memorandum, Jonathan T. Howe to Phil Mayhew, J. S. Donnell III, and Howard Teicher, September 21<sup>st</sup> 1982, file “Lebanon Phase II 1982 Folder 2,” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2-3.

<sup>296</sup> Chester J. Pach Jr., “Sticking to His Guns: Reagan and National Security,” in *The Reagan Presidency*, ed. W. Elliot Brownlee and Hugh Davis Graham (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003). 97-99.

<sup>297</sup> Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon*, p. 119-121.

<sup>298</sup> Benis M. Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon 1982-1984* (Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1987), p. 23-25.

<sup>299</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 394.

Meeting with Assad on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, Habib and Draper again tried to set up a framework for withdrawal. Habib and Draper presented Assad the tenet of US policy: “a sovereign Lebanon with authority throughout its own territory.” To Assad, Habib and Draper suggested a “two-stage simultaneous withdrawal” of both Syrian and Israeli forces. The first stage would withdraw all Syrian forces to the Bekaa Valley; Israeli forces would withdraw to the “security zone” 40 kilometres north of the Israeli-Lebanese border.<sup>300</sup> Assad deadlocked his position. The Syrians were “in principle” ready to leave Lebanon, but this had to be in accordance with the resolutions of the Fez summit of the Arab League. Syrian withdrawal had to be “seen in light of (or in the context of) Israeli withdrawal” Assad reiterated.<sup>301</sup>

Habib again returned to Damascus at the end of November. Habib and Draper was supposed to meet with Assad on November 23<sup>rd</sup> but met instead with Foreign Minister Khaddam. Ambassador Paganelli attributed this to what he called Syria’s “wait-and-see policy toward troop withdrawal.”<sup>302</sup> The Syrians did not object to Israeli-Lebanese negotiations in and of itself which had begun that same month, as long as the settlement would not infringe on Lebanese sovereignty.<sup>303</sup> In effect, the Syrians would object to any Israeli security arrangements in southern Lebanon. But, as the Syrians, undoubtedly knew (or at least anticipated), this was an Israeli precondition during their negotiations with Amin Gemayel. In short, the Syrians were intent on staying in Lebanon.

The special envoy’s trips to the Syrian capital had been reduced to a kind of diplomatic stalemate. To withdraw before the IDF was anathema to Assad, and the Syrians rejected Habib’s notion of a “two-stage withdrawal” out of hand. The talks therefore arrived at an impasse and US-Syrian dialogue had seemingly reached its practical limits. Habib offered Assad an out from Lebanon, and a way de-escalate tensions with Israel. To this end, Habib offered plans of incremental withdrawal schedules and mechanisms to verify a simultaneous Israeli withdrawal. But this misunderstood Assad’s central contention: that the Syrian presence was lawful and Israeli presence was occupation. Assad would never concede this point to American interlocutors.

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<sup>300</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1982 (DTG: 031914Z/PSN: 001034), file “Lebanon Israel-Lebanon Phase II 1982 Folder 2,” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>301</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1982 (DTG: 031917Z/PSN: 000947), file “Lebanon Israel-Lebanon Phase II 1982 Folder 2,” Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>302</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, November 24<sup>th</sup> 1982 (DTG: 241015Z/PSN: 021771), file “Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/1983,” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 1.

<sup>303</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1982 (DTG: 221598Z/PSN: 047937), file “Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/1983,” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 1.

### ***The Soviet Resupply of Syria***

On November 10<sup>th</sup> 1982 Leonid Brezhnev, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, died, ending his 20-year rule of the Soviet Union. Assad and Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass attended his funeral. In Moscow, Assad and Tlass met with Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB (and future Secretary General). Andropov agreed to support the Syrian effort in Lebanon with a massive arms program to bolster Assad's deterrent capability. Andropov committed the Soviet Union to increase the Syrian army, from 225 000 to 400 000 in 1986 as well as with 1200 new tanks, 210 combat aircraft, 1600 artillery pieces and 90 air defence systems, manned by 2500 Soviet instructors.<sup>304</sup>

The Soviet resupply bolstered the Syrian position in Lebanon, and it raised the stakes towards in a potential engagement with Damascus. As Mustafa Tlass put it: "We have lifted one paw of the Soviet bear and put it down in Syria."<sup>305</sup> Rifaat al-Assad, Hafez's younger brother, "believes they have been promised assistance in case Syrian territory is attacked," reported the US ambassador to Syria.<sup>306</sup> In Shultz's reflections, the September/October 1982, before the Soviet resupply, was the period where US leverage over Syria were at its strongest, but Washington failed to capitalise on it.<sup>307</sup>

### ***Conclusion: Becoming the "Spoiler" in Lebanon***

The summer of 1982 had broken Assad's military leverage in Lebanon. On their own, Syrian forces was no match for the IDF. Assad had therefore accepted US mediation even though he was convinced of their continued collusion to oust him from Lebanon. As Habib noted in a telegram on 26<sup>th</sup> October: "The Syrians are prepared to leave Lebanon. But they are extremely wary of what they see as Israeli demands which will threaten Syrian security and lead to what they would consider unacceptable Israeli Influence in Lebanon."<sup>308</sup> Their commitment to withdrawal had the basis in the Fez summit resolution which supported a withdrawal "in light of" Israeli withdrawal. Assad's rejection of president Sarkis' request to leave in June, showed that his position was fundamentally disingenuous. By sticking to his legalistic fig leaf, Assad was able to preserve his influence in Lebanon – now bolstered with state-of-the-art Soviet air cover. As Shultz laments in his biography:

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<sup>304</sup> This number would double to almost 5000 in 1984-1985 double to accommodate for several more upgrades of the Syrian army. See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 398-99.

<sup>305</sup> Khaddam quoted in *ibid*, p. 399.

<sup>306</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, December 7<sup>th</sup> 1982 (DTG: 071133Z/PSN: 026866), file "Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/1983," ExSec-CO, Box 48, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>307</sup> Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil*, p. 224.

<sup>308</sup> Cable, Jerusalem to Washington, (DTG 260831Z/PSN 024579), file "Lebanon Israel-Lebanon Phase II 1982 Folder 7", Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p.1.



[Assad] wanted Lebanon under his thumb. If Syria was excluded from the diplomatic rounds, Assad did everything to undercut progress. But whenever Assad's regime was included, it regarded itself as having gained the upper hand and sidetracked the diplomatic effort with impossible conditions and endless new demands. No matter how we approached them, the Syrians played the spoiler.<sup>309</sup>

Frustrated with Syrian obstructionism, the US-led mediation effort redirected itself to where progress could be made. As Draper noted to Shultz on December 7<sup>th</sup>: "The Lebanese have stressed that they were waiting for the US to come forward with useful proposals. If it proved unable to do so, Lebanon would have to move forward on its own by exploring various alternatives..."<sup>310</sup> Habib and Draper had set the parameters of the withdrawal negotiations, but they were unable to find a working formula that could appease all parties involved.

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<sup>309</sup> Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil*, p. 197.

<sup>310</sup> Cable, Beirut to State (DTG: 071709Z/PSN: 027235), file "Lebanon Israel-Lebanon Phase II 1982 Folder 7," Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 2.

## 5 *Entangled in Lebanon*

*Lebanon is a quagmire. Anyone there will get drawn deeper and deeper into the engulfing chaos.*<sup>311</sup>

Yitzhak Rabin

### *Into the Quagmire and the “1983 War Scare”*

When the 1981 missile crisis was threatening a Syrian-Israeli war for Lebanon, Philip Habib had warned Reagan not get involved in the “internal jockeying” of Lebanon’s many factions. This had proved to be impossible. In their attempt to reconcile Lebanese sovereignty with Israeli security, US mediation achieved neither. Instead Lebanon became a hotbed of political violence. Into the chaos, new actors such as the Syrian-backed National Salvation Front, a multi-sectarian coalition of Anti-Gemayel factions, and Syrian-Iran-backed Shia extremist organisations emerged. Together, they would challenge the Reagan’s admiration’s support of Gemayel and the prospects of US mediation in Lebanon.

As US diplomacy faltered in the summer of 1983, a new approach toward Syrian obstructionism was needed. This new approach was embodied in a rising power within the Reagan administration: Deputy National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane. His approach singled out Syria as the main source of conflict, but McFarlane, like his predecessors, would not be able to untangle the contradictions of the American approach to Lebanon: without a unified administration endorsing his approach, McFarlane’s soft-spoken diplomacy to the Syrians was never backed up with a big stick.

1983 was the year when tensions between the superpowers rose to its highest during the Reagan administration, and arguably, the cold war. Reagan denounced the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” deployed Pershing II intermediate range nuclear missiles (to much protest) in West Germany, as well as unveiling the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). SDI was a sophisticated (and wholly unworkable at the time) network of satellites that would destroy incoming ballistic missiles from the Soviet Union. As historian John Lewis Gaddis

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<sup>311</sup> Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil*, p. 233.

writes: “The reaction, in the Kremlin, was approaching panic.”<sup>312</sup> As superpower tensions rose, “the 1983 war scare” would make it the most dangerous year of the cold war.<sup>313</sup>

***US-Syrian Dialogue and the Embassy Bombing: “Letting them Stew in their own Juice”***

As a consequence of Syrian intransigence in late autumn 1982, Assad was left out of the negotiations, unable to directly influence the accord. US diplomatic effort throughout the winter of 1982-1983 had been refocused toward where progress could be made; between the Gemayel Government and Israel. To this end Shultz writes, “[the US] kept the Syrians generally informed of the negotiations without inviting its participation in discussions over the precise form an agreement might take.”<sup>314</sup> In theory, as the Syrians had continually pledged to promptly withdraw “in light of” Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, this strategy could have worked. Reagan, for his part, “followed Shultz’s lead and focused on Israel to the exclusion of Syria, a nation about which he knew next to nothing.”<sup>315</sup> Though the Syrians were excluded, Assad would loom over the negotiations as a spectre.

The US representative tasked with keeping the Syrians “generally informed” was US Ambassador to Syria, Robert S. Paganelli. He warned that excluding the Syrians would be detrimental to the implementation of the agreement. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1983 Paganelli noted to Shultz that the Syrians would reject any agreement that they were not a part of negotiating or that infringed on Lebanese sovereignty, such as an Israeli security zone in southern Lebanon. To the Syrians this would be tantamount to an imposition of a peace treaty on Lebanon, designed by Israel. The Syrians also repeated their assertion that Lebanon reject any sort of normalization of Lebanese-Israeli relations, such as diplomatic presence and cross-border trade.<sup>316</sup> In response, Paganelli told the Syrians the US did not seek to impose anything on Syria nor Lebanon, but noted in the cable that the Syrians had a “deep mistrust and suspicion” toward the US role in the negotiations.<sup>317</sup> In this way, Paganelli concluded, the Syrians gave “another warning signal that they will not tolerate the violation of Lebanese independence and territorial integrity or the security and interests of Syria and the Arab states.”<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p. 227.

<sup>313</sup> For a discussion of the “1983 war scare” see Stephen J. Cimbala, “Year of Maximum Danger? The 1983 ‘War Scare’ and Us-Soviet Deterrence,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 13, no. 2 (2000).; Benjamin B Fischer, “The Soviet–American War Scare of the 1980s,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 19, no. 3 (2006).; Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p. 226-229.

<sup>314</sup> Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil*, p. 197

<sup>315</sup> Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 360.

<sup>316</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, February 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (PSN: 021534Z/...) file “Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/1983,” ExSec-CO, Box 41, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

Paganelli also observed that Gemayel tried to balance Israel against Syria. On February 4<sup>th</sup> Paganelli reported via the British Embassy that Jean Obeid, Gemayel's envoy to Syria, told "Assad to speak out more forcefully" against Israeli demands. Squeezed between its two much more powerful neighbours, Amin now tried to balance them against each other; by having the Syrians dig in their heels in Lebanon, the Israelis might recognize that their negotiating demands – especially the SLA's role in southern Lebanon – could not be agreed to. As Paganelli noted, Obeid's message to Assad "might explain why Syrian and Saudi officials have in recent weeks in expressing opposition to Israeli gains in the current negotiations" and that this contributed to the recurring theme in his dialogue with the Syrians: "The Syrian leadership already is convinced, without prompting from the Lebanese, that Israel and the United States are working hard to impose conditions on Lebanon against its will."<sup>319</sup> On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, Paganelli sent Shultz a "cautionary note" on Syrian views of the negotiations. Paganelli argued that the agreement would have to appear a peace with no victory:

The Syrians no doubt have a good deal of confidential information as to what is taking place in the Israeli/Lebanese talks and do not have to rely on us for briefings... If the Israelis can practice enough self-restraint not to claim victory, the Syrians would withdraw and perhaps let nature take its course... If however, the Israelis trumpet their success in achieving [Israeli-Lebanese] normalization, this would probably force Assad to dig in his heels.<sup>320</sup>

Another complicating factor in the Israeli-Lebanese negotiations was that Israel used the occasion to make several demarches toward Syria via Paganelli. The Israelis particularly worried about Soviet-manned SA-5 missiles with greater range than its predecessor. And being mobile, they could be moved towards Israeli airspace. This raised the prospects of a pre-emptive strike which, undoubtedly, would derail Israeli-Lebanese talks. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, Weinberger told NBC News that there was "no question" that the SAMs contributed to increased tensions in the Middle East as the Soviets were "capable of pulling the trigger" and that "they are much closer than they should be."<sup>321</sup> Paganelli worried about its escalatory potential given "the war scare backdrop... should the balloon go up between the Syrians and the Israelis."<sup>322</sup> Reagan himself also worried of the prospects of Syrian-Israeli confrontation now that the Soviet Union was involved, noting in his diary on March 5<sup>th</sup> that "Armageddon

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<sup>319</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, February 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (DTG:: 041417Z/PSN: 031131) file "Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/83," ExSec-CO, Box 48, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>320</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1983 (DTG: 221534Z/PSN: 056654), file "Syria 01/11/1983-04/04/1983," ExSec-CO, Box 48, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>321</sup> No author, "Weinberger Calls Soviet Manning of Missiles in Syria 'Very Serious'," The New York Times, March 1<sup>st</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/03/01/world/weinberger-calls-soviet-manning-of-missiles-in-syria-very-serious.html>

<sup>322</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, March 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (PSN: 041414Z/PSN: 073826), file "Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/83," ExSec-CO, Box 48, RRPL, p. 1.

in the prophecies begins with the gates of Damascus being assailed.”<sup>323</sup> On repeated affirmations of the missiles intent, the Syrians stressed that they were defensive in nature. On March 7<sup>th</sup> Khaddam told Pagananellit that “who manned the missiles” was not important, which Paganelli interpreted as an admission that they were manned by Soviet instructors.<sup>324</sup> The CIA concluded that a pre-emptive strike might not resolve Israeli concerns. As part of the Soviet arms shipment to Syria were Scud missiles that could strike Israeli territory.<sup>325</sup>

In Damascus, Paganelli remained a consistent critic of Shultz and Reagan’s attitude toward Syria, advocating dialogue with Assad on Lebanon, Soviet-Syrian ties, and the Middle East peace process. However, dialogue had to have substance. There was no point in high-level contacts, such as special envoy Habib unless he was in “a position to assure the Syrians that their major concern – total Israeli withdrawal – is being taken care of...”<sup>326</sup> In a long telegram to Shultz on March 4<sup>th</sup> Paganelli summarized his views on US-Syrian relations: “There was a brief time last fall when it appeared that there was a glimmer of hope that the Syrians might cooperate constructively or at least not obstruct our Middle East policy goals.” As evidence, he cited Khaddam’s visits to Washington and Syrian cooperation during the evacuation of the PLO and Syrian soldiers from Beirut in 1982. Dialogue had to be maintained argued Paganelli, the risks of excluding the Syrians were too great:

There are of course other alternatives. Leaving the Syrians in isolation to stew in their own juice is one. Unfortunately, their juice spill out all over the area. Isolated or not, the Syrians are feared... because of their capacity and willingness to use terror and subversion as instruments of national policy. Isolated or not, the Syrians could fatally impede our efforts for a Lebanese settlement and significantly threaten Jordan should [King] Hussein move toward the peace table against Syrian will. (In this context we should be prepared to directly warn the Syrians that, if Hussein goes for negotiations, the full might of the [US] will protect him).<sup>327</sup>

However, on April 8<sup>th</sup>, King Hussein unilaterally abandoned the Reagan plan, unable to find a common negotiating stance with Yasser Arafat. To Paganelli, it was time “to put up or shut up” for the Reagan plan. With a sense of fatigued resignation he cabled Washington: “The

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<sup>323</sup> Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 150.

<sup>324</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, March 17<sup>th</sup> 1983 (171450Z/PSN: 015692), “Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/83,” ExSec-CO, Box 48, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>325</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate, “Soviet Policy in Middle East Under Andropov,”\* CREST, February 8<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86t00302r000701070001-9>

<sup>326</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1983 (DTG: 221534Z/PSN: 056688) file “Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/83,” ExSec-CO, Box 48,RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>327</sup> What actions Paganelli suggested to deter Syria from sabotaging the peace process remain classified. Cable,\* Damascus to Washington, March 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (DTG: 041414Z/PSN: 073826), file “Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/83,” ExSec-CO, Box 48,RRPL, p. 2

Israelis simply do not accept our basic prescription for a Mid-East settlement – land for peace – since for land means security, their *sine qua non*.”<sup>328</sup> He further lamented that

It is particularly galling to here [in Damascus] literally in left field, watching the Syrians, their rejectionist allies and their Soviet friends gloat over what appears to be our faltering diplomacy... As cynical as I have become, I viewed the President’s proposal as a sound basis to move towards peace and still do – but we are in trouble and Presidential action and determination are required soonest to retrieve our situation.<sup>329</sup>

In effect, the answer to Paganelli’s plea was already given. The September 1<sup>st</sup> announcement of the peace initiative would remain Reagan’s only speech directly addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>330</sup>

On the morning of April 18<sup>th</sup> 1983, a car smashed into the front of the US Embassy to Beirut detonating a large car bomb. The US Embassy was the foremost symbols of US’ presence and political investment in the Gemayel Government in Lebanon. 63 people, mostly Lebanese applying for visas to the US were killed in the attack. 17 of those killed were Americans.<sup>331</sup> Ten minutes before the attack a representative of the “Islamic Jihad” group called the Associated Press bureau in Beirut, taking responsibility for the bombing. The caller had told the dispatcher that “we shall keep striking at any imperialist presence in Lebanon, including the multinational force.”<sup>332</sup> “Islamic Jihad” was the nom de guerre for a Shia Muslim extremist organization – a forerunner to Hezbollah and supported by Iran.<sup>333</sup> According to Marius Deeb, Assad personally ordered the bombing.<sup>334</sup> A report by the Intelligence Support Activity (ISA) concluded that the Marines were “overwhelmed with raw data of unknown reliability.”<sup>335</sup> Ironically, among those killed in the Embassy blast were CIA Middle East analyst Robert Ames and station chief Kenneth Haas and eight other agents, meeting in the embassy discussing Iranian and Syrian collusion with Shia extremists in Baalbek, Lebanon.<sup>336</sup>

The embassy bombing provoked little response other than public pronouncements however. President Reagan denounced it as “cowardly act” and vowed that the US would

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<sup>328</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1983 (DTG: 311311Z/02439), “Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/83,” ExSec-CO, Box 48, RRPL, RRPL, p. 1

<sup>329</sup> Ibid p. 2

<sup>330</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 255.

<sup>331</sup> Wills, *The First War on Terrorism*, p. 55.

<sup>332</sup> Fisk, *Pity the Nation*, p. 475-476.

<sup>333</sup> Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 88-89.

<sup>334</sup> Marius Deeb, *Syria's Terrorist War on Lebanon and the Peace Process* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2003), p. 84-85.

<sup>335</sup> Jeffrey T Richelson, “‘Truth Conquers All Chains:’ The US Army Intelligence Support Activity, 1981-1989,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 12, no. 2 (1999), p. 184.

<sup>336</sup> Jubin M Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 88-89

continue its quest for “peace in the Middle East and the withdrawal of foreign troops from Lebanon.”<sup>337</sup> And with the Israeli-Lebanese treaty beginning to take shape, Shultz himself took the lead. He would “travel to Arab capitals to attempt and obtain more general agreement for the withdrawal of Syrian and PLO forces.”<sup>338</sup> When Paganelli was summoned to Washington to brief Shultz on progress and prospects of “general agreement,” the Ambassador told Shultz that Assad’s opposition was “inevitable.”<sup>339</sup> On May 7<sup>th</sup>, ten days before the agreement was signed, Shultz arrived in Damascus to meet with Assad. The meeting did not produce anything. In Shultz’s words, “the discussions went as well as I could have expected,” notwithstanding Paganelli’s repeated warnings.<sup>340</sup>

### ***The May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement and its Discontents***

The eponymous Israeli-Lebanese treaty was signed on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1983. The agreement, a peace agreement between Israel and Lebanon, also included provisions of a security zone extending from the Israeli-Lebanese border 45 kilometres north into Lebanese territory under the control of the South Lebanese Army of Major Saad Haddad. In effect, the agreement had defined what the Israelis wanted in Lebanon, it gave Gemayel a political lifeline with US and Israeli backing, and to the Americans the agreement bolstered US credibility as a peacemaker in the Middle East. The agreement’s failure therefore, undermined all three. At the signing of the agreement, US envoy Morris Draper told the press that there remained “obstacles ahead” to its implementation.<sup>341</sup>

The biggest “obstacle” was that the agreement was predicated on Syrian withdrawal. In a sense, the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement had enshrined the outcome of the 1978 Israeli incursion into southern Lebanon. But unlike 1978, and without any red line understanding, the security zone was anathema to Assad.<sup>342</sup> But as the agreement’s success was predicated on Syria’s cooperation, it gave Assad a “veto” over its implementation, as well as a symbol to rally the opponents of the agreement against.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, “Reagan Calls Bombing Cowardly,” *The New York Times*, April 19<sup>th</sup> 1983,

<http://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/19/world/reagan-calls-bombing-cowardly.html>

<sup>338</sup> No author, National Security Decision Directive 92, *RRPL-Dig*, April 27<sup>th</sup> 1983,

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd92.pdf>

<sup>339</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 407.

<sup>340</sup> Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil*, p. 217.

<sup>341</sup> David K. Shipler, “Israel and Lebanon Sign Agreement at 2 Ceremonies,” *The New York Times*, May 18<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/05/18/world/israel-and-lebanon-sign-agreement-at-2-ceremonies.html>

<sup>342</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, p. 417.

<sup>343</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 410

In his opposition against the Gemayel, Israel, and the United States, Assad pursued what international relations scholar Jubin M. Goodarzi has dubbed the “sword and shield” strategy in Lebanon.<sup>344</sup> The “shield” was Assad’s alliances with the Soviet Union and Iran. The Iranians played a dual role though, being both shield and sword. Syria had since the 1978 supported the Shia Amal movement led by Nabih Berri.<sup>345</sup> Iran had its own interests in Lebanon’s Shia community. To Iran, Lebanon was “an appropriate theatre to export its revolution.”<sup>346</sup> The US Embassy bombing had been perpetrated with Iranian support, and around 2000 Revolutionary Guards were based in the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley.<sup>347</sup> Syria and Iran also supported Hizbollah and Islamic Amal, two Shia extremist organisations.<sup>348</sup> To Assad Islamic extremism was just another political tool, and as a Hezbollah’s influence in Lebanon grew, Syrian intelligence tried to play Shia groups against each other.<sup>349</sup> As Iran mobilised Shia extremists, Assad pulled the strings of Lebanon’s anti-Gemayel factions.

On May 11<sup>th</sup> 1983, Assad’s long-time Maronite ally Suleyman Franjieh held a “council of war” in Zghorta. Attendants included Rashid Karami, a Sunni leader from Tripoli (and later prime minister of Lebanon) and Walid Jumblatt, the son of Kamal Jumblatt and after Kamal’s assassination in 1977, the head of the Druze Jumblatt family and head of Progressive Socialist Party (PSP).<sup>350</sup> All participants commanded militias, and endorsed by Syria they formed the National Salvation Front (NSF).<sup>351</sup> Assad also co-opted dissident PLO members who had taken residence in the Bekaa Valley after the evacuation of the PLO fighters from Beirut in 1982, as well as expelling Arafat and the PLO office from Syria. Assad was taking control of the PLO elements in central Lebanon, and employed them against the Gemayel and his backers.<sup>352</sup> In this way, Assad had built a coalition of Lebanon’s disparate anti-Gemayel factions to effectively challenge American and Israeli resolve in Lebanon.

### ***Israel announces its Withdrawal from Beirut***

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<sup>344</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p. 87.

<sup>345</sup> Marius Deeb goes so far as to claim that Assad personally ordered the assassination of the founder of Amal, Musa Sadr, in 1978 to make mobilise it against Israel, replacing Sadr with Berri. See Deeb, *Syria’s Terrorist War on Lebanon*, p. 54.

<sup>346</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p. 77.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77; 82.

<sup>348</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 396-397.

<sup>349</sup> Wege, “Hezbollah-Syrian Intelligence Affairs,” p. 4.

<sup>350</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 410-411.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*



Since becoming president in 1982 Amin Gemayel had neglected national reconciliation in Lebanon, instead leaning on Israeli and American support. In the 1983 fiscal year, the US had pledged \$101 million in military aid as well as training for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), led by Maronite General Ibrahim Tannous.<sup>353</sup> According to investigative journalist Bob Woodward, Reagan also sent Gemayel a secret letter affirming US support for his government.<sup>354</sup> Indicative of Assad's rejection of the May 17 Agreement, Assad also rejected the United States' role in the Lebanese conflict, declaring Philip Habib *persona non-grata* on May 18<sup>th</sup>. To get the Syrians out of Lebanon became an acute need for the United States when Israel on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 announced it would unilaterally withdraw south to its security zone in southern Lebanon.<sup>355</sup> In early July, Shultz made another trip to Damascus, but he made no headway with Khaddam and Assad.<sup>356</sup>

So far, Israeli presence in Lebanon acted as leverage against Assad, but their withdrawal created a vacuum Assad could fill with his proxies. In this way, Israeli withdrawal was a litmus test for the LAF: on the one hand, successful deployment bolstered confidence in the Lebanese government's ability to restore its sovereignty after Israel and Syria withdrew; on the other hand, failure would shatter everyone's confidence in the Gemayel government's ability to govern more of Lebanon than East Beirut. One of the areas the Israelis would withdraw from was the predominantly Druze Chouf district, a stronghold of Jumblatt's PSP and their militia, south of Beirut.<sup>357</sup> Consequently, US strategy had to adapt. As Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Nicholas Veliotes, noted to Shultz on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1983: "Our objective... should be, in the short-term, Syrian acquiescence in any LAF redeployment" such as to the Chouf, and furthermore, "over the long-term convincing the Syrians to withdraw."<sup>358</sup> Veliotes' suggestions as to how Syrians assurances could be obtained leaned on Arab pressure and high-level contacts with the US government. Veliotes, in effect, suggested more of the same. With Habib out of play in Syria, the US needed a new envoy. The new envoy, Robert McFarlane, would try a different approach.

### ***"Better than Henry:" Robert McFarlane Replaces Philip Habib***

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<sup>353</sup> Michael D. Malone, William H. Miller, and Joseph W. Robben, "From Presence to American Intervention," *Survival* 28, no. 5 (1986), p. 424.

<sup>354</sup> Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the Cia, 1981-1987* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 248

<sup>355</sup> Yaniv, *Dilemmas of Security*, p. 182-188.

<sup>356</sup> Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 365.

<sup>357</sup> Harris, *Lebanon: A History*, p. 246.

<sup>358</sup> Memorandum, Nicholas Veliotes to George Shultz, July 21<sup>st</sup> 1983, file "Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron (7/20/1983-8/1/1983)," ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 3.

As US-Syrian dialogue had faltered in the aftermath of the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement, National Security Advisor William Clark and his deputy, Robert C. McFarlane arranged a secret meeting with Assad. Without alerting Shultz or Habib, McFarlane went to Damascus in July 1983. The meeting seems to have been organised through the Saudi backchannel as McFarlane flew into Damascus with Prince Bandar.<sup>359</sup> Of their meeting, McFarlane writes that what Assad was most interested in was interrogating the American on theories explaining the Bermuda triangle. After six hours did Assad accept McFarlane's offer of renewed dialogue.<sup>360</sup> This was, as Seale writes, a part of Assad's "technique" when meeting with foreign dignitaries. When his guests mentioned something in passing, Assad would use this as a point of departure for long and meandering ruminations, and suddenly, trying to catch his guests off-balance, he would turn back to the subject at hand in a confrontative way.<sup>361</sup> When Shultz and Habib found out about the trip, they both resigned. Shultz was persuaded to stay on by Reagan, but Habib, no longer welcome in Damascus, retired.<sup>362</sup> As a gesture of good will, Assad arranged the release of David S. Dodge, Vice-President of the American University of Beirut, who was held by Hezbollah.<sup>363</sup>

McFarlane was brought into the Reagan administration by Alexander Haig. As Haig had become increasingly isolated from the formal decision-making process, McFarlane became Haig's unofficial envoy, travelling on his behalf, sharing the "Haigian" world-view of his superior.<sup>364</sup> Former career officers, both had their first experience in government working under Henry Kissinger. Caspar Weinberger, rather derisively, characterises McFarlane as a "man of evident limitations," driven by an ambition to be "better than Henry" and according to Bob Woodward, he suffered from an inferiority complex.<sup>365</sup> McFarlane would later observe that "to show uncertainty or vulnerability is a weakness. Even to seek advice is evidence that you don't know something, and you should never do that."<sup>366</sup> Both Haig and

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<sup>359</sup> Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 364.

<sup>360</sup> Robert C. McFarlane and Zofia Smardz, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell & Davis, 1994), p. 237-239.

<sup>361</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 412.

<sup>362</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 307-308; Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil*, p. 312-313.

<sup>363</sup> Dodge had been kidnapped by Hezbollah in Beirut on July 4<sup>th</sup> and was being smuggled to Iran through Damascus. McFarlane was in Damascus sometime between July 11-14<sup>th</sup>. Dodge was released due to Syrian intervention and was released on July 21<sup>st</sup>. See Ranstorp, *Hizb'ullah in Lebanon*, p. 88-89; Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 364; Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 412

<sup>364</sup> Charles Babcock and Don Oberdorfer, "The NSC Cabal: How Arrogance and Secrecy Brought on a Scandal," *The Washington Post*, June 21<sup>st</sup> 1987, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1987/06/21/the-nsc-cabal-how-arrogance-and-secrecy-brought-on-a-scandal/10c2c33d-fefe-4b82-9ee1-31cead0fb553/?utm\\_term=.5728a6ddd5c2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1987/06/21/the-nsc-cabal-how-arrogance-and-secrecy-brought-on-a-scandal/10c2c33d-fefe-4b82-9ee1-31cead0fb553/?utm_term=.5728a6ddd5c2)

<sup>365</sup> Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, p. 360; Woodward, *Veil*, p. 353

<sup>366</sup> McFarlane quoted in Wills, *The First War on Terror*, p. 37

McFarlane shared Kissinger's realpolitik approach to international relations and entertained notions of a "big play" akin to Nixon's opening to China.<sup>367</sup>

To posterity, McFarlane's name and legacy is tarnished by his involvement with the Iran-Contra scandal that would envelope the Reagan administration from 1986 to the end of its term. At the NSC, McFarlane surrounded himself with like-minded individuals, such as Donald Fortier, Howard Teicher, Michael A. Ledeen, John Poindexter, and Colonel Oliver North. Now ascendant, this group turned inwards, something which both Weinberger and Shultz notes in their biographies as well.<sup>368</sup> As investigative journalist Charles Babcock and Don Oberdorfer wrote in a 1987 op-ed on Iran-Contra's antecedents:

This small group... were McFarlane's 'soulmates'...they had special access to him and the most secret of his clandestine plans... To one degree or another, these tendencies were evident in the U.S. policies forged by this group [on] Lebanon, Libya and Iran.<sup>369</sup>

As Special Envoy, McFarlane would put his ideas into practice. McFarlane was appointed Special Envoy by Reagan on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1983 and his shuttle would be assisted by US . That same day, the first large-scale artillery barrage, fired by Jumblatt's militias, landed on US positions at Beirut International Airport, which "marked the point in time when the Marine situation in Lebanon began to deteriorate markedly."<sup>370</sup> McFarlane's shuttle would be aided by Ambassador-at-large to the Middle East Richard Fairbanks, and they both left for the Beirut on July 29<sup>th</sup>. Unlike Habib, who had long experience working in the Middle East and who sought compromise solutions by finding formulas and mechanisms which all parties would approve of, McFarlane spoke the universal language of power.

### ***The Diverging Approaches: Ineffective Diplomacy vs. Gunboat Diplomacy***

US policy so far had been to induce Syrian withdrawal through Saudi Arab pressure (which was supposedly to also bring the Syrians back into the fold, against Iran), but that policy had yet to produce any tangible results. Shultz argued the US should focus on creating a government of national unity. "While taking care not to ignore the Syrians," Shultz argued that the US should "shift our concentration in the near term of a Syrian withdrawal... to efforts to ensure the survival of the Gemayel Government in the absence of Syrian withdrawal." He further concluded that "everything we do, including our strategy toward

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<sup>367</sup> James F. Siekmeier, "The Iran-Contra Affair," in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 330.

<sup>368</sup> Weinberger notes that McFarlane "was totally staff driven," and Shultz notes that the NSC had become "the most militaristic group in Washington" Weinberger., 360; Shultz., 226.

<sup>369</sup> Babcock and Oberdorfer, "The NSC Cabal,"; Roger Morris, "Haig Leaves His Dirty Tracks All Over American Foreign Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, January 19<sup>th</sup> 1987, [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-01-19/local/me-3983\\_1\\_foreign-policy](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-01-19/local/me-3983_1_foreign-policy)

<sup>370</sup> Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982-1983*, p. 74

further Israelis withdrawal, should be considered in this light.”<sup>371</sup> The Secretary of State also made proposals to balance Lebanon’s many opposing factions and securing a ceasefire. Among Shultz’s more ambitious (and wholly unworkable) ideas, were “seeking alternative leadership in each [sectarian] community.”<sup>372</sup>

McFarlane’s approach to Lebanon and Syria was framed through both the cold war and his affinity for Israel.<sup>373</sup> McFarlane’s view of the need of US power in Lebanon was compounded by his pessimistic view of the country’s situation, a “judgement no doubt clouded by regional myopia.”<sup>374</sup> He was complacent of Amin Gemayel, who in McFarlane’s assessment “[showed] no aspirations whatsoever to establish a government worthy of the name and to govern.”<sup>375</sup> McFarlane worked with an assumption, garnered from Arabs he met in the region (he leaves unclear who these Arabs are), that “Assad respects power, and unless you are willing to use it against him, he will not yield.”<sup>376</sup> Describing the deteriorating situation in Lebanon and Assad’s pressure on Arafat, McFarlane noted that “Assad is demonstrating his dominance over the Arabs (not isolation from them) and does not see it in his interest to agree to withdraw in the near future.”<sup>377</sup> To this end, McFarlane noted to Shultz that one avenue to exploit was that Assad realised “ “that only the United States can endow him with true leadership in the Arab world, because only the United States can work out a deal with Israel on the Palestinian issue.”<sup>378</sup> And unlike the Shultz’s approach, McFarlane would “reassure Assad that [the US] recognize[d] Syria’s security interests in Lebanon and [be] prepared to discuss how to satisfy them.”<sup>379</sup>

### ***McFarlane in the Middle East***

In advance of his meetings with the Syrians, McFarlane met with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Bandar, the Israelis and the Lebanese. Bandar was optimistic on McFarlane’s behalf, but told McFarlane that as long as Begin remained Prime Minister, Assad saw a new war with

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<sup>371</sup> Cable, Washington to Tel Aviv, August 11<sup>th</sup> 1983 (110416Z/226445), file Middle East (McFarlane) – Cables from Secretary Shultz,” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid. p. 3, 4.

<sup>373</sup> Wills, *The First War on Terror*, p. 36.

<sup>374</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, August 24<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (8/24/1983-8/26/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 54, RRPL, p. 3

<sup>375</sup> McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, p. 245

<sup>376</sup> Ibid. p. 247.

<sup>377</sup> Memorandum, Robert McFarlane to President Ronald Reagan, July 27<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron (7/20/1983-8/1/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL,, p. 2.

<sup>378</sup> Memorandum, Robert McFarlane to President Ronald Reagan, July 27<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron (7/20/1983-8/1/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL,, p. 2-3.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid. 5.

Israel as “inevitable” given “the United States has ‘no guts’ in its dealings with Israel.”<sup>380</sup> Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Arens told McFarlane that the Israelis wanted disengagement from the Syrians, “that after its redeployment to the Awali, Israel would wait for Syrian moves.”<sup>381</sup> In letter handed to Begin by McFarlane, Reagan wrote that “the impending redeployment of the Israeli Defense Force will culminate in [the] partition [of Lebanon],” but to no avail.<sup>382</sup> Begin, under pressure in the Knesset and by this point a recluse, was despondent with the Lebanese unwillingness to call for Syrian withdrawal and ratification of the May 17 Agreement.<sup>383</sup>

McFarlane and Fairbanks also met with Lebanese Prime Minister Shafik Wazzan who expressed gratitude that Lebanon was high on US priorities as the conflict was “ripe” for a solution. But Wazzan also told McFarlane that as Israeli partial withdrawal – not complete withdrawal – meant that Begin was abrogating the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement. Consequently, Wazzan told McFarlane that “Lebanon was free to suspend or abrogate the agreement” themselves.”<sup>384</sup> Under pressure from the centrifugal forces of Lebanese and Israeli internal affairs, the May 17 Agreement appeared to falter at the foot of Mount Lebanon as it became increasingly important to engage with the Syrians to avert a war in the Chouf district, often called “the Mountain war.”

### ***Failing to Avert the “Mountain War”***

The pace of events forced US diplomacy to focus on two tracks: McFarlane focused on the Syrian angle, going to Damascus two times in August 1983 to consult with Assad; the other track was the disparate Lebanese factions gathered in Geneva, Switzerland to talk of forming a government of national unity.

In advance of his meeting with Assad on August 7<sup>th</sup>, McFarlane met with Foreign Minister Khaddam, before meeting with Assad later that same day. Khaddam presented “the standard Syrian hard line: Gemayel was illegitimate as he only ruled on behalf of the Phalange; Syrian withdrawal was contingent on “total Israeli withdrawal;” the May 17<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Cable, Jidda to Washington, August 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (005277), file “Middle East (McFarlane) Chron Cables (8/1/1983-8/4/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>381</sup> Cable, Jerusalem to Washington, August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1983 (050050Z/02794), file Middle East (McFarlane) Chron Cables (8/5/1983-8/7/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL p. 1

<sup>382</sup> Text of letter in Cable, Washington to Beirut, August 16<sup>th</sup> 1983 (152330Z/231099), file “Middle East (McFarlane) – Cables from Secretary Shultz,” ExSec-Sub, Box 53, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>383</sup> Cable, Tel Aviv to Washington, August 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (041804Z/010544) file “Middle East (McFarlane) Chron Cables (8/1/1983-8/4/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1-2.

<sup>384</sup> Cable, Jidda to Washington, August 8<sup>th</sup> 1983 (981315Z/05411), file Middle East (McFarlane) Chron Cables (8/8/1983-8/9/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

Agreement was to be abrogated; and that American “pro-Israeli bias fatally vitiates its effectiveness as a constructive player in the Middle East.”<sup>385</sup>

To Assad, McFarlane would make clear that “President Reagan is determined to take all possible measures to strengthen the Government of Lebanon.”<sup>386</sup> What McFarlane told Assad said in their first meeting remains classified.<sup>387</sup> McFarlane attempted to stress that the United States’ (staying-) power and influence in the Middle East was not driven by hegemonic designs; US foreign policy was a moral one, a just one:

[The US is] deeply and fundamentally committed to a just and lasting peace...This deep aspiration on behalf of my government is based both on a moral imperative and our self-interest, *because we are a deeply conservative power in this area: Peace and stability serve our national interests.* This region has cardinal strategic importance for my country and the other industrialized nations of the free world... We will back our commitment in all ways necessary; not because we want bases or desire hegemony, but to continue the commitment to our unshakeable policy goals...<sup>388</sup>

McFarlane would then go into the details of the May 17 Agreement, but he made no progress:

Early in my sessions with Assad, it became clear that he felt no pressure to make any concessions, and that I had no leverage to coerce them... From Assad’s point of view, if the Israeli withdrawal was inevitable, there was no need for him to give up anything to achieve it.<sup>389</sup>

McFarlane noted that on “willingness of the [Syria] to permit and facilitate a political reconciliation to take place. Here I got nowhere.” He also noted that two options remained: “One is an incremental approach like the one Kissinger used in the mid-70’s” of continued dialogue.<sup>390</sup> The other approach was “more frontal and is based on the assumption that Syria will never willingly compromise.”<sup>391</sup> The first approach proved futile. From August 10<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup>, the BIA had been under continuous artillery fire. McFarlane would opt for the latter option: “the Syrians will never willingly compromise.” A Druze barrage on the BIA on August 28<sup>th</sup> killed two US Marines, and on August 29<sup>th</sup>, as the LAF started its campaign to retake areas held by IDF troops in the Metn and West Beirut, the Marines attacked Druze artillery

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<sup>385</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, August 8<sup>th</sup> 1983 (081532Z/06036), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (8/8/1983-8/9/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>386</sup> Robert McFarlane, Talking Points for Meeting With Assad, August 6<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (8/5/1983-8/7/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>387</sup> The following is based on McFarlane’s talking points as well as other accounts: Wills., 36-37; Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East.*, 412-415; McFarlane and Smardz., 251-253.

<sup>388</sup> (My emphasis) Talking Points for Meeting Assad, p. 2

<sup>389</sup> McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, p. 247.

<sup>390</sup> Summary of McFarlane’s Mission to Date, no date, file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (8/8/1983-8/9/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

with helicopter gunships. To the public, Reagan denied that what the Marines were doing constituted “combat operations.”<sup>392</sup>

### ***The Geneva Negotiations Start and the Role of France***

Negotiations on the formation of a government of national unity started at the end of August in Geneva. The avenue had been suggested by the French. President Francois Mitterand had struck an ambivalent note in Lebanon, especially on Gemayel’s Presidency. On the one hand, French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson had denounced the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement as “an implicit Yalta” and Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy argued that the US-mediated agreement had “ignored the regional role of Syria” concluding that “this accord... has not helped to find a solution.”<sup>393</sup> The French also rejected McFarlane’s overtures for a joint US-French front against the Syrians, but the French representative, Francois De Grossouvre, declined to join McFarlane in Damascus. Cheysson “preferred that Arab states take the initiative in supporting [Lebanon] before France and others came forward.”<sup>394</sup> McFarlane was disappointed as Cheysson previously had indicated that France would support such a statement.<sup>395</sup>

At the Geneva conference, negotiations were being led by Saudi-Lebanese businessman – and later prime minister of Lebanon – Rafik Hariri. The Lebanese were represented on the one hand by Amin, and on the other, by the NSF leaders and their ally Nabih Berri. Syria would participate as an observer, with Foreign Minister Khaddam representing Assad. But as Marius and Mary-Jane Deeb argue, the Syrians “played an enormously important role in the negotiations by ensuring that the [NSF leaders] toed the line and did not break away from the positions it wanted them to hold.”<sup>396</sup> Meeting with Fairbanks on September 1<sup>st</sup>, the date of Israeli withdrawal south of the Awali, Khaddam blamed the Americans for the outbreak of fighting in the Chouf and the breakdown of negotiations: “Your approach is wrong. Concentrating on the Druze/Maronite problem is to ignore the basic issue i.e. civil war has divided Lebanon into two sides, the NSF and its allies and the [Phalange].” In Khaddam’s view, what Fairbanks and the Reagan administration failed to understand was that Syria wanted a comprehensive solution to the civil war in

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<sup>392</sup> David Koff, "Chronology of the War in Lebanon, June-August 1983," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. No. 1 (1983), p. 162-163

<sup>393</sup> Pia Christina Wood, "The Diplomacy of Peacekeeping: France and the Multinational Forces to Lebanon, 1982–84," *International Peacekeeping* 5, no. 2 (1998), p. 30-31.

<sup>394</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, September 1<sup>st</sup> 1983 (012230Z/00001), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/3/1983-9/4/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Mary-Jane Deeb and Marius K Deeb, "Regional Conflict and Regional Solutions: Lebanon," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 518, no. 1 (1991), p. 87.

Lebanon, just as in the Arab-Israeli conflict. As Khaddam told Fairbanks, “seeking partial solutions” would not work. “Kissinger [sought partial solutions] in the Arab Israeli context – he did not succeed, and neither will you.”<sup>397</sup>

### **“Affirmative Action:” McFarlane Lobbies for Direct US Support of the LAF**

As Syrian-backed Druze militias under Walid Jumblatt and Gemayel’s LAF ramped up their efforts gain control of the areas the Israelis were about withdraw from, the “Mountain War” began. On September 1<sup>st</sup> 1983, Gemayel called for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, officially rescinding the Arab Deterrent Force mandate, the crux of Syrian legitimacy in Lebanon. Amin had agreed to do this under pressure from the American envoys in his presidential palace. While McFarlane, Fairbanks and US Ambassador to Lebanon Robert Dillon were meeting Gemayel, Druze artillery shells landed next to Dillon’s residence in Beirut. Amin also signed the order for the LAF to move into areas where the Israelis were pulling out of on September 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>398</sup> Paganelli had met with Khaddam again on September 1<sup>st</sup> to indicate “that US-Syrian relations could be approaching a crunch over Lebanon” if there were no progress.<sup>399</sup> But McFarlane’s attention was then diverted away from Lebanon. That same day, the Soviet Union shot down a civilian Korean airliner – KAL 007 – and in his capacity as Deputy National Security Advisor, McFarlane was needed in Washington.

When the National Security Planning Group (NSPG) met on September 3<sup>rd</sup> to discuss the situation, the agenda turned to Lebanon. It is here McFarlane’s role becomes muddled. Firstly, much is still classified from this period. Secondly, McFarlane retained his deputy national security title as special envoy, and it was his team of “soulmates” which were disseminating intelligence for the NSPG. This gave McFarlane immense informal power in the NSC able to set the premise for the policy discussion as a well as in his capacity as special envoy being in a position to frame the diplomatic situation to the NSPG as well. McFarlane lobbied for gunboat diplomacy, reasoning that a “a platform of heavy guns, after all, can be very visibly imposing” against Syria and the “new wildcard” in Lebanon, Hezbollah.<sup>400</sup> Tanter (though not impartial) argues, McFarlane was able to swing the NSPG’s opinion in his favour as he “manipulated the intelligence process to produce information that would justify

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<sup>397</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, August 31<sup>st</sup> 1983 (311217Z/06785), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/3/1983-9/4/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, RRPL, p. 3

<sup>398</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, September 1<sup>st</sup> 1983 (011838Z/0000), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/3/1983-9/4/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1-2.

<sup>399</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, September 1<sup>st</sup> 1983 (011224Z/06824), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/3/1983-9/4/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>400</sup> McFarlane and Smardz., 249.



his bureaucratic ambitions or achieve policy aims for which there was little consensus in the administration.”<sup>401</sup> Shultz, observed that “the NSC staff had become the most militaristic group in Washington, but it was pulling against a reluctant Pentagon.”<sup>402</sup> Weinberger and Vessey remained opposed to escalating the American military presence, but Reagan was sympathetic.<sup>403</sup>

By McFarlane’s return to Lebanon, the political situation in Beirut was collapsing and Gemayel threatened to resign. Father Bulis Na’man, a Maronite hard-liner, claimed that all 47,000 Christians in the Aley and Chouf districts “face[d] imminent massacre,” setting off a panic in East Beirut.<sup>404</sup> Pressed on two fronts – Prime Minister Karami and the Muslim opposition in Parliament and the Maronite hardliners – Gemayel now threatened to resign while also making “many request[s] for heightened US assistance, red li[n]es and direct involvement.”<sup>405</sup> McFarlane concurred. The LAF had just entered the village of Suq el-Gharb in the Chouf district, and McFarlane suggested “affirmative action by the LAF” as the “best antidote to the siege mentality.”<sup>406</sup> And while Gemayel approved, he still intended to resign, even if his resignation would lead to a Maronite hard-liner – he suggested Father Na’man – taking over. Fairbanks implored Gemayel to remain in office as a Maronite hard-liner in power would mean an immediate partition of Lebanon<sup>407</sup> If Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon was a litmus test for the LAF’s capabilities as a fighting force and Gemayel’s continuation as President all hinged on McFarlane’s negotiations in Damascus. But if McFarlane was unable to obtain any guarantees from the Syrians, the outcome of the battle for Suq el-Gharb would be the deciding factor.

### ***McFarlane Returns to Damascus***

Inbound to Damascus McFarlane requested that Prince Bandar, who was meeting with Khaddam, should stay behind until McFarlane could debrief him. Assad had met with Saudi Foreign Minister and Hariri on Lebanon on September 6<sup>th</sup> and McFarlane wanted to know what the Saudis and Syrians had agreed to so that he did not have to start over when he

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<sup>401</sup> Tanter, *Who’s at the Helm?*, p. 218.

<sup>402</sup> Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil*, p. 226.

<sup>403</sup> Wills, *The First War on Terror*, p. 59-60

<sup>404</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, September 6<sup>th</sup> 1983 (061200Z/09807) file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9.6.83) (2 of 2),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1. Father Na’am was the leader of Permanent Congress of the Lebanese Maronites Monastic Orders, allied with the Lebanese Front. See Marwan George Rowayheb, “Lebanese Militias: A New Perspective,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 2 (2006), 311.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid p. 2.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, September 6<sup>th</sup> 1983 (061538/09824), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/6/1983) (2 of 2),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1-2.

arrived.<sup>408</sup> Bandar, Hariri and the Syrians had worked on the “Fahd Plan” which called for for a nation-wide ceasefire and the introduction of the LAF into the Aley and Chouf districts, as well as a “comprehensive meeting” of the leaders of the NSF, President Amin and the Lebanese Front.<sup>409</sup> On September 5<sup>th</sup>, King Fahd approved the plan.<sup>410</sup> That same day (September 5<sup>th</sup>), Syria called on the Arab League to sever its relations with Lebanon.<sup>411</sup> However, Bandar had already left Damascus for Jidda when McFarlane arrived, unwilling to compromise the secret backchannel. But without the specific plan, McFarlane feared the Syrians would stall. Meanwhile, the LAF was being surrounded in Suq el-Gharb.

Paganelli who held a preliminary meeting with Khaddam realised that something was up. On questions of the Saudi-Syrian discussions Khaddam kept details vague but was “optimistic” on a “number of Syrian-Saudi thoughts on Lebanon.” But Paganelli became suspicious and urged “that no representation be made to the Lebanese government until our full report...is received.”<sup>412</sup> The American Embassy to Jidda got a hold of Prince Bandar by telephone who had a completely different version of the meetings: He described Hafez and Rifaat al-Assad and Khaddam’s demeanour “both negative and cocky” seeing “no need to negotiate as long as their allies in Lebanon were doing well on the ground.”<sup>413</sup> When Bandar had noted the presence of US ships off the coast of Lebanon, Khaddam had responded that “Either we’ll sink it or call in the Russians.”<sup>414</sup> King Fahd, angered by Syrian “stalling and toying,” threatened to end Saudi Arabia’s mediation.<sup>415</sup> Going in to meet with the Syrians, the outcome of the battle of Suq el-Gharb, and by extension, the nature of the US’ commitment to Gemayel, depended on what concessions, if any, the Syrians would give McFarlane.

McFarlane met first with Khaddam. McFarlane handed Khaddam a letter from Reagan which stressed the need of dialogue with Syrian in “good faith” and the need to form a

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<sup>408</sup> Cable, Damascus to Jidda, September 6<sup>th</sup> 1983 (061959Z/06968), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/6/1983) (1 of 2),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1

<sup>409</sup> Cable, Jidda to Washington, September 5<sup>th</sup> 1983 (051203/07342), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/6/1983) (1 of 2),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 2

<sup>410</sup> Cable, Jidda to Washington, September 5<sup>th</sup> 1983 (051315Z/07343), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/6/1983) (1 of 2),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, RRPL, p. 6.

<sup>411</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, September 5<sup>th</sup> 1983 (051612Z/06942) file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/6/1983) (1 of 2),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1

<sup>412</sup> Cable, Damascus to Beirut, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1983 (070928Z/06989), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/6/1983) (1 of 2),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1

<sup>413</sup> Cable, Jidda to Washington, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1983 (070820Z/07384), “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

government of national unity.<sup>416</sup> While Khaddam agreed, he noted that, Reagan's press secretary, Larry Speakes, had told an assembled press corps in Washington that "the Syrians should know that we have considerable firepower offshore, and they should be circumspect in their own active involvement in instigating any violence in the area" the day before.<sup>417</sup> An "ultimatum" such as this was "unacceptable" Khaddam told McFarlane.<sup>418</sup> The issue of Speakes' "ultimatum" dominated conversation. Trying to ameliorate this impasse, McFarlane tried to defuse the situation by telling Khaddam of the NSPG meeting of September 3<sup>rd</sup> on the downing of KAL 007 and Lebanon. This however, just made the whole situation worse: "A plane was downed in Korea, and [the US] issued an ultimatum to Syria!" responded Khaddam. The meeting did however get back on track and McFarlane and Khaddam – who also pledged Jumblatt's approval - ended up agreeing on a framework for Lebanon along the following lines: 1) that the LAF would return to Beirut, 2) a country-wide ceasefire, and 3) a meeting of all parties concerned in the Lebanese civil war.<sup>419</sup> However, nothing was signed.

McFarlane then went on to meet with Assad. To Assad, McFarlane brought a short letter from Reagan, this one also stressed "the need to work together" on Lebanon.<sup>420</sup> Assad spent much of the meeting on "what he characterised as US threats and warnings to Syria"<sup>421</sup> The Syrian President told McFarlane that "although [he] recognized overwhelming US power, it would defend itself if hit." Assad pledged to not expand his presence in Lebanon beyond current positions hoping that "circumstances would permit their withdrawal, rather than the opposite," – being pushed out by force – saying "that it was necessary for U.S. and Syria to understand each other clearly on this matter," noting Syria's historic relationship with Lebanon. In response, McFarlane tried to assuage the Syrian fears that the US had any territorial ambitions in Lebanon, such as military installations, and that "if we had any, we would have stayed in Lebanon in 1958."<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Text of letter in Cable, Washington to Damascus, September 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (042023Z/252967), file "Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9.3.83-9.4.83)," ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>417</sup> William E. Farrel, "Reagan Says Marines Will Remain in Beirut," September 7<sup>th</sup> 1983, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/07/world/reagan-says-marines-will-remain-in-beirut.html>

<sup>418</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1983 (071908Z/07021), file "Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983)," ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 4.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid. p. 5

<sup>420</sup> Text of letter in Cable, Washington to Damascus, September 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (042023Z/252967), file "Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/7/1983)," ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>421</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1983 (071557Z/07008), file "Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983)," ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>422</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washinton, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1983 (071557Z/07008), file "Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983)," ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 2.

US-Syrian dialogue, while still ongoing, cannot be said to have been in good faith. McFarlane described his reaction after the meetings as “puzzled and confused.”<sup>423</sup> The Americans now scrambled to ascertain how “Syrian-Saudi agreements” could actually be built upon, if at all. As McFarlane left Damascus, Druze militias and Palestinian guerrillas surrounded the LAF brigade in Suq el-Gharb, as well as continuously shelling Beirut International Airport where the US MNF contingent was stationed.

### ***The Battle for Suq el-Gharb: “Aggressive Self-Defense”***

From the US embassy residence in Beirut where McFarlane lived while in Lebanon, to the village of Suq el-Gharb on Mount Lebanon there are about 20 kilometres, but there is a direct line of sight due to elevation. On the night of September 10<sup>th</sup>, the LAF brigade in Suq el-Gharb made its last stand. Artillery shells then hit next to the ambassador’s residence. McFarlane and his entourage had to hide in the basement. To Clark McFarlane reported that “the sky was falling.”<sup>424</sup> As he saw it, “there is a serious threat of a decisive [LAF] defeat [in Suq el-Gharb] which could involve the fall of the Government of Lebanon within twenty-four hours... in short, tonight we could be in enemy lines.”<sup>425</sup> McFarlane’s lobbying to the NSPG on September 3<sup>rd</sup> had paid off: By signing NSDD 103 Reagan authorised the Marines to conduct “aggressive self-defense against hostile or provocative acts from any quarter” as well as the deployment of the USS New Jersey off the coast of Lebanon.<sup>426</sup> In an addendum to NSDD103:

It [was] determined that... successful LAF defense of the area of SUQ-AL-GHARB is vital to the safety of US personnel... When the US ground commander determines that SUQ-AL-GHARB is in danger of falling as a result of attack involving non-Lebanese forces and if requested by the host government, appropriate US military assistance in defence of SUQ-AL-GHARB is authorized.<sup>427</sup>

On September 14<sup>th</sup> the US helicopters air-lifted supplies to the LAF units in the Suq el-Gharb. As fighting continued over the next few day, the Lebanese requested fire support.

Meanwhile, that same day, McFarlane returned to Damascus and met with Khaddam. After the battle of Suq el-Gharb, McFarlane told Khaddam the US “has its normal force disposition plus selected reinforcements; on the other side forces have been considerably

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<sup>423</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1983 (071934Z/07022), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>424</sup> Wills, *The First War on Terror*, p. 60; McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, p. 250-251; Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 308.

<sup>425</sup> McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, p. 251.

<sup>426</sup> Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon*, p. 152-155.

<sup>427</sup> No author, “National Security Decision Directive 103,” RRPL-Dig, September 10<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd103.pdf>

reinforced.”<sup>428</sup> In his previous meeting with Assad, the Syrian president had promised that his forces in Lebanon not expand beyond their current positions, but to Assad this pledge did not include his proxies. In the end, they were able to find a common formula for progress in Lebanon: establishment of a nation-wide ceasefire and a security conference – this outcome seems to be the same as Khaddam’s previous “Syrian-Saudi thoughts” as described above, though, again, nothing was signed by McFarlane. Khaddam also urged restraint on all parties in the conflict.<sup>429</sup> With the “Syrian-Saudi thoughts” as a basis for a ceasefire, Reagan implored King Fahd that Assad “should be urged in the strongest terms to accept the text.”<sup>430</sup> However, only four days later, Fairbanks reported that the Presidential palace and embassy residence was again under attack. Shultz relayed the message to McFarlane in Damascus: “No operations being conducted by LAF. Where is Khaddam’s promise [of restraint]?” wrote Fairbanks.<sup>431</sup>

On September 19<sup>th</sup>, US ships off the shores of Lebanon conducted a five-hour barrage of the Druze and Palestinian forces surrounding Suq el-Gharb, breaking their advance.<sup>432</sup> Shultz therefore cabled McFarlane telling him that Bandar had to convey to the Syrians that US fire support “in now being used to defend... it is not... being used for offensive purposes.”<sup>433</sup> Assad was supposed to see that the battle for Suq el-Gharb was a bridge too far; the US would not let him destroy the LAF. It is here notable that the request went through McFarlane’s Joint Chiefs of Staff liaison, Brigadier General Carl Stiner, not directly to the Marine commander Geraghty.<sup>434</sup> To journalists Robert Fisk and Thomas Friedman, this was the moment when the US lost any pretension of neutrality in the Lebanese civil war, and as an anonymous NSC aide phrase it, the “peace negotiator” had become “an artillery spotter”<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Cable, Damascus to Beirut, September 14<sup>th</sup> 1983 (141839/07316), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) 9/14/1983-9/19/1983,” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 3; McFarlane notes that he “got confirmed reports of Farsi conversations, the presence of Iranian advisors and trainers, as well as confirmed Syrian radio transmission and undeniable artillery and mortar fire coming from the confirmed Syrian positions... The assault [on Suq el-Gharb] was obviously Syrian-sponsored and inspired.” McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, p. 251-252.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

<sup>430</sup> Text of Letter in Cable, Washington to Jidda, September 15<sup>th</sup> 1983 (161621Z/264719), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) 9/14/1983-9/19/1983,” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>431</sup> Cable, Washington to Damascus, September 19<sup>th</sup> 1983 (1902250Z/265362), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) 9/14/1983-9/19/1983,” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>432</sup> Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982-1984*, p. 88

<sup>433</sup> Cable, Washington to Damascus, September 19<sup>th</sup> 1983 (191598Z/266428), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) 9/14/1983-9/19/1983,” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>434</sup> Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982-1984*, p. 87-88.

<sup>435</sup> Babcock and Oberdorfer, “The NSC Cabal;” Fisk, *Pity the Nation*, p. 505; Thomas Friedman, “U.S. Warships Fire on Area Held by Damascus,” *The New York Times*, September 15<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/18/world/us-warships-fire-on-lebanon-area-held-by-damascus.html>

### ***McFarlane's Last Meeting with Assad***

With the arrival of the USS New Jersey to Lebanese waters to act as leverage, McFarlane went back to Damascus. On September 22<sup>nd</sup> McFarlane again met with Khaddam. McFarlane stressed that the US wanted constructive dialogue with Syria and that national reconciliation would have to be addressed through Lebanese political institutions: the constitution and parliament. Khaddam disagreed: national reconciliation “dialogue should be between the ‘fighting forces.’” The Syrians now said there were three possible options for progress: 1) implement the “Syrian-Saudi thoughts” (or Fahd Plan), 2) call a meeting of the Phalange, the NSF and Amal to negotiate a ceasefire, or 3) a meeting of all opposing factions with Saudi and Syrian mediators. McFarlane opted to support the Fahd Plan.<sup>436</sup>

McFarlane then met with Assad.<sup>437</sup> To Assad, McFarlane again stressed that the United States recognised Syrian security interests in Lebanon, and that the US “[had] no wish to see relations with Syria deteriorate when we both have so much to gain by working together.”<sup>438</sup> The talking points however, does not mention what this meeting has become infamous for: At the end of their meeting McFarlane told Assad that “by the way, the President has ordered the battleship New Jersey to Mediterranean waters. I expect it to arrive tomorrow.” McFarlane describes this as a “final gambit.”<sup>439</sup> But, as Seale writes, “in fact, Assad had for the moment everything he wanted” and now accepted the Fahd Plan.<sup>440</sup> After the ambassador’s residence was shelled again on the night of September 25<sup>th</sup>, the country-wide ceasefire was proclaimed. What McFarlane had called “affirmative action” of the LAF – making its stand in Suq el-Gharb – had worked. For the immediate future, Amin remained President of Lebanon.

### ***“If Current Concept Proves Inadequate:” Congress and Public Opinion***

Repeatedly the Reagan administration pointed to the Soviet Union’s role in supporting Syria’s spoiler role in Lebanon. Shultz worried that the rise in sectarian violence was due to Soviet interference:

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<sup>436</sup> Cable, Damascus to Beirut, September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1983 (231314Z/07555), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) 9/20/1983-9/23/1983,” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1; Cable, Damascus to Beirut, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1983 (221437Z/07529) file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) 9.20.83-9.23.83,” ExSec-Sub, Box 54, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>437</sup> The Memcon from the meeting remains classified, so this section is based off other accounts and McFarlane’s talking points. For accounts of the meeting see: McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, p. 253-254; Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 415; Wills. 61.

<sup>438</sup> Cable, Beirut to Damascus, September 20<sup>th</sup> 1983 (210133Z/10455), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) 9/20/1983-9/23/1983,” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>439</sup> McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, p. 253.

<sup>440</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 410.

In the wake of the KAL attack, we must reckon with the possibility that the Soviets have made a conscious decision to take more openly antagonistic positions – or even to encourage overtly hostile acts by their surrogates – wherever they feel that can undermine our strength.<sup>441</sup>

In a non-paper titled “Strategies for Lebanon if Current Concept Proves Inadequate” Executive Secretary at the State Department Charles Hill summarised the inter-agency perspectives on Lebanon going forward. Hill noted that noted “The Stakes in Lebanon: As the United States interests in Lebanon has expanded, the credibility of our Southwest Asia and Middle East Peace policies, has increasingly come to rest on the fate of the [Lebanon’s government i.e. Amin Gemayel].”<sup>442</sup> A draft version of the document described “the current situation in Lebanon as “preventing Soviet-backed Syrian victory at US expense.”<sup>443</sup>

In Hill’s assessment, there were four options going forward: 1) continue current level of Marine deployment, regardless of the political situation; 2) support the LAF’s campaign to expand its control beyond Beirut, while still pursuing the diplomatic course (toward Syria) and political solutions (within Lebanon); 3) directly support the LAF’s campaign to expand with US military support, “thus creating greater pressures to force the pace” of diplomacy and reconciliation, in effect intervening in the conflict; or 4) “forcing Syrian (and Israeli) withdrawal by ultimatum, and if Syria refuses, by use of military forces...”<sup>444</sup> Advocates of the third option saw a “military solution... desirable in order to meet a Soviet challenge.” There was however no consensus: Confrontation “would involve unacceptable risks of war with Syria, and by extension, the Soviet Union, without sufficient domestic and international support or probability of lasting success” as well as jeopardising the peace process. Escalation beyond the original MNF mandate would also need Congressional approval.<sup>445</sup> In the end, Hill, in his recommendation to the NSPG, concluded that “Option 2,” supporting the LAF and pursuing a diplomatic solution with Syria, “appears... to give a reasonable chance of success without unacceptable risks of escalation.”<sup>446</sup> The duration of the US presence in Lebanon was estimated as “indefinite.”<sup>447</sup>

Continued involvement in Lebanon however needed both Congressional approval as well as public support. Reagan’s pollster Richard Wirthlin found that “almost all Americans do not like our troops taking fire without recourse:” 45% of those polled wanted the marine

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<sup>441</sup> Cable, Washington to Beirut, September 14<sup>th</sup> 1983 (140213Z/261478), file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/14/1983-9/19/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 1.

<sup>442</sup> Memorandum, Charles Hill to William P. Clark, September 26<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Middle East Trip (McFarlane) Chron Cables (9/28/1983-9/30/1983),” ExSec-Sub, Box 51, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid. 2-3.

<sup>445</sup> Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon*, p. 157

<sup>446</sup> Hill to Clark, p. 2.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid. p. 13

pulled out, while 42% wanted them “reinforced.” He further noted that “when faced with the prospect of those who initially wanted the Marines withdrawn, change their mind.”<sup>448</sup> This strategy, framing Lebanon in the context of the cold war, was also used in Congress.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Shultz argued that “The Soviet Union’s efforts to disrupt our diplomacy will have scored a victory; radical and rejectionist elements will be strengthened.”<sup>449</sup> The new parameters of the US mission, as outlined in NSDD103, went beyond the original MNF mandate as well. After the 1982 Mid-terms, there was now a Democratic majority in Congress, which had become wary after the Embassy bombing in April.<sup>450</sup> Reagan’s request for an 18-month mandate in Lebanon was approved on September 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>451</sup> The immediate future of the Marines in Lebanon was firmly established, but it rested upon a potentially shaky political Congressional foundation.

### ***Conclusion: From Spoiler to Adversary***

By excluding the Syrians from the negotiations that produced the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement, Syria’s opposition was inevitable. As Paganelli had phrased it, “leaving the Syrians to stew in their own juice” was one way of approaching Assad; on the outside, looking in. But, Paganelli noted, “their juice spill out all over the area.” What Habib, Reagan, and Shultz did not anticipate (or failed to take into account), was that two successive negotiations, Israel-Lebanon first, then Lebanon-Syria, was that the first settlement would set the parameters for the next. As the Begin government, weary of Lebanon, pledged to withdraw from Lebanon, this changed the balance of power in Lebanon to Assad’s advantage.

In his dual role of Deputy National Security Advisor and Special Envoy McFarlane had advocated “affirmative action” by the LAF in the battle for Suq el-Gharb. But McFarlane also used LAF’s near defeat in the Chouf to leverage direct US assistance in the conflict. In this way, McFarlane was ‘diplomat and artillery spotter.’ But what military power he could muster (naval artillery) did not produce the awe McFarlane hoped to inspire. On the contrary, naval artillery had eviscerated any pretensions of US neutrality in the Lebanese civil war. Shielded by his superpower patron in Moscow, the momentum in Lebanon was Assad’s side.

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<sup>448</sup> Memorandum, Richard Wirthlin to Edwin Meese, James A Baker III, Michael K. Deaver, and William P. Clark, file “Lebanon (9.21.83-10.8.83),” ExSec-CO, Box 43, p. 1

<sup>449</sup> No author, “Excerpts from a Statement by Shultz on American Policy in Mideast,” *The New York Times*, September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/22/world/excerpts-from-a-statement-by-shultz-on-american-policy-in-mideast.html>

<sup>450</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, “Marines in Lebanon: Congress Becoming Wary,” *The New York Times*, April 20<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/20/world/marines-in-lebanon-congress-is-becoming-wary.html>

<sup>451</sup> Hendrick Smith, “The House Ties Reagan’s Hands with a Slipknot,” *The New York Times*, September 25<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/25/weekinreview/the-house-ties-reagan-s-hands-with-a-slipknot.html>



## 6 ***Cutting the Lebanese Knot***

*Well, we're getting into hypotheticals now of that situation. I'm simply saying that if there was a complete collapse and there was no possibility of restoring order, there would be no purpose in the multinational force.*<sup>452</sup>

*President Ronald Reagan*

### ***On Collision Course with Syria and Intervening in Grenada***

As superpower tensions continued to mount in the autumn of 1983, an exhausted William P. Clark asked to be replaced as National Security Adviser. As several candidates were assessed and discarded, including White House Chief of Staff James Baker III and UN Ambassador and anti-communist hardliner Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Clark's deputy and special envoy to the Middle East, Robert McFarlane, emerged as the consensus choice.<sup>453</sup> However, as McFarlane assumed command of the National Security Council, his first big challenge did not originate in the Middle East, but in the Caribbean island nation of Grenada.

As the focal point connecting President Reagan to the inter-agency process, McFarlane would see his attempt to force Syria out of Lebanon be undermined by several military, political and diplomatic setbacks. Most prominent was the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut on October 23<sup>rd</sup> and the failed air raid on Syrian and Iranian barracks in the Bekaa Valley on December 4<sup>th</sup>. Together with the failure of the national reconciliation process and the failure of US diplomatic and military power to force Syria out of Lebanon, the will of the Reagan administration to remain engaged in Lebanon quickly eroded in December 1983-January 1984. This gave Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey, the most ardent critics of the administration's Lebanon policy, the upper hand in the inter-departmental quarrels on the use of force and the deployment of the marines in Beirut. The shelling of the Chouf had damaged the US position as an honest broker in Lebanon, and the ambiguous commitments of the United States' – to Gemayel, to Israel – combined with ambiguous ultimatums and a botched display of US airpower against Syria. This led to a breakdown of the political situation in Lebanon, and a collapse of the Reagan administration's Lebanon policy. When the Gemayel government

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<sup>452</sup> No Author, "Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues," RRPL-Dig, December 20<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/121483a.htm>

<sup>453</sup> Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 380.

collapsed on February 7<sup>th</sup> 1984, Weinberger and Vessey got their will. The marines “redeployed off-shore,” effectively leaving Lebanon to Syrian devices.

***The Barracks Bombing: An Attack on the United States and France, not the MNF***

On the morning of October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1983, a truck rammed the gates of the Marine Barracks at Beirut International Airport, detonating a 12,000 pound bomb. The blast killed 241 US Marines and support staff, the largest single loss of life to the US Marines “since D-Day on Iwo Jima in 1945.”<sup>454</sup> Less than an hour later, a similar attack happened at the French barracks, killing 58 soldiers. The two bombings eclipsed similar events earlier in Lebanon (such as the bombing of the French and American embassies). The attack was not an attack on the MNF as a whole, just the French and American contingents. American naval artillery had shattered notions of the United States as an impartial arbiter in Lebanon, and in response to attacks on the French MNF contingent in September – at the same time as the battle for Suq el-Gharb – the French had responded with airstrikes against Druze and Syrian positions in the Bekaa Valley.<sup>455</sup> The Italian and British contingents had been left alone.

Commandant P. X. Kelley of the Marine Corps asserted that the attack was purported by “professional elements” – with state-backing.<sup>456</sup> The French had registered that “twelve persons rapidly left the Iranian embassy” in Beirut within 15 minutes of the attack. Ten of the twelve were identified as Syrian military.<sup>457</sup> The first secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Beirut had boasted to General Tannous of the LAF that “Reagan thought he won his re-election in Suq el-Gharb, but he will lose it in the streets of Beirut.”<sup>458</sup> Kelley concluded that “the expertise of the Soviet Union, Syria and Iran, will be brought to bear against [the] marines in the future weeks and months.”<sup>459</sup> That Iran had a role in the bombing was unequivocal in the US intelligence community. Signals intercepted from the Iranian embassy in Damascus to the Sheikh Fadlallah barracks in the Bekaa Valley showed that the Iranians had approved of the strike and that the explosive came from (or at least through) Syria.<sup>460</sup> The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) concluded that “these attacks are probably the work of the pro-Iranian Lebanese Shia Hizb Allah (Party of God), Led by Muhammad

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<sup>454</sup> Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982-1984*, p. 3.

<sup>455</sup> Wood, “The Diplomacy of Peacekeeping,” p. 32.

<sup>456</sup> Telegram, Edward V. Hickey Jr. to Robert C. McFarlane, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1983 (PSN: 271440Z/PSN: 074045), file “Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/23/1983)” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 2.

<sup>457</sup> Telegram, Edward V. Hickey Jr. to Robert C. McFarlane, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1983 (PSN: 271440Z/PSN: 074045), file “Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/23/1983)” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 2.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>460</sup> Richelson, “The Truth Conquers All Chains,” p. 185

Husayn Fadlallah.” The DIA also concluded that France “was a logical target of Iranian sympathisers vengeance” citing French arms sales to Iraq.<sup>461</sup>

### **How to Respond?**

Unlike the Embassy bombing in April 1983, the barracks bombing would directly influence US policy in Lebanon and US policy toward Syria as well as constraining it. Several public pronouncements by the Reagan administration officials contributed to increased tensions. On October 25<sup>th</sup>, Reagan told the press that those who had perpetrated this “despicable act will not go unpunished.”<sup>462</sup> As noted, Lebanon had become a test of US credibility, not only in the Middle East, but globally, and in this context of a frontal assault on the US presence in Beirut, a firm response and a coherent strategy was needed.

In response to the bombing, the NSC discussed how to deal with Syria. Donald Fortier, Senior Director for Political-Military Affairs and Special Assistant to the President, suggested communicating several “red lines” to Syria, suggesting the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement should be one of them.<sup>463</sup> John Poindexter, McFarlane’s deputy, argued that “Syria will pursue Syrian – not Soviet – interests.”<sup>464</sup> Furthermore, Poindexter argued that after the shelling of the Chouf in September 1983, “the Syrians sensed that they had probably reached their military limits” and pointed to “reporting” that the Syrians were ready to “strike a deal with the US.”<sup>465</sup> This, Poindexter argued, meant that the United States should be considering making concessions to the Syrians, such as allowing pro-Syrian Lebanese into Gemayel’s government of national unity. “If Syria gains something through this process – so be it. We can readily live with this as long as the Syrians do not impose their will on Lebanon” argued Poindexter.<sup>466</sup> But in this context of nominal progress in Lebanon before the bombing it proved a significant setback. Poindexter’s suggested overture to Assad was abandoned. Another problem with responding to Syrian interference in Lebanon was that the Syrians had determination and staying power there. One way to remedy this was to have Israel act as a

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<sup>461</sup> Cable, DIA to White House Situation Room, October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1983 (DTG: 230802Z/PSN: 064217), file “Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/23/1983)” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 2.

<sup>462</sup> William E. Farrell, “Unanswered Question: Who Was Responsible?,” October 25<sup>th</sup> 1983, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/25/world/unanswered-question-who-was-responsible.html>

<sup>463</sup> Memorandum, Donald Fortier to Robert McFarlane, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Lebanon III (5 of 10)”, Fortier-files, RAC Box 6, p. 1.

<sup>464</sup> Memorandum,\* Howard Teicher to Geoffrey Kemp, Donald Fortier, Philip Dur, and Oliver North, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Lebanon III (5 of 10)”, Fortier-files, RAC Box 6, p 3

<sup>465</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid. 3.

“punisher” of Syrian misbehaviour as Paganelli reported that there was a widespread fear in Syria that the US would now “unleash” the Israelis on Syria.<sup>467</sup>

The shift in strategy, both on Lebanon, and the broader implications for the Middle East, had begun already before the barracks bombing. A State Department paper that was the basis for an NSPG meeting on October 18<sup>th</sup>, laid out a strategy for the Middle East and closer strategic cooperation with Israel.<sup>468</sup> However, the internecine policy quarrels between those who favoured the use of military power against Syria, such as Shultz, McFarlane, and now Reagan himself, were opposed by those who would be tasked to execute it: Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Vessey.

On October 20<sup>th</sup>, Menachem Begin resigned, with Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir succeeding Begin as prime minister of Israel. As Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon was by the middle of October seen as a goal in and of itself as it would – hopefully – allow for a rapprochement with Israel. In this way, McFarlane argued that Israel should at least appear ready to strike Syria at any time, playing upon Khaddam and Assad’s belief that the United States and Israel colluded against him. As McFarlane noted in an NSPG review of the administration’s Lebanon policy on October 17<sup>th</sup> strategic cooperation with Tel Aviv was paramount as “after all if the balloon [goes] up in the Middle East, who else can really fight!”<sup>469</sup> He further noted the importance of Israeli withdrawal not being perceived as a sign of weakness as “we should accept that firmness (and even violence) on [Israel’s] part toward Syria, and Syrian surrogates (e.g. PLO) represent the strongest incentive for Syria to withdraw [from Lebanon].”<sup>470</sup> Israeli strategic supremacy in the Levant was in Washington a goal in and of itself. Weinberger and Vessey of the Joint Chiefs of Staff however, did not approve of this strategy, calling for more “reciprocity and balance” in US-Israeli relations generally, and “flexibility” on the issue of settlements in the West Bank.<sup>471</sup>

In theory, Israel could act as an enforcer for US interests in Syria, the way it was imagined in Washington. However, Israel refused to play that part. On November 4<sup>th</sup>, an explosion at the IDF headquarters in Tyre killing 60 Israeli soldiers. This attack, seen in

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<sup>467</sup> Cable, Damascus to Secstate, October 25<sup>th</sup> 1983 (DTG: 251040Z/PSN: 2981040), file “Lebanon – Marine Explosion 10/31-11/3/1983) (5),” “Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/23/1983)” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 2.

<sup>468</sup> Our Strategy in Lebanon and the Middle East: Operational Issues, file “Lebanon Chronology (1),” “Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/23/1983)” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 1.

<sup>469</sup> Memorandum, Robert McFarlane to President Ronald Reagan, October 17<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Lebanon Chronology (1),” “Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/23/1983)” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 1.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Memorandum, Caspar Weinberger to Robert C. McFarlane, October 21<sup>st</sup> 1983, file “Lebanon III (4 of 10),” Fortier-files, RAC Box 6, p. 2.

concordance with the US strategy of using Israel as a “punisher” toward Syrian aggression, had to US policy makers the least desirable outcome. The Shamir government publicly blamed Syria, but promptly added that “Syria need not fear an Israeli attack.”<sup>472</sup> The Israelis had effectively rejected – though perhaps unknowingly – the American strategy.

The policy discussions in the wake of the barracks bombings combined into NSDD111 signed by Reagan on October 28<sup>th</sup>. NSDD111 emphasised “Syrian intimidation,” the inability of Amin’s government in achieving national reconciliation and “Israeli inflexibility.”<sup>473</sup> It also included a provision that opened for retaliation.<sup>474</sup> Given these three factors that now governed US strategy in the Levant, the US focus would now turn to deterring Syrian interference in Lebanon through military power, aiding Gemayel in national reconciliation in the Geneva conference and, to reinvigorate strategic cooperation with Israel.

### ***“Though Oceans Apart:” A Cold War in Lebanon***

The barracks bombing coincided with already-under-way US intervention in Grenada. The Reagan administration placed greater emphasis on Caribbean and Latin America than previous administrations.<sup>475</sup> So when Grenadian Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard, with backing from the Soviet Union and Cuba, seized power in Grenada on October 16<sup>th</sup> 1983, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), Jamaica and Barbados appealed to the Reagan administration to intervene and depose Coard. The Reagan administration obliged, and the date of the intervention in Grenada, Operation Urgent Fury, was set for October 25<sup>th</sup> 1983. The operation lasted less than five days.<sup>476</sup>

On October 27<sup>th</sup>, Reagan held a radio speech explaining the US rationale for both Lebanon and Grenada interventions. By comparing (and implicitly) contrasting the different outcomes in Lebanon and Grenada, Reagan made a pathos-laden case for both: “The events in Lebanon and Grenada, though oceans apart, are closely related” pointing out Soviet support for both Syria and Cuba. “Syria has become a home for 7,000 Soviet advisers and technicians who man a massive amount of Soviet weaponry, including SS-21 ground-to-ground missiles capable of reaching vital areas of Israel” and Grenada was “a Soviet Cuban colony, readied as

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<sup>472</sup> Yaniv, *Dilemmas of Security*, p. 225.

<sup>473</sup> No Author, “National Security Decision Directive 111,\*” October 28<sup>th</sup> 1983, *RRPL-Dig*, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd111.pdf>

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Jason M. Colby, "Reagan and Central America," in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan* ed. Andrew L. Johns (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. 435.

<sup>476</sup> Gary Williams, "The Tail That Wagged the Dog: The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States' Role in the 1983 Intervention in Grenada," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* (1996), p. 95-105.

a major bastion to export terror and democracy.”<sup>477</sup> And if the United States abandoned Lebanon now, in the face of Syrian and Iranian adversity, Reagan argued, “can the United States, or the free world, for that matter, stand by and see the Middle East incorporated into in the Soviet bloc?”<sup>478</sup> But unlike Grenada, where US military power had ousted an illegitimate Communist-backed regime in less than a week, US displays power in Lebanon, would have a completely different outcome.

### ***Special Envoy Donald Rumsfeld and the Geneva Conference***

As McFarlane had been appointed National Security Advisor on October 15<sup>th</sup>, Donald Rumsfeld succeeded him as special envoy. Rumsfeld, a former congressman and member of the Nixon administration as well as President Ford’s Chief of Staff and then Secretary of Defence. Arriving in Lebanon on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1983, Rumsfeld met with Gemayel in Beirut. Amin Gemayel characterized the Geneva conference to Rumsfeld – and the Reagan administrations mediatisation efforts in Lebanon as “a joke.” As Gemayel told Rumsfeld, “power sharing,” – incorporating the Shia, Sunnis and Druze in government - was a “Syrian game”<sup>479</sup> As Gemayel saw it, he “signed the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement after the Americans assured him that his worries were unreal concerning the veto power the side letter gave the Syrians.”<sup>480</sup> He felt the American effort had fallen into a Syrian trap: By barring Habib from going back to Damascus to discuss withdrawal, Assad had killed US-Syrian dialogue on Lebanon. McFarlane had been “diverted” by the ceasefire problem” in the Chouf, and to Gemeyel’s amazement, “now with the ceasefire we are still [...] not talking withdrawal but power sharing.”<sup>481</sup> Gemayel then floated the idea to Rumsfeld and Bartholomew that he himself could go to Damascus and deal with Syria to reach a three-way understanding between Lebanon, Syria, and the Americans: “Assad knows his position in Lebanon can never be secure without a deal.”<sup>482</sup>

Gemayel would eventually go to Damascus, but not until after the US marines had left Beirut in February 1984. There was no role for American mediation in Geneva; Richard

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<sup>477</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada,” RRPL-Dig, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/102783b.htm>

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, November 14<sup>th</sup> 1983, (142108Z/12671), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (11/13/1983) (3-3),” ExSec-CO, Box 46, p. 2.

<sup>480</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, November 14<sup>th</sup> 1983, (142108Z/12671), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (November 1983-January 1984) (3-3),” ExSec-CO, Box 46, p 2.

<sup>481</sup> Beirut to Secstate, November 14<sup>th</sup> 1983, (142108Z/12671), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (November 1983-January 1984) (3-3),” ExSec-CO, Box 46, p 3.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid. 3.

Fairbanks would be at the conference, but only in an advisory capacity. To the New York Times, an anonymous US diplomat said that all he was “realistically hoping for was a reconciliation of personalities, as opposed to ideas.”<sup>483</sup>

### ***Retaliation: The Inefficacy of US Airpower in Lebanon***

That the United States somehow had to retaliate after the barracks bombing, was a given. Retaliation against Syria could be either overt or covert; in Lebanon or aimed directly at the Assad regime. Another aspect of retaliation, as Donald Fortier of the NSC staff pointed out, was that it could directly influence the Geneva talks. To Fortier, “Syria’s aggressive posture in the talks no doubt reflects to some extent their view of what they can get away with given our seeming reluctance to hold them directly to account.”<sup>484</sup>

Fortier and Director of Political-Military Affairs on the NSC, Commander Philip Dur, toyed with an elaborate idea to destabilize Syria by mobilising the country’s Sunnis against the “Assad brothers” by having the Turkish government broadcast anti-Alawi propaganda. Dur was in the Middle East as part of Rumsfeld’s delegation along with fellow NSC staffer Howard Teicher. This “Turkish plot” would work itself into several of the plans on how to contain Syria’s influence in Lebanon. The notion of crippling the Assad regime at this point also coincided with Hafez al-Assad’s heart attack in early November. Dur and Fortier suggested a concerted anti-Alawi propaganda, along Turkish military posturing along Syrian-Turkish border. Pressure on Assad’s “home base” – the Latakia province – would theoretically weaken Assad’s power, leading to his ouster. After Assad a Sunni would take over, repudiate the Soviet Union (somehow) and accept Camp David and the Reagan Plan.<sup>485</sup>

The Navy conducted threat awareness and reporting programs (TARP) over Lebanon, including the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. Drew Middleton of the New York Times argues that the TARP missions were designed to provoke the Syrians into shooting, creating a pretext for attacking.<sup>486</sup> If this was the case is difficult to say given that many still-classified documents (specifically those relating to military operational details) remain unavailable. But, correct or not, on November 4<sup>th</sup>, the Syrian SAM sites in the Bekaa Valley took the bait, and fired upon two Navy F-14s. By early November, the US Navy had come up with a plan to

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<sup>483</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Lebanese Await Geneva Talks,” *The New York Times*, October 31<sup>st</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/31/world/lebanese-await-geneva-talks.html>

<sup>484</sup> Note, Don Fortier to John Poindexter, November 1<sup>st</sup> 1983, file “Lebanon III (3 of 10),” Fortier-files, RAC Box 6, p. 1.

<sup>485</sup> “The Destabilization of Syria and the Success of U.S. Plan into Lebanon,\* file “Lebanon III (4 of 10),” Fortier-files, RAC Box 6, p. 1-5.

<sup>486</sup> Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon*, p. 192-193.



“bomb Baalbek into oblivion” and the November 14<sup>th</sup> was set as the date of the attack.<sup>487</sup> But the attack was cancelled. As historian David C. Wills writes there are two versions: in version one, Secretary of Defense Weinberger, on his own authority, cancelled the operation. In version two, Reagan himself cancelled it due to fears of civilian casualties.<sup>488</sup>

After the aborted raid of November 14<sup>th</sup>, the TARP flights continued. So did the Syrian flak fire, and the administration now moved towards a more confrontational stance. On November 23<sup>rd</sup>, Weinberger told the press that Syria was culpable in the barracks bombing as it had been perpetrated with the “sponsorship and knowledge and authority of the Syrian government,” but, Weinberger argued, it did not amount to “an act of war.”<sup>489</sup> Others, such as the Geoffrey Kemp on the NSC were more belligerent arguing that “the next time a shell lands at the airport we should take out a couple of Syrian batteries in [Bekaa Valley] come what may and then send strong warnings to Syria, the Druze and the Shia.”<sup>490</sup> The marine’s rules of engagement were also changed: From “aggressive self-defense” to “vigorous self-defense” against all attacks from any hostile quarter” on December 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>491</sup>

On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, on short notice after the TARP mission, the NSPG held a conference call on how to respond to renewed anti-aircraft fire. Not all members of the NSPG attended, most notably, Caspar Weinberger, who was represented by General Vessey.<sup>492</sup> Vessey reported that the TARP mission had taken several hundred rounds and that ten SAMs had been fired. The Joint Chiefs now favoured retaliation; the rest of the group, including the President, agreed. Shultz, wary of the failing MNF partnership as well as regional entanglements, argued that the Italians, French and British, as well as Congress, be notified before the attack, but was rebuffed by Vessey who argued time was of the essence. Vessey, with the concurrence of McFarlane and Reagan, set the time of the attack at midnight that same day, December 4<sup>th</sup>. After the attack, Reagan ordered a new demarche to be made to the Syrians to stop firing on the TARP flights.<sup>493</sup> The demarche would only be made if the

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<sup>487</sup> For a discussion of the two versions, see Wills, *The First War on Terror*, p. 73-75.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72-76.

<sup>489</sup> Richard Halloran, “Weinberger Links Syria to Bombing,” *The New York Times*, November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/23/world/weinberger-links-syria-to-bombing.html>

<sup>490</sup> Memorandum, Geoffrey Kemp to Robert McFarlane, December 1<sup>st</sup> 1983, file “Lebanon Chronology (2),” ExSec-CO, Box 41, p. 1.

<sup>491</sup> No Author, “National Security Decision Directive 117,” RRPL-Dig, December 5<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd117.pdf>

<sup>492</sup> The meeting was attended by Secretary Shultz, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Vessey, Counsellor to the President Edwin Meese, Chief of Staff James Baker III, National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, and his deputy John Poindexter. NSPG Conference Call (handwritten memcon),”\* December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1983, file “Syria Missile Strikes, December 1983,” Poindexter-files, Box 2, p. 1.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2-3



Syrians directly contacted Paganelli, implicitly acknowledging what was intended to be a devastating air strike.<sup>494</sup>

Despite General Vessey insistence that time was of the essence, the attack was postponed twice. First it was postponed until morning, at 7 AM. At that time, a Soviet destroyer near the US carrier group might have notified the Syrians that the planes were taking off, giving them time to man their defences.<sup>495</sup> Making matters worse, once the planes were on their way to Baalbek, they were given a temporary hold order over the Mediterranean, circling over Lebanese waters for 20 minutes, giving the Syrians time to prepare.<sup>496</sup> When the attack was given a renewed go-ahead, and reset their course toward central Lebanon, two of the planes were shot down. The pilot was killed, and co-pilot, Robert O. Goodman, was captured by Syrian forces.

### ***Tangled in the Lebanese Knot***

The December 4<sup>th</sup> raid was deemed a disaster, and it was the last time the United States attempted to attack Syrian forces in Lebanon. Compounding the administration's humiliating display of US military power, Reverend Jesse Jackson, a contender in the 1984 Democratic primaries, went to Damascus in early January 1984, and negotiated Goodman's release.<sup>497</sup> 1984 was an election year, and the Lebanese knot had entangled the Reagan administration. The Lebanon question would become an election issue if not resolved, and Assad had a staying power in Lebanon. Reagan did not.

In the aftermath of the failed air raid, the Reagan administration scrambled to find policy alternatives, a process which would last throughout December 1983 and early January 1984. The trajectory of continued involvement however, had already been set. On December 9<sup>th</sup>, Commandant Kelley told the press that the marines were being withdrawn "early next year," before backtracking the day after.<sup>498</sup> In a radio address on December 10<sup>th</sup>, Reagan reaffirmed American resolve in Lebanon, and addressed Congressional concerns, telling listeners that "once internal stability is established and withdrawal of all foreign forces is

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<sup>494</sup> Cable, \* Washington to Damascus, December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1983 (29570), file "Syria Missile Strikes, December 1983, Poindexter-files, Box 2, p. 1.

<sup>495</sup> Memorandum, \* Richard S. Beale to Robert McFarlane, December 6<sup>th</sup> 1983, file "Lebanon Documents (12/02/1983) (Rumsfeld Cables) I," CMC, RAC Box 8, p. 1.

<sup>496</sup> As McFarlane writes, "after the planes had launched, the European Command in Stuttgart, Germany, placed a hold on the mission..." McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, p. 272.

<sup>497</sup> Wills, *The First War on Terror*, p. 77.

<sup>498</sup> No Author, "Marine Chief Optimistic on Beirut Withdrawal," *The New York Times*, December 9<sup>th</sup> 1983 <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/09/world/marine-chief-optimistic-on-beirut-withdrawal.html>

assured, the marines will leave.”<sup>499</sup> When asked to define what “internal stability” meant – did it mean Beirut? All of Lebanon? – Reagan unwittingly undermined the peacekeeping effort:

Well, we’re getting into hypotheticals now of that situation. I’m simply saying that if there was a complete collapse and there was no possibility of restoring order, there would be no purpose in the multinational force.”<sup>500</sup>

### ***From “Leaning Somewhat Forward” to “Redeployment Off-Shore”***

Meanwhile, the Lebanese knot tightened. Rumsfeld met with Khaddam again on December 14<sup>th</sup>. This was Rumsfeld’s second trip to Damascus. Their last meeting, had not produced anything, and in the aftermath of the December 4<sup>th</sup> raid, US-Syrian dialogue stalled. Khaddam stressed the need for “clarity,” but as Assad was still convalescing after a heart attack in November – talking politics “was bad for him” Khaddam told the American delegation – any Syrian promises made without Assad’s blessing, could be countermanded. This effectively meant that there would be no movement on Lebanon. To the extent the airstrikes had inspired fear of US airpower into the Syrian negotiation calculus, Khaddam just repeated the Syrian mantra in Lebanon: “Does the United States [not] understand that the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement was dead and that we must discuss a withdrawal mechanism in light of this understanding?”<sup>501</sup> The American notetaker at the meeting, Wat Tyler Cluverius IV, characterised the meeting’s outcome as nothing more than “having occurred, period.”<sup>502</sup>

When Rumsfeld was appointed special envoy in November an anonymous colleague told the New York Times that he had a “willingness to gamble.”<sup>503</sup> This can be seen in Rumsfeld’s contribution to the policy debate in Washington. His effort to dislodge Jumblatt from under Assad’s thumb in Amman had failed.<sup>504</sup> Without clout with Jumblatt, Rumsfeld advocated for increasing the pressure on Syria. Rumsfeld argued that the Syrians feared that the previous failed airstrike would necessitate a greater second strike and sought to exploit this fear in his negotiations with Assad and Khaddam. He called this a strategy of “leaning

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<sup>499</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Lebanon, RRPL-Dig, December 10<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/121083a.htm>

<sup>500</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues,” RRPL-Dig, December 14<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/121483a.htm>

<sup>501</sup> Cable, Jerusalem to Washington, December 16<sup>th</sup> 1983 (160836Z/007505), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (November-1983-January 1984) (2 of 3),” ExSec-CO, Box 46, p. 2.

<sup>502</sup> Cable, Jerusalem to Washington, December 16<sup>th</sup> 1983 (160836Z/007509), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (November-1983-January 1984) (2 of 3), ExSec-CO, Box 46, p. 1.

<sup>503</sup> Robert McFadden, Man in the News; A Talent for Taking Charge: Donald Harold Rumsfeld, The New York Times, November 4<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/04/world/man-in-the-news-a-talent-for-taking-charge-donald-harold-rumsfeld.html>

<sup>504</sup> Cable, Jerusalem to Washington, December 16<sup>th</sup> 1983 (160853Z/007124), file (November-1983-January 1984) (2 of 3),” ExSec-CO, Box 46, p. 2.

somewhat forward.”<sup>505</sup> Central to this idea was the continuation of the TARP flights over Lebanon, but also “visible efforts” such as joint exercises with Jordan and Israel, as well as close air support exercises over Lebanon (giving the appearance of increased support of the MNF and LAF) as well as B-52 overflights (giving the appearance of a potential large-scale bombing campaign on Syria).<sup>506</sup>

McFarlane’s NSC, in large, supported Rumsfeld’s position, but Weinberger’s opposition remained. According the NSC staff, one could either take a “pessimistic” or “optimistic” view with regard to previously stated US objectives in Lebanon. The optimistic view noted that Syria had “taken greater caution” in the wake of the December 4<sup>th</sup> raid, as well as the weakness of Assad (especially regarding his heart attack) as well as “Soviet distancing” from Syria. The pessimistic view was that US action was “too little, too late.” The Syrians were biding their time and waiting for US and Israeli resolve to weaken further; Syria had staying power in Lebanon.<sup>507</sup> McFarlane argued that Syria’s “red-line” in Lebanon [was] the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement. Simply put, the Syrians will not willingly leave Lebanon... until Syria sets the terms” for Lebanon’s government and political future.<sup>508</sup> This, wrote McFarlane, meant that “the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement is, for now, a dead letter. The “best possible outcome” was to put the agreement “on hold” and to be “disposed of.” The Israelis could be assuaged with personal guarantees from the US and Gemayel argued McFarlane.<sup>509</sup> Furthermore, McFarlane and the NSC staff suggested that Syria should be subject to a “test-pressure-test” strategy in which the Syrians were to be intimidated with US and Israeli military posturing in Lebanon and on the Golan while remaining ambiguous on prospects of dialogue.<sup>510</sup> If however, there was no way around Syrian intransigence, the NSC staffers argued that Israel should recreate “the implicit understandings on red-lines” which now, without the PLO in southern Lebanon, could pave the way for UNIFIL expansion into larger parts of Lebanon, while at the same time bolstering the LAF.<sup>511</sup>

The Defence Secretary remained in favour of withdrawal (as he had since September 1<sup>st</sup> 1982), and his arguments had been bolstered by the disastrous outcome of the December

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<sup>505</sup> Cable, Amman to Washington, December 14<sup>th</sup> 1983 (141407Z/10880), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (November-1983-January 1984) (2 of 3),” ExSec-CO, Box 46, p. 1-3.

<sup>506</sup> Cable, London to Washington, December 21<sup>st</sup> 1983 (2116412/27569), f file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (November-1983-January 1984) (2 of 3),” ExSec-CO, Box 46, p. 1-3.

<sup>507</sup> Concept Paper, Lebanon: A Five-Point Plan for Action and Progress and Withdrawal of the USMNF, file “Lebanon (12/11/1983-12/16/1983),” ExSec-CO, Box 44, p. 2-8.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

4<sup>th</sup> raid. McFarlane therefore sought to build a consensus on Lebanon and Syria below cabinet level. In this context, McFarlane and Undersecretary of Defense Fred C. Iklé, suggested an informal working lunch off the record. Representing the State Department was Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Lawrence Eagleburger, Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and former ambassador to Syria Richard Murphy, and Director of the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs Jonathan Howe. Representing the Pentagon was Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage and Iklé himself. McFarlane represented the White House. This meeting became the basis of “The Next Steps in Lebanon,” a non-paper.

“Next Steps in Lebanon,” a document specifically geared to “look open-mindedly at our Lebanon policy” before Congress reconvened on January 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>512</sup> The non-paper, heavily drawn from the NSC’s perspective, succinctly summed up the central dilemmas facing US policy makers: on the one hand, there was no metric for success in Lebanon, which undermined public confidence in the administration’s Lebanon policy. On the other hand, there was the problem of what US policy in Lebanon signalled allies and adversaries alike: there were no guarantees that Syria could be forced out with limited air strikes, and a repeat of the December 4<sup>th</sup> strike “would strengthen arguments that we have no strategy that we are falling further into ‘the quagmire’ and that our military responses are not likely to bring about results.”<sup>513</sup> The “core problems” in Lebanon all stemmed from the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement which was “for now, a dead letter” and should be put on hold.<sup>514</sup> This essentially meant that US policy in Lebanon had regressed to where Shultz and Habib had been in late 1982, though now, the stakes were raised. The cost of US involvement, both political and militarily, had risen sharply, and the non-paper noted the “vital near term need” of “a more imaginative combination of regional and propagandistic pressures to signal Assad that we can compete with him without running the risk of public demoralization.”<sup>515</sup>

The plan laid out in “Next Steps in Lebanon” was hugely ambitious. With a time horizon of one month, the plan set out solve all the underlying issues in Lebanon. The plan called for an intra-Lebanese agreement between Gemayel, Berri, and Jumblatt which would lay the basis for further national reconciliation. US assistance to the LAF was supposed to expand the army from two to ten brigades by summer 1984. This would allow the LAF and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) to expand its authority, which was to act as an incentive

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<sup>512</sup> Non-Paper, “Next Steps in Lebanon,”\* file “Lebanon I (1 of 6),” Fortier-files, RAC Box 4, p. 1

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>515</sup> Ibid. 4.

for further Israeli withdrawal.<sup>516</sup> Together with the US, Israeli and Lebanese security issues would be resolved through a tripartite commission.<sup>517</sup> Separately, the Syrian would be approached to comply with a scheme of phased withdrawal. Acting as an incentive to withdraw (or disincentive to remain), the TARP flights over Lebanon would act as a bargaining chip.<sup>518</sup> If the Syrians did not cooperate, the “test-pressure-test” scheme would be adopted.

Secretary Weinberger and General Vessey however, remained unconvinced. Vessey noted that the European MNF partners were not increasing their troop levels in Beirut, and were unlikely to do so. And while the Syrians “had been relatively restrained” after the December 4<sup>th</sup> air raid and several barrages from the USS New Jersey in mid-December, Vessey noted that increased military support for Gemayel had an adverse effect to strengthening the LAF: “The LAF must be capable, and be seen as capable, of imposing its authority unilaterally” and as “LAF capability increases, it is apparent that the presence of US and other MNF forces... may be more of a liability to [Gemayel] than a help.” Consequently, the best option for continued bolstering of the LAF was by having the Marines “off-shore.”<sup>519</sup>

Weinberger agreed, basing his reasoning on a narrow reading of the Long Commission's findings on the barracks bombing in October 1983, as well as his long-held opinion that the marines should be withdrawn from Lebanon. The Long Commission, the Department of Defence report on the Beirut barracks bombings, noted that the security of US forces in Lebanon “were not adequate to prevent continuing significant attrition of the [USMNF] force” and recommended that the Pentagon find “a comprehensive set of alternatives” to the current situation.<sup>520</sup> Weinberger advocated to Reagan, the marines should be withdrawn to ships by February 1<sup>st</sup> 1984, as “placing our forces offshore would allow us to fulfil our commitment and support our basic objectives, and at the same time maintain public and Congressional support.” The Secretary also noted to the President that the cost of increasing the LAF to ten brigades would exceed \$1 billion, which would have to include

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<sup>516</sup> The Internal Security Force is the Lebanese national police force.

<sup>517</sup> To assuage Israeli concerns about its northern border, the paper suggested that US training and support for the LAF, combined with the fact that southern Lebanon at this time was relatively quiet. US support for the LAF could also include naval artillery and air support.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid. 4-5.

<sup>519</sup> Memorandum, John W. Vessey Jr. to Caspar W. Weinberger, December 29<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Lebanon (12/19/1983-12/20/1983), ExSec-CO, Box 44, RRPL, p. 2.

<sup>520</sup> Robert J. L. Long, Robert J. Murray, Joseph T. Palastra Jr., Lawrence F. Snowden, Eugene F. Tighe Jr., “Report of the DoD Commission on the Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act.” *Federation of American Scientists*, December 20<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://fas.org/irp/threat/beirut-1983.pdf> [p. 105.]

lobbying an increasingly hostile Congress.<sup>521</sup> In effect, the status quo in Lebanon was politically and militarily intolerable, and Weinberger and Vessey exploited the commission's findings to further their own position. Instead of a "comprehensive list," they presented just one alternative: withdrawal off-shore.

### ***Assad's "Filibuster" and the the Red-Line Agreement that Never Was***

With a short-term strategy of securing a "security deal" for Lebanon in the works – the tripartite agreement - it was now hoped that this could give the US position some respite. The deal would be negotiated between Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria as well. The US had no formal role, but tried to influence the agreement through talks with Elie Salem, Amin's Foreign Minister. As Kenneth Dam of the Near East Affairs at the State Department, noted to Bartholomew, "if it is helpful for Salem, he can tell the Syrians and Saudis that the [US] is absolutely inflexible on the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement."<sup>522</sup> Gemayel was hesitant and stalled the talks. As Shultz saw it, "Gemayel will continue to flounder and philosophize unless we work closely with him."<sup>523</sup> From here, Rumsfeld now went to Damascus, and like McFarlane in September, the Rumsfeld would now make his "final gambit" to the Syrian president.

Rumsfeld met with Khaddam and Assad in mid-January. His meeting with Khaddam mostly revolved around the issue of the TARP missions. The American delegation offered several alternatives to the current situation, among which the Syrians could be warned in advance of the flights or they could move the Syrians could move their artillery out of range of Beirut which would negate the necessity of these flight (as well as removing them from deterring LAF manoeuvres in the Greater Beirut area). Khaddam declined all proposals.<sup>524</sup>

Rumsfeld then met with Assad on January 13<sup>th</sup> 1984. Of the meeting, Rumsfeld writes that he "presented Assad with an overhead satellite photo [of] his presidential palace... to remind him we were watching from above."<sup>525</sup> But Rumsfeld's gambit did not pay off. Assad had now fully recovered, being "animated, crisp and strong."<sup>526</sup> Their three hour-long meeting was centred around a one hour monologue by Assad on the war in Lebanon, how the

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<sup>521</sup> Memorandum, Caspar Weinberger to Ronald Reagan, December 30<sup>th</sup> 1983, file "Lebanon (12/19/1983-12/20/1983), ExSec-CO, Box 44, p. 1.

<sup>522</sup> Cable, Washington to Beirut, January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1984 (290359Z/160084), file "Lebanon (12/19/1983-12/20/1983), ExSec-CO, Box 44, p. 2.

<sup>523</sup> Cable, Washington to Baghdad, January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1984 (191439Z/4031), file "Lebanon (12/19/1983-12/20/1983), ExSec-CO, Box 44, p. 3.

<sup>524</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, January 15<sup>th</sup> 1984 (151409Z/054830), file "Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (November-1983-January 1984) (1 of 3)," ExSec-CO, Box 46, p. 1-4.

<sup>525</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>526</sup> Cable, Jerusalem to Washington, January 14<sup>th</sup> 1983 (140334Z/053081), file "Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (November-1983-January 1984) (1 of 3)," ExSec-CO, Box 46, p. 12.

United States and Israel had conspired against Syria and how “one man’s terrorist was another’s freedom fighter.”<sup>527</sup> Cluverius, the notetaker, wrote of Assad that when he talked about Lebanon, he struck an “adamant and somewhat ominous note” and ended the meeting by, as if in a mafia movie, saying that “a [Lebanese] cabinet minister who did not abrogate the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement would, on his way home, find someone lurking behind every corner to shoot him.”<sup>528</sup>

The multinational force countries were never a formal alliance, and their level of involvement differed, as well as their enthusiasm for engaging with Syria. Like the US, France had struck an ambiguous note in Lebanon vacillating between the extremes of air strikes and peacekeeping, and mediating. On November 11<sup>th</sup> 1983, France bombed Iranian-occupied buildings in Syrian-controlled Lebanon.<sup>529</sup> The US remained the ‘big Satan’ but in the eyes of many Lebanese anti-Gemayel factions France was ‘little Satan.’<sup>530</sup> The British government were perhaps the least committed, having joined in January 1983, and with only 200 troops. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had even called US involvement in Lebanon “a gaping wound.”<sup>531</sup> The Italians, though a larger force, were publicly supportive of the Palestinian cause only engaged self-defence. Khaddam even “warmly praised” the British and Italian MNF contingents for their performance.<sup>532</sup> Assad had also noticed this differing commitment and from December 1983 to January 1984, he sent several letters to Thatcher lobbying her to end her commitments in Lebanon.<sup>533</sup>

When Rumsfeld returned to Damascus on January 30<sup>th</sup>, he made his final proposal: a repeat of the 1974 settlement after the October war, including a red-line agreement, “just as Kissinger had given Assad in 1974.” The agreement would not be written down, just an oral understanding. Though, as noted in Chapter 2, and as Khaddam told Rumsfeld, no such understanding existed, as, according to Khaddam, Assad and Kissinger never agreed on the status of “paramilitary actions” in Lebanon.<sup>534</sup> The Syrians were open to such a discussion, but there were caveats. It had to be after a complete Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon

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<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>529</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “French Jets Raid Bases of Militia Linked to Attacks,” *The New York Times*, November 12<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/18/world/french-jets-raid-bases-of-militia-linked-to-attacks.html>

<sup>530</sup> Wood, *The Diplomacy of Peacekeeping*, p. 32-33.

<sup>531</sup> Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon*, p. 146.

<sup>532</sup> Bastian Matteo Scianna, “A Blueprint for Successful Peacekeeping? The Italians in Beirut (Lebanon), 1982–1984,” *The International History Review* (2018), 15.

<sup>533</sup> Varady, *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon*, p. 146.

<sup>534</sup> Cable, Jerusalem to Washington, January 31<sup>st</sup> 1985 (310826Z/004693), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (January 1984-February 1984) (1 of 5),” ExSec-CO Box 46, p. 1.

(including the security zone), and Khaddam insisted there could be no infringement of the “Geneva definition of Lebanese sovereignty,” Lebanon was an Arab country “with the rights and duties of an Arab state.” Disengagement between Israel and Syria would have to be part of a “package deal,” a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and there could be no extensions of existing UN mandates such as UNIFIL or creations of new UN forces to oversee Lebanon.<sup>535</sup> With the momentum on his side, Assad pushed for a total victory over the US, and hegemony in Lebanon.

### **“Redeployment Off-Shore”**

In a radio on address February 4<sup>th</sup>, Reagan appealed to Congress: “Yes, the situation in Lebanon is difficult, frustrating and dangerous. But that is no reason to turn our backs and cut and run.”<sup>536</sup> But Reagan had a tendency to double down before making an about-face.<sup>537</sup> It became clear that the Democratic majority turned against the Reagan administration’s Lebanon policy. Congress had affirmed the War Powers Act after the Grenada intervention, effectively giving the Reagan administration and the US soldiers 60 days to finish its objectives there. After the barracks bombings in October 1983, House Majority Leader Tip O’Neill had characterised Reagan’s “gunboat diplomacy” in Lebanon as “frightening.”<sup>538</sup> With a similar vote on the steps in Congress for Lebanon, as well as Central America, Amin’s political fate hung in the balance. However, a Congressional defeat, which became increasingly likely when Congressional Republicans turned on the administration, a disaster for the administration in an election year.<sup>539</sup>

The political situation in Beirut was collapsing. The LAF was attempting to capture the Beirut suburbs of Shiyyah and Aina-Rummaneh, held by Nabih Berri’s forces. Amal then bombarded on East Beirut and the Presidential palace. Meeting with Gemayel in the bomb shelter of the Presidential palace, Amin told Rumsfeld he had resigned. Salem asked Rumsfeld what he could expect the US to do if Syria now upped the pressure: “What was the

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<sup>535</sup> Ibid. p. 2

<sup>536</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Budget Deficit, Central America, and Lebanon,” February 4<sup>th</sup>, RRPL-Dig, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/20484a>

<sup>537</sup> Lou Cannon, “The Politics of Surrender,” January 25<sup>th</sup> 1988, *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/01/25/the-politics-of-surrender/af2761fa-40d6-455b-9ff1-8cec3c690adb/?utm\\_term=.1034cb9806a3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/01/25/the-politics-of-surrender/af2761fa-40d6-455b-9ff1-8cec3c690adb/?utm_term=.1034cb9806a3)

<sup>538</sup> Steven V. Roberts, “O’Neill Criticizes President; War Powers Act Invoked,” October 29<sup>th</sup> 1983, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/29/world/o-neill-criticizes-president-war-powers-act-is-invoked.html>

<sup>539</sup> Margaret Shapiro, “Hill Finds Denunciation is Easier than Defiance on Foreign Policy Issues,” January 29<sup>th</sup> 1984, *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/01/29/hill-finds-denunciation-is-easier-than-defiance-on-foreign-policy-issues/19baaa28-142b-42df-88a3-04d7748234b3/?utm\\_term=.0baceaa9bd70](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/01/29/hill-finds-denunciation-is-easier-than-defiance-on-foreign-policy-issues/19baaa28-142b-42df-88a3-04d7748234b3/?utm_term=.0baceaa9bd70)



bottom line?” he asked, as this would affect how a potential government would be constituted. Rumsfeld could not promise anything beyond the “vigorous self-defence” of the marines themselves.<sup>540</sup> In effect nothing. Also taking part in the discussion was Wadiah Haddad, Amin’s “national security advisor.” Haddad told Rumsfeld that “we are now getting the worst of both worlds – Israel is treating us as if we had abrogated the [May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement] and Syria as we had already ratified it.”<sup>541</sup>

McFarlane summarised the positions of the NSPG members to Reagan on February 7<sup>th</sup>. On the one hand, Shultz and Rumsfeld argued for increased shelling of the Metn area outside Beirut as this would signal to Syrians “greater resolve” on the US’ part, as well as increasing the morale of Amin and the LAF. This meant destroying, not only the artillery bombarding Beirut, but also ammunition dumps and command structures. Vice President Bush, Weinberger, and Vessey as well as Edwin Meese argued for “moderation;” responding in kind, but no escalation. They also “urge[d]” Gemayel to accept Assad’s invitation to Damascus “to make the best compromise he can with Syria.”<sup>542</sup> That same day, the marines were ordered to “redeploy off-shore.”<sup>543</sup> And while the New Jersey and the marines would lie off-shore, occasionally bombarding the outskirts of Beirut, these barrages were, in effect, a final salute from the US Navy leaving Lebanon.

The question of Gemayel’s political survival lingered. The State Department’s intelligence branch, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, reported that “Damascus now sees itself in a position to dictate whatever political settlement it decides, including a change in presidents,” though weighed against international criticism.<sup>544</sup> Overthrowing Gemayel could make Lebanon ungovernable for the Syrians as well. In this context, the NSC floated several ideas of how to salvage the situation in Lebanon. The key, one assessment noted, was the LAF: “If it holds together, we may still have a basis for for an honorable outcome. If it doesn’t, the game may be over.”<sup>545</sup> The “game” was over.

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<sup>540</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, February 5<sup>th</sup> 1984 (050945Z/027381), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (January 1984-February 1984) (1 of 5),” ExSec-CO Box 46, p. 3.

<sup>541</sup> Cable, Beirut to Washington, February 5<sup>th</sup> 1984 (050945Z/027389), file “Rumsfeld Middle East Mission (January 1984-February 1984) (1 of 5),” ExSec-CO Box 46, p. 3.

<sup>542</sup> Memorandum, Robert C. McFarlane to Ronald Reagan, February 7<sup>th</sup> 1983, file “Lebanon II (2 of 6),” Fortier-files, RAC Box 6, p 1-2.

<sup>543</sup> The “redeployment” was conducted in several phases with the last marines guarding the US/UK embassies withdrawing on July 31<sup>st</sup> 1984. Frank, U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982-1984 1985, p. 138-140.

<sup>544</sup> Bureau of Research and Intelligence Rapport, February 8<sup>th</sup> 1984, file “file “Lebanon II (3 of 6),” Fortier-files, RAC Box 6, p. 1.

<sup>545</sup> “Affecting the Syrian Calculus,” file “Lebanon II (3 of 6),” Fortier-files, RAC Box 6, p. 1.

On February 17<sup>th</sup>, Amin went to Damascus to consult with Assad. He returned to Damascus on February 29<sup>th</sup> officially abrogating the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement. At the insistence of Jumblatt and Berri, Amin also fired General Tannous as commander of the LAF, replacing him with Michel Aoun.<sup>546</sup> Israeli Prime Minister Shamir said that Amin had “effectively given up [Lebanon’s independence]” as abrogation “forced Israel to act on its own to police southern Lebanon border areas.”<sup>547</sup> While the Geneva conference was resumed in March 1984 at Lausanne “[it] was merely a way of formalizing the new redistribution of power on the ground.”<sup>548</sup>

A government of national unity began taking shape throughout April and it assumed office in May 1<sup>st</sup>. Rashid Karami became the new prime minister of Lebanon and his cabinet would eventually come to include both Nabih Berri and Walid Jumblatt.<sup>549</sup> Amin would remain president of Lebanon through 1988, but his influence was severely curbed. As the situation in Lebanon slowly stabilized under Syrian tutelage over the next year, Assad, with Berri, Jumblatt and the Phalange’s intelligence commander Elie Hubayqa, signed the “Tripartite Agreement” on December 25<sup>th</sup> 1985. The agreement formalised “privileged relations” between Syria and Lebanon, “complete coordination of foreign policies,” and the LAF was to be reorganised and “confined to barracks.”<sup>550</sup> While the Lebanese civil war would last for another five years, it was now under Syrian suzerainty, later affirmed in the 1989 Taif Agreement, the formal end of 15 years of civil war in Lebanon.

### ***Paganelli Leaves Damascus: Reviewing Syrian-Israeli-US Relations***

In March 1984, Rumsfeld was replaced as Special Envoy by former US ambassador to Syria, Richard Murphy, though his role would be of much more limited importance in Lebanon than his predecessors as US interest in Lebanon and Syria waned. Observing “redeployment” from Damascus, ambassador Paganelli, the most consistent critic of the Reagan administration’s approach to Syria, submitted his report. To Paganelli, his tenure in Damascus had been the

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<sup>546</sup> Michel Aoun, who had been one of the LAF commanders at the battle of Suq el-Gharb, would in 1987 become Gemayel’s prime minister, violating the National Pact, and turning the Syrians against Gemayel and Aoun. This led to two-year period where there were to rival cabinets. In 1989, opposed the Taif Agreement as it did not call for Syrian withdrawal and was exiled. He returned to Lebanon in 2005, becoming president of Lebanon in 2016. Harris, *Lebanon: A History*, p. 248; Osoegawa, *Syria and Lebanon*, p. 95-96

<sup>547</sup> David K. Shipler, Lebanon is Warned by Both Sides on its Security Accord with Israel; Shamir Declares that Army May Act on its Own to Police Border Area,” February 12<sup>th</sup> 1984, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/12/world/lebanon-warned-both-sides-its-security-accord-with-israel-shamir-declares-army.html>

<sup>548</sup> Deeb and Deeb, “Regional Conflicts and Regional Solutions: Lebanon,” p. 87.

<sup>549</sup> Roger Owen, "The Lebanese Crisis: Fragmentation or Reconciliation?," *Third World Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1984), p. 949.

<sup>550</sup> Harris, *Lebanon: A History*, p. 249-250.

“the most intense and frustrating of [his] 26 years of in the foreign service.”<sup>551</sup> Paganelli cited the need to maintain dialogue with Syria, a recurrent theme of his. Paganelli repeatedly reported that the Syrians viewed the United States as colluding with Israel against the Arab cause in general and Syria in particular. To an extent, Paganelli shared their view:

US support for Israel has made a quantum jump in all areas, and this in face of Israeli damage to US policy objectives in the area... You can make the case that the Israelis rival the Syrians and other radical Arabs in working against USG interests in the Middle East and are handsomely compensated by us while doing it. [Under] the rationale of strategic cooperation and consensus, we have decided that our relationship with Israel is the sole centrepiece of our Middle East policy, and that our Arab friends have no choice but to go along with us, and our Arab foes can go to hell with the Soviets... Our basic tenet, that massive US aid and support for Israel can condition Israeli policy in a moderate and accommodating direction, has repeatedly been proved to be false... [It] is imperative that we bring our relations with Israel under control if we are to retain any credibility as an arbiter of a Middle East settlement and any hope that we can entice a more forthcoming position on direct negotiations from the Arabs. No one argues with our special relationship with Israel... However, we have reached a point of such a tilt that we are in danger of falling over... The strategic asset argument is valid only to a certain point, since the Middle East problem is essentially a regional conflict with global overtones, rather than the reverse.<sup>552</sup>

From his vantage point in Damascus, the Lebanese civil war, the regional dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and a strategic partnership with Israel looked entirely different than in Washington.

### ***Conclusion: Cutting the Gordian Knot of Lebanon***

By October 1983, Lebanon had become a Gordian knot for the Reagan administration to untangle. Faced with a breakdown in the national reconciliation process and the inability to influence Syria's obstructionism in the country, the Reagan administration had waxed and waned throughout late 1983 about how to best salvage its stated policy in Lebanon, while also showing assertiveness in the face of coordinated opposition by Syria.

Pronouncements to the public in 1983 on what constituted success for the Reagan administration had effectively trapped the administration's Lebanon policy. When “internal stability in Lebanon,” was what constituted success in Lebanon as Reagan had termed it, the Syrians could push its levers and exert pressures in Beirut, Reagan's divided administration could not counter effectively without escalation. “Internal stability” became an impassable hurdle, and the only feasible and politically palatable solution became “redeployment offshore.” And as the Marines' security situation in Beirut became intolerable, Syria's position on Lebanon intractable, and with a pending Congressional resolution against them, the administration saw no other way to avoid a defeat on Capitol Hill than to admit defeat in Beirut.

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<sup>551</sup> Cable, Damascus to Washington, June 12<sup>th</sup> 1984 (121412Z/03909), file “Syria,” CMC, RAC Box 9, p. 1.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

## **7 Conclusion: “Letting them Stew in their Own Juice”**

*The reasons for failure [in Lebanon] included divisive leadership and bureaucratic conflict, strategic misjudgement, poorly executed military operations, ambiguous signals to allies and adversaries alike, and bad luck.<sup>553</sup>*

*Geoffrey Kemp*

### ***The Reagan Administration and Syria after “Redeployment”***

In January 1985, President Reagan held a conference call with Hafez al-Assad.<sup>554</sup> It was the only time the two presidents ever talked to each other directly. In their conference call however, Reagan seems unenthused by Assad, and perhaps a little reluctant. In the recording, published in its full by the New York Post in 2014, the listener will hear Assad’s interpreter (one can hear an angry Assad in the background) complain to a Reagan official that Reagan is late. When Reagan finally appears, he rather hastily thanks Assad for his help in finding American journalist Jeremy Levin who had been kidnapped in Beriut, congratulates him for his (unsurprising) election victory, while also telling the Syrian President that

I recognise that we differ strongly on some important regional issues, but our efforts to secure the release of Mr. Levin shows that we can work together and that we do have significant common interests... and that as [Assad] begins his new term in office I hope we can build on those common interests and work to narrow our differences.”<sup>555</sup>

But US-Syrian relations remained strained throughout the rest of the 1980’s due to Syria’s many links to Mideast terrorism. To Reagan Syria was “the bad boy of the Middle East.”<sup>556</sup> For a Reagan administration determined to “not negotiate with terrorists,” US-Syrian dialogue would be limited if Assad did not change his methods. Assad for his part also recognised that his sponsorship of various paramilitary groups. As Seale writes, Assad had “unleashed demons which could be easily controlled.”<sup>557</sup> One of these groups were Hezbollah which would rise to become one of the leading political organisations in Lebanon. Other infamous

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<sup>553</sup> Geoffrey Kemp, "Lessons of Lebanon: A Guideline for Future Us Policy," *Middle East Insight* 6 (1988).

<sup>554</sup> The file, “Syria: President Assad (8790619-8890114), ExSec-HS, Box 33 could not be found in the RRPL archives, no reason as to why was given either.

<sup>555</sup> Gary Buiso, “Never-Before-Heard Tapes of Reagan Revealed,” *The New York Post*, November 8<sup>th</sup> 2014, (16:45-17:36), <https://nypost.com/2014/11/08/never-before-heard-tapes-of-reagan-and-foreign-leaders-revealed/>

<sup>556</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 281.

<sup>557</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 467.

incidents partly traceable to Syrian sponsorship were TWA 487 hijacking in June 1985 and the “Hindawi affair,” a failed bombing attempt on an El Al flight to Tel Aviv in April 1986, linked to Abu Nidal’s group which had offices in Damascus.<sup>558</sup> In 1986, the Reagan administration recalled the US ambassador to Damascus and imposed more sanctions on Syria in response to the Hindawi affair. Ambassador William L. Eagleton returned to Damascus after Assad expelled Abu Nidal that same year.

After the Marines “redeployed” in February 1984, Assad become more helpful in seeking the return of western hostages in Beirut.<sup>559</sup> To this day Syria remains the only continuously listed “state sponsor of terrorism” by the US State Department since 1979.<sup>560</sup> To Secretary Shultz, the Hindawi affair was evidence that Syria was engaged in international terrorism, but that Assad also provided Syria with a internal stability and foreign policy continuity: “Assad may be a bastard, but we need him desperately. He’s the only Arab leader who can make a peace agreement stick.”<sup>561</sup>

In late 1983 as the Reagan administration pondered how to punish Syria for its complicity in the barracks bombing, Assad suffered a heart attack. Internal stability in Syria was not a given in his absence, and Rifaat al-Assad had attempted to oust his brother but failed. Rifaat was then exiled to France. In 1986, the CIA pondered what kind of successor Assad would have, and how this would impact US-Syrian relations. The CIA concluded that “US interests would be best served by a Sunni regime controlled by business-orientated moderates... thus opening the way for Western aid an investment.” A Sunni fundamentalist takeover however was seen as detrimental to US interests as they “would likely deepen hostilities with Israel.”<sup>562</sup>

***Explaining the Absence of a “Syria Policy” and the US-Syrian-Israeli “Strategic Triangle”***  
Throughout US involvement in the Lebanese civil war, the Reagan administration never developed a coherent stance toward Syria. Instead, the US approach to Syria was framed through Reagan’s “black and white” world view, in which Syria had sided with the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union, and in the Levant, where Syria was an opponent of Israel, a

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<sup>558</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 468.

<sup>559</sup> Rabil, “The Ineffective Role of the US in the US-Israeli-Syrian Relationship,” p. 417

<sup>560</sup> No author, “State Sponsors of Terrorism, U.S. Department of State, no date, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/list/c14151.htm>

<sup>561</sup> Erik L Knudsen, “United States-Syrian Diplomatic Relations: The Downward Spiral of Mutual Political Hostility,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 4 (1996), p. 71.

<sup>562</sup> Memorandum, \* [Redacted] to Dennis Ross, Richard W. Murphy, William L. Eagleton, Richard Solomon, Fred C. Iklé, July 30<sup>th</sup> 1986, CREST, p. 24.

close ally. And being a “state sponsor of terrorism” (often directed against Israeli interests), the Reaganite view of Syria was one of antagonism.

To understand US-Syrian relations during the Lebanese civil war, one can view it as part of a “strategic triangle.” Political scientist Lowell Dittmer defines a “strategic triangle” as a “transactional game among three players” in which the relationship of two players in a bilateral relationship is affected by that of the third player which “may affect the value or the symmetry of the first relationship.”<sup>563</sup> The US-Syrian-Israeli triangular relationship Syria during the Reagan administration was what Dittmer has named the “stable marriage” in which there was “symmetrical amity” between the United States and Israel, and “symmetrical enmity between these two and the third” – Syria.<sup>564</sup> It should therefore here be noted that US-Israeli amity was in this period however not “symmetrical.” In the US calculus, it was always beneficial in the long run to support Israel, and if necessary attempt to moderate.

Attempts to moderate Israeli behaviour in Lebanon however were limited. The Reagan administration was much more eager for strategic cooperation than the Begin Government was reciprocating. The inverse argument, was made by Ambassador Paganelli:

Our basic tenet, that massive US aid and support for Israel can condition Israeli policy in a moderate and accommodating direction, has repeatedly been proved to be false... [It] is imperative that we bring our relations with Israel under control if we are to retain any credibility as an arbiter of a Middle East settlement<sup>565</sup>

It is therefore useful to review US-Syrian relations with Raymond Tanter’s “regionalists” and “globalists” distinction in mind. To Reagan Israel carried connotations beyond strategic cooperation, it was a moral commitment. After the July 20<sup>th</sup> 1982 meeting with Prince Saud and Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, Reagan wrote in his diary that Khaddam “was an obvious hater of Israel.”<sup>566</sup>

When the “Lebanese missile crisis” broke out in April 1981, the US had no policy or stated attitude toward Syria, but implicitly, through Reagan’s public adoration of Israel, the Reagan administration was far removed from the Assad regime on any Middle East issue. But Reagan was content with just outlining a broad outline of what he wanted. As a consequence, argues Tanter, the policy process, already complicated by the nascent turf wars that developed from Reagan’s “cabinet government,” the “regionalists” and “globalists” competed over policy.

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<sup>563</sup> Lowell Dittmer, "The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis," *World politics* 33, no. 4 (1981), p. 486.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 490.

<sup>565</sup> Cable,\* Damascus to Washington, March 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (DTG: 041414Z/PSN: 073826), file “Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/83,” ExSec-CO, Box 48,RRPL, p. 2

<sup>566</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 93.

To the “globalist” position cold war concerns and strategic cooperation with Israel was of paramount concern against Soviet interference in the region. Secretary of State Alexander Haig viewed Israel as a US client. In a 1994 interview with John Boykin, Haig said that he would “kick the shit out of Israel tomorrow if that was in the interest of [the US].”<sup>567</sup> But Haig never did. He saw both the Syrians and the PLO as Soviet surrogates, and the damage Israeli occupation of Lebanon did to the US role as a peacemaker in the Middle East was worth the price of damaging Soviet standing in the region. Haig was not alone in such an assessment. As Douglas Feith noted in a 1981 memorandum, “what is bad for the PLO cannot be bad for the United States?”<sup>568</sup> From the “globalist” perspective one could make the same observation about Syria. But this was not policy, just an attitude. If the administration had followed the “globalist” position to its logical conclusion as Haig arguably was pursuing, US self-projection as a peace-maker in the Middle East would be jeopardised. Consequently, the “globalist” approach to the Middle East lost ground to the “regionalists.”

To the “regionalists” the conflict in Lebanon was first and foremost a local and regional conflict, not a US-Soviet proxy war, and as a consequence, the US role in the conflict would be to mediate between the warring parties. The “regionalists” saw the missile crisis as autochthonous to Lebanon and Syria and Israel’s rivalry over Lebanon’s alignment. While Reagan, though passive, favoured the globalist analysis of the crisis, he compared the missile crisis to the July crisis of 1914: it would be a catastrophic war that nobody really wanted, and the US was in a position to avert it by mediating between Syria and Israel. Successful mediation defusing the crisis would also bolstering US claims of being a peacemaker in the region. In this way, the regionalist analysis and its proponents, most prominently Philip Habib, were able to insert American prestige in mediating a compromise between Syria and Israel.

With this in mind, one can therefore serve to explain the absence of a “Syria policy.” On the one hand, the “globalists” dominated the executive positions such the Secretaries of State, undersecretaries, the members of National Security Council, and to the extent that he involved himself, Reagan as well. On the other hand, the “globalist” analysis was politically unfeasible as it could not produce the negotiated settlement in Lebanon the administration was attempting. This pattern repeated itself from the missile crisis through 1983. The “regionalists” were in large foreign service professionals but lacking the formal positions of

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<sup>567</sup> Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 54.

<sup>568</sup> Memorandum, Douglas Feith to Richard V. Allen, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1981, file “Lebanon May (2 of 2), Kemp Files, RAC Box 4, RRPL, p. 1.

power to influence the orientation of US foreign policy in the Middle East – pro-Israeli, anti-Soviet. One of the clearest “regionalists” discussed in the previous chapters are special envoy Philip Habib and US Ambassador to Syria Robert S. Paganelli. In this way, the “regionalists” position was one of moderating an already skewed focus on how to solve the situation in Lebanon in favour of Israel emanating from their “globalist” superiors. The “regionalist/globalist” divide served to balance each other in policy debate, but in the end, they were both coaxed within Reagan’s black-and-white world-view of broad policy outlines; pro-Israeli, and anti-Soviet. As a consequence, the US approached Syrian grievances in Lebanon and vis-à-vis Israel seemingly as invalid. The Syrians were also difficult to negotiate with, which further underlined Shultz’s assumption that the Syrians were intransigent and “spoiled” any negotiation, justifying excluding Syria from the negotiations that would ultimately produce the failed May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement.

### ***Why US Lebanon Policy Failed: Syria as a “Spoiler”***

US Lebanon policy – “a Lebanon free of all foreign forces” – failed because the Reagan administration did not take into account Lebanon’s geopolitical surroundings as well as failing to assert US power behind its publicly stated policy due to internal difference in Reagan’s “cabinet government.” The most prominent policy feuds were those of Haig’s ill-advised solo performance as Secretary of State; the Shultz-Weinberger feud over the use of US military power; and McFarlane and Rumsfeld’s half-measured and ill-advised escalation of US-Syrian tensions which resulted in the December 4<sup>th</sup> air raid. Overarching these issues was how the Reagan administration had been dragged into the Lebanese civil war, first through the “1981 Lebanese missile crisis” and then the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Squeezed between its larger and combative neighbours, Lebanon’s independence is at the mercy of the competing interests of Israel and Syria. To Syria, Lebanon is an estranged fellow Arab state with which Syria has privileged relations. As Khaddam told special envoy Rumsfeld, Lebanon was an Arab state with the “rights and duties of an Arab state.” Negotiations on Lebanon’s future alignment, pro-Arab or pro-Israeli, had to be part of a “package deal,” a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. To Israel, the Gemayel family, from Gemayel patriarch and former president Pierre and his two sons Bashir and Amin, fulcrums to provide stability to Lebanon’s southern border region with Israel. These two visions of Lebanon’s geopolitical alignment was fundamentally in opposition, and while the Israelis had the military advantage in a swift and efficient war – such as the Syrian-Israeli air battle of June 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> 1982 – the Israelis were sensitive to prolonged warfare and



mass casualties. Assad knew this and sought to exploit it by “spoiling” the US-mediated Lebanese-Israeli May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement, rendering Israeli military supremacy impotent in consolidating a politically feasible peace in Lebanon in the long-term.

When negotiating peace, one has to take into account those factions that oppose it. A peace treaty, and the negotiation of it, needs to be seen as a legitimate process by all actors involved. In the case of US mediation in Lebanon, Syria repeatedly charged US interlocutors with colluding, conspiring against their interests in Lebanon. The Gemayel Governments for their part, both that of Bashir and Amin, was narrowly based on the Maronite minority, which in turn undermined their claims as legitimate presidents for all of Lebanon.

To political scientist Stephen John Stedman spoilers in a peace process can be differentiated by type: “limited, greedy, and total.”<sup>569</sup> Assad’s Syria matches Stedman’s definition of a “total spoiler:” “Total spoilers are led by individuals who see the world in all-or-nothing terms and often suffer from pathological tendencies that prevent pragmatists that prevents the pragmatism necessary for compromise settlements of conflict.”<sup>570</sup> Assad had no interest in a settlement in Lebanon conducive to Israeli interests in Lebanon as to Assad, Lebanese stability was a lever to conclude a larger “comprehensive settlement” of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole. But Syria was not the only spoiler. Israeli demands to both Syria and the Gemayels also exceeded what would, to the Lebanese, be a just and legitimate peace treaty. Stedman defines a “greedy spoiler,” which Israel arguably was, as having goals “that expand and contract based on calculations of cost and risk,” and furthermore that “a greedy spoiler may have limited goals” such as expelling the PLO from southern Lebanon, “that expand when faced with low costs and risks...”<sup>571</sup> The IAF campaign to assert Israeli air supremacy in Lebanon in June 1982 can be viewed as an aspect of this dynamic preceding the actual negotiations, and the South Lebanese Army’s role in southern Lebanon, codified in the May 17<sup>th</sup> Agreement, a blatant example of it. If we follow Stedman’s spoiler argument, the US had three different avenues to pursue in the negotiations on Lebanon. It could 1) attempt to “induce” withdrawal with positive measures; 2) “socialise” the warring factions by establishing norms and rules to govern their behaviour in Lebanon; and 3) to coerce withdrawal from Lebanon.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International security* 22, no. 2 (1997), p. 10.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

US policy toward the withdrawal question attempted all three of Stedman's options in addition to outright exclusion from late 1982-summer 1983. In the 1981 missile crisis, the Saudi backchannel was aimed at having the Syrians return to the Arab stance on the Iran-Iraq war, and in return, Syria would be readmitted into the good graces of the Arab world against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. This policy as the benefits of the Syrian-Iranian alliances outweighed the benefits of having its thumb on the scales in Lebanon's politics. And while Assad was happy negotiating with the Saudis in Geneva and Lausanne, he could coerce his surrogates in Lebanon to stall negotiations with increasingly obstinate demands and concerns.

Related to "inducement" is "socialisation" which both McFarlane and Rumsfeld attempted, but they also combined "socialisation" with "coercion." McFarlane pledged US recognised Syria's interests in Lebanon, but, based on the available documentary record, what these interests were and how the United States actually recognised them was kept vague to the point of having no tangible value to the Syrians. In turn, as the Syrians applied pressure on the LAF in the battle of Suq el-Gharb, McFarlane's attempt to coerce the Syrians out of Lebanon with naval artillery was not enough of a threat to Assad's ambition. Instead, it came at the cost of any pretension of being an "honest broker" in Lebanon.

After the barracks bombing in October 1983, Rumsfeld would employ a similar gambit as McFarlane. Attempting to "lean somewhat forward," Rumsfeld hoped to inspire shock and awe in Assad by "faking" US will to escalate an already tense situation. In his final gambit, Rumsfeld made a more personal threat by showing satellite images of the Syrian presidential palace. But Rumsfeld's scare tactics fell on deaf ears in Damascus. Rumsfeld's timing (late January 1984) was off. Rumsfeld made a last-ditch attempt at "socialisation" – the establishment of common norms in Lebanon. The special envoy proposed the re-establishment of the "Red-Line Agreement" that had partitioned Lebanon into a Syrian and Israeli sphere of influence. Rumsfeld framed the "red-line" as a US concession Syria, but with the Democrats potentially clipping the wings of the administration's policy in Lebanon, Rumsfeld's concession was rebuffed as Rumsfeld was offering less (informal partition of Lebanon) than what the Syrians was on the verge of achieving in Lebanon: hegemony.

The kernel of why US Lebanon policy failed however, should not be traced to the internal process in the White House, but rather to its many public pronouncements of what continued Marine "presence" in Lebanon would (and realistically could) accomplish. In the aftermath of the PLO evacuation from Beirut, the Reagan administration saw a Lebanon on its

way to recovery, but US policy makers conflated achievable short-term objectives with unobtainable long-term objectives.<sup>573</sup> The short-term objective was Bashir Gemayel's presidency. As president of Lebanon, Bashir could rescind Syria's Arab Deterrent Force mandate undercutting Syrian legitimacy in Lebanon. Without their ADF mandate, the Syrian army, as Assad and Khaddam repeatedly stressed, would leave Lebanon. With the Syrians out of Lebanon, the LAF would be able to reassert the central government control of the country, securing southern Lebanon, and by extension removing the Israeli *raison d'être* for being in the country in the first place. Secretary of State Shultz decided use the momentum US peace-making in Lebanon had garnered to launch a peace proposal, the Reagan plan, for the Arab-Israeli conflict. A long-term goal for US peace-making in the region. But already by October 1982, Syrian rejectionist had proved an insurmountable obstacle, compounded by renewed Syrian self-confidence after the Soviet Union replaced the broken Syrian air force as well as emplacing state-of-the-art SAMs around Damascus. Paganelli saw Shultz's remedy to Syrian intransigence as short-sighted:

There are of course other alternatives. Leaving the Syrians in isolation to stew in their own juice is one. Unfortunately, their juice spill out all over the area. Isolated or not, the Syrians are feared... because of their capacity and willingness to use terror and subversion as instruments of national policy. Isolated or not, the Syrians could fatally impede our efforts for a Lebanese settlement...<sup>574</sup>

The long-term objective, Arab-Israeli peace, was equally unachievable given that the Reagan plan mad no mention of Syria. The Reagan Plan was neither here nor there. It was a sort of compromise between the Reagan administration's pro-Israeli bent as well as building on the Camp David formula: UN Resolution 242 and the return of occupied land ("land for peace"). But in 1981, the irredentist Begin Government annexed the Syrian Golan Heights occupied since 1967. On the one hand, Begin Government would not accept that settlements built on Palestinian territory was illegal and had to be abandoned. The Palestinians, represented by the PLO, were to be coaxed into a common negotiating position with Jordan vis-à-vis Israel. This vision faltered by April 1983, when King Hussein and Yassir Arafat abandoned the talks.

When the MNF was reintroduced into Beirut in September 1982, the peacekeepers landed on a battlefield. Nathan A. Pelcovits argues that "it is not too simplistic to suggest that the underlying pathology of the MNF's fatal disease was the astounding reliance on a best

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<sup>573</sup> Nathan A. Pelcovits, "What Went Wrong?," in *The Multinational Force in Beirut 1982-1984*, ed. Anthony McDermott and Kjell Skjelsbaek (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1986), p. 42-44.

<sup>574</sup> Cable,\* Damascus to Washington, March 4<sup>th</sup> 1983 (DTG: 041414Z/PSN: 073826), file "Syria 11/23/1982-01/07/83," ExSec-CO, Box 48, RRPL, p. 2

case scenario.”<sup>575</sup> While the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut had been handled relatively smoothly and the MNF had withdrawn, international outrage in the aftermath of the Sabra and Shatilla massacres precipitated its reintroduction. But in Beirut there was no peace to keep, and the MNF’s appearance counted for little more than “presence” in Beirut, and targets for Syria’s proxies.

The Pentagon, fearful of the dreaded Vietnam syndrome, consistently opposed the US presence in Lebanon. In a speech to the national press club on November 28<sup>th</sup> 1984, Weinberger elaborated on “under what circumstances, and by what means, does a great democracy such as ours reach the painful decision that the use of military force is necessary:” 1) military force had to be “deemed of vital interest” to the US; 2) when deploying US forces abroad it has “to be with the clear intention of winning; 3) there has to be clearly “defined political and military objectives;” 4) continual assessment of the force needed to accomplish said objectives; 5) popular and Congressional support; and 6) “the commitment of US forces to combat should be a last resort.”<sup>576</sup> The MNF did not pass any of these criteria. Weinberger and General Vessey of the JCOS consistently argued for withdrawing US forces.

After the US Marine barracks bombing and the failed retaliatory raid on December 4<sup>th</sup>, the political cost of having the Marines in Lebanon became politically intolerable. When Reagan told the press that the US Marines would remain Beirut to until “internal stability had been established,” but by defining success, Reagan had also, inadvertently, defined what constituted a complete failure of US policy in Lebanon “... if there was a complete collapse [of the Gemayel government] and there was no possibility to restore order, there would be no purpose in the multinational force.”<sup>577</sup> By hinging US prolonged commitment on the fuzzily defined term “internal *stability*” as constituting US success in Lebanon, “internal *instability*” meant that “there would be no purpose in the multinational force.”

### ***Conclusion: The Inefficacy of Punishing Syria and other Rogue Nations***

US-Syrian relations have never been good. Finding themselves on the opposite ends of two overlapping conflicts – the cold war and the Arab-Israeli conflict – the two had little interest in rapprochement. But being a global power with a global reach and allies to protect, US interest in the Levant during the Reagan administration suffered a violent shock when facing

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<sup>575</sup> Pelcovits, “What Went Wrong?”, p. 39.

<sup>576</sup> Caspar Weinberger, “The Uses of Military Power,” *PBS Frontline*, November 28<sup>th</sup> 1984, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/military/force/weinberger.html>

<sup>577</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues,” RRPL-Dig, December 14<sup>th</sup> 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/121483a.htm>

down Hafez al-Assad. Unable to effectively retaliate, the Reagan administration pre-empted a Congressional defeat by unilaterally withdrawing after two and half years of frustrated peace-making efforts.

Today, with the Syrian civil war in its seventh year, a parallel situation to that of the late-1983 has developed around Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons stockpile. As in 1983, the Assad regime is supported by Moscow and Tehran. Though uninterested in playing peace-maker in Syria, President Donald Trump has sought to punish Assad with cruise missiles. Political scientist Micah Zenko finds that limited use of US military power in the post-cold war era as "tactically successful" "but strategically ineffective."<sup>578</sup> Trump would be well-advised to recognise the limits of US military power as a quick-fix solution to challenging adversaries, be they North Korea, Iran, or Syria, and recognise that there are other options. One option in and with Syria going forward is course for Trump, like Reagan, to be content with leaving Bashar al-Assad "to stew in his own juice."

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<sup>578</sup> Micah Zenko, *Between Threats and War: US Discrete Military Operations in the Post-Cold War World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 12.

# Primary Sources and Literature

Document collections in the Reagan Presidential Library and Museum are named and organised after individuals or the office which it was filed. What follows is a list of abbreviations used to cite documents from the Reagan Library and other primary sources.

**RRPL:** Ronald Reagan Library and Museum, Simi Valley, California

**CMC:** Crisis Management Centre (CMC), NSC-Records, 1981-1985

RAC Box 8

RAC Box 9

**Kemp Files:** Geoffrey Kemp Files

RAC Box 4

RAC Box 5

**Fortier Files:** Donald Fortier Files

RAC Box 4

RAC Box 6

**Poindexter-Files:** John Poindexter Files

Box 2

**ExSec-Sub:** Executive Secretariat, NSC Subject File

Box 48

Box 50

Box 51

Box 54

**ExSec-CO:** Executive Secretariat, NSC Records: Country File

Box 41

Box 44

Box 46

Box 48

**ExSec-HS:** Executive Secretariat, NSC: Head of State Files: Records, 1981-1985

Box 33

**RRPL-Dig: Ronald Reagan Library and Museum Digital Reading Room**

- Reagan, Ronald. "Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada," RRPL Dig, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1983, last accessed April 10<sup>th</sup> 2018, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/102783b.htm>
- "Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues," RRPL-Dig, December 14<sup>th</sup> 1983, last accessed April 10<sup>th</sup> 2018, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/121483a.htm>
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# Appendix A: Cast of Characters

## Syria

Ahmad, Ahmad Iskander (1944-1983)

Syrian Minister of Information (1974-1983)

al-Assad, Bashar (1965-)

Ophthalmologist; President of Syria (2000-); currently engaged in the Syrian civil war (2011-)

al-Assad, Hafez (1930-2000)

Syrian Air Force Pilot; Secretary of Defence (1966-1970); Prime Minister (1970-71); President of Syria (1971-2000),

Al-Assad, Rifaat (1937-)

Hafez al-Assad's younger brother; leader of the 'Defence companies', an elite paramilitary force (1971-1984); Vice President of Syria led a failed coup d'état against his brother in 1984 before being exiled to France

al-Shishlaki, Adib (1909-1964)

Syrian officer and President of Syria (1949-1954)

Jadid, Salah (1926-1993)

Syrian officer and de facto President of Syria (1966-1970); Jailed in 1970

Khaddam, Abdul Halim (1932-)

Minister of Foreign Affairs (1970-1984); Vice President of Syria (1984-2005); resigned in 2005 and forming a "government in exile" in 2006; part of the Syrian opposition during the civil war (2011-)

Muhammad Umran (1922-1972)

Member of the secret Military Committee; Defence Minister (1965-1966); denounced and exiled in 1966; assassinated in Lebanon (1972)

## Lebanon

Berri, Nabih (1938-)

Shia Muslim; Leader of the Amal Movement (1980-); Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament (1992-); ally of the Progressive Socialist Party and the Jumblatt family

Frangieh, Suleyman (1910-1992)

Christian Maronite; President of Lebanon (1970-1976); ally of Hafez al-Assad

Gemayel, Amin (1942-)

Christian Maronite; President of Lebanon (1982-1988); de facto ally of the United States

Gemayel, Bashir (1947-1982)

Christian Maronite; Leader of the Phalange Militia and the Kataeab Party; President of Syria – never assumed office (1982)

Gemayel, Pierre (1905-1984)

Christian Maronite; Father of Amin and Bashir; founder of the Kataeab Party, a Christian Maronite political party central in the Lebanese civil war

Jumblatt, Kamal (1917-1977)

Druze; Founder of the Progressive Socialist Party (1949); Uniting with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat founding the Lebanese National Movement in 1977; Assassinated in 1977 by the Syrians

Jumblatt, Walid (1949-



- Druze; Leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (1977-); co-founder of the National Salvation Movement (NSF); ally of Hafez al-Assad
- Salem, Elie (1930-)  
Lebanese Foreign Minister (1982-1984); de facto Prime Minister of Lebanon in Amin Gemayel's cabinet (1982-1988)
- Sarkis, Elias (1924-1985)  
Christian Maronite; President of Syria (1976-1982)

## **Reagan Administration**

- Allen, Richard V. (1936-)  
National Security Advisor (1981-1982) Chief foreign policy advisor to the Reagan Campaign
- Bartholomew, Reginald (1936-2012)  
Diplomat, US Ambassador to Lebanon (1983-1986); Director of Politico-Military Affairs on President's Jimmy Carter's National Security Council (1977-1979).
- Bush, George H. W. (1924-)  
Vice President of the United States (1981-1989); President of the United States (1989-1993); Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (1976-1977); US Ambassador to the United Nations (1971-1973); Congressman (1967-1971);
- Clark, William Patrick "Judge" (1931-2013)  
Assistant Secretary of State (1981-82), National Security Advisor (1982-83), Secretary of Interior (1983-85)
- Cluverius, Wat T. (1934-2010)  
Diplomat; US Ambassador to Bahrain (1976-1978)
- Dam, Kenneth W. (1932-)  
Deputy secretary of state (1982-1985)
- Dillon, Robert S. (1929-)  
Diplomat; US Ambassador to Lebanon, 1981-1983.
- Eagleburger, Lawrence (1930-2011)  
Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs (1982-1984); Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (1981-1982)
- Feith, Douglas (1953-)  
Political Affairs on the National Security Council (1981-1982); Undersecretary of Defence (2001-2005).
- Donald Fortier (1947-1986)  
Political Affairs, NSC, 1982 Political Military Affairs Directorate, NSC, 1983-1984; Political Development Directorate, 1985; Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 1986.
- Habib, Philip (1920-1992)  
Diplomat; Special Envoy to the Middle East (1981, 1981-1983); Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs (1976-1978); Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (1974-1976); US Ambassador to South Korea (1971-1974). Habib received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for diplomacy from President Reagan in 1982 for his work as a mediator in Beirut in 1982.
- Haig, Alexander M. (1924-2010)  
US Army General; Deputy National Security Advisor 1970-1973; Supreme Allied Commander Europe (1974-1979); Secretary of State in the Reagan administration (1981-1982).
- Hill, Charles (1936-)  
Executive Secretary, Department of State

- Lewis, Samuel W. (1930-2014)  
Diplomat; Undersecretary of State for International Organization Affairs (1975-1977); US Ambassador to Israel (1977-1985).
- Kemp, Geoffrey (1939-)  
Senior Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs on NSC (1981-1983); Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (1983-1985); International Relations scholar who has written extensively on US foreign policy.
- Robert "Bud" McFarlane (1937-)  
Counsellor at the State Department (1981-1982); Deputy National Security Advisor (1982-1983), Special Envoy to the Middle East (1983); National Security Advisor (1983-1985); Central to the Iran-Contra scandal and convicted in 1988; pardoned in 1992.
- Murphy, Richard W. (1929-)  
Diplomat, Ambassador to Syria 74-78, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (83-89)
- Reagan, Ronald Wilson (1911-2004)  
US President (1981-1989); Governor of California (1967-1975); former actor.
- Paganelli, Robert S. (--)  
Diplomat; US Ambassador to Syria (1982-1984)
- Poindexter, John (1936-)  
Deputy National Security Advisor (1983-85), National Security Advisor (1985-86); Poindexter was central in the Iran-Contra scandal.
- Rumsfeld, Donald Henry (1932-)  
Special envoy (1983-1984); Chief of Staff to Gerald Ford (1975-1977); Secretary of Defence (2001-2006)
- Schweitzer, Robert L. (1928-2000)  
US Army Lieutenant General; Defence Group Coordinator on the National Security Council (1981); fired after publicly criticising the Reagan administration.
- Shultz, George P. (1920-)  
Secretary of State (1982-1989); President of the Bechtel Corporation, a multinational construction and engineering corporation (1974-1982); Secretary of the Treasury (1972-1974).
- Tanter, Raymond (1938-);  
Political Affairs Directorate on the National Security Council (1981-1982); Personal representative of the Secretary of Defence for Arms Control; Author of Who's at the Helm? Critiquing the Reagan administration's handling of the war in Lebanon; Professor of political science at Georgetown
- Teicher, Howard, (--)  
Director for Near Eastern Affairs and South Asia and Senior Director for Politico-Military affairs on the National Security Council (1982-1987); Teicher would later become embroiled in the Iran-Contra scandal.
- Veliotes, Nicholas A. (1929-)  
Diplomat; Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (1981-1984); US Ambassador to Jordan (1978-1981).
- Vessey Jr., John W. (1922-2016)  
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) (1982-1985)
- Weinberger, Caspar W. (1917-2006)

Secretary of Defense (1981-1987); Executive in the Bechtel Corporation; Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (1973-1975); Director of the Office of Budget Management (1972-1973); Chair of the Federal Trade Commission (1969-1970)  
Richard B. Wirthlin (1931-2011)  
Political strategist and Pollster for the Reagan Administration

## **Israel**

Arens, Moshe (1925-)  
Likud Party; Israeli Minister of Defence (1983-1984); Minister of Foreign Affairs (1988-1990); Minister of Defence (1990-1992, 1999)  
Begin, Menachem (1913-1992)  
Likud Party; Israeli Prime Minister (1977-1983); Minister of Defence (1980-1981). Former commander of Zionist paramilitary group Haganah.  
Shamir, Yitshak (1915-2012)  
Likud Party; Prime Minister of Israel (1983-1992); Speaker of the Knesset (1977-1980); Former commander of Zionist paramilitary group Lehi.  
Sharon, Ariel (1928-2014)  
Minister of Defence (1981-1983); Minister of Foreign Affairs (1998-1999); Prime Minister of Israel (2001-2006). One of the main proponents of Operation Peace in Galilee, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, 1982.

## **Miscellaneous**

Arafat, Yasser (1929-2004)  
Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (1969-2004); President of the Palestinian National Authority  
Cheysson, Claude (1920-2012)  
French Foreign Minister (1981-1984)  
Craxi, Bettin (1934-2000)  
Italian Prime Minister (1983-1987)  
Kissinger, Henry  
National Security Advisor (1969-1975), Secretary of State (1973-1977)  
Mitterand, Francois  
French President (1981-1995)  
Nidal, Abu (1937-2002)  
Palestinian freedom fighter-cum-mercenary born Sabri Khalil al-Banna; harboured by Syria (1983-1986); responsible for several international incidents including the assassination of the Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom Shlomo Argov in 1982 precipitating the 1982 Lebanon war.  
Obama, Barack Hussein (1961-)  
US President (2009-2017); US Senator (2005-2008)  
Thatcher, Margaret (1925-2013)  
British Prime Minister (1979-1990)  
Trump, Donald J. (1947-)  
US President (2017-); Self-professed billionaire and real-estate tycoon