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# LEBANON



## 2: The Foreign Involvement

By Mohamed A. El-Khawas

In a recent issue of *The American Scholar*, Leila Fawaz, an associate professor of history and diplomacy at Tufts University, wrote:

"The conflict [in Lebanon] since 1975, although it has an internal Lebanese dimension, has also been a theater of war for all the hostile powers of the Middle East: a Syrian war, an Israeli war, a Palestinian war, an Arab-Israeli war, an Arab war, a great powers and superpowers conflict."<sup>1</sup>

The situation Professor Fawaz describes has come about because the feuding Lebanese factions — the Christians (Maronites), the Muslims (mainly Shiites) and the Druze — plus the Palestinians have been susceptible to external pressures as the civil strife has grown more fierce since 1975.

The political and religious factionalism has fostered a volatile environment in which Lebanese warlords have sought military assistance from neighboring countries. In addition, the global political environment in which these factions have been operating made it relatively easy to receive encouragement and material assistance from foreign powers.

Both regional and super powers — Arab states, Israel and the United States — have scrambled for influence through direct intervention in the divided nation, with the Americans and the Israelis paying a heavy price for their actions.

### Syrian Versus Arab Involvement

The Arab states have been challenged by the Lebanese crisis, which has fostered competition between moderate and radical Arabs. The Arab states do not constitute a monolithic group and they rarely take a unified stand on regional problems. This is particularly true with such an extraordinarily complex situation as is found in Lebanon. Several of the Arab states — both moderate and radical — have become

increasingly involved in Lebanon since 1975, giving the warring factions military aid to assist them in attaining their political objectives.

The outbreak of violence in early 1975, which culminated in a full-scale civil war, paved the way for major escalation in the level of foreign intervention in Lebanon. In particular, Syria saw an opportunity to be a broker in the Lebanese conflict, giving it a chance to enforce its long elusive *Pax Syriana*. In June 1976, Syria sent its troops into Lebanon — an action that marked the first stage in the "internationalization" of the conflict. Around the same time, President Hafez al-Assad surprisingly shifted his support from the Muslim leftists and their Palestinian backers to the hard-pressed Christian rightists, who appeared to be on the verge of defeat.

This Syrian intervention added a potentially dangerous dimension to the conflict and threatened direct foreign military intervention by other powers. Arab states in particular could not sit idle after the Syrian Army took up positions in the Bekaa Valley and started closing in on the Palestinians in Beirut. In a hurriedly convened meeting in Cairo, the Arab League decided to send a Pan-Arab peacekeeping force to replace the Syrian army in Lebanon.

Assad, however, had no intention of pulling out of eastern Lebanon. Instead, he invited other states in the Arab League to send token forces to join the Syrians in Lebanon. Assad directly contacted Algeria's Hourai Boumedienne and Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi and secured their approval to send small contingents to join his army in Lebanon. Faced with this *fait accompli*, the Arab League convinced Saudi Arabia and the Sudan to contribute to the emerging Pan-Arab force. This was a good compromise for Syria: "The Syrians agreed to demands from other Arabs

for 'Arabization' of the crisis, while remaining the pre-eminent force."<sup>2</sup> Syria's military presence was legitimized by the mandate from the Arab League, so that Syria was now viewed neither as occupier nor as uninvited guest.

The Lebanese Christians were not pleased with the presence of Libyan and Algerian troops, both hard-line members of the Arab "Rejectionist Front." They feared that they might join their arch-enemies — the radical Muslim factions and the Palestinians. But the inclusion of Saudi and Sudanese forces eased their fears somewhat. They did not mind letting Assad try to impose some kind of order in Lebanon as long as the power of the Christian Maronites — who had dominated the government since 1943 — remained intact.

Syria's mission was to prevent further escalation of the fighting in order to pave the way for a political solution but, despite Assad's efforts, a political solution has remained elusive. Repeated attempts to establish a cease-fire have proved futile over the years and Syria has instead found itself caught in the web of Lebanese politics. If anything, the feuding factions have hardened their positions as a result of the terrible bloodshed of recent years. This has led to still further foreign intervention and has greatly complicated the search for a political solution to Lebanon's civil strife.

### The Israeli Connection

Israel, which had kept a close watch on the fast-moving events in Lebanon, saw an opportunity for intervention to prevent a victory by a nationalist-leftist-Palestinian coalition in Lebanon. Since the mid-1970s, Israel has allied itself with the Christian Phalangist forces, then headed by Bashir Gemayel. It also supported Major Saad Haddad, the commander of the Christian militia in southern Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> Israel has trained and armed the Christians to fight the radical Muslims, who were loosely



allied with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The intensified fighting in 1976 led Israel's Labor government to discuss ways to aid the battered Christian forces. In the months before the Syrian invasion in June 1976, Israel had responded favorably to Christian pleas for arms and ammunitions. By May, Israel had begun delivering weapons to Christian forces in eastern Lebanon. The deliveries included U.S. M-16 rifles, Russian 122-mm. rockets and T-54 tanks.<sup>4</sup>

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Between May and late August, Israel's Defense Minister Shimon Peres clandestinely paid four visits to the Christian-controlled port of Jounieh, nine miles north of Beirut. During his third visit, he was accompanied by Premier Yitzhak Rabin, who held meetings with Christian leaders (including former President Camille Chamoun and President-elect Elias Sarkis) and a group of moderate Muslims (including former Premier Rashid Karami).<sup>5</sup>

During these meetings, the Israeli officials encouraged the Christians and the moderate Muslims to form an alliance against the Palestinians and the Muslim leftists. More importantly, Israel also agreed to initiate military action to wipe out PLO bases in southern Lebanon, which had posed threats to its security. In September 1976, Israel's Foreign Minister Yigal Allon stated that "a situation will be created in which we will not permit any faction to allow the Palestine Liberation Organization to act against Israel from Lebanese regions close to the border."<sup>6</sup>

This secret agreement was a turning point in the Lebanese civil war, as Israel's role changed from that of arms supplier to a limited partner in a coalition against the Palestinians and Muslim leftists. From this time on, Israel secretly joined the civil war in Lebanon and took military action to help its Christian allies. On September 13, 1976, *Time* magazine reported that Israel's involvement was drawn along the following lines:

□ Israel [was] maintaining a naval blockade of several leftist-controlled Lebanese ports, particularly Sidon and Tyre, thus keeping arms from reaching beleaguered leftist-Palestinian forces. The Israelis [had] so far intercepted 15 ships and torpedoed three others that tried to escape their patrols. Of the 15, six were ordered to Haifa, where weapons were removed — and later shipped to Lebanese Christians

El-Khawas, Lebanon: The Foreign Involvement were apprehended.

□ Israel [was] now training a battalion of . . . Lebanese Christian and Muslim troops in tank warfare at an Israeli base on the edge of the Sinai desert. . . . When the training [was] finished, they [would] be sent back to Lebanon with 38 American-made M-50 Sherman tanks.

□ [Israel had] gained what amount[ed] to *de facto* control over a strip of territory in

## . . . Israel and Syria had both moved against the Palestinians and the radical Muslims.

southern Lebanon, reaching up to the Litani River. . . . In addition, the Israelis [were] trying to arm and train Lebanese villagers in the area to guard against a renewal of Palestinian power.<sup>7</sup>

Ironically, it had turned out that Israel and Syria had both moved against the Palestinians and the radical Muslims. This was evident in the fact that Syria felt relatively secure along the confrontation line in the Golan Heights. Syria withdrew its five armored divisions along the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and moved them either to Lebanon or to the eastern border with Iraq, its hostile neighbor. This action left only one armored division to protect Syria's capital Damascus against attack by Israel.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning, Israel's Labor government did not mind Syria's military intervention in Lebanon since Damascus had established a *de facto* alliance with the pro-Israel, pro-Western Maronite Phalangists. The Israelis were willing to let Syria try to prevent further escalation of the fighting in Lebanon in order to find a political solution that would leave the power base of the Christian Maronites intact.

In 1977, the coming to power of the Likud government, under Menachem Begin, led to further escalation of Israel's involvement in Lebanon. Begin was determined to wipe out the PLO bases in southern Lebanon. To accomplish this objective, Israel first intensified its air raids against Palestinian positions and, then, in 1978, invaded Lebanon directly. In doing so, Israel violated U.S. laws that prohibit the use of American-made weapons in offensive wars.

Following the invasion of Lebanon, Israel installed U.S.-made armored hardware in the southern part of the country and ignored repeated American requests for their removal. Even when the Israelis later claimed that they had complied with the U.S. request, photographs taken by U.S. satellites showed otherwise. President Jimmy Carter was outraged by Israel's false claims and threatened to ask Congress to halt arms sales to Israel unless the weapons were removed from southern Lebanon. It was only then that the Begin government bowed to Carter's pressure.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the Israelis withdrew from Lebanon but continued their air strikes against the Palestinian camps and continued to provide assistance to Christian forces. It was estimated that Israel gave the Phalangist militia, under Bashir Gemayel, some \$250 million in military assistance between 1976 and 1982.<sup>10</sup> Israel's aid was designed to "[turn] the country into a Phalangist-controlled state,"<sup>11</sup> according to Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, the architect of a second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

The Begin government used a bullet attack on Israel's ambassador in London as a pretext for conducting an all-out military action in June 1982 against the PLO forces in southern Lebanon. Again, Israel invaded Lebanon. It is important to note that Begin had secured in advance the approval of U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig for the Lebanese invasion prior to Haig's resignation from the State Department.<sup>12</sup> Haig shared Begin's views on international terrorism and the danger of a Soviet presence in the Middle East. They both saw a strategic advantage in destroying the PLO strongholds in southern Lebanon, and to stifle radicalism in the area and weaken Soviet influence in the Arab world.

The Israeli invasion took place after "a year of unprecedented quiet on the Lebanese border"<sup>13</sup> and at a time when



Israel knew of a conclusion by the British government that the PLO had nothing to do with the attempt a month earlier on the Israeli envoy's life. The planning for this invasion had, in fact, taken place three months prior to that incident and coincided with the time that Israel was about to turn over the last portion of the Sinai to Egypt, following the Camp David Accords. This timing suggests that Begin had planned to use any excuse to invade Lebanon in order to rally the Israeli public behind his government. This is largely because turning the Sinai over to Egypt had not only caused a split within the Likud coalition but also had led to clashes with militant Israeli settlers in the occupied Arab territories.

The incident in London was all the license that Begin needed to undertake his plan to invade Lebanon and to wipe out PLO bases along Israel's northern border. It was, nevertheless, a dangerous precedent in the Lebanese crisis, indeed in the entire Middle East conflict. As journalist/author Jacobo Timmerman has put it:

*For the first time, war was not a response to provocation. Before, even in the worst of cases, it had been preventive. The understanding of this fact after only four days of fighting, when there were doubts about the magnitude of the victory and the fears had vanished, was perhaps the first symptom of uneasiness that gripped some sectors of the country.*<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after the invasion, it became evident that the Begin-Sharon plan was not confined to creating a security zone in southern Lebanon along Israel's northern border but sought to force the PLO out of Lebanon altogether. The Israelis swept across the country and laid siege on West Beirut in preparation for a final assault on the Palestinians who were burrowed among several hundred thousand Lebanese civilians in the Muslim section of the capital. Israeli jets, gunboats, and artillery repeatedly shelled West Beirut, "hitting apartment buildings and hospitals along with Palestinian refugee camps. Armored Israeli bulldozers tore away PLO earthworks so tanks could rumble across the Green Line from Christian East Beirut to Muslim West. The [Israeli] Army took Beirut International Airport, seized the Lebanese Army's own barracks and finally stopped in a garden near the refugee camps. PLO guerrillas stood and fought with handguns, Kalashnikov rifles and rocket-propelled grenades."<sup>15</sup>

Although the Israeli invasion was condemned by the United Nations, Israel remained indifferent. This was exemplified in Begin's address to 200 American members of the United Jewish Appeal in Israel in August 1982: "Nobody should preach to us." He indicated that "Israel would continue the siege of west Beirut as it saw fit, regardless of international criticism."<sup>16</sup>

## Secretary of State George P. Shultz used shuttle diplomacy to try to convince the Israeli and Syrian governments to pull their armies out of Lebanon.

### The American Rescue Mission

The brutality of the Israeli invasion was repulsive to many Americans who raised questions about U.S. military assistance to Israel. As columnist William Raspberry put it:

*Those were American planes and missiles and tanks that smashed into Lebanon, leaving thousands of dead and maimed civilians, women and babies, in their wake. At some point we will have to . . . deal with the fact that weapons, supplied by us on the hard understanding that they will be used only for defensive purposes, have been used to slaughter innocents who were no threat to Israel.*<sup>17</sup>

According to a *Newsweek* magazine poll conducted in August 1982, "nearly two in three Americans disapprove[d] of Israel's march into Lebanon and 43 percent believe[d] that Washington should suspend or cut off arms to Israel."<sup>18</sup> This led President Ronald Reagan to place a ban on the shipment of cluster bombs, which had been widely used by Israel against Lebanese and Palestinian civilians.

The Israeli invasion cast the net of foreign intervention in Lebanon still wider. The U.S. and other Western powers now

became directly involved in Lebanon in an effort to prevent the Israelis from launching a final assault on the PLO in West Beirut. As a first step, the U.S. decided to use diplomacy to try to avert the indiscriminate killing of thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians if the Israelis used force to take over West Beirut.

U.S. special envoy Philip Habib was dispatched to the Middle East to work out an agreement to bring about a PLO withdrawal and an end to Israel's siege of West Beirut. In early September 1982, a multinational force — comprising 800 U.S. Marines, 800 French and 500 Italian troops — arrived in Beirut to supervise the evacuation of about 6,000-7,000 PLO fighters from the Lebanese capital.<sup>19</sup> The Palestinians went to Syria, Jordan, Sudan, Tunisia, North Yemen, and South Yemen. After the evacuation, PLO leader Yassir Arafat set up his headquarters in Tunisia.

Following the evacuation of the PLO and the end of the Israeli siege of West Beirut, members of the multinational force withdrew from the Lebanese capital. Their departure proved to be premature, however. It left the Palestinian refugees at the mercy of the Israelis and their Christian allies, who wanted to sweep every vestige of the Palestinians out of Lebanon. Shortly thereafter, in late September 1982, hundreds of Palestinian refugees were massacred by the Phalangist militiamen at the Sabra and Shatila camps in Beirut as the Israeli army supposedly was guarding the camps.<sup>20</sup>

The massacres raised a dilemma for the U.S., which had guaranteed the safety of the Palestinians after the withdrawal of the PLO from Beirut.<sup>21</sup> This incident brought back the multinational force for the second time in five weeks. Its task was to protect people and maintain peace in Beirut. The Reagan administration was now faced with a bigger challenge. It sought to persuade Israel and Syria to reach an agreement for troop withdrawal in order to pave the way for the establishment of an independent and unified Lebanon, free from foreign armies.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz used shuttle diplomacy to try to convince the Israelis and Syrian governments to pull their armies out of Lebanon. Syria



was unwilling to cooperate, but Shultz got the Israelis and the Lebanese to sign an agreement on May 17, 1983 under which the Israelis agreed to pull out of Lebanon only when other foreign troops (i.e. the Syrians) also withdrew. To reward Israel for its cooperation, the Reagan administration agreed to release F-16 fighter-bombers, which had been withheld "until the Israeli forces leave Lebanon."<sup>22</sup>

22 Syria, on the other hand, ignored U.S. calls for troop withdrawal and used its strong military and political presence in Lebanon to pressure President Amin Gemayel to abrogate the U.S.-sponsored agreement with Israel. Syrian officials made it clear that such action was necessary if Gemayel wanted to implement his plan for "national reconciliation." Moreover, Syria's Lebanese allies refused to participate in a government of national unity unless that agreement was repudiated.<sup>23</sup>

Syria's intransigence frustrated the U.S., which has no leverage with President Assad. In response, the Reagan administration decided to use the Marines to prop up the Gemayel government and to strengthen its role politically and militarily. This meant that the Marines would play a limited combat role in Lebanon.

By the fall of 1983, the military situation was deteriorating rapidly. It was now clear that foreign intervention was keeping the civil war brewing in Beirut. In September 1983, for example, Israel decided to reduce its casualties by pulling out of Beirut and by abandoning its positions in the Chouf Mountains. This led to a scramble among the feuding Lebanese factions for control of the mountains overlooking Beirut. In fact, the U.S. used naval gunfire to prevent the Lebanese Army and Maronite Militia from defeat by Druze fighters who were entrenched in the mountains.<sup>24</sup> This combat role led the Druze to dispute the U.S. claims to impartiality. Ironically, it led them to join sides with Syria.

Israel's abandonment of the Chouf Mountains meant trouble for the U.S. Marines; it exposed the flanks of the Marines at the Beirut Airport, leaving them dangerously vulnerable to sniper fire, artillery shelling, and terrorist attacks.

On October 23, 1983, suicide-bomb truck attacks on the headquarters of the

U.S. Marines and the French paratroopers in Beirut left more than 300 people dead and a score more wounded. American investigators concluded that the attack was carried out by the pro-Iranian Shi'ite Hizb Allah (Party of God) from the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley—a finding that intensified U.S. conflicts with Syria and underlined the vulnerability of the Marines in Beirut. As General John Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

. . . There was little the U.S. could do to get a settlement out of the Syrians unless the Reagan administration was willing to get more involved in the Lebanese civil war . . .

put it: the main concern of the Marine contingent "has become one of self-preservation. They can't serve any real purpose where they are."<sup>25</sup> On November 7, 1983, *Newsweek* commented that "A unit of 1,600 troops was woefully small to have any real effect upon the Gordian knot of Lebanese politics, and yet it was quite large enough to present an inviting target to terrorists."<sup>26</sup>

The bomb attack on the Marine headquarters threw American policymakers into a quandary. Reagan's response was to stand firm in Lebanon. He was supported by the majority of Americans, who felt that the Marines could not simply run in the face of attack.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Reagan had little choice but to find a way to bring the Marines home in order to prevent the bombing incident from becoming a major issue in his 1984 reelection bid.

### U.S. and Israel: Partnership in Lebanon

In response to the deadly attack on the Marines and Syrian intransigence, Reagan decided to develop closer strategic cooperation with Israel in Lebanon. This decision was made on October 29, just six days

after the devastating attack on the Marines. It was reported that Shultz persuaded Reagan to revive the idea of a special political and military relationship with Israel in order to "confront Syria with an Israeli-American military threat."<sup>28</sup> This was seen as a move that would compel Syria to withdraw from Lebanon, thus paving the way for the Marines to return home and also helping to check the spread of Soviet influence in the Middle East. This was agreed upon over the objections of Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all of whom argued that "strategic cooperation" with Israel could imperil U.S. ties with such moderate Arab states as Saudi Arabia and Jordan.<sup>29</sup>

France, whose unit suffered heavy losses from a suicide-bomb attack in October, was troubled by this U.S. embrace of Israel. The French feared that the U.S.-Israeli strategic collaboration would "impede a settlement in Lebanon rather than hasten it."<sup>30</sup> They also feared that domestic political pressures might lead U.S. Marines into a premature withdrawal and that American officials eventually might elect force over diplomacy to break the deadlock in Lebanon.

The new partnership was an abrupt change in direction for Reagan's policy in the Middle East, especially because he was abandoning the diplomatic efforts that had been spearheaded by Saudi Arabia to get Syria to pull its troops out of Lebanon. This change reflected Reagan's disenchantment and frustration with Syria's refusal to withdraw its forces from Lebanon, an action which would have put the U.S.-sponsored Israel-Lebanon agreement into effect. The U.S. had already endorsed the Israeli position that the withdrawal of its troops from southern Lebanon was contingent on a simultaneous pullout by Syrian forces. Thus, Syrian intransigence meant that the U.S. Marines must continue to be deployed in Beirut as part of the multinational peacekeeping force. Yet, Republican leaders in the United States were concerned about the safety of American forces, following the October attack, and wanted to bring the Marines home no later than the summer of 1984, before the presidential campaign moved into full swing. As top White House officials put it: the continued presence of the Marines in Beirut in 1984 could become "a serious political liability for Reagan." They added, "if we don't solve it in the short run, it will



be critical for us in the long run."<sup>31</sup> They consequently took measures to ensure the safety of the Marines, short of pulling them out of Beirut.

The shift toward U.S.-Israeli cooperation certainly did not guarantee that the U.S. Marines would be coming home soon. This conclusion was reached by several Pentagon strategists, who "noting the speed with which the Soviet Union re-armed Syria [in 1982], doubt[ed] whether U.S.-Israeli military posturing [would] impress either the Syrians or the Soviets."<sup>32</sup>

In fact, Assad was in a stronger position: First, Syria was receiving new, sophisticated weapons from Moscow in order to enable it to withstand the American-Israeli military presence and to replace equipment destroyed earlier. Second, Syria had consolidated its grip on eastern Lebanon by helping the rebel factions of the PLO to oust Arafat and his loyalist troops from Tripoli. Third, by supporting factions opposed to President Gemayel, Syria had become "the key player in that fractured country's future."<sup>33</sup> The result was that there was little the U.S. could do to get a settlement out of the Syrians unless the Reagan administration was willing to get more involved in the Lebanese civil war, which had all the ingredients of a Vietnam-style conflict. This was certainly an undesirable prospect for Reagan in an election year.

A series of events over the next few months suggest that the Reagan administration was following Israel's advice to develop "disincentives" that would pressure Syria out of Lebanon: (1) on the eve of Premier Yitzhak Shamir's visit to Washington in October, Reagan decided to keep the battleship USS *New Jersey* off the Lebanese coast indefinitely; (2) on December 4, 1983, the U.S. carried out a belated retaliatory raid on Syrian positions in Lebanon, which came in the aftermath of a similar Israeli attack; (3) shortly thereafter, a policy of instant retaliation was put in force in an effort to protect the U.S. Marines in Beirut and to discourage other terrorist attacks on American targets in the Middle East.

In response to this "gunboat diplomacy," Syrian officials denounced U.S. attacks on their positions in eastern Lebanon, and made it known that their government would not "budge an inch" from its stance on Lebanon despite mounting American pressure.<sup>34</sup> As one observer

noted, "this situation was likely to lead to a major war with a possibility of 'forc[ing] both the U.S. and the Soviet Union to become more deeply and dangerously entwined in the Middle East than perhaps either superpower would like."<sup>35</sup>

There was evidence already that the area of conflict would be widened. On December 12, 1983, American, French, and Kuwaiti installations in Kuwait were bombed. These incidents signalled the beginning of a terrorist campaign against

**There is no guarantee that Assad will succeed in finding a formula that will be acceptable to all of the feuding factions.**

American interests in the Middle East and, possibly, against targets inside the U.S. There was little the U.S. could do to prevent such attacks.

Thus, the U.S. policy of cooperation with Israel did not appear to hasten the return of the Marines. The prospects might have been different if the Israelis were willing to take over more responsibilities in the war-torn country. Israel, however, had no interest in getting more deeply involved in the Lebanese civil war. In fact, morale was low in Israel due to the heavy casualties inflicted on Israeli troops by terrorist and guerrilla attacks. Consequently, Shamir was under pressure to end Israel's involvement in Lebanon as soon as possible. As a *Washington Post* editorial put it: "The Israelis seem little interested in doing anything in Lebanon these days except cutting their losses on a timetable of their own choosing. But this stage of the mess is Israel's doing, and Israel has a responsibility to help American diplomacy clean it up."<sup>36</sup>

By making Israel into his preeminent ally in Lebanon, Reagan ended his stance as a mediator in the Lebanese conflict. One immediate result was shifting his focus away from finding a broader settle-

ment to the Lebanese problem and toward dealing only with the fallout from Israel's invasion of Lebanon.

### Disengagement or Intervention

By early 1984, it was evident that the American-Israeli strategic cooperation had not succeeded in pressuring Assad to withdraw Syrian troops from Lebanon. Lack of progress toward ending the foreign military presence in Lebanon resulted in a new U.S. plan to get the Marines out of Lebanon in order to avoid another disaster that could be detrimental to Reagan's bid for reelection.

On February 8, Reagan ordered a phased pullback of the Marines from Beirut to Navy ships offshore. This decision was made following a dramatic turn of events in Lebanon in early February; the resignation of Gemayel's cabinet; the disintegration of the Lebanese National Army, with Muslim units either defecting or refusing to fight; and the seizure of West Beirut by the Druze and Shiite militias.<sup>37</sup> Under these circumstances, Reagan was torn between the need to expand the U.S. contingent to bolster the Gemayel government and the need to pull out of the turmoil in Lebanon. Reagan chose the latter because the former was too risky in an election year.

In doing so, U.S. credibility suffered a major setback, leaving Gemayel alone to face the crisis as the British and Italians decided to withdraw their units in the multinational force out of Lebanon. France, on the other hand, decided to stay,<sup>38</sup> hoping to convince the United Nations to send a peacekeeping force to Beirut. Following the U.S. withdrawal, Shiite Amal militia took over the positions, including the Beirut Airport, held by the U.S. Marines.

Israel found itself caught in a no-win situation in the longest war in its history. Israeli military analysts pointed out that "Israel [was] fully extended in terms of personnel and overextended financially. . . . Israel [was] vulnerable."<sup>39</sup> This situation divided the Israelis and ignited a heated national debate. The Lebanese debacle had its toll on Israeli politicians. Sharon, the mastermind behind the Lebanese invasion, was forced out of office following the completion of the Commission of Enquiry's investigation into the massacres of Palestinian refugees in West Beirut. He was forced to resign from his position as defense minister in the Likud government.



Moreover, Begin became disillusioned as the war dragged on. The Israeli Army suffered a large number of casualties from Lebanese resistance to the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Surprisingly, Begin decided to step down from his office as prime minister, leaving Shamir as the caretaker until the next election.

When the election results proved to be inconclusive, the Likud coalition and the Labor Party decided to form a government of national unity, with Peres as the prime minister during the first half of the term in office. This "unity" government decided to start pulling out of Lebanon in January 1985 and to turn southern Lebanon over to their Christian allies. Israel also continued to arm and train the Christian militia — South Lebanese Army — in order to bolster the militia's capabilities in southern Lebanon.

In retrospect, the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon resulted in the radicalization of Lebanon's one million Shiites, who had long been deprived of power and wealth under the Maronite government. They turned against Israel, which had received their support during the early days of the invasion. This change came about because of Israel's heavy-handed tactics to subjugate the south and Israel's close ties with Lebanese Christians. The Shiite Amal militia was fighting against the Israelis and their Christian allies. They particularly resented the capture by the Israelis (on their way out of Lebanon) of more than 700 Shiites and their detainment at Atlit prison in Israel. The Shiites resolved to free their fellow citizens at any cost. This led them to strike not only against Israel but also against the U.S., Israel's arms supplier and financial backer.

The strategic cooperation between the U.S. and Israel in Lebanon thus has turned into a liability for the U.S., which has become a target of terrorist attacks. An example was the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in June 1985 and the killing of an American passenger. The Shiite hijackers demanded the release of more than 700 Shiite detainees in Israel in return for the release of the TWA plane and its passengers whom they held as hostages. Faced with the prospect of another hostage crisis similar to that of Tehran, Reagan was forced to solicit the assistance of Syria's President Assad — an old foe — whom he "had so often attacked in the past as a prime trouble-maker." Assad emerged as "a key mover in the quest to free the [American] hostages."<sup>40</sup>





Assad and Reagan used quiet diplomacy to convince Shi'ite Amal leader Nabih Barri and Israel's Premier Peres to work out a compromise to exchange the release of the TWA hostages in Beirut and the Shi'ite detainees in Israel without giving the impression that either the U.S. or Israel capitulated to terrorist demands. The TWA hostages were the first to be released, followed by a phased release of Shi'ite prisoners by Israel.

Assad's role in the hijacking melodrama has demonstrated that Syria is undoubtedly the only power broker capable of imposing some order in Lebanon. Gemayel has little choice but to deal with Assad, who now holds all the cards. This is particularly true for the following reasons: First, the U.S. has been shut out of playing any meaningful role in the Lebanese crisis and Israel has become more concerned with its own security than with imposing a solution on the Lebanese problem. Second, Syria has bolstered its position in Lebanon by allying itself with Druze and Shi'ite factions and by only allowing pro-Syrian Palestinian groups to stay in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley.

It will certainly be difficult to work out a political solution for the long-drawn Lebanese conflict. Syrian officials have been working with Gemayel to save the government of national unity, whose survival is vital for a return to normality. They have been trying to establish and uphold a cease-fire, which still seems to be elusive. The immediate task is to end the artillery duels that have been flaring sporadically along the Green Line that separates Christian East Beirut from the Muslim West. This is essential if the warring parties will ever sit down together to work out a compromise that would allow a unified Lebanon.

## Conclusion

The decade-old civil strife made Lebanon an inviting arena for foreign intervention. Regional forces were the first to exploit the situation. Both Syria and Israel directly intervened by sending their armies into Lebanon. Such military intervention prolonged the internal conflict and led to a widening of foreign involvement in the war-torn country.<sup>41</sup>

The Israeli invasion in the summer of 1982 brought the U.S. and other Western powers into the Lebanese conflict. They first sent a multinational force to supervise the PLO evacuation and to end Israel's

seige of Beirut. West Beirut returned again to protect lives and maintain peace in the Lebanese capital following the massacres of Palestinians in two refugee camps in West Beirut. The multinational force then was trapped in Beirut because of the presence of Syrian and Israeli forces in Lebanon.

It would take another 17 months before such foreign involvement would be reduced. American officials first tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Syria's President Assad to withdraw from Lebanon. Later, following the suicide bomb attacks on the headquarters of the U.S. Marines and French paratroopers in Beirut, American troops became engaged in a limited combat role to support the Gemayel government, including the shelling of Syrian and Druze positions by the USS *New Jersey*. All of these efforts failed to sway Assad to pull out of Lebanon. Reagan was left with no choice but to get the Marines out of Beirut in order to prevent them from becoming a damaging issue in his reelection campaign.

The withdrawal of the U. S. Marines from Lebanon in February 1984 resulted in a decision by the British and the Italians to end their role in the multinational force. This left Israel with the prospect of being alone in a no-win situation in Lebanon. Israel's involvement in Lebanon had been costly, especially in the mounting casualties and in dividing the Israeli public. Israel's change in government in the summer of 1984 resulted in its decision to end its occupation of southern Lebanon. In doing so, it left Syria as the only foreign power still in Lebanon.

Syria's Assad is now in a strategic position to influence the outcome of the internal power struggle in Lebanon. He has not only backed the Gemayel government but also has formed alliance with Druze and Shi'ite factions. In addition, he has split the PLO, leaving only pro-Syrian Palestinian factions in eastern Lebanon. As one Lebanese observer recently said: "Nothing happens in Lebanon without Syria's approval."

There is no guarantee that Assad will succeed in finding a formula that will be acceptable to all of the feuding factions. But at the moment he is the only power broker able to pressure them to accept a compromise that will offer a fair distribution of power within the Lebanese government. This is a necessity because, after the years of strife and accumulated bitter

memories, there can be no return to the *status quo ante* that left the minority Maronite Christians with a monopoly of power for more than 40 years.

Time will only tell whether Lebanon will disintegrate or survive as an independent and unified nation or whether it will remain under the tutelage of Syria indefinitely. □

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