Stew in Their Own Juice: Reagan, Syria and Lebanon, 1981–1984*

As Israeli forces besieged Beirut in the summer of 1982, the United States inserted itself into the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) as a mediator and peacemaker. Projecting itself as an honest broker, the Reagan administration saw a peaceful Lebanon as a stepping-stone to further the Arab-Israeli peace process. Reagan’s overriding priority was to expel Soviet influence from the Middle East, and he saw Israel as a “strategic partner” in this venture. The 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty made Israel’s largest military rival dependent on U.S. support, freeing Israel to take on the PLO in Lebanon with little risk to its own security. The 1982 Lebanon war put Washington in an awkward position vis-à-vis the Arab world, and U.S. involvement essentially sought to shield Israel from international scrutiny—including Arab allies.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Middle East was in a period of upheaval. With Soviet influence in decline and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), a new era dawned. The Reagan administration, building on the preceding administration of President Jimmy Carter, would in response come to rely on direct military power in the region. Correspondingly, the Gulf States, increasingly reliant on American protection, opened themselves up to the newly established Central Command and a slew of new air and naval bases from the Persian Gulf to the Horn of Africa over the course of the decade. In this context, the U.S. intervention in Lebanon was an early test of the United States’ ability to both conduct peacekeeping and power projection in the Middle East.1 However, frustrating these efforts was Hafez al-Assad’s Syria, the sole ally of both the Soviet Union and Iran, which Reagan would later dub “the bad boy of the Middle East.”2

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Since the outbreak of civil war in 1975, U.S. policymakers saw the restoration of Lebanon’s sovereignty and the strengthening of its government institutions as the key to resolving the conflict. Following the orderly withdrawal of Israel and Syria from Lebanon, the administration sent 1,200 U.S. Marines to Beirut and supported Lebanon’s flailing Christian Maronite President Amin Gemayel. But after the October 23, 1983 bombing of the U.S. barracks in Beirut killed 241 U.S. Marines, calls for American withdrawal increased. U.S. intelligence pointed to Hezbollah, a Shia extremist group supported by Iran and Syria that operated out of Baalbek in Syrian-occupied Lebanon. A failed U.S. air raid on Syrian-occupied Lebanon in early December put Reagan in a bind. Left with the choice of escalating tensions with Soviet-allied Syria or withdrawing from an increasingly frustrating geopolitical conundrum, the Reagan administration chose the latter option, leaving Lebanon to Syria.

Though closely aligned with Israel, the Reagan administration initially believed Syria played a stabilizing role in the anarchy that was Lebanon. So why, by late 1983, was Reagan on the warpath trying to force Syria’s withdrawal? Why was Lebanese so-called territorial integrity so important for Washington, and what was the relationship between the Lebanese civil war and the wider Arab-Israeli peace process? How did U.S. policymakers perceive the Assad regime—as an independent regional actor or as a Soviet catspaw—and from this, what was the administration’s “Syria policy”? Using documents from the Ronald Reagan Library, and some Israeli material, we argue that the Reagan administration misread the geopolitical dynamics of Lebanon’s civil war as a Cold War proxy conflict between Soviet-allied Syria and U.S.-allied Israel. However, in Lebanon, the Cold War should be understood as a structural constraint that split the administration. Anti-communist hawks saw an Israeli humiliation of Syria in Lebanon as a victory in its own right. Moderate voices however, tempered this urge. They feared for the complicated mosaic of Arab allies and their security if Reagan gave Israel a blank check against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon. Reagan, inexperienced with the Middle East, failed to resolve this split between “regionalists” and “globalists” in his administration; instead, neither faction was dominant, nor was anyone in complete control. Reagan’s Syria policy fell victim to competing strategic and tactical concerns as officials worked at cross-purposes, both in the short and long term. Consequently, the administration never unified behind a coherent approach to the Lebanese civil war.

Reagan’s support of the Christian and pro-Israeli Bashir and Amin Gemayel moreover, hampered the United States’ image as a neutral peacekeeper, and Lebanon’s anti-Gemayel and anti-Israeli factions looked to Damascus. Reagan’s policy options toward Syria were therefore severely constrained. Forcing Assad

to accept settlements he had no part in shaping ensured Syria’s effort to “spoil” any compromises on Lebanon. The administration failed to work out diplomatic solutions that dealt with Syrian intransigence and proved incapable of countering Syria’s influence within Lebanon and unwilling to muster the military force needed to deter Syrian subversion. As east-west tensions peaked during “the 1983 war scare,” and the relationship between Washington and Damascus reached its nadir, the strategic cost—as well as the domestic political price—of driving Syria out of Lebanon greatly increased, leaving Reagan’s attempt at peacemaking in shambles.

U.S.-Syrian relations under Reagan remain understudied by journalists and scholars. This discrepancy, in an otherwise rich canon on U.S. Middle East policy, and the Reagan administration specifically, needs addressing. Given that much of the source material remains classified, a “definitive” history of the Reagan administration’s foreign policy remains unachievable. Israeli archives, in the process of declassification, remain largely unexplored, though some sources are utilized in this article. Syrian archives remain inaccessible.

A central factor in explaining the failure of the United States’ Lebanon policy was the dysfunction of the Reagan administration’s foreign policy team, which was mired by bureaucratic turf wars and palace intrigue, as well as the inherent tensions between ideological ends and politically feasible means. Instead, U.S. involvement increased incrementally, and without an exit strategy.4 One study concludes that Reagan’s intervention failed as 1) U.S. policy failed to account for Lebanon’ sectarian politics; 2) Washington misread initial success as a stepping-stone to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict; and 3) as negotiations stalled, the Lebanese conflict became a test of U.S. credibility.5 To understand these failures, Syria’s crucial role needs to be examined.

Scholars and journalists have chronicled the decline of U.S.-Syrian relations in the 1950s that lead Syria to align with the Soviet Union.6 However, on the

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latter half of the Cold War, there is a dearth of scholarly research using archival material. Reagan’s Middle East policy is by scholars—and the Reagan administration itself—subsumed under the administration’s Cold War policies, within which the Middle East was an arena of great power competition, and rarely on its own merits.

In interpreting Hafez al-Assad’s foreign policies, scholars group into two camps: “Assad the idealist” or “Assad the realist.” J.K. Gani emphasizes ideology—anti-imperialism and Arab nationalism—as central in explaining Damascus’ poor relations with the United States. Faced with military or diplomatic pressure, trauma such as in the 1973 October war as well as the disengagement talks with U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1974, Damascus doubled down. Its geopolitical aspirations become ideological goals. Realists emphasize Assad’s strategic and tactical acumen. “Rationality,” Raymond Hinnebusch writes, “was manifest in [Assad’s] realist scaling down of the highly revisionist goals deriving from Syria’s identity.” During 1974 disengagement talks, Kissinger found Assad a reliable interlocutor. When Syria intervened in Lebanon against the PLO in 1976—contrary to Syria’s long-professed support for the Palestinians—Kissinger saw a “Syrian defeat” as a “disaster” to U.S. interests in the Middle East. Assad biographer Patrick Seale argues that Assad’s “duel” with Kissinger over the 1974 Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement embittered the Syrian president. Assad recognized Syria’s military inferiority, but refused Kissinger and the Israelis a diplomatic victory, seeking to leverage Lebanese stability in Syria’s favor in a future conflict with Israel or in a future round of negotiations.


Reagan’s involvement in Lebanon began with the 1981 Lebanese missile crisis. In December 1980, the Lebanese Forces (LF) entered Zahleh, the regional capital of the Bekaa Valley. Commanded by Bashir Gemayel, the militia was the armed wing of the Phalange party, a Christian Maronite party founded and led by Bashir’s father, Pierre Gemayel. Though the Maronite militias had initially welcomed the Syrian intervention in the Lebanese civil war, the relationship

had soured. By 1978, fighting had broken out between Syrian forces and Maronite militias. In response to Bashir’s move, Syrian forces, supported by helicopters, besieged Zahleh. The situation in Zahleh escalated when the Israeli Air Force (IAF) shot down two Syrian helicopters on April 25.\(^\text{12}\) The Syrian forces protected their positions with surface-to-air missiles (SAM) to deter the Israelis from intervening further. Bashir was supported with Israeli arms, and had the ear of Israel’s leadership. Hardliners in Menachem Begin’s Likud government, such as Ariel Sharon, then-minister for agriculture and later defense minister, saw Lebanon’s war as Israel’s war.\(^\text{13}\) If Syrian troops moved into Zahleh, Secretary of State Alexander Haig believed “a vigorous Israeli intervention [was] inevitable.”\(^\text{14}\)

An airstrike on Zahleh was approved by the Knesset on April 30, but was postponed due to poor weather.\(^\text{15}\)

Seeing a window for U.S. mediation, Reagan appointed Philip Habib, former Undersecretary of State for political affairs in the Carter administration, special envoy to the Middle East. War could mean the derailment of the Arab-Israeli peace process, rupturing the still-not fully implemented Egypt-Israel peace treaty. Meeting with Habib on May 5, Reagan reminisced about a group of Lebanese students he had met on the campaign trail. The students charged that the U.S. response to Lebanon’s plight amounted to little more than meaningless statements—“don’t die, Lebanon, but don’t get well either.”\(^\text{16}\)

Unwittingly, Reagan indicted the United States’ Lebanon policy going back to the civil war’s beginnings in 1975, characterized by James Stocker as “a product of neglect.”\(^\text{17}\)

To Reagan, Lebanon seemed simple—“after all, they’re all Lebanese.”\(^\text{18}\) However, Lebanese national identity, straddling Christian and Muslim (and Sunni and Shia) faiths, as well as Arab and non-Arab ethnicities, is a deeply political matter. Ethno-sectarian tensions, between Lebanon’s influential Christian Maronite community, and the poorer, disempowered Muslim majority population, worsened with the Arab-Israeli conflict. The influx of Palestinian refugees in 1948 amplified sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians. Sectarian tensions worsened after the PLO’s failed bid for power in Jordan in 1970. By 1975, there were around 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon. The PLO destabi-
lized the balance of power between Lebanon’s confessional groups. Lebanon dissolved, controlled by over 80 militias connected to various parliamentary parties, competing for control over Lebanese state institutions.19

But sandwiched between Israel and Syria, civil war meant Lebanon fell prey to outside pressures. Unable to remake Lebanon on their own, Lebanon’s powerbrokers courted foreign patrons. The PLO joined forces with the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a leftist coalition headed by the Druze Kamal Jumblatt. This worried the Syrians. Assad feared a PLO-leftist victory made an Israeli intervention in Lebanon a fait accompli.20 Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State in the Gerald Ford administration, also worried. He had promised Egyptian president Anwar Sadat that Israel would not intervene in Lebanon, but Kissinger had no veto-power over Israel’s Lebanon policy. When the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) collapsed along sectarian lines in March 1976, Assad concluded that he had to intervene to forestall Israeli intervention—against his purported Palestinian allies. Kissinger played on Syrian fears of Israeli belligerence and presented Assad with what he anticipated to be Israel’s “red lines” for allowing a Syrian intervention: no aircraft or helicopters, no SAMs, and Syria would have to remain north of the “Beirut-Damascus axis.” Assad accepted Kissinger’s caveats. Syria intervened and the war entered a stalemate. In this way, Syria and Israel had entered a short-term “marriage of convenience” against the PLO—with Kissinger as matchmaker. Assad was able to legitimize his intervention as an Arab League peacekeeping force—the Arab Deterrent Force (ADF). The bulk of the ADF was 30,000 Syrian troops.21 The “red-line agreement” survived the 1978 Israeli invasion of south Lebanon, and it provided both Israel and Syria with some predictability in a crisis—just as the one Bashir precipitated in Zahleh. Assad wanted the “red-line agreement” restored; the Israelis demanded the missiles’ removal.

With an election in June 1981, however, Begin leaned on U.S. mediation.22 Assad on the other hand “would rather let the Israelis take out the missiles by force,” Habib told Reagan, as Assad preferred military defeat to political humiliation.23 Syrian foreign minister Abdul Halim Khaddam responded to Habib’s overtures with “qualified interest.”24 After two months on the brink, Habib, with the help of a Saudi backchannel established by national security advisor

20. Seale, Asad of Syria, 276.
23. Memorandum of conversation, Reagan, Habib, May 5, 1981, Memorandums of Conversation—President Reagan (8), Box 48, ESS, RRPL.
Richard Allen, was able to pave over and bake the Syrian-Israeli standoff into an Israeli-PLO ceasefire “by implicit linkage” on July 24: the missiles could remain, but were not to be fired.25

Lebanon divided the administration into “regionalists” and “globalists.” Reagan was an ardent anti-communist. To Reagan, Soviet communism was a source of “evil” in world affairs and Israel a bulwark against communism in the region. Correspondingly, Reagan had little sympathy for the Palestinians.26 If Syria could be pressured into leaving Lebanon by Israel, it was a U.S. propaganda victory by proxy, but policymakers disagreed on the crisis’ origins, central actors, those actors’ projected aims, as well as what U.S. objectives should be. Was Washington to understand a Syrian-Israeli war as a conflict with autochthonous origins or as part of a global superpower rivalry?

Assad’s Syria was a Soviet ally. Syria was also on the State Department’s list of “state-sponsors of terrorism.”27 “Globalists,” who privileged Cold War concerns, dominated executive positions and included Secretary Haig, various undersecretaries, the National Security Council (NSC), and an aloof Reagan. Reagan, who preferred to outline the overall policy direction, left the specifics to those charged with their implementation. However, anti-communism alone did not neatly transform into policy.28 “Regionalists,” like Habib, favored diplomacy aimed at preserving the careful mosaic of U.S. commitments in the region, including the peace process. They were career diplomats who lacked the formal positions of power that would permit them to influence the overall direction of U.S. policy.29 Thus the “regionalist” position was, in practice, one of moderating a skewed focus on solving Lebanon in favor of Israel emanating from its “globalist” superiors. This dynamic in Reagan’s foreign policy-making team remained throughout its involvement in Lebanon. The interagency Special Situations Group (SSG) on Lebanon rarely met due to the feuding of Haig and Vice President George H. W. Bush. By June 1982, meetings between Haig and national security advisor William P. Clark devolved into “shouting matches.”30

That Israel intended to invade Lebanon in 1982 to root out the PLO was an open secret. Habib was re-appointed special envoy in December 1981 to ease tensions. Meeting with Ariel Sharon, Israel’s Defense Minister, Habib was shown plans for an Israeli invasion of Lebanon—Operation Big Pines. The

28. Spiegel, The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict, 397.
29. Raymond Tanter, Who’s at the Helm?: Lessons of Lebanon (Boulder, CO, 1990), 20–21; Cannon, President Reagan, 250.
30. Mulcahy, “President and Secretary of State,” 292.
operation, Sharon told Habib, aimed to secure Israel’s northern border by destroying the PLO’s forces in Lebanon as well as engaging Syrian troops. A humiliated Assad would see no other option but to withdraw his troops from Lebanon. This “clean up,” as Sharon described it, would pave the way for the remaking of Lebanon as a “rump state” dominated by pro-Israeli Maronites. The Israelis hoped for an American endorsement, but Habib demurred. He worried Sharon’s plans would jeopardize Washington’s relations with the Arab world. Reagan agreed: Sharon was a “loose cannon.”

This description may well describe Alexander Haig. Haig’s main contribution to U.S. Middle East policy was the “strategic consensus”—the apotheosis of the U.S. Cold War strategy in the region. The strategic consensus was no break with previous U.S. Middle East policy but an explicit endorsement of its inherent contradiction—that is, explicitly pro-Israel, while at the same time balancing its strategic relationships with key Arab states that publicly supported the Palestinians. This policy meant upgrading the U.S.-Israeli “special relationship” to a “strategic partnership” against “threats” “caused by the Soviet Union” as defined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed on November 30. The partnership, however, got off to a rocky start when Israel effectively annexed the Golan Heights, rendering the peace process formula of “land for peace” moot with respect to Syria. In response, Washington suspended the MoU, but quietly restarted arms transfers in the spring of 1982.

With the Egypt-Israel peace treaty finalized on April 26, 1982, Sharon pressed for American approval for his “clean up” of Lebanon. Haig reasoned, in a round-about way, that once the PLO was defeated, “Israel’s arguments against granting … autonomy to the [Palestinians] would be negated.” Haig’s reasoning was prevalent. In May 1981, as Israeli air strikes hit PLO positions in southern Lebanon during the so-called “katyusha war,” NSC staffer Douglas Feith noted that “[w]hat is bad for [Yasser] Arafat cannot be bad for the U.S.” To Sharon, Haig emphasized the need for a “recognizable [PLO] provocation … to be understood internationally.” But Haig went further: “we want Syria out of Lebanon more than you. It is a Soviet proxy.” Sharon also undersold the scale of his operation—rechristened “Operation Peace for Galilee”—as a limited campaign. “[L]ike a lobotomy” replied Haig. Neither accurately described the 1982 Lebanon war.

On June 6, 1982, 60,000 Israeli troops invaded Lebanon. The Begin government pointed to the attempted assassination of Shlomo Argov, Israel’s ambassador to London, on June 3 as a violation of the 1981 ceasefire. That it was the

31. Memorandum of conversation, Reagan, Habib, Dec. 11, 1981, Memorandums of Conversation—President Reagan (January 1982), Box 49, ESS, RRPL
34. Memorandum, Feith to Allen, May 20, 1981, Lebanon May-April (2 of 2), RAC Box 4, GKF, RRPL.
Abu Nidal group—rivals of the PLO—that attacked Argov was dismissed. As the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) advanced northwards, they encountered Syrian forces which, to Israel’s frustrations, kept north of the “red-line.” Lacking a pretext to attack Syria’s troops, Israel used Habib’s shuttle diplomacy to its advantage. In two instances, Israel manipulated U.S. mediation, undermining Habib’s credibility with Assad. On June 9, the IAF destroyed Syria’s SAMs in the Bekaa Valley while Habib and Assad were meeting in addition to shooting down eighty-seven Syrian fighters. The Soviets, fearing the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) would suffer a complete collapse, urged Assad to pursue a ceasefire agreement. The Soviet premier, Leonid Brezhnev, sent a similar message to the White House, but also sent five Soviet Navy ships to the Mediterranean as a symbolic show of force. On June 11, Habib managed to secure a new ceasefire, but the Israelis simply flanked Syrian positions. Habib was furious, but Assad nonetheless believed the Americans and Israelis conspired against Syria and blamed Habib personally.

The siege of Beirut put Reagan in a difficult position: an Arab capital was under siege, jeopardizing the Reagan administration’s ambition to continue an Arab-Israeli peace process. The United States had not vetoed UN Security Council resolution 509: Israel was to withdraw “unconditionally” from Lebanon. Intra-administration tensions came to a head as ever-isolated Haig further muddled U.S policy until his firing on June 25. Morris Draper, Habib’s deputy, recalled: “Washington didn’t know what to do half the time, so they accepted Phil’s views as he saw them on the ground.” Israel’s military-strategic supremacy was difficult to translate into a political victory. The Reagan administration—in an effort to preserve the peace process—was suddenly the PLO’s greatest hope of respite. Reagan now turned to getting the PLO out of Beirut (and Lebanon)—removing Israel’s casus belli entirely.

Though Arab states publicly expressed their solidarity with the PLO, no Arab state volunteered to host the besieged Palestinians. By mid-July, Reagan and George Shultz, Haig’s replacement as Secretary of State, turned to the Syrians directly, inviting a delegation to the White House for discussions. Assad replied that he would only accept Arafat and the PLO leadership, no fighters, but accepted the invitation. Accompanied by Saudi Arabian foreign minister Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Syrian foreign minister

37. Ibid, 409.  
41. Boykin, Cursed Is the Peacemaker, 91.  
42. Cable 24714, Washington to Damascus, July 12, 1982, Syria President Assad Cables; Memorandum, Stoessel to Reagan, July 12, 1982, Syria: President Assad (8165088–8204794), both in Box 33, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Heads of State (hereafter ESHS), RRPL.
Khaddam arrived in Washington. In the Oval Office, Khaddam refused the American request to receive PLO guerillas. Khaddam believed Israel would use the PLO’s presence as a pretext for an Israeli invasion of Syria proper, equating Israel’s policies in Lebanon with those of Nazi Germany. In his diary, Reagan noted that Khaddam “was an obvious hater of Israel.” To Khaddam’s objections, Shultz reiterated U.S. policy: “free of all foreign forces” meant that Syrian, PLO, and Israeli forces were all to leave Lebanon.

Meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir on August 2, Reagan admonished Israel’s siege tactics. Reagan even considered sanctioning Israel, but rejected the measure as he feared it would jeopardize his relationship with Israel. To assure Israeli security concerns, peacekeepers would oversee the evacuation of the PLO to Tunisia. The evacuation was organized in two phases. Phase I was the insertion of the Multinational Force (MNF) into Lebanon to facilitate and verify the evacuation of the PLO. Phase II would be the evacuation of the remaining “foreign forces”—Israel and Syria. Enlisting the help of 800 French and 400 Italians, the bulk of the MNF was 1,200 U.S. Marines. By September 3, most of the PLO had left Beirut for Tunisia. A contingent of 3,600 Syrian soldiers also left Beirut for the Bekaa Valley. With its mission completed, the MNF left Beirut.

**THE DAMASCENE SPOILER**

Whereas Phase I was a complete success, Phase II stalled immediately. Syria insisted on a legitimate right to be in Lebanon, referring to the ADF mandate. For Damascus’ continued cooperation, Assad sought major concessions. After the Khaddam–Reagan meeting, Assad proclaimed that “until [the U.S.] spells out its overall position on the Middle East,” including the Arab-Israeli peace process, Syrian troops would remain. Begin, in turn, would not withdraw without a “security zone” extending forty-five kilometers northward from the Israeli–Lebanese border under the control of the self-styled South Lebanese

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43. Letter, Assad to Reagan, July 14, 1982, Syria Assad Cables 8105988–8204794, Box 33, ESHS, RRPL.
44. Memorandum of conversation, Reagan, Shultz, Khaddam, Saud, July 20, 1982, Memorandums of Conversation-President Reagan (08/04/1982-08/06/1982), Box 50, ESS, RRPL.
45. Reagan, Reagan Diaries, 93.
46. Memorandum of conversation, Reagan, Shultz, Khaddam, Saud, July 20, 1982, Memorandums of Conversation-President Reagan (08/04/1982-08/06/1982), Box 50, ESS, RRPL.
47. Memorandum of conversation, Reagan, Shamir Aug. 2, 1982, Memorandums of Conversation-President Reagan (08/09/1982), Box 50, ESS, RRPL.
Army (SLA) of Major Saad Haddad. Syria and Israel’s interests in Lebanon were, as U.S. negotiators had to reckon with, incompatible.

To circumvent Assad, the Reagan administration placed all its chips on Bashir Gemayel and promoted him as their preferred candidate for the upcoming Lebanese presidential election. Bashir, according to investigative journalist Bob Woodward, had been a valued asset of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) since 1976 and Reagan had approved $10 million in covert assistance to the Lebanese Forces in March 1982.\(^{51}\) As Habib saw it, a Syrian withdrawal agreement was “technically simple but politically difficult to arrange.” But as president, under Washington’s tutelage, Bashir could petition the Arab League to revoke its support for the Syrian-led ADF. This, Habib believed, “plus the linkage of Israeli simultaneous withdrawal, should provide the impetus for ending the Syrian military presence.”\(^{52}\)

However, Washington misread initial success in Beirut as a stepping-stone to solve the broader issue underlying the 1982 Lebanon war—the Arab-Israeli conflict. In July an administration 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.”\(^{53}\) But the Reagan Plan, launched on September 1, 1982, was a failure. The plan, building on the Camp David Accords, was an awkward compromise. It called for a joint Jordanian-Palestinian negotiating position, as well as the return of occupied land, but also rejected the idea of a Palestinian state. Consequently, it alienated both Palestinians and Israelis, and made no mention of the Golan Heights. Assad’s attempted leveraging of Lebanon as part of a “comprehensive settlement” was thwarted. Syria denounced the initiative.\(^{54}\) The plan’s poor reception made it Reagan’s sole peace initiative in the region.

Elected president of Lebanon on September 1, Bashir never assumed office. On September 14, a member of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party with “close Syrian involvement” assassinated President-elect Gemayel.\(^{55}\) Habib’s plan to use Bashir as a cudgel against Syria, as well as Sharon’s vision of a Christian, pro-Israeli Lebanon, fell apart. Retaliating, the IDF moved into West Beirut on September 17 and cordoned off the Palestinian Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Inside, LF militias went on a revenge-fueled killing

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52. Cable 5815, Beirut to State, Aug. 25, 1982, Israel/Lebanon Phase II (1), RAC Box 4, GKF, RRPL.
54. Cable 06423, Damascus to Washington, September 3, 1982, Middle East—Reactions to the President’s Peace Initiative (1 of 4), RAC Box 4, GKF, RRPL.
55. Anziska, Preventing Palestine, 216.
spree. Over three days, 700–2,500 people were killed.\textsuperscript{56} Reagan, repulsed, hastily ordered the MNF back to Beirut on September 26 to restore order.\textsuperscript{57}

The MNF’s return to Beirut raised specters of a prolonged Vietnam-style conflict in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{58} The administration expected criticism—after all, the Marines had left less than three weeks before. “What if there are snags and the foreign forces don’t withdraw,” the NSC-drafted press guidance asked, then answered: “[The President] expects them to withdraw promptly. Period.”\textsuperscript{59} Internally, the administration was divided: George Shultz was in favor of the MNF’s return, but defense secretary Casper Weinberger vociferously opposed it. Former colleagues in the Bechtel Corporation, the two emerged as bitter rivals often derailing policy discussions on Lebanon.\textsuperscript{60} The Shultz-Weinberger feud compounded the still-unresolved “globalist-regionalist” divide within the administration. Shultz “hoped” both Israel and Syria had withdrawn completely by December 1982.\textsuperscript{61}

Amin Gemayel, Bashir’s older brother, received parliamentary assent on September 21 to become President of Lebanon. In Reagan’s estimation, Amin would set Lebanon “on a firm path to national reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{62} However, Amin Gemayel lacked his brother’s charisma and clout with the Maronite militias. Instead, he believed the MNF could balance Israel and Syria. In a speech to the UN on October 30, he called for the MNF’s expansion to 30,000 troops.\textsuperscript{63} But Amin’s hope that the MNF could serve as an international force to serve his needs were dashed. Instead, the MNF’s presence in Beirut would expose Reagan to Assad’s attempts to bleed out the American public’s appetite for remaining in Lebanon.

In October, Habib returned to Damascus with a plan for a “two-stage simultaneous withdrawal” of Syrian and Israeli forces. The first stage would involve the withdrawal of all Syrian forces to the Bekaa Valley; the second would involve the withdrawal of all Israeli forces to the “security zone” forty kilometers north of the Israeli–Lebanese border.\textsuperscript{64} National Security Decision Directive

\textsuperscript{56} Shlaim, Iron Wall, 415–417.
\textsuperscript{57} Cannon, President Reagan, 356.
\textsuperscript{59} Memorandum, Clark to Bush, Shultz, Weinberger, Kirkpatrick, and Vessey Jr., September 30, 1982, Israel/Lebanon Phase II (2), RAC Box 4, GKF, RRPL.
\textsuperscript{60} Andrew Preston, “A Foreign Policy Divided against Itself: George Schultz Versus Caspar Weinberger,” in A Companion to Ronald Reagan, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Chichester, 2015), 554–555; Cannon, President Reagan, 350.
\textsuperscript{61} Memorandum, Shultz to Reagan, no date, Israel/Lebanon Phase II (2), RAC Box 4, GKF, RRPL.
\textsuperscript{62} Letter, Reagan to Gemayel, September 22, 1982, Israel/Lebanon Phase II (2), RAC Box 4, GKF, RRPL.
\textsuperscript{63} Robert Fisk, Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon (New York, 2002), 446.
\textsuperscript{64} Cables 7135, 7153, and 7155, Damascus to Washington, Oct. 3, 1982, Israel/Lebanon Phase II (2), RAC Box 4, GKF, RRPL.
(NSDD) 64 outlined Washington’s objectives in Lebanon as “the quickest orderly withdrawal of Israeli, Syrian, and Palestinian armed forces from Lebanon” and a U.S. effort to restore Lebanese sovereignty, including an expansion of the multinational force.65 Assad, meanwhile, rallied support for his position on Lebanon from the Arab League. Meeting in Fez in September, the League adopted a resolution whereby Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon had to be seen “in light of Israeli withdrawal.”66 Leaning on the Fez resolution, Assad rejected all of Habib’s suggestions.

Habib’s ever-more complicated withdrawal schemes were rebuffed again in November. Assad’s military had been weakened by the IDF’s decimation of his air force, but he had secured renewed Soviet support: a massive arms deal including 1,200 tanks, 210 fighter jets, and around 2,500 Soviet instructors to man the SA-5 SAMs. These estimates were in line with CIA estimates dating back to the 1981 “missile crisis” and the agency’s view of the Syrian-Soviet “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation” that assumed Moscow would dispatch airborne troops to Syria to ensure the regime’s survival.67 Rifat al-Assad, Hafez’s brother, told U.S. officials that he “believe[d] they have been promised assistance in case Syrian territory is attacked.”68 The Soviet ambassador to Beirut would however deny that such assurances were given. It is likely therefore that the Syrians were bluffing.69 Regardless, the Soviet-manned SAMs certainly changed the dynamic of the U.S.-Syrian-Israeli dialogue about Lebanon; under Soviet protection, Syria’s position in the Bekaa Valley was secure.

Syria’s other major ally, Iran, also coveted influence in Lebanon. In October 1982, around 2,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guards arrived in the Bekaa Valley to spread the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary zeal. Syria and Iran also supported nascent Shia extremist organizations such as Hezbollah and Islamic Amal, an offshoot of the Shia Amal movement.70

By December, U.S. shuttle diplomacy was dead in its tracks. Negotiations on Lebanon were at an impasse and the Reagan Plan was flailing (in April 1983, King Hussein announced that Jordan-PLO negotiations had failed). Frustrated by Syrian obstructionism and Israeli obduracy, Shultz concluded that to

69. Golan, Soviet Policies in the Middle East, 155.
maintain momentum in the negotiations required him to focus on the Israeli-Lebanese angle first, then Lebanon-Syria. The suspended 1981 MoU with Israel was revived, weakening Washington’s claim to being an honest broker. Moshe Arens, Israel’s defense minister from February 1983, attributed this “softening” in U.S. policy toward Israel to the declining influence of “State Department Arabists” including Habib, Draper, and Assistant Secretary of State Nicholas Veliotes.71

Under Shultz’s new approach, Syria would be “informed” of Israeli-Lebanese negotiations but allowed no input. However, what Habib, Reagan, and Shultz did not anticipate (or failed to take into account) was that with two successive negotiations—Israel-Lebanon and then Lebanon-Syria—the former settlement would set the parameters for the latter. Intended as punishment, Syria’s exclusion had the opposite effect; with no stakes in a positive diplomatic outcome, Assad had everything to gain by spoiling an Israeli-Lebanese agreement’s implementation. “No matter how we approached them” wrote Shultz, “Syria played the spoiler.” 72 By excluding Assad, Shultz’s observation became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Paganelli, Shultz’s approach was flawed. In a “cautionary note,” Paganelli warned that Assad “no doubt ha[s] a good deal of confidential information as to what is taking place in the Israeli/Lebanese talks and do[es] not . . . rely on us for briefings.” Crucially, Paganelli believed if “Israelis trumpet[ed] their success” it “force[d] Assad to dig in his heels.”73 Gemayel, in turn, had to balance Maronite pressure in favor of Israel, and the majority Muslim population’s pro-Syrian inclination. Moreover, Gemayel’s negotiators questioned Israel’s continued involvement in Lebanon after the Kahan commission saddled Sharon with “personal responsibility” for the Sabra and Shatilla massacres.74 Gemayel lobbied “Assad to speak out more forcefully” against Israel, Paganelli reported, seeking to balance Israel against Syria.75 Critical of how little credence Shultz and Habib’s team gave Syrian interests, Paganelli concluded: “There are of course other alternatives. Leaving the Syrians in isolation to stew in their own juice is one. Unfortunately, their juice spills 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

72. George P. Shultz, Triumph and Turmoil: My Years as Secretary of State (New York, 1993), 197.
73. Cable 01387, Damascus to Washington, Feb. 22, 1983 S01/1182-0483, Box 48, ESC, RRPL.
75. “Talks in Beirut Regarding the Negotiations” Feb. 10, 1983, Israel-Lebanon Negotiations, 8406/6, ISA; Cable 0912, Damascus to Washington, Feb. 4, 1983, S01/1182-0483, Box 48, ESC, RRPL.
national policy [and] the Syrians could fatally impede our efforts for a Lebanese settlement.”

Instead, Israel made several demarches to Syria regarding SAMs in the Bekaa Valley. If the Israelis resorted to risky unilateral action—possibly hitting Soviet troops—the situation could spiral out of control. Resentful of being perceived as an “outpost of the Soviet empire,” Syrian officials refused to admit that Soviet advisors operated the SAMs until March 1983. Martha Mautner, a State Department official, implored that an Israeli strike only served Moscow’s propaganda and “Syria’s efforts to torpedo any settlement.” Given U.S.-Soviet tensions and the prospects of an Israeli pre-emptive attack, Reagan wrote in his diary on March 5, 1983 that “Armageddon in the prophesies begins with the gates of Damascus being assailed.”

Assad pressed his advantage in the spring and summer of 1983. On April 18, Hezbollah set off a car bomb at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing sixty-three, including Robert Ames, head of the CIA’s Office of Near East and South Asia Analysis. Shultz, however, remained undeterred in his pursuit of an Israeli-Lebanese agreement. That Assad’s allies in Lebanon, including former president Suleiman Frangieh and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, alongside dissident PLO fighters, formed the National Salvation Front (NSF), a coalition of Lebanon’s anti-Gemayel factions to challenge American and Israeli resolve in Lebanon went unnoticed.

The eponymous agreement between Israel and Lebanon was signed on May 17, 1983. It formalized Haddad’s “security zone” enclave in southern Lebanon. But predicated on Syria’s withdrawal—without being a party to it—Assad had “veto” power over the agreement’s implementation. Habib, moreover, was declared persona non grata in Syria. Shultz went to Damascus in early July to break the stalemate to no avail. Making matters worse for Gemayel, Israel announced its withdrawal to the “security zone” on July 4. Israel’s unilateral withdrawal created a power vacuum around Mount Lebanon that Gemayel’s Lebanese Armed Forces, with American military aid and encouragement, raced to fill. Jumblatt’s militia, acting as Assad’s proxy, also vied for control of the mountain. These clashes in the Chouf and Aley districts in the Mount Lebanon governorate, marked the beginning of the so-called Mountain War.

76. Cable 01684, Damascus to Washington, March 4, 1983, Syria 01/1182-0483, Box 48, ESC, RRPL.
77. Cable 02281, Damascus to Washington, March 25, 1983, Syria 01/1182-0483, Box 48, ESC, RRPL.
78. “A Conversation with Martha Mautner, Deputy Director of the Soviet Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, State Department,” Jan. 11, 1983, file PM [Menachem Begin] – USA, 4343/3, ISA.
79. Reagan, Reagan Diaries, 150.
80. Seale, Asad of Syria, 410–11.
82. Cannon, President Reagan, 365.
With Shultz’s Syria policy discredited, the “globalist” NSC took charge of Lebanon policy at the expense of the State Department’s “regionalists.” The National Security Council headed by William “the judge” Clark and his deputy Robert McFarlane oversaw the administration’s worldwide “roll-back” of Soviet influence. On August 8, Clark figured on the cover of Time advocating “The Big Stick Approach,” signaling a shift in American policy. A veteran of Kissinger’s NSC, McFarlane harbored ambitions of some “big play.” Without alerting Shultz or Habib, he went to Damascus in mid-July 1983 to reboot U.S-Syrian dialogue. The meeting was most likely organized through a back-channel by Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan al Saud. Assad accepted McFarlane’s offer, and, likely as a good will gesture, arranged the release of David S. Dodge, acting president of the American University of Beirut, who had been held hostage by Hezbollah. McFarlane was in Damascus sometime around July 11–14. Dodge was released after Syrian intervention on July 21. A day later, McFarlane was named Habib’s replacement as special envoy, but, concurrently, remained Clark’s deputy.

As special envoy, McFarlane initially sought a diplomatic compromise with Syria that would keep Gemayel in power, but he quickly concluded that Assad would not leave on his own accord. He intended to play on Assad’s ambitions to regional leadership, and he was “prepared to discuss how to satisfy” Syria’s interest in Lebanon. However, McFarlane’s overtures were ignored. In Damascus he met Syria’s “standard hard line”: Gemayel was illegitimate, Syrian withdrawal was contingent on “total Israeli withdrawal,” and the May 17 agreement was to be abrogated; he also faced charges of “pro-Israeli bias.” Syria’s recalcitrance, the Saudi backchannel informed McFarlane, stemmed from Assad’s fatalistic assumption that another war with Israel was “inevitable” as long as Begin remained Prime Minister and Reagan President. Assad, concluded McFarlane, “felt no pressure to make any concessions, and that [he] had no leverage to coerce them. [If] Israeli withdrawal was inevitable, there was no need for him to give up anything to achieve it.”

Meeting with Richard Fairbanks, U.S. ambassador-at-large to the Middle East, on August 31, Khaddam warned that “partial solutions” such as the 1974

87. Memorandum, McFarlane to Reagan, July 27, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (7/20/1983-8/1/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
88. Cable 06036, Damascus to Washington, 8 Aug. 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (8/8/1983-9/8/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL; Talking Points for Meeting with Assad, Aug. 6, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (8/5/1983-8/7/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
89. Cable 05227, Jidda to Washington, Aug. 4, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (8/1/1983-8/4/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
90. McFarlane, Special Trust, 247.
Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement would not work in Lebanon. “[Kissinger] did not succeed,” Khaddam told Fairbanks, “and neither will you.”91 Syria’s end-game remained the same: a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

“Assad,” McFarlane would later write, “respects power, and unless you are willing to use it against him, he will not yield.”92 McFarlane therefore sought to embolden the LAF to fill the vacuum created by the IDF’s withdrawal from Mount Lebanon. On September 1, 1983, Gemayel officially rescinded the ADF’s mandate, the crux of Syrian legitimacy in Lebanon. He agreed to this under pressure from the American envoys and signed the order for the LAF to move into the Chouf.93 That same day, the Soviet Union shot down KAL 007, a civilian Korean airliner on September 1, and, in his capacity as deputy national security advisor, special envoy McFarlane was summoned to Washington.

As U.S.-Soviet tensions soared, the National Security Planning Group (NSPG), the top national security officials in the administration, including Reagan, Bush, and CIA director William Casey, met on September 3. The subject turned to Soviet-allied Syria. McFarlane argued in favor of gunboat diplomacy: “[A] platform of heavy guns [would] be very visibly imposing” to Syria. There was also the “new wildcard” in Lebanon, the Iranian-supported Hezbollah.94 The NSPG was initially reluctant, but relented, as, arguably, McFarlane manipulated intelligence to justify “his bureaucratic ambitions.”95 To Shultz, McFarlane’s “NSC staff had become the most militaristic group in Washington, but it was pulling against a reluctant Pentagon,” including Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Vessey, who remained opposed. Reagan, however, was sympathetic.96

When McFarlane returned to Beirut, the political situation was collapsing. Pressed on two fronts—between Prime Minister Rashid Karami and the Muslim opposition in Parliament and Maronite hardliners—Gemayel was threatening to resign while making “requests for heightened U.S. assistance, red lines and direct involvement.” The LAF had just entered the village of Suq el-Gharb in the Aley district. McFarlane suggested “affirmative action by the LAF” as the “best antidote to the siege mentality.” He implored Gemayel to remain in office, warning that a Maronite hardliner in power would mean the immediate partition of Lebanon.97 McFarlane, meanwhile, would meet with the Syrians hoping they would restrain Druze militias in the Chouf.

92. McFarlane, Special Trust, 237.
94. McFarlane, Special Trust, 249.
95. Tanter, Who’s at the Helm?, 218.
96. Shultz, Triumph and Turmoil, 226; David C. Wills, The First War on Terror: Counter-Terrorism Policy during the Reagan Administration (Lanham, MD, 2003), 59-60.
97. Cables 09824 and 09830, Beirut to Washington, September 6, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/6/1983) (2 of 2), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
Inbound to Damascus, McFarlane requested Prince Bandar, who was meeting with Khaddam, stay behind so McFarlane could debrief him. Unwilling to compromise the secret backchannel, however, Bandar left and confusion followed. Reportedly, Assad had met with the Saudi foreign minister and a Saudi-Lebanese businessman and later prime minister of Lebanon, Rafik Hariri, on September 6th. Hariri was leading concurrent intra-Lebanese negotiations in Geneva and was rallying support for a Saudi-negotiated ceasefire plan—the Fahd Plan: a nationwide ceasefire that included introducing the LAF into the Aley and Chouf districts—as well as a “comprehensive meeting” between the leaders of the NSF, President Gemayel, and the Lebanese Front. Reading Khaddam’s account of a “number of Syrian-Saudi thoughts” on Lebanon as “too optimistic,” Paganelli grew suspicious that Assad was stalling as his allies advanced on Suq el-Gharb.

Paganelli’s suspicions proved correct. By telephone from Jidda, Bandar described the Syrians’ demeanor as “negative and cocky.” Regarding U.S. ships off the Lebanese coast, Khaddam had taunted “either we’ll sink it or call in the Russians.” An angered King Fahd threatened to end Saudi mediation. McFarlane’s prospects were further dimmed when Reagan’s press secretary, Larry Speakes, told an assembled press corps in Washington that “the Syrians should know that we have considerable firepower offshore.” “Ultimatums,” the Syrians charged, were unacceptable. Nevertheless, in conversation with McFarlane, Assad pledged that Syria would withdraw from Lebanon voluntarily. McFarlane, in turn, assuaged Syrian fears that the United States had designs in Lebanon: “if we had any, we would have stayed in Lebanon in 1958.” As McFarlane left Damascus, Druze and Palestinian guerrillas surrounded the LAF brigade in Suq el-Gharb.

Back in Beirut, McFarlane had a rude awakening. Artillery bombarded the U.S. ambassador’s residence. The “sky was falling” as “there [was] 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 . . . tonight we could be in enemy lines,” McFarlane reported. His lobbying of the NSPG paid off: In signing NSDD, Reagan authorized the Marines to conduct “aggressive

98. Cable 02786, Jidda to Washington, September 5, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/6/1983) (1 of 2), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
99. Cable 06989, Damascus to Beirut, September 7, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
100. Cable 07384, Jidda to Washington, September 7, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
101. Ibid.
103. Cable 07021, Damascus to Washington, September 7, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
104. Cable 07008, Damascus to Washington, September 7, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/7/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
105. Wills, First War on Terror, 60; McFarlane, Special Trust, 250–51.
self-defense against hostile or provocative acts from any quarter.” The USS New Jersey was deployed to Lebanese waters. Suq el-Gharb was deemed “vital to the safety of U.S. personnel,” authorizing “U.S. direct assistance to the LAF.”

Notably, with the support of Shultz and McFarlane against Weinberger and Vessey’s continued opposition, NSDD made the decision to defend Suq el-Gharb with American firepower a military consideration—not a political decision.

Returning once again to Damascus, McFarlane accused Syria of organizing the attack on Suq el-Gharb—a violation of his earlier pledge. Khaddam and McFarlane were still able to find common ground—apparently along the lines of the aforementioned Fahd Plan, though McFarlane signed nothing. 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.” However, four days later, September 19, Baabda Palace and the U.S. embassy residence was hit by Druze artillery: “Where is Khaddam’s promise [of restraint]?” wondered Fairbanks.

In his last meeting with Assad, McFarlane made his “final gambit”: “by the way, the President has ordered the battleship New Jersey to Mediterranean waters. I expect it to arrive tomorrow.” It was an overt threat of U.S. military force. On September 19, the U.S. Navy conducted a five-hour barrage of the Druze and Palestinian forces surrounding Suq el-Gharb. Nevertheless, McFarlane had overplayed his hand. Shultz instructed McFarlane to emphasize to Assad that the New Jersey’s shelling was “being used to defend . . . it is not being used for offensive purposes.” Assad was to conclude that Suq el-Gharb was a bridge too far; the United States would not let him destroy the LAF. “Affirmative action”—the LAF’s stand in Suq el-Gharb—had worked. Gemayel remained President of Lebanon, but McFarlane surrendered any remaining pretense of the United States’ neutrality in Lebanon. Assad, in McFarlane’s analysis, respected only raw power, but as an anonymous NSC aide phrased it, the “peace negotiator” had become “an artillery spotter.”

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107. Crist, Twilight War, 119–120.
108. Cable 07316, Damascus to Beirut, September 14, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/14/1983-9/19/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
109. Cable 264719, Washington to Jidda, September 15, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/14/1983-9/19/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
110. Cable 266362, Washington to Damascus, September 19, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/14/1983-9/19/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
111. McFarlane, Special Trust, 253.
113. Cable 266428, Washington to Damascus, September 19, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/14/1983-9/19/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
SYRIA BECOMES AN ADVERSARY

Direct military support for the LAF meant that the nature of U.S. involvement in Lebanon had changed, though exactly how remained ambiguous. In 1983, after all, tensions between the superpowers were at their highest, arguably, of the entire Cold War.\textsuperscript{115} In Washington, Lebanon was a Cold War proxy conflict, and Soviet-allied Syria was subverting a pro-Israeli-American Gemayel. Charles Hill, Executive Secretary at the State Department, noted in mid-September that U.S. “credibility” in the Middle East “has increasingly come to rest upon the fate of [Lebanon]” where the U.S. objective was “preventing Soviet-backed Syria victory at U.S. expense.” Hesitant to turn a U.S.-Soviet proxy conflict in the Middle East into a NATO–Warsaw Pact confrontation in Europe, Hill concluded that diplomacy was the best option. U.S. involvement in Lebanon was, potentially, “indefinite.”\textsuperscript{116}

On the morning of October 23, 1983, a six-ton truck bomb detonated at the U.S. marine barracks at Beirut International Airport. The blast killed 241 soldiers and support staff, the single-largest loss of life to the U.S. Marines since the Second World War.\textsuperscript{117} Less than an hour later, a similar attack happened at the French barracks, killing fifty-eight. Within fifteen minutes of the attacks, “twelve persons rapidly left the Iranian embassy” in Beirut; ten were identified as Syrian military.\textsuperscript{118} Intercepted communications between the Iranian embassy in Damascus and the Sheikh Fadlallah barracks in the Bekaa Valley pointed to Iran and the explosives came from (or at least through) Syria. The Defense Intelligence Agency concluded that “these attacks are probably the work of the pro-Iranian Lebanese Shia Hizb Allah (Party of God), led by Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah,” and France “was [a] logical target of Iranian sympathizer’s vengeance” for its arms sales to Iraq.\textsuperscript{119} Unlike the embassy bombing in April, the barracks bombing entailed an appraisal of the strategic rationale for being involved in Lebanon itself.

Public pronouncements by administration officials contributed to increased tensions—both with Damascus and Moscow. On October 25, Reagan told the press that the perpetrators of this “despicable act will not go unpunished.”\textsuperscript{120} Fears of an “indefinite” Vietnam-type war were also developing in Washington. With a Democrat-controlled Congress, Reagan courted public opinion. Richard Wirthlin, Reagan’s pollster, found that respondents “do not like our

\textsuperscript{116} Memorandum, Hill to Clark, September 26, 1983, Middle East Trip (McFarlane) – Chron Cables (9/28/1983-9/30/1983), Box 51, ESS, RRPL.
\textsuperscript{117} Frank, \textit{U.S. Marines in Lebanon}, 3.
\textsuperscript{118} Memorandum, Hickey Jr. to McFarlane, Oct. 27, 1983, Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/23/1983), Box 41, ESC, RRPL.
\textsuperscript{119} DIA to White House, Cable 2223, Oct. 23, 1983, Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/23/1983), Box 41, ESC, RRPL.
troops taking hostile fire without recourse. Either they want to pull [the Marines] out (45%) or they want them reinforced (42%). Nevertheless, when faced with the prospect of Soviet-allied Syria taking control of Lebanon, slightly less than half of those who initially wanted the Marines withdrawn change[d] their mind. Consequently, the Soviet–Syrian connection was played up. The Beirut bombing, moreover, coincided with the U.S. invasion of the Caribbean island nation of Grenada, where a Cuban and Soviet-backed communist government had seized power. In a pathos-laden radio speech on October 27, Reagan made the case for remaining steadfast against a purported global communist offensive. “Though oceans apart,” there was direct connection between Lebanon and Grenada. Syria was “a home for 7,000 Soviet advisers and technicians who man[ned] a massive amount of Soviet weaponry, including SS-21 ground-to-ground missiles capable of reaching vital areas of Israel,” and, if the United States abandoned Lebanon, argued Reagan, “can the United States ... stand by and see the Middle East incorporated into the Soviet bloc?”

Assad feared Reagan would “unleash” the Israelis in retaliation for the barracks bombing. Preying on Syrian fears of U.S.-Israeli “collusion,” McFarlane, who became national security advisor after Clark’s mid-October resignation, argued that Israel should appear ready to strike Syria at any time. “[F]irmness (and even violence) on [Israel’s] part toward Syria ... represent the strongest incentive for Syria to withdraw from Lebanon.” But Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir had no intention of doubling back over the Awali River. After the bombing of the IDF headquarters in Tyre in early November, Shamir refrained from retaliating, though he publicly blamed Syria. Israel had effectively rejected McFarlane’s strategy.

On October 28, Reagan approved retaliatory measures against “suitable targets” to be “possibly coordinated with France.” Different proposals for retaliation were discussed, both overt and covert. Assad’s control of Syria was fragile: Since his 1976 intervention in Lebanon, Assad had been handling a crisis at home—the Hama rebellion, a Muslim Brotherhood insurrection. The Islamist insurgency included assassinations and car bombs, even in the heart of Damascus—and Assad himself had been targeted.

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123. Damascus to Washington, Cable 08374, Oct. 25, 1983, Lebanon Bombing/Airport (10/25/1983), Box 41, ESC, RRPL.
The Americans had entertained subverting Assad’s control of Syria since 1981, but Habib had advised against it: “Assad’s problems with the Brotherhood have declined as his confrontation with Israel became more acute.” By 1982, however, Assad had had enough, and tasked his brother Rifat with ending the rebellion. In February 1982, the Syrian army entered Hama, leveling neighborhoods, killing indiscriminately somewhere between 5,000 and 25,000 people.

NSC staffers Philip Dur and Donald Fortier believed a combination of anti-Alawi propaganda and Turkish military posturing on the Syrian-Turkish border could bring Syria back to the negotiating table. Pressure on Assad’s “home base,” moreover—the Latakia province—might theoretically lead to his ouster, Dur and Fortier reasoned. After Assad, a Sunni would take over, repudiate the Soviet Union (somehow) and accept a similar arrangement to the Camp David Accords as well as the Reagan Plan. This “Turkish plot” worked itself into several of the plans on how to contain Syria’s influence in Lebanon, though how the administration could influence such developments was unclear, and it was never implemented.

Where Dur and Fortier assumed that the “Assad brothers” were running Syria together the opposite was true. In response to the bombings of the French garrison, French jets bombed Syrian and Iranian positions in the Bekaa Valley. A day later, on November 12, Assad suffered a heart attack. With Assad out of play, and on the brink of war, some of Syria’s elite turned to the younger Assad. Rifat, the leader of the regime’s “defense companies,” had subtle policy differences with his brother. He was suspicious of Moscow and feared the Soviet-Syrian alliance would follow the terminally ill General Secretary Yuri Andropov to his grave (Andropov died after prolonged illness in February 1984). Without Moscow, Syria had no great power protection. Consequently, the Syrian elite polarized around one of the two brothers. But as the older Assad recovered in late 1983, tensions between the factions that had emerged around each of the two remained, trickling down into the security services, the army, and the party. Through May 1984, Damascus remained divvied up between factions allied with Rifat and those loyal to Hafez. Meanwhile, U.S.-Syrian tensions reached their zenith.

By mid-November, the U.S. Naval presence off the coast of Lebanon increased and U.S. jets flew reconnaissance over the Bekaa Valley under fire from Syrian flak. A retaliatory strike was planned for November 14, but never materialized, and the French went ahead with their strike alone. Much of the

127. Memorandum of conversation, Reagan, Habib, May 29, 1981, (9), Box 48, ESS, RRPL.
129. “The Destabilization of Syria and the Success of U.S. Plan into Lebanon,” no date, Lebanon III (4 of 10), RAC Box 6, Donald Fortier Files (hereafter DFF), RRPL.
130. Seale, Asad of Syria, 421–440; Van Dam, Struggle for Power in Syria, 118–123.
documentary record here remains classified. There are two versions of what happened. In the first version, Reagan himself cancelled it, due to fears of civilian casualties. In the second, Secretary Weinberger, on his own authority and in an act of insubordination, cancelled the operation.132

The Weinberger theory, when viewed in the context of the “1983 war scare,” has some merit. Weinberger’s opposition to direct military involvement was well known. In his autobiography, he describes the MNF’s mission as “demonstrably unobtainable” and he abhorred advocacy for power plays in Lebanon.133 As fears in the Pentagon (and Congress) of a Vietnam-style asymmetric conflict flurried, prospects of war with Soviet-allied Syria were anathema to Weinberger. Weinberger’s project was the Reagan administration’s enormous arms build-up—geared toward driving a declining Soviet state into bankruptcy.134 In November 1983, the “war scare” reached its peak when the Kremlin mistook Able Archer 83, a large-scale war game in West Germany that included the mock deployment of NATO’s nuclear weapons. The Soviets put their nuclear forces on alert, fearing an imminent surprise attack.135 U.S. air-strikes on the Syrians had the potential to draw in Moscow, and from there, the logic of nuclear deterrence could produce an unpredictable and dangerous dynamic that could spiral out of control. It is therefore likely that Weinberger’s public accusation that Syria had sponsored the barracks bombings was followed by assurances to Damascus that the bombings “did not amount to an act of war.”136 On the brink, Weinberger may have feared that what would begin as limited air-strikes in Lebanon could escalate into a nuclear exchange in Europe.

Less bombastic policies centered on deterring Syrian aggression and subversion. Geoffrey Kemp at the NSC suggested that “the next time a shell lands at the airport we should take out a couple of Syrian batteries in [the Bekaa Valley] come what may and then send strong warnings to Syria, the Druze and the Shia.”137 The Marines’ rules of engagement were also changed from “aggressive” to “vigorous self-defense” on December 1.138 Meanwhile, the reconnaissance flights continued. So did the flak fire.

132. Wills, First War on Terror, 72–75; Crist, Twilight War, 141–148.
137. Memorandum, Kemp to McFarlane, December 1, 1983, Lebanon Chronology (2), Box 41, ESC, RRPL.
After a reconnaissance flight was fired upon with surface-to-air-missiles on December 3, the NSPG held a conference called on short notice. Notably, Weinberger was not present, but was represented by General Vessey.\textsuperscript{139} He reported that the jets had taken several hundred rounds and that ten SAMs had been fired. The joint chiefs now favored retaliation, and the rest of the group, including Reagan, agreed. Shultz argued that the Italians, French, British, as well as Congress, should be notified before the attack, but Vessey rebuffed him. McFarlane and Reagan concurred. The time of the attack was set at midnight that same day, December 4. Despite Vessey’s insistence on urgency, the attack was postponed twice. First, it was postponed until morning, as it was thought that a Soviet destroyer near the U.S. carrier group might have notified the SAM crews in the Bekaa Valley.\textsuperscript{140} Second, as the planes were on their way to Baalbek, they were put on temporary hold by European Command, circling over Lebanese waters for twenty minutes allowing the Syrians time to prepare.\textsuperscript{141} As the planes resumed their course, two were shot down. The pilot, Mark Lange, died as a result of injuries sustained during the crash, and the navigator, Robert O. Goodman, was captured. Compounding the administration’s botched air raid, Reverend Jesse Jackson, a contender in the 1984 Democratic primaries, went to Damascus in early January 1984, and negotiated Goodman’s release.

The administration’s scramble to find policy alternatives lasted throughout December 1983 and early January 1984. But the trajectory had already been set. In a radio address on December 10, Reagan reaffirmed American resolve and addressed Congressional concerns, telling listeners that “once internal stability is established and withdrawal of all foreign forces is assured, the marines will leave.”\textsuperscript{142} When asked to define what “internal stability” meant—Beirut? all of Lebanon?—Reagan unwittingly undermined the MNF’s rationale: “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.”\textsuperscript{143} Lebanon, moreover, would become an election issue if not resolved. Assad had staying power in Lebanon. Reagan did not.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese knot tightened. Donald Rumsfeld, McFarlane’s replacement as special envoy, met with Khaddam on December 14. Khaddam
stressed the need for “clarity,” but as Assad was still convalescing, Khaddam told Rumsfeld that any Syrian promises made without Assad’s blessing could be countermanded. Rumsfeld had a similarly unproductive meeting with Khaddam in early November as well. The December 14 meeting was described as nothing more than “having occurred, period.” In the last weeks of 1983, the administration scrambled to find a feasible Lebanon policy before Congress reconvened at the end of January. Rumsfeld’s contribution was a strategy of “leaning somewhat forward”—feigning a massive U.S. attack upon Syria. Central to this idea was the continuation of reconnaissance flights over Lebanon, but also “visible efforts,” such as joint exercises with Jordan and Israel, close air-support exercises over Lebanon (giving the appearance of increased support for the MNF and LAF) and B-52 overflights (giving the appearance of a potential large-scale bombing campaign on Syria).

McFarlane’s NSC, for the most part, supported Rumsfeld’s position and promoted a “test-pressure-test” strategy: increasing pressure on Syria while prodding for concessions and furthering mutual interests (if any). If the test-pressure-test strategy failed, the NSC staffers argued—if there was no way around Syrian intransigence—Israel should recreate understanding with Syria along the lines of the previous “red-line agreement.” Without the PLO in southern Lebanon, this could pave the way for United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) expansion into larger parts of Lebanon, while at the same time bolstering the LAF. But the NSC needed to overcome the Pentagon’s opposition.

A Department of Defense commission published its findings on the October 23 bombings in mid-December 1983. It tasked the Pentagon with finding “a comprehensive set of alternatives” to the Marines’ deteriorating security situation. But Weinberger and Vessey presented just one alternative: withdrawal of the Marines. “[The] presence of U.S. and other MNF forces . . . may be more of a liability [to Gemayel] than a help” in the long term, argued Vessey. Consequently, bolstering the LAF was best accomplished by having the Marines “off-shore.” Vessey’s argument was echoed by Weinberger who also


stressed the need to “maintain public and Congressional support,” which was already faltering.149

Rumsfeld returned to Damascus in mid-January 1984 but made no progress. The Syrians rejected all offers, including an end to U.S. overflights.150 When inducing concessions did not work, Rumsfeld sought to scare Assad. In his autobiography, Rumsfeld claims he presented Assad with “an overhead satellite photo [of] his presidential palace . . . to remind him we were watching from above.”151 Nevertheless, Rumsfeld’s satellite image—like McFarlane’s “final gambit”—fundamentally misread the situation. Assad was fully recovered after his heart attack; “animated, crisp and strong,” giving a meandering monologue about how the United States and Israel were conspiring against Syria, and how “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” On Lebanon, Assad struck an “adamant and somewhat ominous note,” ending the meeting in gangster-like fashion: “a [Lebanese] cabinet minister who did not abrogate the May 17 Agreement would, on his way home, find someone lurking behind every corner to shoot him.”152

On January 30, Rumsfeld made his final proposal: a “repeat” of the 1974 Syrian–Israeli disengagement agreement, including an understanding regarding paramilitary groups in Lebanon and the Golan, “just as Kissinger had given Assad in 1974.” It is unclear if Rumsfeld confused the 1974 disengagement agreement with the 1976 “red-line agreement.” The agreement, Rumsfeld assured, would be an unwritten oral understanding. But Rumsfeld was offering Assad less than he already had. What concessions could the Americans give (such as changes in the Lebanese cabinet) that Assad could not accomplish by force? Khaddam told Rumsfeld that, because Kissinger and Assad never agreed on definitions of “paramilitary action,” this aspect was left out of the previous agreement. The Syrians were open to discussing “red lines,” but there would be caveats: it would have to follow a complete Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon (including from the “security zone”), and there could be no infringement of the “Geneva definition of Lebanese sovereignty,” which saddled Lebanon with “the rights and duties of an Arab state.” Disengagement with Israel 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 (including UNIFIL), nor any new UN force to oversee Lebanon.153 With momentum on
his side, Assad was pushing for a total victory over the United States, and for hegemony in Lebanon.

When it became clear that the Democratic majority had turned against the administration, Reagan’s Lebanon policy was in disarray. A Congressional defeat would be a disaster in an election year as Congressional Republicans turned on the White House too.154 On February 4, Reagan pleaded with Congress: “Yes, the situation in Lebanon is difficult, frustrating and dangerous. But that is no reason to turn our backs and cut and run.”155

Meeting in the bomb shelter of Baabda Palace on February 7, Gemayel told Rumsfeld that he had resigned. What would the Americans do now? Rumsfeld could not promise anything beyond the “vigorou self-defense” of the Marines. Elie Salem, Lebanon’s foreign minister, told Rumsfeld they were “getting the worst of both worlds—Israel is treating us as if we had abrogated the [May 17 Agreement] and Syria as if we had already ratified it.”156 Shultz and Rumsfeld argued for increased shelling to signal to the Syrians “greater resolve.” However, Vice President Bush, Weinberger, Vessey, and others favored “moderation” and “urge[d]” Gemayel to accept Assad’s invitation to Damascus “to make the best compromise he can.”157 That same day, the Marines were ordered to “redeploy off-shore.”

As the State Department saw it, Assad was “in a position to dictate whatever political settlement [he] decide[d], including a change in presidents.”158 On February 17, Gemayel went to Damascus. He returned on February 29 and abrogated the May 17 Agreement. Former U.S. ambassador to Syria Richard Murphy replaced Rumsfeld as special envoy in March 1984, though Murphy’s role was limited as Reagan’s interest in Lebanon diminished. The New Jersey’s occasional bombardment of Beirut’s outskirts amounted to, in effect, a final salute from the U.S. Navy as it left Lebanon. The civil war would last for another six years. Gemayel would remain president, and Lebanon remained under Syrian suzerainty.

Throughout its involvement in Lebanon, the Reagan administration never developed a “Syria policy.” Instead, Reagan’s unwillingness to resolve the “regionalist-globalist” dispute produced a Syria policy that was neither here nor there. Syria was partly approached as Soviet client-state and partly as a threat to Israeli security, and U.S. Lebanon policy never coherently addressed how Lebanon’s sovereignty could encompass their opposing visions. Haig and Shultz

157. Memorandum, McFarlane to Reagan, Feb. 7, 1983, Lebanon II (2 of 6), RAC Box 6, DFF, RRPL.
158. “Bureau of Research and Intelligence Report,” Feb. 8, 1984, Lebanon II (3 of 6), RAC Box 6, DFF, RRPL.
prioritized Israeli grievances to the detriment of U.S. standing in the Arab world. In his final report as ambassador, Paganelli took the opposite view, arguing that “[o]ur basic tenant [sic], that massive U.S. aid and support for Israel can condition Israeli policy in a moderate and accommodating direction, has repeatedly been proved to be false.” According to Paganelli, “the Middle East problem is essentially a regional conflict with global overtones, rather than the reverse.”

What mattered to Assad was the “moral victory” of not bowing to Israel. Negotiations, therefore, gave Assad a platform to grandstand by not bowing to “U.S.-Israeli collusion”—an image the Reagan administration did little to combat. On the contrary, U.S. frustrations with both Syria and Israel had very different consequences. In prioritizing a politically expedient Israeli–Lebanese agreement and concurrently cultivating closer ties with Israel, Shultz made a cardinal error. Shultz believed Assad would see that there could be more to gain by following his lead, but the opposite was the case. Lebanon was firmly under Assad’s thumb, and the Syrians would remain as an occupying force until they were finally pushed out in 2005.

Reagan vacillated on the use of force against Syria, and his absentee leadership-style emboldened hawks like McFarlane and Rumsfeld who worked with the flawed assumption that Syria could be awed into submission. But their threats were ineffective, and the military power they could muster was limited by those tasked with executing it. Weinberger’s opposition was no secret but a matter of public record, and with east-west tensions soaring, war with Syria could spiral out of control.

While the Soviet-Syrian alliance was crucial in emboldening Assad, it was Damascus that occupied the driver’s seat in Lebanon, not Moscow. In failing to appreciate Syrian interests and the inevitability of Syrian power if their interests were not heeded, the Reagan administration was unable to resolve the underlying conflict between Syria and Israel in the 1980s—that of Lebanon’s alignment. U.S. policy promoted Lebanese autonomy instead, but “free of all foreign forces” was an unsustainable policy without U.S. military power backing it up. Ironically, Shultz would later come to appreciate the Syrians’ dogged determination: “Assad may be a bastard, but we need him desperately. He’s the only Arab leader who can make a peace agreement stick.”

Reagan’s involvement in Lebanon ended in abject failure. By ignoring Syria’s role in settling the conflict, Reagan brought about a “spoiler.” The bloody civil war would not end until the signing of the 1989 Taif Accords. The 1982 Lebanon war was also a blow to the Syrian-Israeli peace process. The Reagan Plan glossed over Begin’s de facto annexation of the Golan Heights (only recognized after 38 years by U.S. President Donald J. Trump in April 2019) which effectively pushed Syria out of the peace process, leaving them on the outside looking in—to “stew in their own juice.”

159. Cable 03909, Damascus to Washington, June 12, 1984, Syria, RAC Box 9, CMC, RRPL.