
The Middle East

Will Washington finally halt Israel's war rampage in Lebanon?

by Nancy Coker

Waves of Israeli air force jets swoop over Beirut, bombing an entire section of the city to rubble. Apartment buildings are leveled. More than 600 Lebanese civilians are killed; thousands are wounded. It is the July 17 air strike—the largest against Lebanon by Israel in seven years. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin pledges to continue hitting at civilian targets, justifying his policy of wanton murder by stressing his commitment to liquidate “Palestinian terrorists” wherever they may be.

A curious paralysis grips the Reagan administration. President Reagan is described by aides as “confused” and “perplexed.” Secretary of State Alexander Haig refuses to condemn Israel.

The effect of Begin's bloody rampage—and Reagan's toleration of it—will be to shatter U.S.-Arab relations and propel the Arab world into the Soviet camp. The result could be a superpower confrontation and oil crisis in the weeks or months ahead.

Cowboy politics

Reagan's support for Begin is a direct result of his poor grasp of the realities of the international strategic situation and his shortsighted insistence on viewing the world in black-and-white cowboy fashion—i.e., the “good-guy Israeli capitalists” taking on the “bad-guy Palestinian communists.” Deluding himself that he is defending the free world by backing the lunatic Begin, Reagan is in fact setting the stage for a major international crisis and, potentially, a third world war by allowing Begin to run amok in Lebanon.

Reagan is thus susceptible to a larger policy design, devised and backed by Great Britain and French President François Mitterrand: using Begin to polarize the Middle East, Yalta-style, along superpower lines and establish a Western-aligned “strategic consensus” against the Soviets.

Reagan administration tolerance for Begin is reflected in the totally inadequate U.S. response to Israel's provocations in Lebanon. Reagan's decision to suspend the delivery of ten F-16 jets to Israel can hardly be deemed punishment, even by the Israelis, who gracious-

ly accepted the delay. “We understand that Washington can't do anything but that,” said one of Begin's aides sanguinely. “We understand their embarrassment. If the jets are held for a while, Israel won't be so endangered. I believe the planes will be delivered.”

The ineffectual response on the part of the Reagan administration was matched by a statement issued by the heads of state at the Ottawa economic summit that even-handedly called for an end to the violence and urged “restraint” by “all sides and parties,” without even singling out Israel!

Beyond the Litani

According to intelligence sources, Begin is preparing for a full-scale invasion of Lebanon aimed at annexing territory as far north as the Zahrani River. The Zahrani, which is located just 27 miles south of Beirut, is well beyond the current “red line,” defined as the Litani River. An “Operation Zahrani” would culminate in the expulsion of all Palestinians in Lebanon living below the Zahrani and within rocket range of Israel, the *Baltimore Sun* reported on July 21.

The first phase of Operation Zahrani took place on July 20, when Israel sent ground units deep into Lebanon to knock out Palestinian positions along the Zahrani River. It was the first Israeli ground attack since hostilities began two weeks ago.

To prepare for an invasion, Israel has been systematically destroying Lebanon's communications and transportation infrastructure. At least 10 bridges have been blown up, along with key roads and supply lines. Last week, Israeli jets destroyed an oil refinery near the Zahrani. The refinery produced one-third of Lebanon's gasoline. As a result, an acute gasoline shortage has gripped the country.

Other preparations for war include the stationing by Israel of tanks and other armored vehicles in areas of southern Lebanon controlled by Israel's Lebanese puppet Maj. Saad Haddad.

An aide to Begin confirmed this week that Israel is not interested in pursuing a negotiated settlement to the

fighting and is ready to launch "a wide conflict against Syria on Lebanese soil." "Air strikes alone" cannot "break the PLO," said one Begin official.

Yehoshua Saguy, the chief of Israeli military intelligence, stated July 22 that one motive for Israel's massive bombing raid on Beirut was to generate Lebanese civilian resentment against the Palestinians. "I would say at least they have something to think about now," Saguy said.

Reports meanwhile persist that Syrian President Hafez Assad is considering deploying "air defense weapons in Beirut" to protect the Lebanese capital against Israel. A number of Syrian soldiers stationed in Beirut were killed in the Israeli bombing. In addition, 50 Soviet warships are reported to be positioned off the coast of Lebanon, having stayed in the area following their joint maneuvers with Syria last week.

Is Begin going too far?

A number of Israel's leading moderate newspapers have started to question Begin's policy. Israel's most prestigious paper, *Haaretz*, wrote that what "has already been harmed is Israel's moral superiority over its enemies." Another daily, *Al Hamishmar*, stated, "It is an illusion to think that it is possible to eliminate the terrorists, even if we use the air force against them." And the *Jerusalem Post* editorialized, "To what extent is this stepped-up military action guided by a well-thought-out policy? What was the decision-making process of the government, which in fact is only a transition administration? . . . Given [his] narrow majority [in the June 30 election] was it not incumbent on Begin to seek broad national support for such extreme action by consulting the Labour opposition beforehand? How far can Israel strain its already tense relations with Washington without dire consequences?"

Numerous American Jewish leaders have reacted similarly. In Philadelphia, one prominent Jewish spokesman stated how difficult Begin's bombing raids have made it for parents to maintain pride in being Jewish in their children. "Begin has gone too far," said another leader. "Begin doesn't know when to quit, when to restrain himself."

Even some of his erstwhile Anglo-American backers may be concerned about Begin. Signs that this may be the case appeared in the French daily *Le Monde* last month which reported that Begin's excesses are alienating the entire Arab world, including the moderates, making Alexander Haig's plans for a strategic military alliance among Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Gulf countries, and Israel an impossibility.

Whether, and for what reason, the Reagan administration will move to constrain Begin is still unclear. However, there are signs that the threshold of tolerance may have been crossed.

On July 22, Deputy Secretary of State William Clark, known for his personal loyalties to Reagan and not to Haig, made his first major public statement since assuming his position six months ago, and attacked Begin. Reflecting Reagan's growing irritation with Begin, Clark said, "Our commitments are not to Mr. Begin but to the nation he represents, and without question he is making it difficult to assist Israel." Clark's statement echoed an earlier comment by Reagan: "That fellow Begin sure makes it hard to help him."

Referring to the decision not to go ahead with the delivery of the F-16s, Clark said, "You just don't ship gasoline to a fire." Clark stressed, "Our commitments to the area may not parallel Mr. Begin's. Israel is not our only friend in the region." Clark went on to suggest that the delivery of the F-16s could be postponed indefinitely and that the ban may be widened to include F-15 jets and M-60 tanks as well.

Clark's statements take on added significance in light of reports that he did not clear his comments with Haig, who, it is estimated, would have disapproved. In addition, the *New York Times* reported July 22 that the prevailing view among Arabs is that one of the motives for Israel's provocations in Lebanon is to thwart the strengthening ties between the Reagan administration and several Arab countries, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

The same day, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger also issued a round of milder criticism of Begin. "I think that [Begin's] course cannot really be described as moderate at this point," said Weinberger. "It is essential that there be some moderation and some general realization of how volatile the region is and how quickly individual acts of violence or individual acts of aggression or retaliation, or whatever, can lead to something much more violent."

New Arab moves toward Moscow

by Judith Wyer

The pro-Israel bias of the Reagan administration combined with the lack of support for pro-U.S. Arab nations is pushing those Arab states to make overtures to the Soviet Union.

This is not occurring because the leaderships in Saudi Arabia or Jordan are in ideological agreement with Moscow, but because they no longer see the United States as the trustworthy ally it used to be. "It's just a