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Israel's Invasion of Lebanon: Background to the Crisis

SHEILA RYAN*

Ten days in June 1982 created a bitter new reality for the world to ponder. Israeli troops occupied the southern part of Lebanon and encircled West Beirut. The US evinced even less official distress than it had following the Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor and bombing of Beirut a year ago. Announcing that it would be "premature" to ask that Israeli troops withdraw, the US continued to extend massive political and material support for the invasion. The Arab states manifested only muted protest, about which the US administration seemed quite unconcerned.

As of early August, it is still too early to suggest what the denouement of the crisis might be, but it is none too soon to examine what led up to the crisis. What factors combined to produce a situation in which the US would give so much support to and impose so little restraint on Israel?

On a strategic level, two factors have created the conditions in which the invasion took place. The official US antipathy to Palestinian nationalism represents a hostility of such depth as to be almost baffling. In Israel there has risen to power an extreme form of expansionist Zionism intent upon the physical obliteration of the Palestinian national movement.

US Strategic Antipathy To Palestinian Nationalism

Over the last ten years there have been recurrent waves of expectation—or from more than one quarter, of apprehension—that the US was on the brink of acceding to the reality of Palestinian nationalism and of allowing it some continued form of expression. The enormous economic and geopolitical interests of elites in the US were repeatedly proffered as evidence that the US government would find it imminently necessary to seize the initiative and foster

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the establishment of a Palestinian state, as a means of stabilizing the region and thus enhancing its own long-term interests in the area. These interests were said to require close relations with the conservative oil-producing Arab states; and *realpolitik* was supposed to dictate that the US would assert itself, shake off transitory domination of its policies by Israel, and adopt a more "even-handed" perspective on the region in order to reduce polarization and enhance the internal security of its Arab allies.

There are two striking characteristics of these predictions. The first is that they have never been fulfilled. The second is that they emanated from opposing points of the political spectrum: from Israeli hawks and from Israeli doves; from Palestinian "rejectionists" who feared that the US was conspiring to impose a puppet "ministate," and from those in Palestinian political life most optimistic about the potential of the US to assist their national cause; from conservative American geopoliticians and from radical American critics of imperialism.

These predictions result in part from a failure to apprehend how deep-seated has been the US strategic hostility to Palestinian nationalism. Since the US first was confronted with the question of Palestinian nationalism as a policy issue, successive administrations have factored the Palestinians into the Soviet side of a global equation, and responded to the Palestinian movement as an element to be repressed rather than as a force to be coopted and placated to enhance US regional objectives.

The major architect of this US policy edifice is Henry Kissinger; on his strategic foundation rests the US Palestinian policy to this day. The foundation was laid in September 1970. In the spring of that year the Nixon Administration—and Kissinger as the President's National Security Adviser—came to realize that some of its fundamental premises about the Middle East would have to be re-evaluated. The assumption that the Palestinians could be dealt with as purely a refugee problem to be resolved in the context of negotiations between Israel and the Arab states was no longer tenable.¹ But within months of having first confronted the Palestinian issue in this form, Kissinger had fixed the Palestinian movement firmly in the global context of US conflict with the Soviet Union.

Thus the rise of the *fedayeen* in Jordan was considered not in the context of regional history nor from the point of view of accommodating it, but rather in the framework of international threat, and from the perspective of suppressing it. In a graphic example of this form of conceptualization, Kissinger writes in his memoirs:

Within a three-week period in September 1970 three major crises descended upon the Administration in corners of the world thousands of miles apart . . . they all represented—

¹ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 573.

or seemed to us to represent—different facets of a global Communist challenge. None could have succeeded without Communist impetus or encouragement. The Soviet military thrust into Egypt and its incitement of radical Arabs spawned the crisis in Jordan; the naval base in Cuba was a direct Soviet challenge; and Chile's election, for all its ambiguity, presented the possibility that a nation would join the Communist family by democratic processes for the first time in history.²

The Nixon Administration interpreted the suppression of the PLO in Jordan as a victory over the Soviet Union, at a time when the US was having very rough going indeed against what it perceived as "Soviet clients" in Indochina. The "forces of moderation had been preserved,"³ in Kissinger's view, and the forces of radicalism rolled back. The administration was acutely aware that this was because Israel was prepared to intervene with its full and considerable military force, at a time when US troops were stretched thin by the Vietnam war.

September 1970 thus marked a watershed in two ways. It pitted the US in strategic opposition to the PLO, and it created a qualitatively new appreciation in the US administration of the Israeli military role in the region.⁴ This new appreciation rapidly took on a material form: US military assistance to Israel skyrocketed.

There was a limited dissent within the administration to this kind of McCarthyism on a world scale. Elliot Richardson left his position as Under Secretary of State (having devoted considerable attention to the Middle East) to assume a Cabinet post after having drafted a secret memorandum which urged, quite unavailingly, that the US find a means of accommodating Palestinian nationalism.⁵ Pragmatic voices like Richardson's would continue to be raised in later administrations. They were never, however, heeded at the decision-making level.

² *Ibid.*, p. 594.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 631.

⁴ Several well-informed accounts of this period emphasize the anti-Soviet framework of formulation of Kissinger's policy on the Palestinians. See Nadav Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), pp. 450-456; William Quandt, *Decade of Decisions: American Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 105-127; Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (New York: Dell, 1974), pp. 226-241.

⁵ Richardson later recollected, "My last will and testament to the department on the Middle East was a paper which said in substance that the fallacy of the great-powers policy or the involved powers in dealing with the situation from the establishment of the state of Israel to date had been the failure to recognize that the aggrieved party were the Palestinians . . . Had the Palestinians been treated as if they were a sovereign state, even if they'd been reduced to the Gaza Strip or an enclave on the West Bank where they could have a capital and a flag, the situation might have been faced up to. It seemed to me we had blown chance after chance . . . My argument was that we would never achieve a real settlement in the Middle East that did not deal with the situation of the Palestinians, and I thought we ought to find ways of exploring what the solutions could be. Although we had, by neglect, created a situation in which there were very few moderate Palestinians left to talk to, I thought that we ought to set about establishing some contacts . . ." Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 312.

The US pledge to Israel contained in the secret addendum to the second Sinai Disengagement Agreement was, consequently, not in substance a concession to Israel since the US was not interested in dealing with the PLO in any event. The memorandum of understanding included a clause pledging that the US would neither recognize nor negotiate with the PLO unless the PLO recognized the state of Israel and accepted United Nations Resolutions 242 and 338. In fact, Kissinger was known to be opposed to a Palestinian state, however "moderate" its leadership,⁶ fearing that such a state would inevitably become destabilized and destabilizing. He later rued that he had not hastened toward agreement with Jordan in order to pre-empt the PLO. After the Arab recognition of the PLO's role as formalized at the Rabat Summit, however, the moment for such manipulation had passed.⁷

The Carter Administration came into office trailing the possibility that it would be more open to a "Palestinian option": a number of key posts were filled by members of a Brookings Study Group, which had concluded that a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East was in the interest of the US, including a resolution of the Palestinian issue.⁸ The major foreign policy initiative of the Carter Administration, the Camp David Agreement, concluded a separate peace between Israel and Egypt and denied in effect the right of the Palestinians to self-determination. The strategic concept behind the Camp David Agreement was to exclude the PLO from any role, and to build the basis for a new age of US hegemony in the region around the core of an Israeli-Egyptian alliance. The Carter Doctrine extended from the Camp David basis, asserting a new determination by the US to intensify the projection of its military power into the region.

The "strategic consensus" notion of the Reagan Administration that states in the region should put aside their differences to combine their forces against the "Soviet threat" has remained elusive in its implementation. But implicit in it is the premise that the Palestinians and their national aspirations must be swept aside.

The continuity of US policy on the Palestinian issue is underscored by the musings of Kissinger after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon:

One of the principal casualties of the Lebanese crises has been the Western illusion—especially prevalent in Europe but rife too in the middle levels of our government—in all recent administrations—that the key to Middle East peace is to be found in a PLO-Israeli negotiation based on various formulae to 'moderate' the PLO. It was always a mirage. The colossal effort needed to induce Israel to accept the PLO as a negotiating partner would have forced us to expend all our capital on procedures before substance was reached—even

⁶ Edward Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis and Kissinger* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976), p. 148.

⁷ Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 363; Quandt, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-259.

⁸ "Toward Peace in the Middle East," Report of a Study Group, Brookings Institution, 1975.

on the highly dubious assumption that it was achievable at all. Nor was it desirable. It would have given a veto on negotiations to the most intransigent element in the Arab world, the group most hostile to the peace process and most closely associated with Arab radicalism with least incentive for restraint. Nor is the PLO a suitable instrument to stabilize the Arab world.

While the failure of the Israeli government to consult adequately with the US before the invasion is unfortunate, Kissinger grants,

in this particular case the results were congruent with the interest of the peace process in the Middle East, of all moderate governments in the area and of the United States. It would serve nobody's interest to restore PLO control over Lebanon or Syrian preeminence in Beirut. The United States can have no interest in salvaging Arab radicalism or rewarding military reliance on the Soviet Union.⁹

The Emergence Of A "War Now" Party In Israel

The second crucial element was the rise in Israel of a powerful group intent upon striking a major blow at the PLO in Lebanon, and perhaps a blow against the Syrians as well. Their motivation sprang from the political incentive to suppress the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon in order to further Israeli plans for the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These plans appear to include the effective annexation of these areas, their population by Israeli settlers, and quite possibly their forcible depopulation by a substantial number of Palestinians. There are strong indications that Cabinet ministers in Israel envision the expulsion of Palestinians to the East Bank, and the creation there of a "Palestinian state" under Israeli military domination.

To a significant extent, Israeli officials have been able to implement their military plans for Lebanon because they were able to insert their exclusivist and expansionist particularities into a regional US "anti-Soviet" context. The military buildup to the present Israeli onslaught in Lebanon has been in process for many years, though the political justification has evolved over the last decade. Throughout the 1970s, Israeli officials clung to the fiction, often Biblical, of "retaliation" in justifying their attacks on Lebanon. Each attack was said to be an act of retribution for some Palestinian commando action across the Lebanese-Israeli border. The rhetoric of retaliation endured, if not the plausibility of it, even through the massive Israeli invasion in 1978. That invasion, which the Lebanese government announced left 1 100 Palestinians and Lebanese dead, most of them civilians, was declared by the Israeli government to be an act of retaliation for the coastal road operation. When the smoke of the crossfire cleared after that Palestinian commando action, 35 Israelis lay dead or mortally wounded.¹⁰

⁹ *Washington Post*, July 16, 1982.

¹⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross, in *Arab Report and Record*, April 1-15, 1978, p. 247.

The arithmetic of retaliation, of course, always resulted in multiple Palestinian and other Arab deaths for each Israeli killed. According to Israeli police statistics, 282 Israelis have been killed by Palestinian militants over the last 15 years.¹¹ In contrast some 10,000 Palestinians and Lebanese are estimated to have died at the hands of the Israeli military.

In 1979, Ezer Weizman, then Israeli Minister of Defense, announced a new policy of "pre-emptive attack" in Lebanon. No longer would each Israeli attack be justified as revenge for a particular Palestinian action; the Israeli government was asserting the right to strike at will. At the beginning of 1981, the Israeli government produced statistics designed to show that "pre-emption" had been a success. According to these figures, only 7.7 percent of all "terror incidents" in the areas under Israeli control had stemmed from Lebanon, while 92 percent of the "terror incidents" were said to have been launched from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.¹²

By the spring of 1981, Israeli officials were sounding ever more pugnacious. Brigadier General Yaakov Even, Israeli Army spokesman, declared, "we are on the offensive. We are the aggressors. We are penetrating the so-called border of the so-called sovereign state of Lebanon and we go after them wherever they hide."¹³

Discussion about major military moves in Lebanon was conducted quite openly in the Hebrew press, and debate about the possible reaction of the US to a massive incursion was an element in that discussion. Ze'ev Schiff, military correspondent for *Ha'aretz*, identified Ariel Sharon with the group calling for military intervention in central and northern Lebanon. He wrote:

The aim of such intervention would be two-fold: not only to damage Syrian forces, but to destroy the PLO infrastructure in Lebanon, especially in all the territory south of Beirut. Success of such action could deal a mortal blow to the PLO. What is more, it is very possible that Israel would meet with understanding in the Reagan administration in this matter. Washington is seeking to check any Soviet clients, and why should it be against harming Moscow's more important clients—Syria and the PLO?¹⁴

An opposing group, represented by Deputy Minister of Defense Mordechai Zipori, favored continuing assaults on southern Lebanon and on the PLO, while

¹¹ "How Many PLO Victims?" by B. Michael, *Ha'aretz*, July 16, 1982.

¹² *New York Times*, January 3, 1981. These statistics, of course, raise an obvious question about the efficacy of military means to stop armed actions. If the presence of an occupying army in the West Bank and Gaza was unable to suppress such activity, what reason was there to believe that attacks on Lebanon would succeed in accomplishing that stated objective? This question was underscored by another set of official statistics. Officials reported that "terror incidents" had increased by 73 percent in the West Bank in 1980 and by 100 percent in Gaza. Israeli intelligence described the "terrorists" in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as becoming more sophisticated in technique and effective in coordination. *Jewish Week*, January 25, 1981.

¹³ *New York Times*, April 18, 1981.

¹⁴ *Ha'aretz*, April 10, 1981.

avoiding entry into the center of the country or into conflict with the Syrians. Interestingly, Schiff suggested that this group also saw potential US support for wider-ranging incursions, differing only on the element of timing:

As for the American position—it is true that the Reagan administration would not be against Damascus and the PLO being harmed, but it is not at present interested in having to focus on a war, for which it is not at all prepared. The Americans have not yet strengthened themselves sufficiently to reply to such a challenge, if for example the Russians decide to offer massive aid to Damascus in case of war. A sudden flareup today would disrupt American steps to build an anti-Soviet alignment in the region. Washington's support for Israel's war on terrorists is one thing, but an expanded military flareup between the IDF and the Syrians is another matter. Thus it would be a mistake to think that the Reagan administration would back such an Israeli move right now.¹⁵

The first half year of the Reagan Administration provided a point of intersection for this Israeli aggressiveness and a new degree of US bellicosity in the Middle East. The comments of Richard Allen justifying Israeli raids into Lebanon as "hot pursuit" of terrorists, were far more sympathetic to Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty than any Carter Administration officials had ever been made, at least in public. These statements signaled what was to come.

The crucial point for the merger of the Israeli anti-PLO thrust in Lebanon and the overall US anti-Soviet momentum in the region appears to have been Haig's visit to Jerusalem in early April. Israeli officials were delighted to hear the US Secretary of State name the PLO as a "Soviet proxy" in the region, along with Libya and Cuba. Haig told the press that his two meetings with Begin had produced

a convergence of outlook in the area of broad, strategic threat to the Middle East region, to include traditional military threats from unfriendly superpowers, to include assessments of proxy activity, and to include some very important discussions on the overall issue of international terrorism.¹⁶

Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir exulted that Haig conducted a major review of US policy with Israeli officials, concentrating on Lebanon, and that the US was putting together a "revolutionary" new approach, asking states in the region to put aside their differences to fend off the Soviet threat. The Reagan Administration, the Israeli Foreign Minister emphasized, is "more friendly than previous" administrations.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Accompanying the rise of this "war now" group was the emergence of what Israeli journalists began to call a "Christian lobby" in the army—a group of officers urging that Israel aid the Phalange in taking over Lebanon. Israeli Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan and Major General Avigdor were both associated with this group. See *Davar* Supplement, April 17, 1981; *Washington Post*, April 29, 1981.

¹⁶ *Jerusalem Post*, April 7, 1981.

¹⁷ *Jerusalem Post*, April 10, 1981.

In an address to the Knesset following Haig's visit, Begin declared:

These days we have points of agreement between the Government of Israel and the US Administration as follows: First, both nations are allies. . . . We agree that both our countries are in a permanent alliance.

The second joint point is: the position concerning the role played by Syria in Lebanon. The United States and Israel agree that Syria is no longer an expeditionary force to implement peace or a stabilizing army. Indeed both countries believe this.

Third there is a joint opinion on the terrorist organizations.

Fourth, active opposition to these bloody terrorist organizations wherever they are.

Fifth, opposition to the expansion of Soviet imperialism throughout the world, and particularly in the Middle East.

These are the five points agreed upon between us and the United States and I can say that I cannot remember a time when there was such deep and wide agreement between our two nations.¹⁸

The apparent change of attitude by the US toward the Syrian role in Lebanon appears to have been a key element. Shamir told a Knesset committee: "Once the US administration assessed Syria as a moderating factor, but this assessment is now being reexamined in view of the fact that there are about 10,000 Soviet advisers in Syria today."¹⁹

These US steps appear to have flashed a green light to Israel for its actions in Lebanon. David Shieler, the *New York Times* correspondent in Jerusalem, wrote that

A basic change in the attitude of the United States toward Israeli military action in Lebanon appears to have given a new flexibility to Israel's Army and Air Force, which have been busy recently with air strikes and ground assaults against Palestinian guerrilla bases in Lebanese territory.²⁰

Begin later insisted that "sovereign Israel" had no need of a green light from Washington, and a US State Department spokesman denied lamely that the Reagan Administration had intended to flash such a signal.²¹ The concert between the two capitals was nonetheless clear for all the world to see.

Such were the relations between the US and Israel on the issue of Lebanon in the weeks and months preceding the massive Israeli bombing of Beirut in July 1981. The US reaction was essentially supportive of Israel against international outrage. The US assisted in putting together the cease-fire which remained in force until the Israeli attacks on Lebanon eleven months later, and imposed a brief delay on some military shipments. The Begin government never appeared

¹⁸ Jerusalem Domestic Service in Hebrew, 1407 GMT, May 11, 1981.

¹⁹ Jerusalem Domestic Service in Hebrew, 1100 GMT, April 14, 1981; see also *The Jewish Press*, April 19, 1981.

²⁰ *New York Times*, April 18, 1981; see also *New York Times*, April 29, 1981.

²¹ *New York Times*, April 30, 1981.

seriously disturbed by this very mild rebuke. As an Israeli official said, "We know that the US is not selling us airplanes only for use in parades on Independence Day. They sell them because of the common strategic interest between our two countries. I believe the planes will be delivered."²²

Israel As A "Strategic Asset" and "Strategic Consensus" In The Middle East

While the Israeli government was never acutely discomforted by the brief interruption of delivery of jets from the US, it was vociferous in its distress about the sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia. The administration's intention to sell these surveillance aircraft to the Saudis was announced in the spring, as the crisis was building over southern Lebanon, and was approved by Congress in the fall, after an acrimonious effort by the Israeli government and its supporters in the US to forestall the arms deal.

The dispute over the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia highlighted the problem for US strategists of constructing a "strategic consensus" in a region in which the putative consenting parties were hostile to each other. Israel was most anxious about the developing US military ties with several Arab regimes because those states allegedly became militarily stronger through such arrangements. Also—and arguably principally—Israel feared that the eagerness of the US to develop such links with Arab governments would create conditions for US pressure on Israel to make some concession on the Palestinian issue.

There is no question about the determination of the Reagan Administration to militarize its relations with a number of regimes in the Middle East. The administration's budget request for fiscal year 1983 earmarked 65 percent of the foreign military assistance funds for the Middle East.²³ The AWACS sale was the single most massive weapons deal in US history. The ambitious program for "power projection" in southwest Asia, through development of a Rapid Deployment Force and prepositioning supplies, required agreements with governments for "facilities" on their territory, including air and naval bases. Egypt, Kenya, Oman and Somalia all made agreements for construction of "facilities" for actual or potential use by the US.

The administration made extensive but unavailing efforts to reassure the Begin government and its US supporters, coordinated through the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), that the AWACS would not enhance the Saudi military position vis-a-vis Israel. It should have been a source of paradoxical comfort to Israel—though there is no evidence that Begin found solace in it—that the administration's proposal demanded an extensive lobby-

²² *Washington Post*, July 21, 1981.

²³ Computed from US Department of State statistics.

ing effort by the Saudis and US corporations with a stake in the deal, including those with business interests in the Middle East or in weapons production.²⁴ It was an awesome effort, one which put into clear perspective their relatively lackadaisical efforts on behalf of the Palestinian issue. It was a striking piece of evidence that while US allies amongst the conservative Arab states are willing to press their cases forcefully in regard to their particular relations with the US, they are not to date willing to make these relations heavily contingent upon the US stance on Arab-Israeli issues.

Such evidence notwithstanding, Israel remained an anxious, even neurotic ally, given to transient episodes of paranoia that the Reagan Administration's quest of Arab allies could lead to pressure on Israel for moderation in its conflicts with the Arabs.

The Preparation Of Public Opinion

Perhaps this anxiety is an element in the serious attention which Israeli officials devoted to the preparation of US public opinion for the impending invasion. The new Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Moshe Arens, told the press in February that an Israeli invasion of Lebanon was "only a matter of time."²⁵ His preposterous contention—that Israel, "under PLO guns" from the north, and faced with a loss of "qualitative edge" militarily as the US supplied various Arab regimes with sophisticated weapons, might be forced to take preemptive military action—was to a very considerable extent taken at face value by the US media.

Israeli Chief of Military Intelligence Yehoshua Saguy produced sheaves of data designed to show the press that the PLO was receiving major new infusions of Soviet weaponry. While cautious State Department spokespersons downplayed these allegations, Haig lent credence to them. According to a *Washington Post* report, he "said the United States has reports that Palestinian forces in southern Lebanon are receiving Soviet rockets and artillery, a development which he said could jeopardize US efforts to prevent new fighting in that troubled region." Haig "made clear that 'the provision of armaments' is viewed seriously by the United States as a 'potential threat' to the ceasefire," *Post* correspondent John Goshko wrote.²⁶ Few journalists felt professionally obligated to provide any context for these reports by indicating the dimensions of the continuing massive arms transfers to Israel by the United States.²⁷

²⁴ "The Petrodollar Connection," Steven Emerson, in *New Republic*, February 17, 1982.

²⁵ *Washington Post*, February 26, 1982; *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1982; *Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 1982.

²⁶ *Washington Post*, February 6, 1982.

²⁷ A rare piece of reporting by Edward Cody attempted to place the charges in critical perspective, interviewing Joint Forces military in southern Lebanon. *Washington Post*, March 1, 1982.

All of the major print media carried extensive and explicit reports on the probability of a major Israeli invasion of Lebanon throughout the spring. Columnists and op-ed writers involved themselves in open contention about the probable advantages and disadvantages of such an action. Joseph Kraft perhaps went furthest in favoring such Israeli action, sketching out the pipe-dream of Israeli generals about dismembering Syria. The most likely scenario, Kraft wrote, was for Israel to launch

a deep strike, cutting off PLO units on the border, and including a crack at Syrian forces in central Lebanon. The theory is that the PLO and the Syrians would be forced to quit Lebanon, with Assad toppled from office. In that case, Syria would implode.

A Sunni Moslem regime would dominate the central spine of the country, running from Damascus north through Homs and Hammah to Aleppo. The Alawites would hole up in their mountain stronghold around the northern port of Latakia. The Druze, another Islamic sect, would draw together in the sector of southern Syria, abutting Israel.

That regrouping would foster a general peace.²⁸

While the probability of a major act of Israeli aggression was so extensively reported, one searched the pages of major daily newspapers—like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Wall Street Journal*—in vain for two conspicuously absent themes. First, there was no editorial outcry against the much trumpeted invasion, nor any call for action from Washington to forestall it. Secondly, there was a striking absence of reporting on the human and political realities of the very probable targets of an Israeli attack. Six paragraphs in the *Los Angeles Times* in February which reported how the people of Tyre felt about the impending invasion are an extraordinary exception.²⁹

At the same time, readers were frequently presented with “local color” reports about the bizarre nature of life in violent Beirut, with scant accounts of the political factors behind the violence, either of an internal Lebanese nature or of an Israeli character. The *Washington Post*’s Edward Cody wrote:

As such violence tightens its hold on life in this disintegrating nation, the reasons for bloodshed are becoming so obscure—and often so meaningless—that Lebanese and their foreign friends lose the thread and, eventually, stop being interested.³⁰

Sharon’s trip to the United States just before the invasion laid a heavy emphasis on press contact and justification of the impending Israeli attack as a legitimate act of self-defense against the red menace to the north. He secured the services of Uri Dan, Israeli reporter for the sensational and rabid pro-Israel *New York Post* to arrange his schedule. Sharon regaled the reporters and editors of the *Wall Street Journal* with a two-and-a-half hour interview, illustrating with charts

²⁸ *Washington Post*, March 16, 1982.

²⁹ In an article by J. Michael Kenneday, *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1982.

³⁰ *Washington Post*, June 3, 1982.

and maps the modalities of the Soviet threat. "Palestinian terrorism, PLO terrorism, has been one of the main means by which the Soviets are preparing the ground for further extension into the Middle East," intoned the general.³¹

Sharon's efforts were rewarded by an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* three days before the actual invasion—an editorial which stopped just short of outright encouragement to the Israelis to invade. After instructing its readers that "the Syrian-PLO nexus in Lebanon has a senior partner, the Soviet Union," the editorial declared:

The most immediate issue in the Middle East is how to deal with the entrenched Soviet-Syrian-PLO position in Lebanon and the threat it poses to peace. And in trying to solve that riddle, the US and European policy makers could do worse than to pay more attention to the views of the Israelis, who have had some experience surviving in the Middle East.³²

Final Steps Toward The Invasion

During the months before the invasion, the Reagan Administration was acutely aware of the Israeli momentum toward attack. The overall effect of the actions taken by the administration during this period can only be construed as giving strategic sanction to the attack, while offering occasional tactical restraint.

The administration clearly rejected any strong action to rein in Israel. In February, when major Israeli military action appeared to be an immediate possibility, the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented a contingency plan to a Lebanon contingency group chaired by Deputy Secretary of State Walter Stoessel. The paper denied that Israel had a "legitimate defense" concern extending to Lebanese national territory, and predicted that Israeli military action in Lebanon could lead to an entanglement with Syria and a full-scale war with enraged Arab states taking action against the US. The contingency plan suggested a joint US-USSR political initiative for Lebanon. Most startlingly, it advanced the notion that the US might become involved in air combat with Israel as the US attempted to establish air cover over Lebanon "in a hostile environment" as part of an effort to evacuate US citizens from the war zone. The significance of the paper is in its "categorical rejection." It was "dismissed out of hand," the *Middle East Policy Survey* was told by "outraged" US officials.³³

The US administration did take several steps designed to minimize the damage which the impending Israeli attack might do to US relations with Arab states. The administration leaked reports to the press—quite probably inaccurate ones—that it was privately threatening to retaliate in event of invasion by

³¹ *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 1982.

³² *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 1982.

³³ *Middle East Policy Survey*, March 12, 1982.

squeezing the flow of aid to Israel.³⁴ It also let it be known that it had requested not to be informed in advance of an invasion.³⁵

During February and March, an apparent divergence in the Israeli government developed between forces clustered around Sharon, who wanted a major military assault on Lebanon before the scheduled Israeli withdrawal from the remainder of Sinai on April 25, and those like Begin, who seemed more cautious.³⁶ The motive for an attack before the April 25 deadline would have been to preclude withdrawal from the Sinai. As these Israeli officials seemed to hope, and the US administration clearly feared, an invasion could have put intolerable pressure on Egypt to respond in a "hostile" manner, thus providing a pretext for Israel to remain in the Sinai. The US appears to have made a serious effort to postpone the invasion until after April 25, thus safeguarding its important interests in the continuity of the Camp David arrangement between Israel and Egypt and in the survival of the Mubarak regime.

The immediate reaction by the US after the withdrawal was to let up on any pressure against the invasion of Lebanon and to cast about for means to reward Begin. The *Middle East Policy Survey* reported that

... key US policymakers, including Secretary of State Haig reportedly agree that Israel will need several months of 'breathing space' following the 'trauma' of the withdrawal and that during this period the Administration should devise 'confidence building' measures to restore US 'credibility' in Israel.³⁷

In the weeks before Sharon's visit to the United States, signs of Israeli preparation for attack were more blatant and alarming than ever. On May 10, the Israeli cabinet formally approved unilateral military action in Lebanon rather than "retaliation," a fact reported in the Israeli press.³⁸ Israeli Chief of Staff Eitan publicly acknowledged for the first time that the Israeli Army had been placed on alert and that troops had been concentrated along the northern border. His comment in an Israeli press interview conveyed a sense of eagerness for the fray; "... since I've spent billions of dollars building an unusual system, I can and must use it," the General explained.³⁹

Put thus on notice of the intent of the Israeli military to use the weapons it had already been given, the US government took a series of actions while Sharon was in Washington which can only have reassured him that the flow of

³⁴ *Jerusalem Post*, May 17, 1982.

³⁵ *Middle East Policy Survey*, April 23, 1982.

³⁶ *Jerusalem Post*, February 9, 1982.

³⁷ *Middle East Policy Survey*, May 7, 1982. Hedrick Smith also described a readiness in the administration to "ease political strains" with Israel. *New York Times*, May 14, 1982.

³⁸ *Jerusalem Post*, May 17, 1982.

³⁹ *Yediot Aharonot*, May 14, 1982.

armaments would swell still further. Just before Sharon's plane touched down in Washington, the Reagan Administration informally notified Congress that it intended to sell Israel 75 additional F-16 jet fighters.⁴⁰ Almost simultaneously, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted to make aid terms even more favorable to Israel than the administration was proposing. In an amendment proposed by Senator Alan Cranston, the Senate panel increased the projected economic aid by \$125 million, so that it would equal Israel's scheduled debt repayment to the US of \$910 million in 1983. Senator Charles Percy stated, "It's one of the most extraordinary proposals I have heard. It's a watershed. For the first time in the history of the United States, it makes the American taxpayer responsible for all Israeli debts and all future debts."⁴¹

While Sharon was in Washington, Secretary of State Haig was in Chicago addressing the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. His words—which one must assume, given the explosive context of Lebanese-Israeli tensions, would have been carefully selected—suggested that the US was ready to see some significant action:

... conflict cannot be managed perpetually while the problems at the root of the conflict continue to fester. The world cannot stand aside, watching in morbid fascination, as this small nation with its creative and cultured people slides further into the abyss of violence and chaos. The time has come to take concerted action in support of both Lebanon's territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and a strong central government capable of promoting a free, open, democratic and traditionally pluralist society.

The President has therefore directed Ambassador Habib to return to the Middle East soon to discuss our ideas for such action, with the cooperation of concerned states.⁴²

These words must have cheered Sharon. They certainly encouraged the Phalangists. The newsletter of a registered agent in Washington for the right-wing Lebanese forces exulted about Haig's call for "concerted action."

This new US policy orientation towards Lebanon reflects a profound change since the 1975-76 conflict began in Lebanon. For the first time, a high-ranking US official has spoken out on behalf of the independence and territorial integrity of Lebanon and against the foreign manipulations of that country. That President Reagan and Secretary of State Haig have seen the truth behind the turmoil in Lebanon is a welcome step toward returning Lebanon to the Lebanese people.⁴³

Evidence is not yet publicly available to show either that Sharon discussed with Reagan Administration officials the timing and other details of the coming invasion, or that he refrained from doing so. Certainly those who suspect that the United States was fully informed in advance, and took specific steps to

⁴⁰ *Financial Times*, May 27, 1982.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, May 26, 1982.

⁴² *New York Times*, May 27, 1982.

⁴³ *Lebanon News*, June 1982. *Lebanon News* is published by the Lebanese Information and Research Center.

support Israel, will find their suspicions deepened by the fact that on June 1, the USS Kennedy left its duty station in the Indian Ocean to sail for the Lebanese coast, and the USS Eisenhower left its station in Naples for the waters near Crete. The US vessels monitor Soviet naval activity, a matter which must have been of concern to both Israel and the US as the invasion began, and no one could predict with assurance what the Soviet response would be.

However, the pattern of US strategic support for Israeli assaults on Lebanon was already so thoroughly established that the questions of prior notice and approval on the eve of the invasion are almost irrelevant. The conjunction had occurred between a US strategic hostility to Palestinian nationalism, springing from the highly debatable concept that its advance is to the advantage of the Soviet Union and to the detriment of US interests; and the imperative apprehended by the Israeli government to obliterate the Palestinian nationalist organization as a prelude to expansionist and exclusivist plans for the West Bank and Gaza Strip.