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The Origins of the US War on Terror

Lebanon, Libya and American intervention in the Middle East

Mattia Toaldo



The Origins of the US War on Terror

The war on terror did not start after 9/11, rather its origins must be traced back much further to the Reagan administration and the 1980s. Utilizing recently declassified archival resources, Toaldo offers an in-depth analysis of how ideas and threat perceptions were shaped both by traditional US policy in the Middle East during the Cold War and by the cooperation with the Israeli right. The book examines two case studies of American intervention in the region and of its reactions to terrorism: Lebanon between 1982 and 1984 and Libya from 1981 to 1986. The first encounter with Hizbullah and the 'pre-emptive strike' against Qadhafi are analysed in light of the recently released sources.

Tracing foreign policy thinking developed by Reagan officials and Israeli intellectuals and leaders, the work demonstrates the significant impact this thinking had on US foreign policy after 9/11: ideas such as pre-emptive strikes, regime change and state-sponsorship were elaborated in the Reagan years and would later influence Bush's Global War on Terror. The book will be of great interest to scholars of US foreign policy, Middle East studies and American history.

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Introduction

Revolutions

The origins of the War on Terror are to be found, many years before 11 September 2001, during the time Ronald Reagan was in the White House. His administration has left its imprint on the American view of the fight against terrorism: the idea of terrorism as a form of warfare to which the West had to respond with warfare; the use of pre-emptive strikes against terrorist facilities or against any target deemed to have any relationship with this phenomenon; the idea that terrorism relied on sponsor states which were all connected into a 'terror network'; the need to use regime change to overthrow the regimes which ruled over these states.

This imprinting, however, was deeply influenced by the Global Cold War mindset so popular in the administration: allies and enemies were picked according to a Cold War logic; Cold War red lines shaped the choices of the administration; the concept of war was still the one of the twentieth century, not the one of the 'age of risk'. The understanding of the president was actually heavily conditioned by the Cold War logic and this conditioned also the way events in the Middle East were presented to American public opinion.

The cultural and political background of many members of the administration was another factor, along with an earlier version of the War on Terror and the influence of the Cold War mindset, which heavily conditioned the approach of the Reagan administration to terrorism in the Middle East. Many members of the administration had a particular vision of what being a conservative in America meant and this influenced their view of the Cold War. For many conservatives and

neoconservatives alike, foreign policy was a means to reform domestic policy: showing 'resolve' abroad was a good way to reshape domestic morale after the failures of the 1960s. The president himself had a peculiar way to balance his conservatism with more pragmatic leanings and can be defined as a 'pragmatic ideologue'.

All of these elements will be analysed to better describe America's confrontation with Middle Eastern terrorism in the Reagan years; a decade in which, either in this part of the world or because of movements or organizations which came from this region, the United States and its citizens would be struck several times by terrorists: in Lebanon with two separate attacks against the US embassy in Beirut; at the Marines barracks at Beirut's International Airport in what remained for a long time the deadliest attack against Americans overseas; on several planes and ships which were hijacked, especially during 1985; in the Vienna and Rome airports during Christmas holidays of that year; in a discotheque in West Berlin by terrorists who were probably linked to the Libyan regime. And these are just some examples, not the complete list of terrorist attacks against Americans in these years.

Before proceeding, several terms have to be defined properly in order to avoid misunderstandings. First, the words 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' in this book indicate individuals, groups or governments that were considered as such by the US government. These words were applied to people and situations that did not always fit into the standard definition of terrorism: an act of violence committed against individuals with the explicit goal of spreading terror.¹ The broad use of terrorism by American policy-makers to indicate any enemy in the Middle East which used unconventional means was in itself a problem because it grouped under the same label organizations and governments that had very different ideologies, structures and aims. 'Terrorism' defined the *phenomenon* in the literal meaning of this word: something that appears. The emphasis in the Reagan years was on the 'terrorist' technique of warfare rather than on the different actors who used it. This approach was one of the crucial

obstacles to a full understanding of what was going on in the region and of the motives behind attacks against Americans.

The second specification has to do with the expression 'war on terror' which is part of the title of this book. On the one hand, this underscores the elements of continuity between some of the ideas of the Reagan administration and some of the main tenets of the Global War on Terror declared by President George W. Bush after 11 September 2001. On the other hand, the expression emphasizes the fact that for the first time during the Reagan administration 'terrorism' was associated with 'war': because it was viewed as a form of warfare waged against the US and against 'Western civilization' but also because, according to some members of the administration, it needed warfare in response. This latter view, however, was not generalized in the administration and Lawrence Freedman is right to point out that the 'war on terrorism' in the Reagan years 'could be interpreted either as a reference to a real war or a rhetorical device to mobilize the nation to address some great problem'.²

The confrontation between the United States and radical Islamic terrorism has been termed 'World War 4' by some intellectuals, albeit exclusively after the events of 11 September 2001. It was the neoconservative godfather Norman Podhoretz who gave sense to this expression when he wrote on *Commentary* that following 9/11 'war had been declared on the United States, and to war we were going to go'. Only in 2001, according to him, did members of al-Qa'ida and other terrorist networks start to be considered by the American administration not as simple criminals but as 'irregular troops of a military alliance at war with the United States'.³ This framework was further clarified by other authors such as Eliot Cohen and Daniel Pipes: the Cold War was World War 3, the Global War on Terror (which is World War 4) started on 9/11 and the enemy of the United States was nothing less than 'militant Islam'.⁴

Is it really so? Did the confrontation between America and radical Islam actually begin on 11 September 2001? Andrew Bacevich, in his *The New American Militarism* disagrees and tries to provide a different narrative:

For the fact is that even as the Cold War was slowly winding its way to its denouement World War IV was already under way – indeed, had commenced two full decades before September 2001. World Wars III and IV, that is, consist of parallel rather than sequential episodes. (...) They evolved in tandem, with the former overlaid on top of and therefore obscuring the latter. (...) The real World War IV began in 1980, and Jimmy Carter of all people declared it.⁵

This work takes Bacevich's approach seriously and argues that the prevailing Cold War logic in Reagan's White House conditioned the first elaboration of some of the ideas of the successive Global War on Terror. This happened despite many of the attacks to which Americans fell victims during the 1980s had little or nothing to do with the bipolar confrontation and more to do with regional dynamics and the events of 1979 in Iran and Afghanistan.

It is precisely the blend between new threats, new enemies and old frameworks which makes the policy against Middle Eastern terrorism of the Reagan years so interesting. Ideas elaborated for a world dominated by the bipolar confrontation and by nation-states were later used in the world of the post-cold War years: one where a long or even never-ending war would be fought, as Donald Rumsfeld said, against 'the unknown, the uncertain, the unseen and the unexpected'.⁶

This book focuses on two case studies: the American intervention in Lebanon between 1982 and 1984 and the confrontation with Libya between 1981 and 1986. Reagan's Middle East policy dealt also with several other issues: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Iran-Iraq war and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, just to cite the major ones. Lebanon and Libya were picked as case studies of this work because they shared three crucial features: first, they represented situations in which the US was faced with a powerful terrorist threat directed against its troops and its civilians; second, they were cases in which the US had decided to intervene directly with its troops instead of supporting

‘freedom fighters’ or covert actions as in other parts of the world; finally, both in Lebanon and in Libya the US administration, at least initially, saw friends and foes through the lens of the Global Cold War, underemphasizing the regional dynamics.

Both in Lebanon and Libya the US thought itself to be fighting Soviet proxies and supporting friends of Western democracy. In the first case Americans received a heavy blow from an Islamic terrorist organization which had more to do with the groups which were forming Hizbullah under Iranian auspices and little to do with the Soviet Union and international communism. Qadhafi, initially perceived as a dangerous Soviet client, was later re-framed as a sponsor of international terrorism that could be hit just because of his loose ties with the USSR.

The extensive use of the Cold War paradigm is all the more important when one takes into account the changes that had started to take shape in the Middle East following the 1967 Arab–Israeli war and especially after the Iranian revolution in 1979.

In the introduction to *The Cold War and the Middle East*, Avi Shlaim and Yezid Sayigh go as far as saying that in this region ‘the Cold War had already lost some of its significance in the preceding decade [the decade before the fall of the Berlin Wall] as a primary context for the formulation of policies in both foreign and domestic spheres’.⁷

In his chapter on ‘The Middle East, the Great Powers, and the Cold War’, Fred Halliday goes even further saying that

It could be argued that if the Cold War is defined as the dominance of international politics by the Soviet–US competition, then it ended not in the late 1980s but a decade earlier, with the Iranian revolution in 1979 (...). The main line of division and conflict was not that of the Cold War, but that between the Islamic revolutionary movement in Iran and the states opposed to it.⁸

To better understand the Middle East of the 1980s, therefore, one has to look at what happened in the late 1970s.

1979, revolutions and invasions in the Greater Middle East

The year 1979 marked the beginning of the fifteenth century in the Islamic calendar and indeed it was a new era that was taking shape in the Muslim world. In this year, General Zia started what he called the 'Islamization' of Pakistan substituting British common law with Islamic law. On 20 November, the new-year day in the Islamic calendar, a crowd of religious hardliners opposed to the Saud family took control of the Great Mosque in Mecca. They surrendered only after a siege that lasted for two weeks.

This year would be a turning point for Islamic fundamentalism as one of the major political movements in the Middle East. Moreover, for the first time this movement would control one of the most important states in the region. As French historian Gilles Kepel wrote in his *Jihad*, 'after 1979 no one, in the Muslim world and beyond, ignored the expansion of the Islamic phenomenon'.²

As often happens, 1979 was the result of a process that had started some years before. Reinhard Schulze convincingly argues that the events of 1973, with the final defeat of Arab nationalist regimes and the oil shock, laid the ground for a major shift in the balance of power in the Middle East from (relatively) secular Egypt to the more fundamentalist regimes of Libya and Saudi Arabia. In 1972 Qadhafi had introduced the use of Islamic law (*šaria*) in Libya, putting it into the forefront of Islamization¹⁰ The rise of oil prices gave an enormous amount of money to these regimes and directed Arab emigration toward the Gulf and Libya. These immigrants helped to spread a more conservative vision of Islam back home. Finally, in the years between 1973 and 1978, the Organization for the Islamic Conference, backed by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, helped to transform the Islamic discourse into the main ideology of previously leftist-dominated resistance movements in the Muslim world.¹¹

The Islamic reaction in Iran had started with the American-assisted modernization attempts carried out by the Shah in the 1960s, the so-called White Revolution.^{[12](#)} Since then, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the opposition to the Shah from within the Shiite clergy, had been exiled first to Turkey, then to Najaf and finally to Paris. In his home country, the rise of oil prices and the industrial modernization carried out by the Shah had effectively created a middle class which nevertheless did not wield any political power. By the mid- 1970s it was clear to these people that most of the money coming from the oil market was being squandered in weapons and in unrealistic public works. When oil prices started to decrease, the middle class which had grown out of the modernization process started to feel the weight of the economic crisis. As Melvyn Leffler noted, the more the Shah repressed the opposition, the more it grew.

Leftists, moderates, and Islamic reformers focused their wrath on the Shah while competing for support in urban streets and rural towns. From exile in Iraq and then in Paris, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini spat forth his hatred of the Shah, of America and of modernity. Like the communists, he called for justice and blamed the woes of humankind on capitalist greed; unlike the communists, whom he detested, he called for the restoration of God's law, the Sharia. Political Islam had found a voice.^{[13](#)}

At the same time, the Carter administration, coherently with its policy of promotion of human rights, had pressured the Shah to ease off the repression. At the middle of the decade, in Iran an entire social class was becoming poorer but was also granted more freedom of speech and action to cry out its disappointment.

Also, the limited political liberalization, according to Kepel, gave Iranians the impression that US support for the Shah was waning away, thus emboldening the opposition. During the so-called 'Tehran Spring' in 1977 some forms of freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of assembly

were guaranteed. The secular middle class was the first to come out from silence but also the least organized. In a matter of months, the leading role in the opposition to the Shah went to Khomeini and his followers who could rely on an efficient network of mosques and buildings to hold their meetings. Mass demonstrations took place on 10 and 11 December 1978 and led to the strike of the workers of the oil sector which seriously curtailed the Shah's revenues. On 16 January 1979 the Shah left Iran to go into exile. On 1 February Ayatollah Khomeini was back in Tehran, greeted by an immense crowd.¹⁴

To understand how this could have happened – and happened so quickly – in one of the main bastions for US policy in the entire Greater Middle East, one has to look also at the debate that took place inside the Carter administration and between the administration in Washington and the US embassy in Tehran.

The regional experts, such as member of the National Security Council (NSC) staff Gary Sick, had tried to warn National Security Advisor Brzezinski that the narrative of the unrest created by the ruling Pahlavi family was unreliable:

Although the government is making reference to Communist support and outside involvement, what may be the true threat to the Shah's regime [is] the reactionary Muslim right wing which finds his modernization program too liberal and moving too fast away from the traditional values of Iranian society.¹⁵

The inability to distinguish among the different parts of the opposition was going to be one of the weaknesses of the US administration in this crisis. In late 1978, President Carter had been torn by conflicting advice: on one side National Security Advisor Brzezinski was more concerned with the global balance of power; on the other side, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was more sensitive to the analysis of regional experts like Gary Sick.¹⁶ Therefore, Brzezinski advised Carter to side with the Shah: a military repression was needed to crush the rebellion. Vance, instead, thought that the president had to

convince the Shah to strike a deal with the moderate elements of the rebellion.

The US embassy was a supporter of this latter thinking. In November 1978, the US ambassador in Tehran, Robert Sullivan, had proposed in a memo to ‘think the unthinkable’: ‘patch together a reformist coalition – as Douglas Little described Sullivan’s plan – of pro-Western military officers, middle-class professionals, and religious moderates capable of reining in the Islamic extremists’. Little, however, notes that ‘few inside the Carter administration found Sullivan’s thoughts thinkable’ mainly because they did not believe that the Shah was going to be overthrown.¹⁷

Also, there was an ideological reason behind the inability to come to terms with the real nature of the Iranian revolutionaries: this was probably another case of that fear of revolutionary change that Michael Hunt has described as one of the main features of the ideology of US foreign policy.¹⁸ As NSC staff member Gary Sick later commented, the fear of revolution blocked US policy-makers and did not help them to understand the differences between the various elements of the opposition to the Shah which, according to him, provided them with some opportunities: ‘The emergence in Iran of a coalition of non-communist, non-fanatic Islamic and pro-Western moderates operating within a responsible constitutional framework was profoundly to be preferred to the virulently anti-Western theocracy that ultimately assumed power.’¹⁹

Brzezinski, however, seemed to be more concerned about the potential global risks coming from Iran than with political analysis of the opposition to the Shah. In early December, he had asked the Defense Department to make contingency plans for deploying US forces to guard the oil fields. On 2 December he wrote to Carter what later came to be known as the ‘Arc of Crisis’ memorandum:

If you draw an arc on the globe stretching from Chittagong (Bangladesh) through Islamabad to Aden, you will be pointing to the area of currently our greatest vulnerability (...). There is no question that we are confronting the beginning of a major crisis, in some

ways similar to the one in Europe in the late 1940s. Fragile social and political structures in a region of vital importance to us are threatened with fragmentation.

The resulting political vacuum might well be filled by elements more sympathetic to the Soviet Union (...). A shift in Iranian/Saudi orientation would have a direct impact on trilateral cohesion [meaning the US, Western Europe and Japan] and (...) in a sentence it would mean a fundamental shift in the global structure of power.²⁰

The power struggle that was taking place in the Middle East became, in Brzezinski's analysis, part of the global struggle with the Soviet Union. Not by chance, on 28 December he wrote to Carter that 'the disintegration of Iran would be the most massive American defeat since the beginning of the Cold War, overshadowing in its real consequences the setback in Vietnam'.²¹

In January 1979 Brzezinski insisted with Carter that the US should organize a military takeover that could produce a caretaker government made up of pro-Western military officers. Carter, however, according to Douglas Little, wanted to avoid civil war in Iran and encouraged the Shah to flee the country, which he did on 16 January.²² Leffler argues that another, more profound, motive was behind Carter's reluctance to intervene militarily:

All through the Iranian crisis – Leffler wrote – Vietnam was much on his mind. American embroilments in foreign civil wars were bound to fail and were incompatible with US beliefs. Détente required self-discipline in the face of strategic setbacks. (...) Patience was therefore imperative.²³

The Kremlin, indeed, had feared a US intervention in Iran in the last months of 1978. On 17 November, Brezhnev informed Carter that he had received reports about a possible American military move in Iran and warned that such a move would

‘endanger Soviet security’. The Soviet leader proposed that he and Carter issue a joint declaration renouncing publicly any intervention. Carter replied that there was no plan to intervene in Tehran but that the US support for the Shah was not going to be withdrawn. Also, he warned Brezhnev tactfully against spreading rumours of a US intervention in order to justify its own military moves: ‘I am sure that you appreciate that any such interference would be a matter of the utmost gravity to us.’²⁴

The irony of the events of those months was well described by Raymond Garthoff: ‘The American reaction to events such as the Iranian revolution has been to fear Soviet intervention, while the Soviet reaction has been to fear American intervention in this area adjoining the Soviet Union.’²⁵ The same kind of paradox arose over a neighbouring country: Afghanistan. Here, however, the Soviet Union did decide to intervene in the end, unlike what had happened to the Americans for Iran.

Afghanistan had entered the Soviet reach on 27 April 1978 when the local communists had staged a *coup d’état* with the help of several members in the army.²⁶ As Melvyn Leffler found out through his archival research, the Soviets initially did not favour the ‘revolution’ since they already had good relations with the previous government headed by Daoud.²⁷ The Afghan communists had soon divided between the extremist *Khalq* faction led by Taraki and Amin and the pro-Soviet *Parcham* faction whose head was Karmal. The *Khalq* faction had actually prevailed in purging the members of the *Parcham* faction and pushing them into exile to Moscow. When Soviet leader Ponomarev arrived in Kabul in September, Taraki told him of tempting promises he had received from the US. Ponomarev backed saying that the KGB had reports of his links with US intelligence.

To tighten their grip on the ambiguous and unreliable Afghani leaders, the Soviets decided to sign a treaty of friendship with their regime in December 1978 while asking both Amin and Taraki to show restraint and avoid persecuting their opponents or stirring up an Islamic reaction in the countryside. Unfortunately for the Soviets, the two radical

leaders did not comply and on 15 March the Islamic fundamentalist guerrilla dealt a severe blow to their army in Herat. Taraki's and Amin's soldiers deserted or dwindled, giving the impression that the communist regime was really in danger. Taraki and Amin started to ask for direct Soviet intervention to shore up their position. This started a discussion inside the Soviet politburo which, in some aspects, echoed that which took place inside the US administration over Iran.

Gromyko, for example, wrote that 'if we lose Afghanistan now and it turns against the Soviet Union this will result in a sharp setback to our foreign policy'. Soviet leaders, however, seemed to have a better understanding of the threat of Islamic fundamentalism than their American colleagues. 'What is the problem?' Ustinov rhetorically asked. 'The problem is that the leadership of Afghanistan did not sufficiently appreciate the role of Islamic fundamentalists.' Andropov, on his part, added that Afghanistan was far from being in a situation favourable for the outbreak of a socialist revolution. Gromyko agreed with both of them and outlined the risks for Détente coming from a Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.²⁸

Requests for intervention, however, did not stop with the spring of 1979. Soviet distrust of Amin was growing both because of his alleged links with US intelligence and because of his ruthlessness in repressing the opposition. In August 1979 a plot was organized with the help of Taraki to overthrow Amin. The undesired outcome brought Taraki to jail where he was later killed, leaving Amin as the only man in charge in Kabul. Even though Soviet support officially did not wane during the following weeks, suspicions continued. On 2 December, Andropov sent an handwritten note to Brezhnev: 'we have been receiving informations,' he wrote, 'about Amin behind-the-scenes activities which might mean his political reorientation to the West'.²⁹ Soviets feared that Afghanistan could be turned into a new US base following the fall of the Iranian bastion. Pershing II missiles along with intelligence centres to eavesdrop the Soviets could be implanted in the central Asian country, as was planned in Europe.

To avoid this, a regime change was needed: the unreliable Amin was to be replaced by the pro-Soviet Karmal, with the use of Soviet troops if needed. According to Leffler, at this point the Soviets no longer feared disrupting Détente: ‘after the decision to station medium-range missiles in Europe – Soviet leaders concluded – there was nothing to lose’.³⁰ Also, Soviet leaders were convinced that the war would not last long, three or four weeks, as Brezhnev had told ambassador to the US Dobrynin. On 12 December the final decision to intervene in Afghanistan was taken.³¹ Amin was ousted and Karmal, coming to Kabul with Soviet lorries, was brought to power. The Soviets, according to Odd Arne Westad, were subject to the same illusion that would strike the Americans in Lebanon some years later: the idea that their intervention could save a regime that was not able to stand by itself.³²

Further confirmation to Leffler’s research has still to come but his basic conclusion is shared also by Gilles Kepel: the invasion was the result of a fundamental weakness of Soviet positions in Afghanistan, not the first act of a march toward the Persian Gulf.³³ It was, however, perceived rather differently in the West:

The Soviet arrival in Kabul was perceived as a continuation of the 1800s Anglo-Russian ‘great game’ in which the Tsar had tried to have access to ‘warm waters’. That became, in the context of post-1945 relations, an open violation of the international balance of power that had come out of Yalta and also a threat for western security made even worse by the proximity of the oil fields in the Persian gulf and the ongoing unrest in Iran.³⁴

America’s strategic shift

The invasion of Afghanistan, coupled with the demise of any credible secular alternative inside Iran, changed the American perception of regional events which came to be seen, even more than in the past, through the lens of the zero-sum game with the USSR. As Kepel notes, in those months the US had

lost one of its main allies (the Shah) while the Soviets seemed to have gained a new stronghold in Afghanistan, gaining a vantage point to the strategic Persian Gulf. Later, however, events would prove to have a different meaning: the US-backed Afghani *mujahedin* would constitute, as Kepel argues, a ‘Sunni alternative’ to the Iranian extremists helping to turn Afghanistan in one of the main causes of the collapse of the USSR.³⁵

The perception of a Soviet offensive in this part of the world was strengthened by the treaty of friendship between the Marxist South Yemen and the USSR in October 1979, which seemed to threaten the American policy aimed at obtaining military facilities in the Horn of Africa.³⁶ The scenario in the Greater Middle East looked bleak to American policy-makers:

The invasion [of Afghanistan] – summed up Fritz Ermath, the Soviet expert on Brzezinski’s staff – sharply increases the prospect of eventual Soviet military domination of the greater Middle East and US exclusion from the region, except perhaps from Israel. Next we shall very probably see civil strife in Iran with direct Soviet involvement, a PDRY [Popular Democratic Republic of Yemen, communist] take-over of North Yemen, increased Soviet efforts to destabilize Turkey and Pakistan, and intense Soviet pressure on other states in the region to line up with Soviet interests.³⁷

As Bacevich points out, these events led President Carter to conclude that ‘treating the Middle East as a secondary theatre, ancillary to the Cold War, no longer made sense’.³⁸ The statement of the Carter Doctrine came with the State of the Union address on 23 January 1980:

Let our position be absolutely clear: an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will

be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.^{[39](#)}

According to Bacevich, with the statement of the doctrine that was to bear his name, Carter decided to throw ‘the weight of American military power into the balance’ to protect the Persian Gulf.^{[40](#)} Other authors, such as Melvyn Leffler, point out the return to a more traditional pattern of US foreign policy entailed in the doctrine which ‘revived’ containment and ‘resurrected’ the Cold War.^{[41](#)} This revival, however, was in contrast with the nature of the revolution in Iran and of the guerrilla that had stirred up Soviet intervention in Afghanistan: they were both rooted in Political Islam, though in two different branches of that.

Behind the Carter Doctrine was a new strategic thinking by the US government developed as a consequence of the events which had occurred during the late 1970s. The interest in the Persian Gulf dated back to Carter’s first year in office when Presidential Directive 18 was issued. This document stressed the ‘essential equivalence’ in the strategic sphere between the two superpowers and requested that the US enhance its conventional forces also through the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force which was described as follows:

The United States will maintain a deployment force of light divisions with strategic mobility independent of overseas bases and logistical support, which includes moderate naval and tactical air forces, and limited land combat forces. These forces will be designed for use against both local forces and forces projected by the USSR based on analyses of requirements in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, or Korea.^{[42](#)}

The Rapid Deployment Force was not implemented before 1979, according to Stivers, because the ‘liberals’ inside the Carter administration were pushing for a US–Soviet naval arms-free zone in the Indian Ocean. Neither the Marine Corps nor any other corps in the US military pressed hard for its implementation.^{[43](#)}

Raymond Garthoff observed that this project was perceived from the beginning by the Soviets as just another move to exclude them from the Middle East. Attempts in this direction, according to Garthoff, were dated back by them to the very outset of Détente in 1972. ‘In the arc of crisis – he wrote – Moscow saw the United States or its allies and associates as having almost invariably taken the first step in external intervention or involvement.’⁴⁴ This mutual fear regarding the arc of crisis would lead eventually, as we have seen, to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US sanctions.

Njolstad is one of the authors who stress the continuity between Carter’s last years in office and the early policy of the Reagan administration. He, too, like Bacevich underlines that, following the fall of the Shah ‘the Carter administration implemented a shift in strategic priority away from Europe and in favour of the Persian gulf/Middle East region’. The shift, however, had begun some years before the fall of the Shah and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan even though this latter event ‘gave the effort a new urgency as well as improved prospects for success’. Signs of this acceleration were evident throughout 1979: in March an updated version of 1978 Comprehensive Net Assessment was approved. It called for an increased military presence in the Gulf. The urgent task was to transform the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) which had been called for in PD-18 from a ‘paper tiger’ into a ‘real military factor’. The first RDF units started to exercise in the region in the second half of 1980. In tandem with this force, a ‘regional security framework’ was devised to assure a long-term US military presence in the Persian Gulf.⁴⁵ This would be an informal alliance including Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Persian Gulf monarchies. It was based on two assumptions: that Saudi Arabia and Jordan would acquiesce in the Egyptian– Israeli peace; and that the common threat represented by the USSR and Arab radical states would help to pack the alliance together. Even though the first assumption would prove to be wrong before the end of the Carter administration, the second was assumed by the Reagan administration and used to repackage the ‘regional security framework’ into its policy of ‘Strategic Consensus’.

Regardless of the actual working of these alliances, the United States was indeed shifting its strategic attention towards the Persian Gulf. This shift had been conceptualized some months before the statement of the Carter Doctrine in the 'Limited Contingency Study' drafted at the Defense Department under the direction of then Deputy Assistant Secretary for regional programmes Paul Wolfowitz.⁴⁶

He had been previously struck by a seminar held by Geoffrey Kemp, a young professor who would eventually become special assistant to the president for National Security Affairs under Reagan. In his lectures at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, according to Mann's recollection, Kemp argued that the American military was overly obsessed with defending Europe while the real danger facing the US was the possibility that Soviet forces would have moved southward, into the Persian Gulf. This vision fitted well with the analysis by Team B (a neoconservative cluster of defence intellectuals and politicians) that the administration was underestimating the Soviet threat. Wolfowitz hired both Kemp and Dennis Ross (another quite successful figure in the subsequent years and to date) to write the Limited Contingency Study. It began with a very assertive statement: 'We and our major industrialized allies have a vital and growing stake in the Persian Gulf region because of our need for Persian Gulf oil and because events in the Persian Gulf affect the Arab-Israeli conflict.' Therefore, 'the importance of Persian Gulf oil cannot easily be exaggerated' because if the Soviet Union were to control it, the impact would 'probably destroy NATO and the US-Japanese alliance without recourse to war by the Soviets'.⁴⁷

This idea was a relevant breakthrough away from the traditional Cold War strategies of the US military. The previous focus of the Pentagon's planning had always been the invasion through the Fulda Gap in Germany, along NATO's northern flank in Norway or across its southern flank in Greece and Turkey. Wolfowitz asked: what if another country, directly from the Gulf, decided to threaten the viability of oil fields? What if Iraq did so? The description of Iraq was very similar to the one later given of Libya: 'a worrisome element because of [its] radical-Arab stance, its anti-Western attitudes,

its dependence on Soviet arm sales, and its willingness to foment trouble in other local nations'.⁴⁸

The Persian Gulf oil was the big strategic prize for the super-power that controlled the area. The US could not afford to leave it to the Soviets. Carter did not hide this to the American public when he delivered his State of the Union Address on 23 January 1980:

The region which is now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance: It contains more than two-thirds of the world's exportable oil. The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world's oil must flow. The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position, therefore, that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil.⁴⁹

The Carter Doctrine started to shift US policy focus toward the Middle East and the Persian gulf, exactly what had been predicted in Wolfowitz's Limited Contingency Study. Other developments further confirmed this shift, as Mann noted: US officials started to encourage friendly states in the Middle East to build larger airfields and storage facilities that American forces could use; in 1980 the exercise Bright Star was carried out jointly by US and Egyptian troops; the year after Carter left office, the Reagan administration created CENTCOM, the new military command for the Middle East.⁵⁰

Carter's revival of the Cold War

The shift towards the Persian Gulf took place at the same time in which the Cold War entered a second phase after the interval of Détente. While the strategic shift was justified, in the eyes of American policy-makers, by this revival of the Cold War, it had been accelerated by the events in Iran and Afghanistan which had more to do with the rise of Political Islam than with the Cold War logic. This contradiction

between threat perceptions and reality would prove to be crucial during the Reagan years.

As a reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter imposed the grain embargo, curtailed technological cooperation with the USSR and boycotted the Moscow 1980 Olympic games. On 2 January 1980 the National Security Council also approved, along with these sanctions, a plan for covert support of the *mujahedin*.⁵¹ As Gates recorded, before this NSC meeting Carter had already given the green light to the CIA to proceed with the plan.⁵² Actually, the support for the Afghani opposition dated even further back to the previous spring when, on 6 April, a Special Coordination Committee had approved a plan for economic and military aid to the *mujahedin*.

Also, the relationship with many regional allies such as Pakistan which had been chastised for their violations of human rights and their nuclear proliferation was resumed. As Garthoff recorded, a ‘massive build-up of the American naval presence in the Indian Ocean–Persian Gulf region’ was carried out along with an increase in the weapons supply to Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Garthoff, however, warns that this support was changing nature with respect to what it had been in the early 1970s:

The new containment approach marked a very fundamental revision of policy. The Carter Doctrine was not only a reaffirmation and extension of the Truman and Eisenhower doctrines of an earlier political and geopolitical era; it was also in part a repudiation of the post-Vietnam Nixon doctrine. No longer would the United States expect other countries in the first instance to defend their own security.⁵³

Having moved away from Détente and having stepped up American military posture in the greater Middle East did not make Carter the champion of American militarism. Instead, he was to link his name to what was perceived as one of the major American military failures in recent times. This would in turn condition Reagan’s approach to Middle Eastern

terrorism: no more, he thought, the US would suffer a humiliation to the like of this.

In October 1979 the Democratic president had let the exiled Iranian Shah enter the US for medical treatment for his cancer. Iranian radicals, however, suspected that this was part of an American plot to return the Shah to the throne as had been the case in 1953. But there was more than that. The first months of 1979 had seen the victory of Islamic fundamentalists against the secular nationalists to gain the soul and the body of the revolution.⁵⁴ Initially, after Khomeini's arrival in Tehran, the provisional government had been run by Mehdi Bazargan and members of Mossadeq's National Front. These people played a decisive role in assuring the continuity of state functions during the revolutionary period. In March a referendum had approved the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in the following months the Experts' Assembly drafted the new theocratic constitution.

The assault on the US embassy which took place on 4 November 1979 must be seen through these events: as Kepel argues, not only the emerging Islamic radicals wanted to protest against Carter's help for the Shah, they also saw the attack against the embassy as a tool to oust the secular nationalist and crush the liberal and leftist opposition to the Islamic republic. As a consequence of the assault, 66 Americans were taken hostage, the Bazargan cabinet resigned and the head of the moderate clergy, Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, was arrested.⁵⁵

The stand-off between the Carter administration and the Islamic Republic riveted the world attention and led to the suspension by the US of Iranian oil imports and the imposition of economic sanctions which succeeded in the release of only 14 hostages.

As he had done before the outbreak of the revolution, Carter showed himself to be reluctant to use military force. On 13 December, five weeks after the start of the kidnapping, he said that Americans had learned from Vietnam that 'to become unnecessarily involved in the internal affairs of another country when our own security is not directly threatened is a

serious mistake'. The overcoming of this fear of using military force and being caught in a quagmire abroad, referred usually as the Vietnam Syndrome, would be one of Reagan's main goals. Not everyone, though, shared Carter's caution. National Security Advisor Brzezinski recommended greater pressure including the possibility of assisting efforts to unseat Khomeini. This, however, was still not a good moment in the US for regime change theories and Brzezinski's suggestions were overruled by Carter's willingness to save Détente in some form. In a few weeks, however, as we have seen the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan would radically change Carter's mind on the relationship with the Soviets.

As months passed with the hostages still under captivity, Carter faced the prospect of an electoral campaign with this issue as its focus. The idea of a rescue operation gained strength. Operation Eagle Claw was launched in great secrecy on 24 April 1980 but, to Carter's chagrin, it collapsed before it even took place. Equipment failures led the commanders to abort the mission before it even met any opposition from the Iranians. Eight Americans died as a result of the collision of two aircraft while they were refuelling at a remote staging area ('Desert One') in the Iranian desert. The failure had several causes, as David Martin and John Walcott pointed out: first, the lack of good maintenance for the helicopters and the aircraft involved; second, the men involved in Eagle Claw came from different branches of the armed forces and had never worked together before; third, there had not been any specific drill on this kind of operation in the past; finally, good intelligence was lacking.⁵⁶ 'The disastrous failure at Desert One' NSC staff member Gary Sick later commented, 'was a terrible blow to the United States at a moment when it badly needed a victory.'⁵⁷

As Andrew Bacevich noted, not only was Eagle Claw Carter's low point, it also demonstrated that the US armed forces had 'hit the bottom'. This event 'persuaded Americans that the enfeebled state of the armed services had become intolerable. This least militaristic of recent presidents inadvertently created the conditions for the militarization of US policy.'⁵⁸

Moreover, the US military was not the only American product who had been defeated by anti-Western radicals in Iran. The modernization theories that the US government and intellectual elite had started to translate into policies in the late 1950s, and which had been tested in Iran, were also crushed by the events of 1979 and 1980 in Tehran. As Douglas Little concluded,

Wedded to the belief that economic development and westernization would bring political stability to pro-American regimes from Tehran to Tripoli, every administration from Eisenhower's to Carter's embraced a reformist agenda that had unintended revolutionary consequences. More often than not, US backed programs such as the Shah's White Revolution (...) inadvertently raised popular expectations to unrealistic levels and triggered a violent backlash.⁵⁹

The last year in office of the Carter administration was, therefore, both on the practical and on the theoretical levels, an anticipation of the Reagan administration, as Raymond Garthoff argues:

In retrospect, while the first three years of the Carter administration represented basically a continuation of the Nixon–Ford policy of Détente, the fourth and last year was a precursor to the Reagan turn toward confrontation (...). After January 1980 [the structure of negotiations with the USSR] was largely dismantled and the aim subject to such a major condition – Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan – that Détente became inoperative. In many ways January 1980 was a sharper turning point than January 1981, when Ronald Reagan was inaugurated and repudiated Détente.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, with the hostage crisis in Tehran the United States had faced for the first time the threat of Islamic radicals against American civilians. The USSR, too, had confronted an asymmetrical threat coming from Islamic radicals though indirectly through the Afghan guerrilla which had destabilized

its clients in Kabul. Both superpowers had misunderstood the rise of Political Islam and saw events in Afghanistan and Iran only through the lens of the zero-sum game of the Global Cold War. The United States reacted to events in these two countries with the statement of the Carter Doctrine which started the American strategic shift towards the Persian Gulf. Carter's successor would inherit this strategic shift and combine it with his own ideas and inclinations. Moreover, the main features of Reagan's coalition and of the elite that came to power with his victory have to be described in order to better understand the policy of this administration towards the Middle East.

The Reagan revolution

Jack Kemp had been a successful quarterback early in his professional life but on 15 July 1980 he was not playing football in Detroit. Instead, he was addressing the Republican National Convention who would appoint Ronald Reagan as the candidate to the US presidency for the Grand Old Party:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

There is a tidal wave coming in this country – a political tidal wave as powerful as the one that hit in 1932, when an era of Republican dominance gave way to the New Deal. Soon we are going to find millions of Americans of every racial, cultural, and economic background surprising themselves by voting Republican (...). Today we represent the majority philosophy of the American people. In November, we will convert this philosophic majority into a governing majority (...). We are going to get that majority not just because people have grown tired of the Democrats, but because they see in the Republican Party a better chance to realize the American idea.⁶¹

To be clearer about what the 'American idea' was according to him, he added:

[In the US] for the first time in history, a government was established, not with the power to bestow happiness – or withhold it – but to create the climate in which each individual, guided by Judaeo-Christian values, could pursue his or her own happiness.⁶²

The tidal wave did hit the US and the Democratic Party on 4 November 1980 when Ronald Reagan won the popular vote by a margin of 51.6 per cent to Carter's 41.7 per cent and captured 44 states, winning the electoral vote 489 to 49. The opinion polls taken just the weekend before election day had predicted a toss-up; it turned out to be just slightly less than a landslide.

Reagan had been decisively underestimated by his critics, who pointed at his supposed lack of intellectual skills. Democratic insider Clark Clifford defined him as an 'amiable dunce', a description which would, through the years, be turned into David Broder's remark that 'a desert' existed 'between Ronald Reagan's ears'. Even one of his speech writers, Peggy Noonan, in what she called 'a moment of exasperation', referred to his mind as 'such a barren terrain'.⁶³

Despite all these critics, Ronald Reagan turned out to be one of the most important American presidents in recent decades. While John Patrick Diggins might be exaggerating when he writes that 'he may be, after Lincoln, one of the two or three truly great presidents in American history',⁶⁴ it is fair to say that he brought about an electoral and political revolution in the US which continues its effects still to this day. As Eric Foner wrote in his *The Story of American Freedom*, 'Reagan's administration marked the end of the New Deal as a politically dominant set of public policies, ideas, and political alliances'.⁶⁵

Reagan's coalition, as Kemp had wishfully predicted during the 1980 convention, would replace the 40-year-old New Deal coalition and produce that dramatic change in US politics that many authors have labelled as the Reagan Revolution.⁶⁶ This expression is therefore used here in this sense: as a profound change in coalitions and ideas whereas in

actual policies it is probably wiser to say that there was an 'evolution' from the last years of the Carter administration.

A very incisive definition of the combination of Reagan's revolutionary ideas and coalition with his balanced (or contradictory) policies is given by Robert M. Collins who defined him as a 'pragmatic ideologue'.⁶⁷ '[Reagan] produced a political transformation that altered substantially the terms of debate in American politics and public life, while at the same time ensuring that the changes wrought would be short of revolutionary.'⁶⁸

His role in the shaping of his administration's policy, also, should not be overstated. He was not very involved in the *concrete* shaping of US strategy in the Middle East: it is actually fair to wonder *if there ever was* a comprehensive strategy in the fight against terrorism during his administration.⁶⁹ If it existed it was hardly the work of his mind. More realistically, the main strategist for the war on terror in the Reagan administration was George Shultz, and only from 1984 onward. Also, his strategy was not shared by other members of the cabinet such as Caspar Weinberger and was implemented only partially with the strike against Libya in 1986.

The president, however, influenced the way the threats in the Middle East were perceived initially within a clear Cold War framework and in the way the administration policy was presented to US public opinion. This is why it is worthwhile to discuss the roots of Reagan's policy in his coalition and in his rise to political success.

First of all, the 'philosophical majority' to which Kemp referred was built in the course of several decades, when liberalism was still the hegemonic thinking of the American ruling elite. Intellectually, a few authors had been crucial to the rebirth of conservative thought in the late 1950s. A decade earlier, in 1948, Richard Weaver had started with his *Ideas Have Consequences* in which he argued against nominalism and the philosophical tendency to reject absolute truth.⁷⁰ Eric Foner noted that the importance of this book for the later conservative movement rested on its mourning of the

‘dissolution of the West’ and its calling for ‘a return to the transcendental, namely Christian values’.⁷¹ Another philosopher, Leo Strauss, argued in favour of absolute truths, even though of a different, classical nature. According to James Mann, Strauss’ writings and teachings had a tremendous influence on many conservative and neoconservative intellectuals of later years, among them Paul Wolfowitz whose Limited Contingency Study had had such a tremendous impact on the strategic shift towards the Middle East. The belief in the West and its absolute, indisputable values carried with it some concrete policy prescriptions.

A few of Straussians believed that the philosopher’s ideas carried with them a strong doubt about the value of the United Nations and other international organizations. Such institutions were either ‘steps on the way to the universal homogenization of human beings, or foolish examples of our loss of confidence in our justice and power’ wrote Mark Blitz, one of Strauss’ disciples in an essay on the political implications of his philosophy.⁷²

In his essay on Reagan’s transformation of American conservatism, Ted McAllister adds one more author to this conservative pantheon, Whitaker Chambers with his *Witness*.⁷³ In McAllister’s account, Chambers characterized the struggle with the Soviet Union

As a cosmic war between two mutually exclusive faiths, communism and freedom (...). Nothing less than the fate of the Judeo-Christian civilization, which is to say Western civilization, was at stake in this gigantic struggle for power. But the struggle was also a timeless one, emerging out of the Garden of Eden, between a vision of Man alone or of Man in relationship with God.

It is interesting to note how, in the course of the Reagan administration, the threat to Western civilization and the importance of Judeo-Christian values which can be seen in

these conservative authors would be emphasized to stress the dangers coming from terrorism. For the moment, however, McAllister concludes that with Chambers 'the primary intellectual weapons of a conservative movement were now in the arsenal'.⁷⁴

Conservatives of this kind, centring on moral authority, would be joined by libertarian thinkers such as Hayek and Friedman who opposed the liberal hegemony on a different, more material ground. For them, it was important to reduce the role of big government in order to preserve American freedom, conceived mainly as the right to property and free enterprise. Reconciling this 'libertarian freedom' with Weaver's and Chambers' search for 'moral authority' seemed to be an impossible task, as Foner argued. The man who achieved this result was William Buckley Jr, editor of the *National Review*, which from the late 1950s managed to be the main forum for conservative thought. Incidentally, Buckley had a strong personal relationship with Reagan which is demonstrated by the tremendous amount of personal letters, sometimes on a weekly basis, between him and the president that are now stored at the Reagan Library. Thanks to Buckley's efforts, libertarians and moral conservatives coalesced in the fight against liberal big government at home and in the 'cosmic war' against the USSR abroad.⁷⁵

These two elements, domestic moral renewal and anti-communism, would be tied together in conservative words and deeds during the Reagan years. Moreover, they would influence Reagan's Middle East policy each in a different manner. Anti-communism would translate into the effort to understand and present the issues of the region through the prism of the Cold War. Those seeking moral renewal at home would rally around the flag of the new American militarism meeting with those members of the foreign policy elite seeking to restore American prestige with Middle Eastern allies. Andrew Bacevich gave a complex and comprehensive explanation of the social and intellectual roots of the rise of the new American militarism during the Reagan years. He defined this militarism as a combination of two tendencies: first, what C. Wright Mills called 'military metaphysics – a tendency to

see international problems as military problems and to discount the likelihood of finding a solution except through military means’;⁷⁶ second, the tendency to have a romanticized view of soldiers, ‘to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness’.⁷⁷

Bacevich interprets this militarism as a reaction to the defeat in Vietnam and to the perceived destruction of traditional American values caused by the 1960s’ counter-cultures. Several social actors gathered around this idea. First of all, obviously, the military apparatus whose prestige had been squandered during the Vietnam years; second, neoconservative intellectuals who thought that Détente had to be repudiated and that the Soviets had to be fought seriously; third, evangelical Christians who thought that military ethics could provide those moral values that had been lost in the 1960s, as well as that both the military build-up and the intellectual acceptance of the ‘just war’ paradigm were the right tools to fight the Soviets and win the battle of Armageddon; fourth, ‘defence intellectuals’ who passed from the study of ways to avoid war (deterrence) to the preparation of ‘smart wars’ which could be fought and won quickly and with few body bags.⁷⁸

Reagan’s coalition was obviously wider than that which supported the new militarism; nonetheless none of its components was against this idea. Foner described it as a ‘Polyglot coalition of old and new conservatism – Sun Belt suburbanites and working-class ethnic Catholics; anti-government crusaders and advocates of a more aggressive foreign policy; libertarian ideologues and those seeking to restore “traditional moral values” to American life.’⁷⁹

This coalition emerged in grassroots movements having their origins in the 1960s when a significant part of the American population started to part ways from the Democratic party. This conservative reaction to the last phase of the hegemony of the New Deal coalition had been provoked not only by Johnson’s Civil Rights and Voting Acts (along with the bussing of schools) but also by decisions taken by the ‘progressive’ Warren Supreme Court such as the banning of prayer in public schools (1962), the liberalization of

pornography (1962 and then again in 1964), the legalization of contraceptives and the birth-control pill (1965), the ban on the death penalty (1972) and the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade* which guaranteed women's freedom of choice on abortion in 1973. This, according to Micklethwait and Wooldridge, was a 'succession of outrages' for what had been labelled in 1964 as the 'coalition of the fed-up' supporting the ultra-conservative Republican candidate to the presidency, Barry Goldwater.^{[80](#)}

In these same years of frustration for many Americans, Reagan and his renowned optimism started to emerge as a national political actor. Reagan's biography demonstrated that in America there was always some reason to be optimistic.^{[81](#)} He was a Washington outsider who had been raised in Dixon, a small town in Illinois, went to a college of only 250 students not far from his home town and made his fortune during the Great Depression – first as a radio announcer in Iowa and then as an actor in California where he became a union leader (ironically, he was the first union leader to ever sit in the Oval office).

In his youth he had been a Democrat and he remained throughout his life an admirer of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. During the 1950s he started to work on public relations for the big corporation General Electric where he championed the role of free enterprise and chastised big government. He slowly turned into a Republican during this decade but actually became a *registered* Republican only in 1962. He waited until then as in 1960 Nixon needed him as a Democrat to show that he was able to get support from across the aisle.^{[82](#)}

In 1964 he gave a televised speech in support of the conservative Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Despite Goldwater's disastrous showing in the elections, that speech launched Reagan as a national conservative star. In what came to be known as 'the speech' for its importance in Reagan's political career he said: 'You and I have a rendez-vous with destiny. We will preserve for our children [America], the last hope of man on earth, or we will sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.'^{[83](#)}

Two years later he would win the election for governor of California and would serve two terms from 1966 to 1974. In the Republican primaries in 1976 he challenged President Ford and lost in a very close contest – 1,070 delegates to Ford's 1,187.⁸⁴ He then spent the next four years delivering speeches and perfecting his message to run against Carter in 1980.⁸⁵

Even though many of his close advisors thought that he would be too old to run again in 1980, he did not lose hope. And he had his reasons, once again, to be optimistic: as Collins writes, 'in the late 1970s the historical moment was more auspicious for Reagan (...) Reagan now was catching the cresting wave of a conservative resurgence that was beginning to wash over American public life.'⁸⁶

The seeds of the resurgence of American conservatism were actually starting to come to a full growth in the late 1970s when a number of grassroots movements started to converge with a growing political mobilization of the (mainly evangelical) Christian right and the stabilization of conservative think tanks such as the Hoover Institution, the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation.⁸⁷

The rise and stabilization of these conservative think tanks was rooted, as Diggins wrote, both in Goldwater's defeat (which had taught conservatives they needed to redouble their efforts) and in the 'disgrace of Watergate' which oriented their efforts away from pure party politics and the next election campaign. Wealthy conservatives directed their philanthropy toward conservative think tanks which 'prepared concise briefing papers filled with bullet points that effectively dispensed conservative arguments to busy news reporters and distracted congressional aides'.⁸⁸ Some of these works, as will be clear in the coming chapters, constitute today a good archival resource to understand where some of the ideas of the Reagan administration about the Middle East and terrorism were created in the first place.

These think tanks, in their often informal alliance with grassroots movements and religious organizations helped to overturn a liberal hegemony in American politics. When Reagan decided to run once more for the US presidency in

1980, many political investments (both at the grassroots level and at the intellectual one) had started to bear dividends. As the authors of *The Right Nation* noted,

[By 1980] The conservative movement had a flotilla of think tanks, an enthusiastic army of followers and a popular cause. All it needed was a charismatic pitchman to sell it to the American people. Ronald Reagan was the answer to years of prayers: a true believer by any standard and a charmer too.⁸⁹

As McAllister argued, this new conservative coalition had transformed the Republican party by bringing new money and new political tools. They would not only end liberal hegemony but also ‘redraw the boundaries of the respectable right’.⁹⁰

Reagan’s rise to power, however, was not just the result of these long-term processes. Carter’s failures in his last year and half in office made it much more likely. First of all, the economic crisis generated by the 1973 oil shock had generated what the journalist Lance Morrow on *Time* would define ‘the cold Spenglerian apprehension that the lights were about to go out, that history’s astonishing material indulgence of the US was about to end’. In 1979, 72 per cent of the public agreed with the statement: ‘We are fast coming to a turning point in our history where the land of plenty is becoming the land of want.’ On the first weekend of that summer some 70 per cent of the nation’s gas stations were closed, endless lines appeared at the few that stayed open.⁹¹ The idea of a nation deprived of gas, and more generally deprived of its right to pursue happiness through a high standard of living, were one of the leitmotifs of Reagan’s rhetoric.

To this ‘malaise’, President Carter tried to give a solution with a televised speech which came to be called ‘the crisis of confidence address’ because of the bleak picture it gave of America’s present. To reduce inflation and dependence on foreign oil resources the president proposed a new programme of austerity:

I’m asking you for your good and for your Nation’s security to take no unnecessary trips, to use carpools or

public transportation whenever you can, to park your car one extra day per week, to obey the speed limit, and to set your thermostats to save fuel. Every act of energy conservation like this is more than just common sense – I tell you it is an act of patriotism.⁹²

Saving oil, Carter said, was a way to achieve ‘more freedom, more confidence and more control over our lives’. In Carter’s programme for the 1980s the choice was clear: ‘There is simply no way to avoid sacrifice.’⁹³

The contrast between Carter’s call for austerity and pessimism and Reagan’s optimism could not be more striking. According to Collins, the

combination of Carter’s failure to deal effectively with the nation’s vexing problems and the President’s pessimistic analysis of those problems and of the nation’s future heightened the fear of Americans, and left them increasingly receptive to the blandishments of a former movie actor who still saw America and the future in bright Technicolor hues.⁹⁴

Diggins stressed even further this feature of Reagan’s message, going as far as saying that his election marked America’s ‘Emersonian moment’ when ‘people were told to trust not the state but the self and to pursue wealth and power without sin or shame’.⁹⁵

Reagan’s most biting critique of Jimmy Carter was that the President tried to make the people feel contrite. Carter asked them to think small, to face an era of limits. Reagan proposed to save America from such sickness of will. He would sublimate the commandments of deity so that politics could be about what he called our ‘God-given rights’ – rights to property, liberty, and the self-preservation of life.⁹⁶

Carter’s fortunes were also damaged by the hostage crisis in Tehran. The 52 US diplomats held prisoner inside the former US embassy for 444 days were freed, symbolically, only a few

hours after he left office.⁹⁷ The failed rescue attempt through operation Eagle Claw seemed to demonstrate that America had not recovered from its defeat in Vietnam and could not show any resolve against its enemies. Some weeks earlier, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Carter's own reaction seemed to show that the communist threat had been consistently underestimated during the 1970s by the supporters of Détente. Those like Reagan, on the contrary, who had always pointed at the rising Soviet threat, seemed to have had the right intuition.

If Carter's was a defeated, humiliated and impoverished America, Reagan's would be quite the opposite as he tried to point out right from his first day in office. In his inaugural address on 20 January 1981 the new president said:

We are not, as some would have us believe, doomed to an inevitable decline. I do not believe in a fate that will fall on us no matter what we do. I do believe in a fate that will fall on us if we do nothing (...). It is time for us to realize that we are too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams.⁹⁸

This new wave of confidence in America's mission and in the need to show again military resolve was not just the work of a good ghost-writer. In Detroit, Kemp had been right in predicting that a 'tidal wave' would benefit Reagan. This tidal wave had started to surge with the work of some intellectuals in the 1950s, had been nourished by the failures and excesses of the 1960s' liberalism and had been transformed into a political investment through grassroots movements and conservative think tanks in the 1970s. Carter's 'malaise' crisis and his widely perceived international failures in 1979 and 1980 finally gave the ultimate push to Reagan's triumph on 4 November 1980.

It is with this social, political and intellectual background that Reagan's Middle East policy must be understood. A long-term conservative resurgence based on, among other things, the belief that America's right to liberty and happiness rested on unimpeded growth and that the US needed to show a renewed resolve abroad in order to restore its traditional

institutions and values at home; a belief that translated into three of the total four US armed interventions of the Reagan administration taking place in the Middle East: in Lebanon between 1982 and 1984, with the strike on Libya in 1986 and in the Persian Gulf in 1987. As Bacevich argues the 'overarching motive for action was the preservation of the American way of life'.⁹⁹ Militarism was the practical tool to carry out this policy and also a set of values which cemented Reagan's coalition anti-communism, the intellectual framework used to understand the situation and present it to the American public.

Reagan, though, was not just the antithesis to Carter he pretended to be both during the 1980 campaign and in his first months in office. The former Georgia governor inspired and anticipated many of Reagan's policies of confrontation with the Soviet Union in the Third World and in the Middle East. First, with respect to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter had decided to support Islamic *mujahedins* and end Détente. Second, with the statement of the Carter Doctrine bumping up US protection of the Persian Gulf and its oil supplies into a major US policy, it paved the way for the Reagan major US military involvement in the Persian Gulf/Middle East. Nevertheless, Ronald Reagan would come into office with the idea that, during the Carter years, the United States had suffered a Soviet offensive in the Third World and in the Middle East which now had to be reversed. It was time to fight effectively what Odd Arne Westad has defined the Global Cold War, namely the worldwide confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union between the 1960s and the 1980s.¹⁰⁰

Reagan's Global Cold War

Reagan believed in the global dimension of the confrontation with the Soviet Union. During his campaign, on 3 June 1980 he stated to the *Wall Street Journal*: 'Let's not delude ourselves, the Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren't engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world.'¹⁰¹

At least initially, Reagan saw also events in Libya and Lebanon as part of this ‘game of dominoes’ and he used the Global Cold War conceptual framework to present his views to American public opinion. At the same time, some local players tried to present their agenda in terms compatible with Reagan’s Global Cold War mindset: the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin described his country’s invasion of Lebanon as a crucial victory in the fight against the Soviet proxies in the Middle East and the Lebanese right-wing Maronites would also try to win American support by presenting themselves as a bulwark against communist penetration in the Levant.

The perception of a worldwide Soviet offensive was not just Reagan’s, rather according to Westad it was shared by the US elites in the late 1970s.

While in part connected to the domestic rise of the New Right and the critique of liberalism in America, the emphasis on a Third World challenge was also related to seeing revolutions as the *result* of Soviet involvement rather than a cause of it.

According to this view, Westad continues,

It was dependent on America to reestablish order in the natural development of ‘newly independent states’ which the Soviet Union had been perverting at will during the détente era. If unsuccessful, not only would the fates of these countries be sealed, but the United States itself would, in time, be in mortal danger. [Responding to this offensive] was part of a greater project to restore American power that the New Right movement had embarked on during the 1970s. It reflected a view of the United States as being under siege (...). For the Reaganites the Cold War was an apocalyptic struggle that had to be won.¹⁰²

On 26 February 1982 speaking at the Conservative Political Action annual conference the president would say that ‘We live today in a time of climatic struggle for the human spirit, a time that will tell whether the great civilized ideas of

individual liberty, representative government, and the rule of law *under God* will perish or endure.’^{[103](#)}

The echo of Chambers’ and Weaver’s writing was all too strong in these statements: the climatic struggle, the attack against Western civilization and freedom under God. The idea of a Soviet offensive in the Third World which threatened the very heart of Western civilization fit well the ideas and motivations of the new conservative coalition which had been shaping since the 1960s. Was it grounded on reality or was this an overstatement?

According to Westad’s research, earlier in the 1970s the Soviet leadership showed a willingness to unleash an offensive in the Third World. After Vietnam, many in the Soviet establishment and intelligentsia had started to argue in favour of intervention in the Third World. There had been substantial advances in military capabilities and there was a political opportunity that could not be wasted. On the ideological side, the competition with capitalism in the immediate future could only take place in the Third World. The victory in Angola in the spring of 1976 spurred Brezhnev into action. Moreover, the communist takeover in Ethiopia and the victory in the war with Somalia in February 1978 had demonstrated the real global posture of the USSR to the Soviet elite that had come out of the Second World War. The lesson drawn from these events by the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was that revolutions and wars of national liberation like those in Angola or in Vietnam had succeeded because they had a Marxist core while other leaders like Indonesia’s Sukarno were by that time completely defeated or gone.^{[104](#)}

This phase of Soviet euphoria did not last very long. By the time Reagan started his campaign for the 1980 presidential elections the offensive was actually on the defensive. The intervention in Afghanistan was a sign of Soviet weakness, not the most recent episode of the offensive as it was perceived widely at that time, and not just by Reagan’s staff.

Early in the 1980s, a growing perception of overstretch made its way among the Soviet elite and further curbed the

danger posed by this offensive. According to Westad, from November 1982 the new Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, had sensed this decline in the Soviet ability to expand overseas but had no solution to offer.^{[105](#)}

Moreover, when Reagan took office the dynamics of the international system were changing. As Leffler argues, the 'era of decolonization was over' and the Soviet Union could no longer 'exploit the evils of Western imperialism or present itself as the successful model of development'. Also, 'revolutionary nationalists were no longer flocking to Moscow' to acquire know-how for their political enterprises. In the Middle East especially, the bulk of anti-Western feelings and actions was now in Islamic fundamentalism and in its political fulfilment, the Islamic Republic of Iran. Precisely these new dynamics, according to Leffler, made it possible for Reagan to pursue a peaceful understanding with the USSR.^{[106](#)}

It is also true, however, that anti-communism was the cement of Reagan's coalition. Furthermore, Reagan could not understand how favourable the international system had become, and how little remained of the previous Soviet offensive in the Third World, until the mid- 1980s when it became clear that the Soviets were starting to experience serious problems in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

It is indeed worthwhile to wonder if the US leadership was aware of the problems which the Soviet offensive was starting to experience before the mid- 1980s and since the early Reagan administration. According to John Arquilla, some hints were coming from the analysis of Soviet capabilities led by Andrew Marshall at the Office of Net Assessment at the Pentagon and Henry Rowen at the National Intelligence Council. The Soviets, according to this analysis, had already spent their windfall money from the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979 for their expansion in the Third World. The result, as Arquilla points out, was that 'the Russians were pursuing expanded influence among poor countries – where success would only entail the need for endless subsidies'.^{[107](#)} The recent book by the former Russian intellectual-turned-politician Yegor Gaidar gives further credit to the relationship between oil revenues and Soviet expansion. According to him, the

Soviet Union did not even benefit from the second oil shock because by that time it was using more than 70 per cent of its oil to subsidize both Eastern European and other clients.^{[108](#)}

Nevertheless, Ronald Reagan and his administration simply had less than adequate intelligence on the true state of the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s. They could not benefit from the archival resources many current authors, among them Leffler and Westad, have seen to understand the real nature and duration of the Soviet offensive, especially as far as the invasion of Afghanistan is concerned. Also, the CIA under Casey was stressing the danger posed by the Soviets and their proxies in a wide number of Third World countries.^{[109](#)} Reagan and his advisors had more elements pointing to an existing threat than to the contrary.

Also, conservative and neoconservative intellectuals alike reinforced this threat perception. During the election year, one of the neoconservatives' godfathers, Norman Podhoretz, published his *The Present Danger* where, as Diggins summed up, 'the public was told that America was losing the Cold War, especially what Podhoretz called the Second Cold War, which threatened to be the wave of the future in the underdeveloped world'.^{[110](#)} According to Podhoretz, events in Iran and Afghanistan represented the 'final collapse of an American resolve to resist the forward surge of Soviet imperialism'. Americans had to renounce the idea that the Cold War was giving way to Détente and that the East–West struggle could be replaced by the North–South conflict as Carter had argued in the early phase of his presidency.^{[111](#)}

The existence of a global Soviet offensive was confirmed also by Jeane J. Kirkpatrick's article for the neoconservative journal *Commentary* on 'Dictatorships and Double Standards'. In her essay she argued that the US had to back right-wing authoritarian dictatorships in order to avoid the danger of seeing them replaced with communist totalitarian regimes. Reagan liked this article, which came out in November 1979, so much that eventually he asked her to be part of his team. The lead of the article summed up what Kirkpatrick thought the problem was and also her narrative of it:

In the thirty-odd months since the inauguration of Jimmy Carter as President there has occurred a dramatic Soviet military build-up, matched by the stagnation of American armed forces, and a dramatic extension of Soviet influence in the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Southern Africa, and the Caribbean (...). The US has never tried so hard and failed so utterly to make and keep friends in the Third World.

As if this were not bad enough, in the current year the United States has suffered two other major blows – in Iran and Nicaragua – of large and strategic significance. In each country, the Carter administration not only failed to prevent the undesired outcome, it actively collaborated in the replacement of moderate autocrats friendly to American interests with less friendly autocrats of extremist persuasion.^{[112](#)}

According to Diggins, ‘Reagan’s neoconservative advisors’ worked on the way to win the Second Cold War and concluded that ‘rather than just contain communist revolution, the West would have to act decisively to overthrow it using counterinsurgency strategies in the Third World and nuclear dominance through rapid missile development and deployment in Western Europe’.^{[113](#)}

The first part of this proposal, the support to anti-communist insurgencies in the Third World, would become official US policy for the first time in January 1983 when National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 75 on ‘US Relations with the USSR’ stated that

The U.S. must rebuild the credibility of its commitment to resist Soviet encroachment on U.S. interests and those of its Allies and friends, and to support effectively those Third World states that are willing to resist Soviet pressures or oppose Soviet initiatives hostile to the United States, or are special targets of Soviet policy.^{[114](#)}

In his State of the Union Address on 6 February 1985 Reagan stated what would be later called the 'Reagan Doctrine':

We must stand by all our democratic allies. And we must not break faith with those who are risking their lives – on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua – to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, the idea that the enemies of the Soviets, or 'freedom fighters' as they came to be called, deserved US support did not always work well, at least as far as our case studies were concerned. The Lebanese Phalangists, who tried to present themselves as 'freedom fighters' struggling with Soviet clients such as Syria and the PLO were not exactly the same as the Afghani *mujahedins* or the Nicaraguan *Contras*. They were actually quite the opposite since they represented the Christian minority which had always held power in their country. Similarly, Libya's terrorism was largely indigenous and was not part of the Soviet offensive. Moreover, the difference between US-supported 'freedom fighters' and terrorists or guerrillas rallying around the flag of 'national liberation' was not that clear and generated doubts even inside the administration. When launching his all-out plan to fight terrorism, Secretary of State George Shultz had to spend some time trying to explain the difference between the two.

The statement of the Reagan doctrine and Shultz campaign for a declaration of war against terrorism were the peak of a process that started in the days after the victory in the 1980 presidential elections. Reagan's advisors, along with many conservative and neoconservative intellectuals, saw events of 1979 in Latin America and the Middle East as yet another demonstration that a Soviet offensive was underway worldwide. The Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, the Iranian Islamic revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reinforced a wide-spread feeling that the Soviets were supporting subversion and terrorism around the world in order to continue the Cold War even under Détente, only in a different way.

A good example is provided by the writings of Constantine Menges who, during the Reagan administration, served first as national intelligence officer for Latin American Affairs at the CIA and then as special assistant to the president for Latin America. During the campaign in 1980 he wrote in the *New York Times*:

History will mark the events in Iran, Afghanistan and Nicaragua in 1979 as a turning point in the invisible war between radical and moderate forces for control of the oil and destiny of the Middle East and control of Central America and Mexico.

Menges thought that the Middle East could be the issue on which the Soviet Union would finally achieve the ‘decoupling’ of Europe and Japan (heavily dependent upon Middle Eastern oil) from the US. In this region, Menges wrote, Western *military* power was needed against ‘converging radical forces’ coming from the region but also supported by the USSR.^{[116](#)}

During the transition between the Carter and the Reagan administration, Menges identified a ‘destabilization coalition’ composed of the USSR, Libya, Cuba, Yemen and Syria. Against this coalition, Menges proposed three elements: support for ‘reformist, moderate, pro-western forces’; ‘international communication’; ‘offensive action against terrorists, radical groups and their transnational supporting network’.^{[117](#)} Interestingly enough, the list countries that he included in the ‘destabilization coalition’ would figure in the ‘League of Terror’ that Secretary Shultz would identify as the international network of governments supporting terrorism worldwide. This idea would be one of the pillars of the Reaganite view of Middle Eastern terrorism, connecting the terrorist threat with the global competition with the Soviet Union.

This connection was emphasized by Ronald Reagan’s personal concern with the danger posed by communism. Even though he elaborated on the revival of the Cold War that had occurred during the last phase of the Carter presidency, he did it with a special emphasis. As Ronald Bruce St. John points out, while at least for his first years in office Carter stressed

the regional causes of local conflicts, Reagan tried from the very beginning to frame everything into the Global Cold War paradigm.¹¹⁸ Carter's regionalist approach, however, did change a lot in the course of 1979 as Brzezinski's conception of the 'arc of crisis' took hold and with it the idea that events in the Greater Middle East were part of a zero-sum game with the Soviet Union. Also, according to Quandt, the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war in September 1980 led many in Washington to fear that the Soviets might exploit the turmoil in the Gulf to advance even further toward 'warm waters'.¹¹⁹

When he took office, however, it was not entirely clear what Reagan thought about the Middle East. During the campaign, he wrote only one article on this region which was published in the *Washington Post*.¹²⁰ According to William Quandt, the 'context in the Middle East was described almost exclusively in Cold War terms' while the only other point that Reagan raised was his commitment to the security of Israel.¹²¹ These two themes emerged again in his address to the B'nai B'rith¹²² Forum where he started by saying that 'in defending Israel's right to exist, we defend the very values upon which our nation is built' while stressing the growing Soviet threat in the region:

Because of the weak and confused leadership of Jimmy Carter, we are approaching a flashpoint in this tragic process, with Soviet power now deployed in a manner which directly threatens Iran, the Persian Gulf and the Arab sea; with Soviet forces and proxy forces building up again in the region; with Soviet fleets and air bases emplaced along the sea lanes on which we and our Allies and the entire free world depend.¹²³

And indeed, Reagan's main speeches as president and his diary are witness to his use of the Cold War framework to look at the entire region. With him in the White House, the US policy in the Middle East had initially an impressive Cold War tilt. A sense of an impending ultimate threat was stressed by the Reagan administration and preserved throughout the years. The National Security Decision Directive (NSDD-32, Reagan's equivalent of Carter's PD-18) issued on 20 May

1982 read: 'the decade of the eighties will likely pose the greatest challenge to our survival and well-being since World War II.'¹²⁴ The consequence of Reagan's emphasis on the Global Cold War was the lack of interest for regional dynamics 'until they forced themselves to centre stage as full-blown international crises'.¹²⁵

The new Republican administration worked, according to Avi Shlaim, on four main assumptions: the first was that the threat to the security of the oil-producing Gulf states was the major problem facing the United States in the region; second, the Arab–Israeli conflict had become somewhat less significant and it could be left on the back burner; third, the Gulf and the Arab–Israeli conflict were two distinct issues that could be treated separately by the US; fourth and last assumption was that, above all, what the states of this part of the world needed most was protection against the Soviet threat.¹²⁶

These assumptions along with the overall emphasis on the Global Cold War influenced the policy framework that went under the name of Strategic Consensus and which was elaborated in the first months of 1981. This strategy started to emerge during the visit of Alexander Haig, Reagan's first secretary of state, in the Middle East in April 1981. The goal was to form a solid anti-Soviet alignment that would include both the so-called Arab moderates and Israel to thwart possible Soviet inroads in the region. The three pillars of this Consensus were Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel. According to William Stivers, the informal alliance would also include Turkey, Pakistan, Jordan and the Gulf Emirates. Where this Arab–Israeli alliance could not work, the US was going to directly use its military forces.¹²⁷

Strategic Consensus reflected a mainly military approach to the Middle East issues and, at least during 1981, this meant an enormous increase in arms supplies to US allies in the region. By the end of that year, arms sales to these countries had skyrocketed by an amazing 325 per cent.¹²⁸ AWACS planes had been sold, not by chance, to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. A Memorandum of Understanding on military cooperation had been signed with Israel.

Strategic Consensus, at least in the early years of the Reagan administration, combined with the actual implementation of the Carter Doctrine – especially with regards to the building of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) envisioned in PD- 18. The massive military build-up carried out by the Reagan administration since its first weeks in office included the RDF. Funds were increased by 85 per cent for fiscal year 1982. Furthermore, the RDF would not just be a Joint Combined Force, as Carter had conceived it, but it would be assigned its own units. In 1983 the RDF became the US Central Command, in charge of the Middle East and south-west Asia.¹²⁹ After 9/11, this would be the most important military command in the fight against terrorism and two wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) would take place simultaneously under its leadership.

William Quandt argued that this policy tried to focus all of America's allies in the region on the Soviet threat while 'simultaneously attempting to push parochial local conflicts to the back burner'.¹³⁰ Alexander Haig, the main supporter of the Strategic Consensus, tried to refute allegations that it was a geostrategic abstraction with no real background in regional politics. In his memoirs, he argued that terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and the Soviet Union were in reality one 'consolidated fear':

[The fear] That terrorism and fundamentalism so destabilize the region that the Soviets would either subvert the Islamic movement for their own purposes or seize control of Iran and possibly the whole gulf in a second revolution after the Iranian revolution collapsed under the political and economic weight of its own excesses.¹³¹

Local allies of the US, both the Arab 'moderates' and Israel, saw some interesting opportunities in the overlapping, in American strategic thinking, between terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and the Global Cold War. Some of them accepted this globalist approach in words and practised their regional goals in deeds.

The policy of Strategic Consensus, however, was not just the result of the emphasis on the Global Cold War by the Reagan administration. It was rooted in the traditional hierarchy of priorities of the American policy in the Middle East during the Cold War which ranked first the fight against the Soviet Union and second the security of Israel. Before describing how the Reagan administration's general policy framework was implemented, it is therefore necessary to describe two 'special relations' which will be the object of the first chapter: that between the United States and the Middle East in the context of the Cold War along with the 'special relationship' between America and Israel. Both elements would play a decisive role in the policy of the Reagan administration in Lebanon, which is the object of the second chapter, where the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 is described along with the American intervention in the context of the multinational force. The failure of that mission would be all the more evident after the terrorist attack against the Marines' barracks in Beirut which would cause the death of 241 soldiers. This attack was, before 9/11, the deadliest act of terrorism against America and eventually accelerated the disengagement of US forces from Lebanon which is described in [Chapter 3](#). This chapter starts with the description of the aftermath of the terrorist attack and the decision to withdraw and then it analyses the process through which some members of the administration, and especially the Secretary of State George Shultz, started to propose some crucial ideas in the US fight against Middle Eastern terrorism. Themes such as the international network of states supporting terrorism or the need to use pre-emptive strikes to fight against asymmetrical threats would be elaborated thanks to the cooperation with Israeli right-wing politicians, among them Benjamin Netanyahu. Nevertheless, this elaboration about the fight against terrorism would be heavily influenced by the Global Cold War mindset of the Reagan administration whose origins have been described here. This new conception of terrorism would be partially tested with the strike against Libya in 1986. The confrontation between the Libyan dictator Qadhafi and President Reagan from 1981 to 1986 is described in the fourth

chapter. Finally, some conclusions and the legacy of the Reagan administration in the fight against terrorism are drawn.

1 Crucial relations

Two important revolutions occurred between 1979 and 1980. The first radical change started with the election of conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom which anticipated the 'Reagan revolution' in the United States. The victory of the former governor of California brought to power a leader concerned with what he perceived as a Soviet offensive in the Third World and in the Middle East. Moreover, Reagan's elite and social coalition was the result of a rising tide in American politics which had started as a reaction to the domestic liberal reforms of the 1960s and had been reinvigorated by the aversion to what was perceived as American decline in foreign affairs. The second revolution had reached a climax with the beginning of the new Islamic century in 1979 and the revolution in Iran. After the overthrow of the pro-Western Shah, an Islamic republic was established with a distinctly 'anti-imperialist' foreign policy that would appeal to many Muslims beyond Iranian borders.

Still in 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had reinforced US perception of a Soviet offensive in the extra-European world and encouraged a strategic shift from Europe towards the Persian Gulf and the greater Middle East. Reagan's particular version of American conservatism, the growing influence in the Arab world of Political Islam, the renewed Cold War and the growing US military involvement in the greater Middle East would all play a decisive role in the shaping of the policy of the Reagan administration in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, different and more longstanding factors have to be described in order to analyse the events that are the subject of this book. As a matter of fact, US policy in Libya and Lebanon in the 1980s was the result of a complex interaction between several ‘crucial relations’.

First of all, the Reagan administration showed a considerable degree of continuity with the main features of the relationship that the US had pursued with the Middle East since the end of the Second World War. Cold War considerations and hierarchy of priorities had always been high when Washington dealt with governments and actors from this part of the world. Moreover, the Reagan administration would also witness the coexistence of policy-makers more concerned with the global dimension of local events – and therefore, with its implications for the Cold War – and ‘regionalists’ more focused on Middle Eastern politics. The balance between these two trends, however, would be tipped in favour of the former during the Reagan years.

The second ‘crucial relation’ which needs to be investigated is that between the United States and Lebanon. The US intervention in 1982, indeed, was not the first one in the country. Not only had Eisenhower deployed American troops to Beirut in 1958, other presidents and secretaries of state had played a crucial role in the development of local events. Simultaneously, American global concern with fighting the Cold War was manipulated by local actors to achieve their goals.

Third, the ‘crucial relation’ between the US and Libya must be analysed not only to understand the nature of Qadhafi’s regime but also because this Northern African country was an example of a wider political strategy, that of ‘modernization’, which had been implemented since the 1960s in two other countries that would later turn troublesome for the US: Iran and Iraq.

Finally, that with Israel is a ‘special relationship’ which cannot be overlooked when analysing events in the Middle East. Its existence, though, should not be given for granted and its ‘specialness’ is a rather recent phenomenon which owes a

lot to the Reagan years and to the events in Lebanon. Moreover, the common US–Israeli elaboration about the fight against terrorism during 1984 would be crucial to the preparation of the 1986 strike against Libya.

Since the last years of the Carter administration, the US government had re-emphasized the Cold War dimension in its understanding of the events in the Middle East. This emphasis, if one looks at history, was not completely misplaced. The Middle East had actually been an important scenario for many events of the Cold War since its early phases. The dispute over Iran and Azerbaijan in 1946 was one of the first clashes in the 50-year-long competition between the two superpowers; the Suez crisis in 1956 was one of the events that expanded this competition from Europe to the Third World; four US presidential doctrines (Truman's, Eisenhower's, Nixon's and Carter's) originated from Middle Eastern conflicts. Six times the American nuclear alert was activated due to problems in the Middle East: the Suez crisis in 1956, Lebanon and also Jordan in 1958, Turkey in 1963, Jordan in 1970 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Seeing events in the region through the prism of the Cold War, therefore, was not without justification if one worked for the American government although this was not the only available conceptual framework: regional dynamics were also important. The balance between regional and global causes has always been a crucial cleavage in the academic literature as well as within the US foreign policy elite which dealt with the Middle East. In the introduction to their *The Cold War and the Middle East*, Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim draw a distinction between two competing approaches to the study of the Middle East: the 'systemic' which assigns a decisive role to external powers and especially to superpowers; the 'regionalist' which points out how 'local states have much more leverage in dealing with outside powers than is generally recognized'.¹

This division actually resembles one of the main cleavages inside the US foreign policy elite which dealt with the Middle East. As Steven Spiegel explained, throughout the Cold War two conflicting views have clashed. On one side, those more concerned with regional issues (such as the pro-Israelis or the

pro-Arabs), on the other one those 'who see the Middle East as part of a larger, more global conflict'.² Former member of the Political Affairs Directorate at the NSC Raymond Tanter has defined the former as regionalists and the latter as globalists and this distinction proved very useful in the analysis of the events that are the subject of this book.³

Seen from another perspective, the issue is the balance between the role of the superpowers and that of regional actors: how much the former could influence the latter and how much the latter could manipulate the former. Avi Shlaim in his *War and Peace in the Middle East* argues that even though the involvement of great powers is not a unique feature of this region, the 'pervasiveness and profound impact of this involvement' are specific to the Middle East. In support of his view he cites Carl Brown's *International Politics and the Middle East*.⁴ However, even though Shlaim assigns a major role to the superpowers, he does not see it as decisive and supports rather the opinion of Malcolm Yapp that 'the dominant feature was the manipulation of the international powers by regional powers'.⁵ Shlaim's own view is that 'regional powers have enjoyed more leverage in dealing with outside powers than is generally recognized'.⁶

In fact, events described in this book tend to confirm these interpretations of the role of the Cold War in the shaping of US policy, during the Reagan administration too. The Middle East was increasingly important in the eyes of US policy-makers precisely because of its Cold War implications and this determined a more 'globalist' trend in the foreign policy elite of the United States. Simultaneously, the bipolar confrontation was used by local actors to manipulate the superpowers. Thus, the more an administration tended to be 'globalist' the more opportunities it gave to regional actors for 'manipulation'.

All of these factors were present in a particular form under the Reagan administration. The events of 1979 had been read, as we have seen, as a further confirmation of Cold War threats in the region and this did not help, as will be clear in Lebanon, to understand developments such as the rise of the Party of God that had little to do with Communism and the Soviet Union. The balance between 'globalists' and 'regionalists' was

tipped in favour of the former, particularly because of Reagan's personal inclinations. Manipulation by local actors, especially with regards to the war in Lebanon, was more effective when based on the Cold War paradigm.

Manipulations, however, worked in two directions, especially in the period from the mid- 1950s to the early 1970s. Fawaz Gerges in his comprehensive account of the events of the Cold War in the Middle East from 1955 to 1967 wrote that 'the intrusion of the Cold War into regional politics exacerbated regional conflicts and made their resolution more difficult'.⁷ The case of the 'false intelligence report' passed by the Soviets to the Egyptians in May 1967 provides a good example of 'exacerbation' by the superpowers. The report contained news of a supposed Israeli military build-up on the Syrian front and started a chain reaction: it provoked the Egyptian mobilization which in turn was one of the causes of the Israeli pre-emptive strike which materially started the war. According to Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez this was part of a pattern of behaviour by Moscow aimed at provoking an Arab-Israeli war.⁸ The Six Days War was just an example of the combination between the super-power chess game and regional dynamics, a constant feature of US policy during the Cold War which needs to be analysed with some details.

US policy in the Middle East during the Cold War

Several factors of continuity can be spotted when analysing American policy in the Middle East during the Cold War. To start with, the priorities of US policy were similar from one administration to the other. As Steven Spiegel wrote,

American leaders have consistently sought to prevent Soviet expansion, limit Arab radicalism, promote Arab-moderates and pro-American governments throughout the area, and preserve oil supplies. (...) no administration since 1948 has wavered from a fundamental commitment to the security and survival of the State of Israel.

Finally, unilateralism was a fundamental part of US policy in the region, based on the belief that ‘America’s allies had made errors that the United States would not repeat’.⁹ Avi Shlaim, too, outlined the same main areas of interests: containment of the Soviet Union; control over the oil sources of the Persian Gulf; limiting Arab radicalism; and safeguarding Israel.¹⁰

The fact that the Soviet threat ranked first in US hierarchy of priorities did not imply that a coherent and successful strategy was always devised. The US had initially tried, and failed, to replicate in the Middle East the regional security system that it had created in Europe. This failure was due in part to the Arab–Israeli conflict and had left the US without a coherent strategy for the region. The problem was that, while in Europe there was a coincidence between regional and global factors (the Soviet Union was both a local and a global actor here), this was less true in the Middle East where some of the crises were born before the Cold War and have outlived it. William Quandt was therefore right to conclude that while the ‘Soviet angle was never far from the minds of policymakers’, it ‘did little to help clarify choices’.¹¹

As a matter of fact, shortly after entering office the Reagan administration framed a regional security framework called Strategic Consensus which called for a common cause against the Soviets by both pro-Western Arab regimes and Israel. This strategy, however, did not deal with the issue that had always divided these allies, namely the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Nevertheless, throughout the Cold War, the absence of a coherent strategy to contain the Soviet threat in the Middle East did little to diminish the importance of this region for US global calculations. Military bases in Arab states, for instance, would enable the Western allies to conduct aerial offensives in the Russian heartland, concentrate troops for ground intervention and position intelligence forces close to the enemy’s frontier. As Peter Hahn wrote,

‘If a hostile Power secured control of this area,’ US and British officials agreed in 1947, ‘not only would we lose very important resources and facilities but it would acquire a position of such dominating strategic

and economic power that it would be fatal to our security.’¹²

The proximity of this region to the Soviet Union had indeed been again evident after the events of 1979. In the global chess game, the fate of Afghanistan and Iran would determine whether the West would be on the Soviet’s doorstep or whether the USSR would have access to the vital Persian Gulf. Indeed, according to Seyom Brown, the doctrine taught by American geopolitical thinkers at West Point (where Alexander Haig, Reagan’s first secretary of state, studied) warned

Against allowing a would-be Eurasian ‘heartland’ hegemon to establish a position of dominance on the Near Eastern ‘rimland’ for this would allow the Eurasian imperialist to interdict the oceanic powers’ lines of global navigation for essential commerce and military operations. A heartland power that also controlled the rimland could rule the world.¹³

Ironically, the Middle East concerned the US because of the possibility of Soviet inroads while being, at the same time, one of the few areas of the world in which there was seldom a serious domestic communist threat. This detail was not entirely clear to the officials of the Reagan administration who dealt with Qadhafi’s Libya and considered it as part of the Soviet bloc. Qadhafi’s revolution was, yes, ‘anti-imperialist’ but ideologically speaking it had little to do with communism which he actually despised as much as he did capitalism. The fact that Qadhafi regularly bought Soviet weapons did not imply that he coordinated his foreign policy with the Kremlin.

Libya was not an isolated case. As a matter of fact, throughout the Cold War, the Soviets failed to stir up a single communist revolution in any of the Arab countries. As Fired Halliday pointed out, in the Arab countries of the Middle East the USSR could not count on strong and influential Communist parties and had to rely on radical nationalist regimes found in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Libya and Algeria. ‘They may, on occasion, proclaim “socialist” goals and

aspirations but, apart from the PDRY [People's Democratic Republic of Yemen], Soviet influence has been superficial, and has been easily controlled and repudiated when the states wished.' Often, these regimes took initiatives which, against Soviet will, stirred up a major American involvement. Their reliability was, according to Halliday, poor:

The PDRY has been too marginal, and factionally divided, to count. The others – Syria, Egypt and Libya – have been difficult clients at best, prone to adventurist initiatives on the one hand and fickle rapprochements with the West on the other.¹⁴

Moreover, where tiny Communist Parties existed such as in Syria or Iraq, the Soviets sacrificed them in order to have good relationships with the radical nationalist regimes.

Soviet policy in the Middle East was therefore based on this fundamental weakness and centred on two main interests. First, having a more or less stable partnership with various Arab radical governments in order to build up the Soviet reputation as a promoter and supporter of 'wars of national liberation'; and second, obtaining from a number of strategically important countries in the region the possibility of using their ports and airports for the Soviet Navy and Air Force. To achieve this second goal the Soviets nurtured good ties first with Egypt then with Syria and Yemen, while their relationship with Qadhafi's Libya was more based on mutual exchange of weapons-for-dollars than on any common long-term political goal.¹⁵

The alliance between the USSR and these nationalist Arab regimes was born under Nikita Khrushchev who in 1955 struck an important arms deal with Nasser. The relationship gained momentum and came to include Syria, Iraq, Algeria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) while Libya was always 'an embarrassing partner'. The underlying concept devised *ex post facto* was of 'Revolutionary Democracy': a non-Marxist, non-proletarian set of ideas and politics based on anti-colonialism. The idea was that anti-colonial, anti-imperialist revolutions might eventually grow into social revolutions. Brezhnev, on his part, saw the Middle East as part

of that 'soft underbelly' of the capitalist system that had to be included in the Soviet bloc in order to provoke a loss for the United States.¹⁶

Nevertheless, despite all this ideological and political work, by the early 1980s the Soviet position in the Middle East had grown increasingly weak. As Neil Malcolm wrote:

Third World clients had in any case turned out to be unpredictable and unreliable collaborators. The socialist countries (...) in a number of cases were no doubt seen as liabilities rather than as assets to be further accumulated (...). The Middle East now represented more a problem to be solved than an opportunity to be exploited.¹⁷

The irony, though, was that this decline of Soviet influence in the world and particularly in the Middle East was not clearly felt by US policy-makers in the early 1980s. Some of the events that unfolded in the late 1970s (in Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua and above all in Iran and Afghanistan) actually convinced more than one member of the US foreign policy elite that a Soviet offensive was on the way. This belief led the Reagan administration to fashion the Reagan Doctrine as a counter-offensive in the Third World.¹⁸ So while the Soviet Union's influence in the region was declining, in the United States a new administration came into power believing that its main goal was to defeat a growing Soviet threat in the Middle East.

The Soviets were not the United States' only concern in the Middle East. The defence of the Persian Gulf oil fields ranked second on the list.¹⁹ The importance of these resources is rooted in the 1920s but their strategic necessity had been greatly increased with the outbreak of the Cold War. The region contained the largest proven oil reserves of the world which had to be denied to the Soviets and used for the economic reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan. In 1947, oil coming from this area was about half of the total amount needed for the US Armed Forces and the vast majority (about 90 per cent) of it fuelled the Marshall Plan. The CIA

deemed Middle Eastern oil ‘essential to the security of the US’ while the State Department added that tax revenues from American oil companies that had invested in the region were ‘substantial’. ““The uninterrupted supply of oil from the Middle East is so vital,” the Pentagon observed in 1956, “that nothing should be allowed to threaten its continuance.”’²⁰

The relationship between oil and the Middle East, Douglas Little wrote, was so strong that ‘the most recognizable symbol of the Middle East for most Americans has probably been the oil well’. In the first 25 years of the Cold War there was a ‘symbiotic’ relationship between the policy-makers and the oil industry that ‘allowed the United States to provide aid and exert influence in the Arab world while keeping shareholders and friends of Israel relatively happy’.²¹ After the creation of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) in 1970, defending oil fields became an alternative goal for many in the US business elite, as opposed to safeguarding Israel. Those policy-making friends of the conservative monarchies of the oil-rich countries (and of American oil companies) were opposed to stronger relations with Israel and vice versa. An example of this cleavage could be found in the Reagan administration where Caspar Weinberger often clashed with Alexander Haig on the relationship with Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The third main US interest in the region was the fight against Arab radical nationalism. The rationale behind this strategy can be found in a book published in the spring of 1968 by the American ambassador in Cairo during the Kennedy administration, John Badeau, on the ‘political and ideological Cold War that is now raging the Middle East’. According to Badeau, the radical nationalists, such as Nasser, were fighting against the conservatives, such as Saudi Arabia and Morocco.²² This classification (which was already part of US policy since the Eisenhower administration) soon became one between the *pro-Soviet* radicals and the *pro-Western* conservatives. This was not out of place since, from a certain point on, some of the Arab radical regimes were actually chosen by the Soviet leadership as their proxies in the region; if one focused on the USSR rather than the Middle East, he

could easily confuse Nasser for a Soviet ally. During the Cold War, according to William Stivers,

In the eyes of American officials the Soviets were not likely to gain influence in the Middle East by crude military action or other forms of direct intrusion. Rather, they would take advantage of the anti-Western orientation of ultra-nationalist elements.²³

In their fight against Arab radicalism, Americans would also side on the defence of what Stivers called the ‘established order of things’. This explanation has some elements of truth as we will see in the case of Lebanon where American diplomacy in 1982 and 1983 would try to achieve stability through the preservation of the confessional balance of power established by the 1943 National Pact. This assigned a major role to the Christians, something the Muslim majority was no more ready to accept. It was precisely the obsolescence of the National Pact in light of the demographic reality (and of the Arab–Israeli conflict) that had caused the civil war, and the refusal to clearly address the issue of confessional balance of power in Lebanon would hamper American attempts at stabilization of the country.

The roots of the Lebanese civil war and of US intervention

The US intervention in Lebanon in 1982 was not its first one, and the civil war raging in that country since 1975 was not the first of the twentieth century. In this Mediterranean country several communities had coexisted since the Middle Ages: the Maronites (a Lebanese version of the Roman Catholics), the Greek Orthodox, the Sunni and Shiite Muslims, the Druzes and also a tiny Jewish community. The peculiarity of Lebanon is not the existence of these communities but the political and institutional roles they have been accorded.

According to Lebanese historian Georges Corm, the role of the communities was not an ‘historical constant’ but a result of modernity and interaction with Western powers. The first step in this sense was taken by the Ottoman rulers after the

Maronite–Druze clashes in 1840 and 1860. In 1861 the system of *Mutassarifiya* was established, political representation was granted to each community proportionally to its population and had to coexist with the power of the Ottoman *wali*. With the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the French were given a mandate over Lebanon. French domination, according to Corm, would even increase the role of the communities: a decree issued by the mandate authority in 1936 recognized the existence of 17 ‘historical’ communities. From that moment on, no Lebanese could exist from the legal point of view, unless he proved to be part of one of these communities.²⁴

Independence was finally achieved in 1943 thanks also to a gentlemen’s agreement, called the ‘National Pact’, between the notables of the major communities. The agreement divided power in the central government between a Maronite president and a Sunni prime minister. Based on the 1932 census (which is to date the last official census of the Lebanese population) the Pact established a ratio of six Christian members of parliament for each five Muslim MPs. The electoral system based on the local community notables (in Arabic *zu’ama*) hindered the birth of real political parties. Lebanon was not a real nation but a ‘confederation of protonational communities’ vested with political power as Israeli historian Itamar Rabinovich argued.²⁵ As far as foreign policy was concerned, the Pact included one more provision, according to Corm: the Maronites would not seek foreign protection while the Sunnis would not try to merge Lebanon with Syria.²⁶

This system actually worked well for the first 15 years and made the country the closest thing to a parliamentary democracy in the Arab world. Personal ambitions were of course part of the game, too. In 1949 the Maronite president Bechara El-Khoury won an unconstitutional second mandate thanks to a parliament whose election he had tightly controlled. In 1952, a coalition of community notables forced him to step down but this event did not create a major crisis. Power was granted in the interim to Army general Fouad Chehab, appointed prime minister, who would then turn it back to Camille Chamoun once he was elected president of the Republic by the parliament.

Despite its declared neutrality, Lebanon would be regarded as a potential ally by the West. This idea had been reinforced by the 'moderate' attitude of the government in Beirut toward the first Arab–Israeli war. On 8 June 1948 a document by the US State–War–Navy Coordination Committee (SWNCC, the precursor of the current NSC) stated the ideological motives of this alliance: Lebanon was 'the sole country in the Near East having a Christian majority, a feature which has characterized Lebanon as a sort of occidental bridgehead in the Moslem world'.²⁷ The search for cultural or religious proximity would be one of the constant features of US policy in the region: in this case, the fact that Lebanon had a presumed Christian majority turned it automatically into a 'bridgehead' for the West in the Muslim world. After all, as John Dumbrell and Axel Schäfer argued, for a democratic polity such as the US, 'cultural similarity' is one of the key factors to establish special relations.²⁸

This American and British interest for Lebanon, though, would be manipulated by domestic actors and bent to achieve their political goals. The 1952 crisis did not evolve into a major crisis, according to Corm, because the neutrality of the country was not questioned and none of the major actors had been backed by any foreign power. The new president Camille Chamoun, however, was a supporter of the British influence in the Middle East and tried to move the country decisively towards the Baghdad Pact thus starting to break the fundamental provision of the National Pact on foreign policy.²⁹ He soon impressed US diplomats in 1953 for his staunch anti-communism and his promises of aid to the West: 'If it ever came to war with the Soviets,' he told US diplomats, 'Lebanon would be 100 percent on the side of the West, our harbours would be open to your ships, our airfields to your planes.'³⁰

The problems would come with the combination of the approaching end of Chamoun's term and the growing American Cold War concerns in the Middle East following the Suez Crisis and the Eisenhower Doctrine. On 5 January 1957 the president addressed Congress proposing legislation promoting economic and military aid for the countries of the

Middle East threatened by communism and went as far as to say that this support would include

The employment of the armed forces of the United States to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations, requesting such aid, against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism.³¹

On this occasion the president had won Congressional approval for his plan that included \$200 million worth of economic aid and military support for pro-Western regimes in the region.

President Chamoun told the US ambassador in Beirut in January that he ‘supported the Eisenhower plan one hundred percent’.³² Chamoun’s words, however, did not reflect a consensus in Lebanese politics: both the Sunnis and the Druzes warned that the neutrality implied in the 1943 National Pact could not be changed by the president alone.³³

According to Erika Alin, these differences on foreign policy were transformed into a domestic cleavage: ‘The Lebanese government’s increasingly pro-Western orientation found support primarily among Christians whereas pro-Arab allegiances were to be found primarily, but by no means exclusively, among the country’s Muslim population.’ The unrest was evident after the murder on 8 May 1958 of the pro-Nasser journalist Nassib Metni. Also, the possibility that Chamoun could seek a second term in office had provoked the insurrection of the opposition which was led by the Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt. The Maronite president was indeed pursuing a domestic, personal goal (his re-election) while depicting his actions as the defence of his pro-Western policy against the Communist and Nasserite threats.³⁴

With this uneasy domestic situation, he started applying, with some insistence, for US intervention to quell the rebellion. It was not an easy choice for the US administration because the policy of the Eisenhower administration was, according to Erika Alin, fundamentally ambiguous. On the one hand ‘the administration regarded the 1958 civil crisis in

Lebanon as a microcosm of the threat to western influence emanating from the spread of Soviet communism and Arab nationalism' and attributed the clashes to the communists who had 'fanned the flames'. On the other hand it privately acknowledged the purely domestic factors behind the unrest and 'that communists were not directly involved in Lebanon's civil disturbances'.³⁵

Thus, while publicly following a globalist path, the Eisenhower administration privately acknowledged the existence of domestic causes to the unrest in Lebanon. Also, the globalist framework used – the East–West struggle – was misleading since the Lebanese opposition traced back mainly to the Nasserite pan-Arab ideal rather than to Soviet communism. Alin notes that, in this respect, the problem was the ambiguity of the Eisenhower Doctrine itself: it did not clearly distinguish between communist and nationalist threats. Nonetheless, military action was seen as 'an important means of sending a deterrent signal to anti-western forces in the Middle East and elsewhere'.³⁶ This would also be a constant feature of US policy in the region: the focus on superpower credibility to be achieved also by military action against regional foes.

This combination of global and domestic factors could be seen in the parliamentary elections that had been held in June 1957. Chamoun won 53 out of 66 seats thanks both to help from the CIA, as Douglas Little argued,³⁷ and to smart gerrymandering in favour of his supporters, as Corm wrote.³⁸ The result was that Camille Chamoun used the global US approach of the East–West struggle to strengthen his purely domestic rule over Lebanon.

The more he tilted toward the West, the more unrest he produced, the more he needed a foreign intervention on his behalf. As the summer of 1958 was about to start, the low-intensity civil war did not seem to stop. The US government started to seriously entertain the idea of intervening in the country. The Eisenhower administration decided to pose three conditions for US involvement. First, that Chamoun accept UN help in resolving the crisis; second, that he obtain support from at least another Arab state; third, that he renounce his

own candidacy for a second term. American diplomats pressed him to support his main Christian rival, General Chehab, and reach an understanding with Nasser pressing him to use his influence to 'try to end dissidence within Lebanon'.³⁹

On 14 July, a *coup d'état* overthrew the pro-Western regime in Baghdad. Chamoun summoned the US and British ambassadors and asked explicitly for help pointing at the 'communist and Nasserite' danger coming from Iraq. Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, too, were pressing hard for US military intervention to contain the radical tide sweeping through the region. While these countries saw a regional threat, namely Arab radicalism, the US inserted this threat into the global East–West struggle and exploited it to show a measure of 'resolve' against the Soviets. In the NSC meeting held the day of the coup in Baghdad, it clearly emerged that US credibility was at stake, not just the fate of Lebanon. Eisenhower, according to his Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Robert Cutler, made clear that, 'to lose this area by inaction would be far worse than the loss of China, because of the strategic position and resources of the Middle East'.⁴⁰ The globalist view in Washington overruled any regional consideration in Beirut. As Erika Alin wrote 'while trying to address Lebanon's internal problems [the Eisenhower administration] subordinated this to the primary objective of ensuring that the crisis did not diminish western influence in Lebanon and in the Arab world'.⁴¹

The globalist approach also helped to get through Congress Operation Blue Bat, namely US intervention in Lebanon. A few hours after the NSC meeting, the president consulted key members of the Congress. William Fulbright, the Arkansas Democrat who would later chair the Foreign Relations Committee wondered if the crisis was really 'Soviet-inspired' or if Nasser was playing 'his own game'. Eisenhower's response was quite instructive, 'the crucial question is what the victims believe' and Chamoun believed that 'it is Soviet Communism that is causing him his trouble'. Fulbright actually voiced the concern of two other congressmen who would later have an important role in US politics, Senator John F. Kennedy (Massachusetts-D) and

Hubert Humphrey (Minnesota-D) who termed the intervention in Lebanon as a 'sad mistake'.⁴²

The confusion between Arab nationalists and Communists should have been avoided simply by reading the CIA's National Intelligence Estimate issued around this time. pro-Nasser and pan-Arab radicals, not pro-Soviet subversives, were behind US problems in the region.⁴³ Despite this confusion, the *coup d'état* in Baghdad finally broke US hesitations about intervention in Lebanon. One week after that, on 15 July 1958, 1,700 Marines waded ashore in Beirut starting Operation Blue Bat. In a week, the number of US troops in Beirut would rise to 14,000. British troops, with US resupply, were meanwhile carrying out a similar job in Amman while the US Seventh Fleet was checking the security of the Straits of Hormuz with orders to defend the oil fields in the Persian Gulf.

For many historians⁴⁴ Eisenhower's handling of the 1958 crisis constituted his 'finest hour' as Douglas Little described this position. pro-Western regimes had been shored up, the special relationship with Great Britain was strengthened and the oil fields were safe from Arab radicals. Last but not least, no Americans were killed in the operation that ended by Christmas the same year. Eisenhower himself, in his memoirs, presented Operation Blue Bat as a successful example of how Marines were fit to fight 'small wars'. '[T]he operation in Lebanon demonstrated the ability of the United States to react swiftly with conventional armed forces to meet small-scale, or "brush fire" situations' in the Third World.⁴⁵ This description should be kept in mind when analysing the US intervention between 1982 and 1984: what was missing, according to Reagan's secretary of state, George Shultz, was the capability to cope with 'small wars' or asymmetrical warfare – this is how he saw terrorism – with the discrete use of US military conventional power.

Not all historians, however, share Eisenhower's view of Operation Blue Bat.⁴⁶ According to them, America was drawn into the Lebanese labyrinth and assumed obligations toward the Lebanese leaders that the subsequent US presidents would not be able to repudiate. Also, according to Little, 'US

officials tried to mislead both Congress and the US people by publicly attributing Lebanon's political instability to Communist subversion while privately acknowledging that the real cause was Arab nationalism.' Little goes even further when he says that Eisenhower set a precedent for his successors and they would use it with little success. US Presidents would continue to misrepresent Third World nationalism as Soviet-inspired, and the US as a guarantor of friendly governments against this threat.⁴⁷ Furthermore, with Operation Blue Bat the US had sided with the conservative front of Lebanese politics composed mainly of those Christians who did not want to change the terms of the 1943 National Pact and considered their country as part of the Western bloc. During the 1980s' intervention, this factor would not be addressed directly: the US would acquiesce in the election to the presidency of the Lebanese republic of Bashir Gemayel, a Maronite who the US State Department did not consider as the best figure to revise the 1943 National Pact, one of the major motives behind the outbreak of the civil war in the 1970s.

To be fair, the consensus on the National Pact had been already shattered with the 1958 crisis. The main cleavage was now between what we could call the Revisionist front and its opponents. Revisionists wanted to change the 1943 agreement to allow a bigger share of power for Muslims and a more pan-Arab foreign policy. Most of the Revisionists were Muslims but among them there were also Christians. The anti-revisionists (mainly Christian Maronites) saw Lebanon as a 'Christian haven and fortress in the midst of a hostile Muslim environment'.⁴⁸ For this reason, they were not eager to revise the National Pact and they would increasingly rely on external actors (whether Israel or the United States) to hold to their positions.

To make things even worse, since 1948 there were over 200,000 Palestinians living in refugee camps, almost completely segregated from the rest of the country because their full participation in political life would have definitively altered the ethnic balance in favour of the Muslims. With the gradual disintegration of the national consensus created with

the 1943 National Pact, the Palestinians grouped in the PLO would acquire more power and influence in the Revisionist front.

On 3 November 1969 the Cairo Agreements, reached under Nasser's patronage, granted the Palestinians permission to carry weapons and organize military activity inside the refugee camps in Lebanon. Gradually, this transformed them into the military umbrella organization for the Revisionist front.⁴⁹ The following year, the PLO members expelled from Jordan as a consequence of 'Black September' established their headquarters in southern Lebanon and in Beirut. In a short time this became a state-within-a-state and the Israelis became more and more concerned about their northern border.

Such was the situation when the civil war broke out in 1975. On 13 April, in Beirut, a bus loaded with Palestinians was attacked by the Maronite militia. Twenty-seven passengers were killed. Fighters from the Sunni Nasserite '*Al-Murabitun*' (The Sentinels) movement and from the Palestinian PFLP-General Command responded by killing four Christians. The fighting escalated in December during 'black Saturday' when checkpoints were established both in East and West Beirut. Drivers who were found on the wrong side of the city were taken out of their cars and killed on the spot.⁵⁰

Soon, the Phalangists would control eastern Beirut while the Palestinians and their Sunni allies would settle in the western part of the city. The civil war, however, was not just the result of a single incident. It came at the end of an evolving process over the past years when, along with the Palestinians, almost every faction in the Lebanese melting-pot had built its own militia. The Christians had the Maronite Phalange, based mainly within the Gemayel family and inspired by the 1930s European fascist regimes. The Revisionist front, on the contrary, could count on the Palestinian and Druze militias. This latter group was a tiny Muslim minority which had gathered around the old feudal Jumblatt family and its Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Druzes lived mainly in the Shuf plateau overlooking Beirut. The Shiites were the poorest and fastest-growing community of the country, living mainly in the south of Lebanon and in Beirut's slums. They were the

slowest to build their own party, *Amal* (Arabic for hope), a moderate Islamist movement. Later on, after the Israeli invasion, a splinter group from Amal would form *Hizbullah* (Arabic for Party of God), a radical Iranian-backed fundamentalist organization which would hit the US troops several times, eventually contributing to their withdrawal from the country in 1984.

Unfortunately for the Lebanese, these militias interacted with outside powers which had their own interests in the morass. First of these was Syria. Using the Cold War paradigm one would infer that Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, an ally of the Soviet Union, should have sided with the 'leftist' Revisionist front. Local dynamics, however, were more important to him than Cold War considerations. Early in 1976, the helpless Lebanese president Elias Sarkis asked for Syria's intervention on behalf of the Christians. The rationale behind the Syrian intervention was explained by the British journalist and long-time Beirut correspondent Robert Fisk. Assad feared the outcome of the civil war could be the birth of a revolutionary Palestinian state on its borders provoking Israel into a war and eventually involving Syria in the fighting. Also he was afraid that if the civil war lasted longer, it could poison his country and destabilize his regime.⁵¹ Other considerations moved Assad, according to the Israeli historian Itamar Rabinovic. Assad feared that, were the Revisionist front to succeed, Syria would have ended as a buffer between a radical Lebanon and a hostile Iraq. Assad's goal was instead to build better relations with the US by acting as a regional power.⁵²

As a matter of fact, Syrian intervention in Lebanon realistically could not have taken place without some form of 'go-ahead' from the United States, now more powerful in the region since the USSR had 'lost' Egypt. Henry Kissinger brokered an informal understanding whereby Israel assented to Syrian intervention in Lebanon as long as the Syrians did not come closer to Israel than a certain, fixed 'red line'. The American-Syrian agreement seemed to work well and some form of order was finally established in the country. With this agreement, however, the US had been somewhat involved in the civil war.

For the Soviet Union this agreement was a major problem. It fostered better Syrian–US relations and it posed two Soviet allies (Damascus and the PLO) against each other. Kosygin went to Damascus on 1 June 1976 in order to avoid the Syrian intervention, which actually took place on 31 May. He was faced with a *fait accompli*. This was the ultimate proof that national Syrian interest was more important than the relationship with the USSR for Assad.⁵³

The Israelis were also part of the game in Lebanon and had their own interests to pursue. First of all, they wanted to avoid the shelling of their northern cities and villages from PLO positions in southern Lebanon. Second, both Ben Gurion and later Begin harboured dreams of an ‘alliance of the minorities’ in the Middle East which would include, among others, the Israelis and the Lebanese Maronites. Ben Gurion’s biographer Michael Bar Zohar wrote that Israel’s founding father wanted to conquer Lebanon up to the Litani river, create a Christian state north of that river allied with Israel and leave to the Syrians the Muslim-dominated areas,⁵⁴ a plan not light-years away from Sharon’s ‘Grand Design’ in 1982: the consolidation of Maronites’ hegemony in the Lebanese political system by way of Israeli support to the election of Bashir Gemayel to the presidency; the expulsion of the Palestinian leadership and militias from the country; the signing of a peace treaty by a Lebanon freed from the PLO and Israel.

According to Israeli journalists and historians Ze’ev Schiff and Ehud Ya’ari, the first meetings between Maronite and Israeli officials took place in 1976. In August, Yitzhak Rabin had met with members of the Chamoun family and reached an agreement. Israeli weapons would flow to the Maronites. Overall, during years of military support Israel gave \$150 million to the Lebanese rightists.⁵⁵

While in the first months of the civil war the Revisionist front had prevailed, thanks to Syrian and Israeli intervention the balance was tipped in favour of the Maronites again. This first phase of the civil war ended with the Riyadh Agreement on 18 October 1976 which constrained the Palestinian armed presence in Lebanon. The Syrians remained in the country under the cover of the Arab Deterrent Force. The stabilizing

effect of this intervention did not last long since the Lebanese rightists continued to aspire to dominate the country and the Palestinians continued to use Lebanon as a launching pad against Israel.

On 11 March 1978 armed Palestinians emanating from their strongholds in southern Lebanon hijacked a bus and attacked and killed civilians on the coastal road between Haifa and Tel Aviv. In response to this, Israel launched Operation Litani, occupying a six-mile deep security zone on Lebanese territory. Israel withdrew on 13 June but left behind the Southern Lebanon Army (the so-called 'Haddad militia' from the name of their commander) composed mainly of Christians and Shiites which in effect created a buffer zone in southern Lebanon. In that same area a UNIFIL peacekeeping force was also deployed. In Beirut, the Maronite Phalange drew the Syrians out of the eastern part of the city. The alliance between the Christian rightists and Israel was now a matter of fact but the United States had also played a role in the temporary stabilization of the country through Kissinger's mediation of the Syrian intervention and in establishing contacts with the Maronites and their Phalange party.

This was the leading party among the Christians with a militia of around 20,000 men. The Party was defined by the CIA as a 'State within a State' since in the area of Mount Lebanon (the Maronite heartland) it collected taxes, enforced the law and dispensed justice. Its main goal was preserving 'Maronite Christian hegemony in Lebanon'. In December 1980, the Phalange approved a document entitled 'The Lebanon We Want to Build Up' which contained a plan for a 'Swiss-style canton system' dividing the country along ethnic lines and leaving only a weak central authority in place.

Bashir Gemayel, the young promise of the family, was described as the man in control of the militias and as 'the leading advocate of an aggressive anti-Syrian, pro-Israeli policy' while his elder brother Amin now represented a minority, more conciliatory position in the Phalange. The relationship with Israel was of 'occasional discreet ties' since the 1940s, now strengthened in the aftermath of the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. Since early 1976, the CIA added,

Israel had become the 'key outside military ally' providing arms and ammunition.^{[56](#)}

The Phalangists, however, were not satisfied merely by the alliance with the Israelis. Particularly after Reagan's election, they sensed that, as long as they could frame their struggle into Cold War terms, they could drag the US administration more decisively on their side. As early as May 1981, the Maronite-dominated American-Lebanese League wrote to Vice President Bush to offer its view of the struggle in Lebanon: the Syrians had to be removed from the country and Assad's regime had to be 'weakened' because 'Syria is anti-western by nature and inclination and it is the primary extension of Soviet policy in the region'. Also, since both the USSR and Damascus were 'testing the resolve of the new US Administration', a 'strong, pro-western Lebanon' had to be established. Obviously from their point of view, the Christians had to take the lead in such a pro-Western government because 'only the Christian resistance has prevented the loss of strategic Lebanon to the anti-US and pro-Soviet Syrian/PLO forces'.^{[57](#)} Because of this supposed convergence of interests, the Phalange's leadership tried to strengthen its ties with the Reagan administration. In a letter written in November 1981, Bashir Gemayel proposed to Reagan establishing an alliance in order to 'achieve a free, pluralist Lebanon' and further US interests in the area. In the meantime, his father Pierre denied ties with the Israelis and tried to bridge the gap with the other Lebanese factions.^{[58](#)}

Similarly to what Chamoun had done in 1958 and to what later the Israelis would also do, the Phalangists were therefore describing to the Americans their domestic goals, namely the preservation of Maronite hegemony over the Lebanese political system, as part of the bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union and its allies.

As in the 1958 crisis, intelligence supported a more regionalist view than the one held in Washington. In a CIA report issued in February 1982, the Soviet attitude towards confrontation in Lebanon was analysed. The Soviets, it said, were going to provide the Syrians with only limited support such as weapons resupply if the clash was confined to

Lebanon. Their influence in Lebanon was limited because Assad considered Syrian interests in the country as ‘vital and separate’ from the Soviet–Syrian relationship. And the CIA report predicted what actually happened some months later: ‘An Israeli attack on Syria’s SAM sites in Lebanon or a large-scale ground incursion into Lebanon would probably prompt the Soviets to resupply the Syrian military.’⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the Maronites’ and Israelis’ plans into the wider Cold War framework did win them the sympathy of the Reagan administration who would later acquiesce in many of their goals: the election of Bashir Gemayel to the presidency of Lebanon and the evacuation of the PLO from the country in August 1982 and the signing of a Lebanese–Israeli agreement on 17 May 1983. The choice of alliances was probably one of the fatal flaws in the US intervention in Lebanon. The Christians would prove to be both unable to rule the country by themselves and unable to change the domestic balance of power by striking a deal with the other factions to strengthen the central government. The presumed Soviet proxies, namely the Syrians, would be excluded from the negotiations of the Lebanese–Israeli agreement but their opposition would prove to be quite harmful for US troops. The Shiites would form Hizbullah and deal a fatal blow to the US presence in Beirut. Both the Syrians and the Shiites would eventually provoke the US withdrawal, with the Christians unable to defend themselves, and work towards a national reconciliation agreement that could provide the minimum of stability needed for the continued Marines’ presence in the country.

The alliance between the Israelis and the Phalangists, however, had been created some years before the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Reagan’s United States would follow suit, convinced by their globalist outlook that Lebanon was ‘about the Cold War’ and that this alliance was the appropriate one to fight Soviet influence and Soviet proxies. The strategy implemented by the United States after the Israeli invasion, while acknowledging most of the Phalangist and Israeli goals, would underestimate the importance of a new national pact, capable of bringing together the Muslim and Christian

constituencies. The Shiites of Lebanon would be almost completely ignored until they formed Hizbullah and started striking at US troops. Their previously hegemonic organization, Amal, would be considered too close to the Soviet Union and the Syrians.⁶⁰ Thus, the combined effect of the Cold War mindset and of the confusion between Arab radicals and the worldwide communist threat would not allow the US to push adequately for the change of the Lebanese National Pact and led them to initially rely on those forces, like the Phalangists, who clung to the status quo.

Modernization theories and the rise of Qadhafi

The United States, however, was not opposed to all types of change. Rather, it opposed ‘revolutionary change’ and favoured political modernization. This trend has to be understood if one wants to comprehend some of the origins of Qad-hafi’s rise to power in Libya as well as the conditions that generated the Islamic revolution in Iran. Ironically, the failures of the same modernization theories that had been devised by US policy-makers would be one of the driving forces behind both the Libyan and the Iranian revolutions – although this term should be handled with care regarding Qadhafi’s Libya.

The mistakes in the modernization policies championed by the US were committed, among other factors, out of fear for revolutionary change. The fear of the ‘perils of revolution’ has long been among the main aspects of US foreign policy, as noted by Michael Hunt in his 1987 book *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*. In depicting the influence of John Adams on US thought about revolutions, Hunt wrote:

So many and so serious were the risks that attended a revolution, Adams soberly concluded, that resistance to despotism was justified only where ‘the fair order of liberty and a free constitution’ could be rapidly realized and prolonged anarchy avoided.⁶¹

A year and a half before John Badeau’s book on the ‘political and ideological Cold War’ in the Middle East was published, the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, William

Fulbright, came out with his *The Arrogance of Power*⁶² in which he argued, for a variety of reasons, that Americans were 'handicapped' when dealing with Third World revolutionaries. They were frightened by the prospect of radical change and, as Little summed up,

unwilling to admit that the people of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East were likely to pursue a path to the future very different from the one travelled by the United States. The concept of peaceful revolution was an oxymoron.⁶³

This antipathy toward revolutionary change led American policy-makers to think more deeply about modernization theories as the answer to the unrest in the Third World.⁶⁴ As Del Pero argues, the 'ideology of modernization' was a liberal response to Eisenhower's policy toward the Third World which centred on military assistance to the ruling classes and the imposition of free market economies. This ideology was the result of the great investments that had been made in social sciences and would be the hegemonic theory during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The basic idea was that there was only one path to modernity and that the final goal was an industrial economy and a consumer goods society with high living standards and low unemployment. The intellectual supporters of this ideology thought that 'pre-modern' societies could be shaped by enlightened policies and become modern.⁶⁵ As for the policy-makers, according to Douglas Little

Always skeptical of any Third World radical who deviated from a Jeffersonian trajectory, America's national security managers believed that by combining Yankee ingenuity with Middle East petrodollars, the United States could nudge traditional societies such as Iraq, Libya and Iran down the road toward evolutionary change, thereby making revolutionary change impossible.⁶⁶

In early 1956, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller asked then Harvard political scientist Henry Kissinger to head a series of wide-ranging panels on the issues most likely to

confront the US at home and abroad. In the late 1950s, the members of what came to be called the 'Rockefeller panel' published a series of reports highlighting 'the revolution of rising expectations' sweeping the Third World. Kissinger argued that America could not stand by and watch as the old social orders were overthrown together with the old colonial rule. He also wrote that whoever won the White House in 1961 should either 'assist these states in becoming economically and socially viable or watch them drift into the Kremlin's orbit'.⁶⁷

Two authors were very important in the translation of modernization theories into concrete US foreign policy. First, Walt Rostow who in his 'anti-communist manifesto' warned that communism was the danger facing all the societies that failed to modernize effectively.⁶⁸ In 1957, Rostow, along with Max Millikan, wrote the book *A Proposal: Key to an Effective Foreign Policy* in which he argued that the Cold War was moving to the Third World and that the only way to win it for the US was through modernization.⁶⁹ One of Rostow's former colleagues, Daniel Lerner, in his *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* argued for implementation of modernization theories in this region: 'What America is, the modernizing Middle East seeks to become.'⁷⁰

Things did not work exactly as these social scientists had predicted, at least in the Middle East. The three countries that were picked to test the effects of modernization were Iran, Iraq and Libya because their oil sources allowed for the development of better living standards.⁷¹

In Iran, a US covert action helped overthrow the nationalist democratic government headed by Mossadeq in 1953.⁷² After this was accomplished, US policymakers and diplomats had tried to convince the Shah that unless he modernized the country and helped to build a new middle class, he would be overthrown by a communist revolution. The implementation of what was called the 'white revolution' would create initial opposition in the clergy and then general disappointment in the 1970s preparing the ground for the Islamic revolution of 1979.⁷³

Another modernization programme was implemented for Iraq under the regime of Nuri Said, later overthrown by Colonel Qassim in 1958. To counter the Nasserist influence, Qassim would eventually ask for the cooperation of the local communists. This pushed Eisenhower's advisors to rely on the tiny Ba'ath party that was going to seize power in 1963 with a *coup d'état*.⁷⁴ The Ba'ath party would eventually become one of Saddam Hussein's instruments of power in the 1970s and beyond, but this is a story which is not to be told here.

Finally, Libya was also one of the testing grounds for modernization theories. The northern African country had declared independence on Christmas Eve 1951 under the leadership of King Idris al-Sanusi. The 'United Kingdom of Libya' was one of the first African and Arab countries to gain independence, although this was not so much a recognition of the national liberation efforts made by the Libyans under Italian colonial rule but the result of the impossibility to assign a trusteeship to the many super and middle powers who aspired to it: the United Kingdom, along with Italy, France and the Soviet Union.⁷⁵ As a matter of fact, this proved to be the best solution for the Western world. Had Libya been a UN trusteeship, no military bases of the 'free world' could be established on its territory. As an independent country, on the contrary, it could sign treaties or agreements with Western powers to establish bases which were deemed crucial for the control of the Mediterranean and North Africa.⁷⁶

This is precisely what happened in the years immediately after independence: Libya signed treaties with the United Kingdom and the United States which granted them basing rights in exchange for substantial economic aid. The treaty with the United Kingdom was signed on 29 July 1953. In exchange for extra-territoriality for its bases, the British government would foot the bill of a consistent part of the Libyan government budget for the years to come. The United States, on their part, signed a similar treaty on 9 September 1954. The agreement, which was due to expire on 24 December 1970, allowed them to establish at Wheelus Field (just outside of Tripoli) what was then one of their largest military bases in this part of the world, a crucial element of

their control of the Mediterranean and of the defence of western Europe. They would pay \$7 million in the first year, \$4 million in the successive six years and \$1 million for each of the following 11 years before the expiration of the treaty.⁷⁷ This money was badly needed at the time as Libya had not yet discovered oil in its territory and was actually one of the poorest independent nations of the world, having to import from Egypt even elementary school teachers, which it lacked completely.

American and British money was not conditional on the implementation of political reform. On the contrary, initially Western powers seemed content with King Idris' autocratic rule as long as he guaranteed them basing rights and Libya's loyalty in international affairs. Idris' system of government could be labelled as that of 'the government of the royal palace' where the Sanusi family ruled in accord with the major tribes, regardless of constitutional checks and balances. The only real elections, those of 1952, had been rigged to avoid the victory of a party somewhat hostile to the Sanusis. Political parties were banned since then, and so they would be under Qadhafi.⁷⁸

The level of absolutism in Libya was not worse than that of other conservative, pro-Western monarchies of the region such as Saudi Arabia or Jordan but, unlike them, the Libyan Sanusis and their system of government proved incapable of surviving because of a combination of factors: the decolonization movement; the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the rise of Nasser's Arab nationalism in neighbouring Egypt which made being a close ally of the West unpalatable to many Libyan young people.

The first oil fields were established in Libya only in the late 1950s. This had actually destabilized the Sanusis' power base by weakening tribal loyalties, shaking the economic system and leading to the birth of a new, educated middle class with 'rising expectations' in terms of living standards, distribution of wealth and power, and foreign policy. In the early 1960s, the American officials in the country feared that, unless modernization was carried out, King Idris would be overthrown by pro-Nasser Libyans. The Sanusis, however,

never accepted implementing the whole modernization package and instead focused on US military aid to quell the rising unrest. In January 1964, large student demonstrations took place both in Tripoli and in Benghazi. To avoid the spreading of the unrest, the monarchy announced that the concessions for the military bases would expire without renewal in 1970. Nevertheless, new demonstrations took place in 1965 and again in 1967, emphasizing again the open contradiction between the growing pan-Arab feeling among the young Libyan middle class and the pro-Western orientation of the monarchy. Ironically, despite American pressures towards modernization, it was precisely the economic and social modernization brought about by the oil boom that had made King Idris' system of government obsolete. Incidentally, the monarchy would be overthrown by a group of young military officers who had received education thanks to the oil boom which had taken place under Idris.

On 1 September 1969 a small band of officers from the Libyan army overthrew the Sanusi dynasty. Among this group of 70 officers a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) was created whose initial 12 names were not revealed until early in 1970. Nevertheless, the key role of Mu'ammar Qadhafi, then just an army captain of 27, was to emerge very quickly. The first acts of the RCC exposed the mix of Political Islam and pan-Arab feelings that lay at the heart of Qadhafi's political project: alcohol was banned, Christian churches and night-clubs were shut down, foreign-owned banks confiscated, and Arabic decreed as the only official language of the country. The constitution approved later that year imposed the RCC at the top of the new institutional system, with the power to appoint the cabinet. Article 2 of the constitution said clearly that Islam was the official religion of Libya.⁷⁹ The expulsion of Italian settlers, the evacuation of US and British bases and new conditions imposed on foreign oil companies would follow suit – eventually, on 1 September 1973, oil companies operating in Libya would be nationalized.

Meanwhile, starting with his speech in Zawiya on 14 January 1971, Qadhafi built a peculiar regime centred on his role as *qa'id* ('guide' in Arabic) but structured as a direct

democracy with large popular assemblies named ‘People’s Congresses’ at its heart. The peculiarity of Libya’s regime, which in 1977 was renamed ‘state of the masses’ or *Jamahiriya* in Arabic, was not completely clear to the members of the Reagan administration: yes, some elements of this system were apparently similar to the Russian soviets and to direct democracy⁸⁰ but actually the Libyan regime, instead of building an omnipresent state structure as in the Soviet Union, saw the gradual elimination or weakening of all formal state structures including the national army. In their place, a complex system of formal and informal institutions under the control of Qadhafi himself was implemented.

Libyan foreign policy under Qadhafi, too, was a question mark for American policy-makers. Despite their initial hopes that reference to Islam would keep the new Libyan dictator away from the Soviets, a few months later an arms deal was brokered between the new regime and the USSR. Simultaneously, Qadhafi had signed similar agreements with France and Italy, not exactly part of the Soviet bloc.⁸¹

In the subsequent years, Qadhafi would try to merge Libya with all of its close Arab neighbours, he would subsidize subversive and radical groups worldwide, pursue a peculiar idea of African unity with him at the centre, verbally fight against Israel and concretely support the domestic enemies of almost all of the conservative Arab regimes allied to the West. All of this was carried out while having excellent business relations with many European countries, first of all Italy. To pursue this ambitious foreign policy agenda, he could count on enormous oil revenues: \$95 billion in the first ten years after the revolution.⁸²

Qadhafi’s brand of fundamentalism was a mix of religious extremism and Nasserite pan-Arabism as it emerged in the ‘Green Book’ which outlined his plan for a ‘Muslim Cultural Revolution’. Qadhafi’s ‘Third Universal Theory’ claimed that by returning to the fundamentals of Islam, Libyans could build a ‘Third Way’ toward development that rejected both Western capitalism and communism. As François Burgat has argued, Qadhafi’s policy at home and abroad in the 1970s, with all its ambiguities, had significantly contributed to the shift from

pan-Arab Nasserism towards Political Islam as the dominant discourse in the Arab world and beyond.⁸³

His *coup d'état* – which he obviously labelled as ‘revolution’ – established a pattern which would be followed years later in Iran by a more massive, civilian revolution. A violent revolt was needed to overthrow pro-Western regimes and produce a regeneration of the country through return to the fundamentals of Islam and rejection of Western allegiances. Moreover, with all its ups and downs, his regime and his conduct seemed to prove that it was possible to challenge American and Western positions in the Arab world while not entering the Soviet bloc, as long as one could rely on significant oil revenues and solid, if autocratic, control of domestic politics.

Developments in Libya under Qadhafi were not completely to be ascribed to the failures of the US-led modernization programmes. These had been implemented only partially by King Idris. The Libyan example, however, did refute the basic assumption of modernization theories: as Donnette Murray wrote about Iran, the ‘belief that socio-economic development was the key to mitigating instability’ underpinned America’s policy.⁸⁴ In fact, both in Libya and in Iran, it worked the other way around: economic development, whether generated by US-led modernization programmes or not, undermined the old political order represented, respectively, by King Idris and the Shah. By encouraging obsolete autocratic rulers to be at the forefront of quick economic modernization programmes based on large oil revenues, the United States actually created the conditions for the social mobility which made those same regimes anachronistic. The economic development caused by the oil revenues created a middle class which, in the case of Iran and Libya, was not granted political freedom and eventually turned to authoritarian and extremist leaders to overthrow its pro-Western oppressors. The modernization programmes often came together with military assistance to the ruling elites which then used their renewed military prowess to quell social unrest. The paradox of American policy based on modernization theories was therefore the delusion that quick

economic development towards a consumer goods society would not create a contradiction with the preservation of domestic political status quo that guaranteed the country's international loyalty to the United States and the West. Thus, in the end, the result of the imperfect implementation of these modernization programmes led to the rise of regimes which eventually would be among the most hostile to the US in the 1980s.

American policy in the Middle East, though, was not just shaped by Cold War concerns or by the aversion to revolutionary change. The safeguard of Israel and the incremental building of a special relationship with this country had a profound influence on American policy, especially during the Reagan years. This is not to say that relations with the Israeli government were always good: the Reagan presidency saw many moments of dire tension with the Jewish state.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the alliance gained a new, deeper political, cultural and ideological dimension which allowed the two governments, both under the hegemony of conservatives, to overcome their divisions. This new dimension of the special relationship overlapped with the traditional, albeit recent, US–Israeli alliance whose origins and developments need to be discussed separately.

The US–Israel special relationship

In a press conference held on 22 May 1977, US president Jimmy Carter said: ‘We have a special relationship with Israel. It’s absolutely crucial that no one in our country or around the world ever doubt that our number-one commitment in the Middle East is to protect the right of Israel to exist.’⁸⁶

The relationship between the state of Israel and the United States is one of the main themes of the history of the Cold War in the Middle East and also of current international politics. Several books and essays have dealt with this issue in the past⁸⁷ but the debate has been particularly active and popular after the article on the ‘Israel Lobby’ by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt appeared in the *London Review of Books* in March 2006. They argued that US policy in the Middle East is

a prisoner of the hegemony of the Lobby.⁸⁸ The issue of the existence – and relevance – of a pro-Israeli lobby in the US,⁸⁹ however, is only one aspect of the general theme of the US–Israeli special relationship.

Before analysing the US–Israeli special relationship, a short premise needs to be made because, as in other aspects of the history of the Middle East, the terminology has to be carefully selected. In this work, the expression ‘*Jewish Lobby*’ will never appear. It is the opinion of the author that this expression is both ambiguous and inaccurate: *ambiguous* because it is often used to hide anti-Semite feelings and justify creative conspiracy theories; *inaccurate* because, as we will see, any identification between the US Jewish community and the pro-Israeli organizations such as the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is perfunctory.

The US–Israel relationship is, indeed, also a domestic political issue in the United States. According to Douglas Little, ‘critics of the special relationship have attributed its persistence to election-year arithmetic and domestic politics’.⁹⁰ Walt and Mearsheimer’s article must be included in this category along with Janice J. Terry’s exhaustive analysis of the role of lobbies in the making of US Middle Eastern policy⁹¹ or Edward Tivnan’s study of the excessive influence of the ‘Lobby’ on US policy.⁹² Besides, a whole wealth of studies tried to demonstrate the influence of domestic politics on Truman’s decision to support the creation of the state of Israel in 1947 along with the pro-Israeli tilt of all American presidents except for Eisenhower.⁹³ Finally, some authors have started to investigate the relationship between the rise of the religious right in the US and the growing alliance with Israel, an element which should be kept particularly in mind when analysing the Reagan administration.⁹⁴

On the other hand, authors less critical of the special relationship have argued that Cold War and strategic considerations have consolidated the alliance. Israel was a strategic asset in the fight against the Soviets and was the only reliable and truly Western-oriented democracy of the Middle East.⁹⁵ The differences between these two historical interpretations resemble the discussion among policy-makers

between those who considered Israel as a strategic asset and those who saw it as a liability.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, as often happens, the uniqueness of the US–Israel special relationship derives from a multiple array of historical, strategic, domestic and international causes which must be analysed separately and then compared with the subject of the present study.

First of all, historically speaking, the relationship was not always *that special*. In his comprehensive history of the US–Israeli relationship, David Schoenbaum argues that it is not older than ‘network television’. If money is a good indicator of a special relationship, Schoenbaum notes that from 1948 to the Jordanian civil war in 1970 ‘official US aid barely peeped above the baseline of a graph’. Since then, Israel has turned into the world’s largest recipient of US aid both in absolute and per capita terms.⁹⁷ As Odd Arne Westad has pointed out, over the years Israel has received \$81 billion of economic and military aid. To draw a comparison, Westad cites the figure for US aid to all of sub-Saharan Africa from 1945 to the early 2000s: \$32 billion.⁹⁸

In the first years of the Jewish state both the USSR and the USA had mixed relations with Israel. In those years, the Israeli population was overwhelmingly of European descent (Ashkenazim) and the links with Western Europe were still strong. The Middle Eastern Sephardim Jews and the Russian Jews came in significant numbers only later. Not by chance, the know-how to acquire nuclear weapons was provided by France and the same country, along with Great Britain, was part of the alliance that tried to preserve European control over the Suez Canal and ensure Israeli sovereignty over the Sinai Peninsula in 1956. On that occasion, President Eisenhower ruined the Anglo-French–Israeli plans by supporting a UN resolution that called for their withdrawal. UN sanctions, with US support, were avoided only through last-minute negotiations in which the Israelis finally agreed to withdraw and the UN decided to deploy a peacekeeping force in the Sinai and Gaza. During the discussion in the US Congress over sanctions, Secretary of State Dulles stated something which would later become the leitmotiv of the opponents of

the view of Israel as a strategic asset, ‘Much of the world, including the Israeli government, believed Israel could in crucial moments control US policy. Should the Arab nations see any confirmation of this belief they would turn to Russia.’⁹⁹

The turning point came with the Six Days War in which the Johnson administration provided unwavering support to Israel. Johnson had been a friend of Israel since the late 1950s. His support dates, incidentally, to around the time AIPAC was founded. Richard Nixon, who had masterminded the 1956 showdown, was convinced that America’s relationship with the Jewish state had to reflect the US national interest, not merely interest group politics. Only after Israel helped to support the Jordanian conservative regime in the 1970 crisis, did Nixon start to consider it as a strategic asset. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War the president instructed the Pentagon to ‘send [to Israel] anything that will fly’.¹⁰⁰

Carter’s tenure in the White House could also be considered far from a honeymoon with Israel. Only with Reagan did the alliance take a different content: no more only a strategic asset, Israel was starting to be viewed also as an ideological ally. As AIPAC leader Thomas Dine stated in 1986: ‘We are no longer talking about a transformation in the relationship. We are talking about a revolution.’¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Dine’s statement should be read also as a sign of relief after what had been a difficult decade for AIPAC: in 1974 it had a staff of fewer than ten and its head Morris Amity ‘had to explain even to Jewish audiences that AIPAC was not OPEC’. When Dine had taken over as executive officer in 1980, membership was barely above 10,000 with an operating budget of less than \$1.5 million,¹⁰² a ridiculous amount by US standards in this field.

Overall, the special relationship with Israel should therefore be regarded as a recent feature of US foreign policy and was not always as tight as it looks now. As Bernard Reich concluded, there existed ‘broad patterns of concord on the more strategic and existential issues, accompanied by disagreement on the specifics of many of the elements of the

Arab–Israeli conflict and on the means to achieve congruent objectives’.¹⁰³

The special relationship is not only recent and unstable, it also lacks a wide-spread consensus in the foreign policy elite. policy-makers and intellectuals are divided between those who see Israel as a strategic asset and those who consider it a liability. The golden moment of the former was the early 1980s: the fall of the Shah in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the statement of the Carter Doctrine and the Reagan victory in the 1980 elections all conjured up the idea that Israel had a certain number of ‘services’ which could be useful in fighting the Cold War. They were outlined in a paper by Steven Rosen issued by AIPAC in 1982 on the ‘Strategic Value of Israel’. The Jewish state could serve as a base for a swing force between Europe and the Persian Gulf.¹⁰⁴ Israel was also valued for its defence capabilities as well as for its cooperation in research and development and in the intelligence field. In a 1983 article in *Commentary*, Steven Spiegel argued ‘if Israeli experiences were worth only 2% of the [US] annual defense budget, that would amount to over \$4 billion’.¹⁰⁵ To be able to use Israeli services, supporters of the strategic asset position thought that its ties with the US had to be exclusive: ‘Indeed, if Israel is to play a role in the Middle East, the other countries must not enjoy ties of the same nature.’¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, those that perceived Israel as a burden had a mainly negative position. They simply opposed stronger ties without being ‘an advocacy for any precise policy’ as Mansour wrote.¹⁰⁷ Their main point was that strong ties with Israel harmed those with the Arab states. ‘The US,’ wrote former Undersecretary of State George Ball in 1984, ‘cannot cooperate militarily with Israel without irreparably damaging its relations with the Arab states.’¹⁰⁸ In the Reagan administration, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Vice President George H.W. Bush would, at times, highlight this risk without actually influencing very much American policy.

Indeed, the importance of Israel in the fight against the Soviet Union was only one of the factors, that defined and

drove the special relationship. The moral and psychic legacy of the Holocaust^{[109](#)} mattered as much as the ‘presumed affinities of that were now universally referred to as “Judaео-christian” values’.^{[110](#)}

As a matter of fact, over time lobbying for Israel has been easy and effective primarily because Americans have perceived Israel as a sister nation. In a 1975 survey, half of the respondents said the Israelis were ‘like Americans’ while the same quality was attributed to Arabs only by 5 per cent of those surveyed. In fact, Schoenbaum notes, ‘what could be more American than the taste for biblical symbolism, entrepreneurial zip, pioneer settlement, national independence, and democratic republics that Israelis have shared and exploited since the beginnings of Jewish settlement in Palestine?’^{[111](#)} If the frontier is the defining moment of American exceptionalism, as Turner argued,^{[112](#)} then Israel provided, in the mind of many Americans, a new ‘West’ to be conquered. The Israeli survivors of the Holocaust were also compared to the Puritans running away from religious persecutions in Europe to settle in the New World. As Francis Chase wrote in the *National Geographic* in 1946, ‘on a miniature – almost on a laboratory scale – a visit to Palestine today is much like a visit to America of yesterday’.^{[113](#)} Arabs, on the other hand, were depicted as backward and semi-feudal in a replication of that ‘hierarchy of race’ that Michael Hunt has included among the main features of the ideology of US foreign policy.^{[114](#)}

Douglas Little cites dozens of examples of this approach in his *American Orientalism*. One of John F. Kennedy’s military advisors, Robert Komer, once explained to the president that it was always important to ‘take adequate account of the inferiority of the Arab soldier compared to the Israeli’. Harold Gliden, then serving as a US diplomat in Baghdad once predicted: ‘if Arabs ever took over the world, they would start instantly to tear it down.’ After the bloody military coup that occurred in Baghdad in 1963 he told a reporter, ‘Arab values of vengeance, prestige and obsession with feuding are not acclimated to urban society.’^{[115](#)}

It is within this background of sympathy for Israel that the Lobby has managed to successfully champion the cause of the special relationship. As Janice Terry has skilfully explained, the role of political lobbies is a consequence of the low level of popular participation in US politics. Voters concerned for the fate of Israel – not only US Jews but also a growing percentage of evangelicals – often were also those most likely to go to the polls. By mobilizing them and by exerting constant pressure on policy-makers, the pro-Israeli lobby has raised its leverage on US foreign policy.¹¹⁶

AIPAC, the main organization of the Lobby, was born in 1954 as an offspring of the American Zionist Council of Public Affairs which had already effectively fought against a presumed anti-Israeli bias in the White House during the Eisenhower administration. Its founder I.L. Kenen operated on the belief that what was good for Israel was also good for America.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, the pro-Israeli front in US politics is not just made up of AIPAC and similar organizations and is not an exclusive haunt of US Jews. A more accurate definition of the term ‘pro-Israeli Lobby’ can be found in Mearsheimer and Walt’s article:

We use ‘the Lobby’ as shorthand for the loose coalition of individuals and organisations who actively work to steer US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction. This is not meant to suggest that ‘the Lobby’ is a unified movement with a central leadership, or that individuals within it do not disagree on certain issues. Not all Jewish Americans are part of the Lobby, because Israel is not a salient issue for many of them. In a 2004 survey, for example, roughly 36 per cent of American Jews said they were either ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ emotionally attached to Israel.¹¹⁸

As they point out later in the article, the Lobby is made up also of Christian evangelicals who think that the rebirth of Israel is the fulfilment of a biblical prophecy, ‘neoconservative *gentiles*’, government officials and US representatives having

no personal affiliation with either Israel or the US Jewish community.

Indeed, the US–Israel special relationship gained additional momentum and relevance in the late 1970s as a consequence of the enlargement of its social and cultural coalition which, in many cases, overlapped with Reagan’s coalition. Support for Israel was one of the main points of Reagan’s agenda and one of the few issues (along with anti-communism and taxation) that kept together the neoconservative intellectual elite and the social conservatives that were both part of the Reagan coalition. Several leading Neocons such as Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz were simultaneously of Jewish descent and very attached to Israel’s security. According to Michael Schaller, a determination to assist Israel – which many liberals and leftists had come to criticize – partially shaped their political agenda. This agenda dovetailed especially well with many evangelical Christians and with the followers of the grassroots organization Moral Majority. Cooperation with these Jewish intellectuals also provided a strong base of ideas to the conservative movement.¹¹⁹

Moreover, the support for Israel in the Reagan coalition came from organizations, such as the Moral Majority, which had more general goals. The birth of the Moral Majority was a crucial factor in Reagan’s victory in the 1980 elections. This alliance of conservative Christians brought forward the idea that the creation of a powerful Israel represented a critical precondition for Christ’s eventual return.¹²⁰ According to the leader of the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell, in 1980 about 20 per cent of the voters agreed with the organization’s platform and the security of Israel was one of its pillars:

Moral Majority had four tenets: pro-family, pro-life, pro-strong national defense, and pro-Israel. It did n’t matter who you were, or where you went to church, or if you went to church or not. If you could say yes to the four tenets, you could be part of it.¹²¹

The roots of the relationship between conservative Christians and the Zionist cause could be traced back to the thinking of

the nineteenth century's Louis Way, an Anglican clergyman who was fascinated by the ancient Apocalyptic theories. Way emphasized three themes, all of which anticipated the contemporary movement called Christian Zionism: first, Jewish 'restoration' was a necessary historical and political phenomenon; second, careful charting and interpretation of present-day events would become a primary task of informed Christians, who with sufficient study and inspiration, could decode the signs of the times pointing to the 'end'; and third, the restored Jewish nation in Palestine would be a sign of the end of history and prelude to Jesus' return to earth.^{[122](#)}

These beliefs were boosted when Israel captured Jerusalem in the June 1967 war. Nelson Bell, editor of the influential evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, wrote in his editorial of July 1967,

That for the first time in more than 2000 years Jerusalem is now completely in the hands of the Jews gives the student of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible.^{[123](#)}

With the election to the White House in 1976 of Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher, the once-Marginalized evangelicals were given increased visibility and legitimacy. However, he was soon to disappoint Israel's friends, declaring in March 1977 that the Palestinians deserved their homeland. The new right-wing Israeli Likud (Hebrew for 'consolidation') government elected two months later did not like this idea at all. According to Donald Wagner, the Likud strategy was to split fundamentalist Christians from Carter's political base and simultaneously to rally support among conservative Christian Americans for Israel's new positions. Political advertisements were bought in major US newspapers reading: 'We affirm as Evangelicals our belief in the promised land to the Jewish people (...). We would view with grave concern any effort to carve out of the Jewish homeland another nation or political entity.' A former employee of the American Jewish Committee who coordinated the campaign, Jerry Strober, told *Newsweek* magazine: '[The Evangelicals] are Carter's constituency and he [had] better listen to them (...).

The real source of strength the Jews have in this country is from the Evangelicals.’¹²⁴

As both Wagner and Di Motoli argue, during the late 1970s and the early 1980s the US–Israeli special relationship evolved into an ideological alliance between the American religious right and the hard-line nationalism of the Israeli Likud. Di Motoli argues that, along with the fulfilment of the agenda for a ‘Greater Israel’, the two political rights shared their support for a revival of traditional values and for the abandonment of a presumed ‘Socialist’ or ‘New Left’ hegemony in their societies.¹²⁵

The other crucial factor in the change of the special relationship during the Reagan years is Ronald Reagan himself. He was decisively a supporter of those who saw Israel as a strategic asset in the fight against the Soviets. On 15 August 1979 the candidate Reagan wrote in the *Washington Post* that

The fall of Iran has increased Israel’s value as perhaps the only remaining strategic asset in the region on which the United States can truly rely (...). Only by full appreciation of the critical role the State of Israel plays in our strategic calculus can we build the foundation for thwarting Moscow’s designs on territories and resources vital to our security and our national well-being.¹²⁶

According to former CIA analyst Kathleen Christison, support for Israel was part of the counter-offensive he wanted to launch against the USSR:

Israel’s greatest enemies – Syria and the Palestinians and, more distantly, Libya – are Soviet puppets; Israel is a democracy fighting the forces of totalitarianism; Israel and America are together victims of worldwide Soviet-inspired terrorism; support for Israel is therefore an ideological imperative.¹²⁷

Reagan not only shared the view of Israel as a strategic asset, he also thought Armageddon (the final battle between good

and evil) could come during his time in office.¹²⁸ In that case, Israel would have been crucial. During the 1980 campaign he told a Jewish fund-raiser that 'Israel is the only stable democracy we can rely on in a spot where Armageddon could come'. In this fight the Arab 'moderates' would just be junior partners of a basically US–Israeli alliance. A book by intelligence analyst Joseph Churba stated that 'the Arab states can be auxiliaries to Israeli–American might – they can never be a substitute for it'.¹²⁹ Reagan's first national security advisor endorsed this idea in his introduction to the book.¹³⁰

The situation between Reagan and the Likud government, however, was not exactly a honeymoon and the special relationship actually suffered from several ups and downs during the Reagan administration. Actions such as the annexation of the Golan Heights, the strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak, and the severe bombings of Beirut in August 1982 had a negative effect on the relationship. The 1981 Memorandum of Understanding and the Shamir Visit in late November 1983, in contrast, were positive points.

The Israeli leadership under Menachem Begin recovered from the above-mentioned problems by successfully inserting its foreign policy strategies and needs into the Cold War framework so important for Reagan. First the Memorandum of Understanding (a result of Strategic Consensus) and then the invasion of Lebanon were justified by the common Soviet threat. A masterpiece in this regard was Begin's argument during his June 1982 meeting with Reagan that the invasion of Israel's northern neighbour had helped to unveil the biggest Soviet base in the Middle East.¹³¹

Later, the Israeli leaders were even more skilled in pointing to the new threat of terrorism – capitalizing on the first hard hit to the US on 23 October 1983 when more than 240 Marines were killed. While American threat perceptions were starting to be decisively different from Western Europeans (see their reaction to the 1981 US campaign against Libya),¹³² they were strikingly similar to the Israeli's.

In the years to come, the common threat perception about terrorism would become one of the cornerstones of the special

relationship. As Mearsheimer and Walt wrote:

Beginning in the 1990s, and even more after 9/11, US support [to Israel] has been justified by the claim that both states are threatened by terrorist groups originating in the Arab and Muslim world, and by 'rogue states' that back these groups and seek weapons of mass destruction. (...) Israel is thus seen as a crucial ally in the war on terror, because its enemies are America's enemies.¹³³

The converging analysis on terrorism, however, dates back to the 1980s, to the years that are the subject of this study. It was elaborated, as we will see in [Chapter 3](#), in Israeli military and intellectual circles such as Benjamin Netanyahu's 'Jonathan Institute' but it also interacted with US post-Vietnam debate over the use of military force. Also, authors like Claire Sterling who read the problem of terrorism through the Cold War pattern, had a great influence on US foreign policy at least in the first half of the 1980s.¹³⁴ The common analysis on terrorism defined it as a form of warfare that threatened the whole West. This threat perception, which is not just a justification for Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories, is one of the common beliefs making the special relationship so 'special' since the 1980s.

The US would experience its first massive casualties in terrorist attacks in Lebanon, a country where America got involved as a result of a longstanding civil war and of Israeli intervention in it. The lessons learned from that experience, namely that terrorism was warfare and that it needed warfare in response, would drive some US policy-makers like Secretary of State George Shultz to cooperate more closely with Israeli right-wingers who had an ideology similar to that of the US republicans under Reagan and who displayed a longer record in the battle against political violence. This common US-Israeli elaboration would then lead to a particular view of the fight against terrorism which would be partially experimented with the strike against Libya in 1986. To understand this evolution, events in Lebanon have to be described and interpreted first.

2 Lebanon, attack and withdrawal

Lebanon was not at the top of the agenda of the Reagan administration in 1981. The focus was rather on fighting Soviet influence in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, restoring US credibility in the region after the fall of the Shah and strengthening the Camp David agreement that had consolidated Egypt's transformation from a Soviet ally into one of the pillars of American influence in the region.

The Lebanese crisis, however, started to unfold only a few months after Reagan entered the White House and proved to be a serious challenge for his Middle East policy. The failure of the US intervention in the country and the terrorist attacks that hit the US embassy and the Marines' barracks in 1983 produced shockwaves that reshaped the US vision of terrorism and eventually motivated the strike against Libya in 1986.

The Reagan administration saw local events through the lens of the Cold War. This paradigm influenced also the choice of allies, the main criteria being the policy of 'strategic consensus' between Arab moderates and Israel against Soviet inroads. The 'special relationship' with Israel also played a relevant role, especially because the Israeli leaders skilfully depicted the situation in Lebanon with terms easily understood by US officials concerned with the fight against the USSR and its regional proxies. It is because of the overlapping of Cold War concerns and of the special relationship with Israel that the United States saw Israel's interference in Lebanon as the only effective counterweight to Soviet– Syrian influence in the Levant.

The Israeli right-wing government in power since the summer of 1981, however, was not fighting America's Cold War in the Middle East. Prime Minister Begin and, with particular emphasis, Defence Minister Sharon had their own goals to pursue in Lebanon: the invasion of the country would uproot the presence of the PLO in Beirut, annihilate its influence over the Palestinian cause and thus eventually securing the de facto annexation of the West Bank, strengthening the hold of their Lebanese allies from the Maronite Phalange Party and signing a peace agreement with Lebanon.

Throughout the crisis, the Israeli government would successfully achieve the American convergence on its intermediate goals: the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut and the election of Bashir Gemayel, the young leader of the Phalange, to the presidency of Lebanon. These would be attained also thanks to the deployment of an American contingent in the Lebanese capital, the first such intervention after the withdrawal from Vietnam.

Drawn into Lebanon by its special ties with Israel and its Cold War concerns, the United States would sink more and more deeply into the complex dynamics of the Lebanese civil war. In this context, Americans would increasingly side with those forces, like the Phalangists, that defended the status quo and the balance of power that had been established with the National Pact of 1943. Eventually, the Israeli invasion and American intervention in the country would accelerate the creation of terrorist groups inside the Shiite community which would officially become Hizbullah, the Party of God, only a few years later. This event had little to do with the Soviet bloc that the Reagan administration thought was the main threat in the region and a lot more to do with the Islamic Republic that had been established in Iran in 1979.

Map 1 Lebanon



(courtesy of Limes, Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica).

This chapter ends with the attack against the Marines at Beirut airport on 23 October 1983, carried out by Islamist terrorists close to Hizbullah. That event came to be considered inside the US government as the first occasion in which terrorism was used as a form of warfare against Americans. The debate that followed, which was about withdrawal from

Lebanon and the changing nature of warfare, will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

The beginning of the US involvement in Lebanon

During 1981, three crises would mark the beginning of the US involvement in Lebanon and the evolution of the relationship with Israel: the ‘missile crisis’ between the Jewish state and Syria; the tension between the PLO and Israel which ended with a US-brokered ceasefire whose interpretation would be at the heart of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon; and the Israeli strike on the Osirak nuclear plant in Iraq which caused a temporary slow-down of US–Israeli military cooperation whose resumption would be one of the main achievements in the aftermath of the invasion of Lebanon.

The ‘missile crisis’ broke out in the late spring of 1981 and was part of the Lebanese civil war.¹ At the end of 1980, the Lebanese Christian rightist leadership decided to extend its military presence to the city of Zahle, the capital of the Beqa’a valley and a crucial point for the defence of the Syrian territory. The *casus belli* for the Syrian army was the construction of a road from this town to Mount Lebanon, in the Christian heartland north of Beirut. On 1 April 1981, units from the Maronite Phalange had inflicted heavy casualties on the Syrian army which then decided to heavily shell the militia as well as the civilian population in Zahle.

At this point, the Maronite lobbyists started their campaign in the US to present the situation in their terms. In mid-April, the American Lebanese League (which represented Lebanese Christians in the US) bought pages in major newspapers to denounce the ‘systematic extermination of the Christian community in Lebanon by the Syrian army and the PLO’. The advertisement formally asked Reagan to pressure the Syrians to pull out their troops.²

The Israeli government was sensible to this campaign. For obvious reasons, Begin was very receptive to the issue of a ‘Christian genocide’ in Zahle. He, like his political rival Ben Gurion, liked the idea of an alliance of minorities in the Middle East uniting the non-Arab and non-Muslim peoples of

the region. The Christians of Lebanon held a special place in this conception because they faced the danger of extermination by their Arab neighbours. On 28 April, the Israelis shot down two Syrian helicopters in Zahle. The Syrians responded by introducing surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) in the area and by deploying Scud surface-to-surface missiles from nearby Damascus. These missiles were seen as a major problem by the Israeli government because they would make reconnaissance flights over Lebanon impossible, thus endangering the security of northern Israel which could be shelled by militias operating from southern Lebanon. A planned Israeli strike against them on 30 April had to be cancelled because of bad weather.

The 'missile crisis' and the possible escalation between Israel and Syria concerned the US administration. Philip Habib was appointed special envoy of the president for the Middle East and dispatched to the region to defuse the crisis. Nevertheless, not everyone in the administration thought that the cancelled Israeli strike against the Syrian missiles was a bad idea. Some officials in the Department of State's Politico-Military Affairs and in the Policy Planning Staff were concerned about the Soviet origin of those missiles and thought that Israel had to be granted the green light to eliminate them.³

Habib, however, managed to strike a deal between the Israelis and the Syrians. He worked out an informal understanding that the Syrians would not fire the missiles and the Israelis would not try to destroy them. Israeli jets could continue their over-flight of Lebanon and the SAMs would continue to stand still.⁴

Settling the 'missile crisis' was not enough, unfortunately, to stabilize this part of the Middle East. The Israeli government was still concerned about the security of its northern border threatened by the massive PLO presence in southern Lebanon and in Beirut. These areas were used by the Palestinian militias as launching pads for Katyusha missiles against the cities of northern Israel. The 'War of Katyushas' posed a peculiar threat to Israel. These missiles hit randomly in a general area, thus spreading terror among the population.

At the same time, these missiles do not need a fixed position to be fired, they can be mounted on the back of a truck and moved far away by the time Israeli jets arrive on the scene of the launch.

On 28 May Begin approved the Israeli Defence Forces' (IDF) chief of staff's proposal to launch bombing strikes against PLO concentrations in southern Lebanon.⁵ The bombings continued until 3 June and then started again on 10 June. After this second wave, the Palestinian militias started to shell the Israeli coastal town of Nahariya. The fighting escalated with Israeli bombing raids over West Beirut. The total death toll at the end of the fighting would be 450 dead among Palestinians and Lebanese and six among the Israelis. The Israeli bombing, that of 17 July alone, killed 300 and wounded another 800, most of them Lebanese civilians.⁶

When US envoy Philip Habib met with the Israeli prime minister on 24 July, Begin was ready for a truce. The American diplomat had worked out another informal agreement: the Israelis and the PLO would both refrain from shooting at each other from across the Lebanon–Israeli border. As with the Syria–Israel deal, the terms of the agreement were written down but there was no piece of paper bearing everyone's signature.⁷ Because of the non-recognition of the PLO by Israel and the US, the ceasefire had taken a peculiar form: apparently, the US had reached an agreement with the Jewish state and with Lebanon and the Lebanese government had negotiated with the PLO through the UN.

Actually, contacts between the US embassy in Beirut and the PLO existed, although they were not official. In a 'message to be delivered by ambassador Dillon to his security contact' the Israeli understanding of the recently brokered ceasefire was exposed. The Israelis thought the ceasefire applied not just to the Lebanese–Israeli border but to any attack against their country by the PLO. Thus, the message conveyed by US officials to their Palestinian counterparts in Lebanon was that 'any other military move directed at Israeli targets at this tense time could bring about unpredictable escalation'.⁸ This would be one of the points reiterated by the Israeli government before the 1982 invasion: the 1981

ceasefire had to bring overall security to their country and not just move elsewhere the threat from the northern border. This momentary truce could hold only while the parties agreed to it. As a consequence of the Habib mission, the US had given a double guarantee, on the Syrian–Israeli dispute and on the safety of the Lebanese–Israeli border with regards to the shelling by the Palestinians. American credibility was now at stake in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the United States and the Israeli government had grown tenser because of nuclear proliferation in the region. On 7 June, the Israeli Air Force bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak.⁹ Reagan reacted by delaying the delivery of F-16 aircraft to Israel. In a letter to the US president, Begin made ample use of references to the Holocaust saying just as during the Nazi years Jewish children had been killed by Ziklon gas, now they were under the same threat from Iraqi radioactivity. This new extermination of Jews had been prevented by the ‘heroism’ of Israeli pilots, Begin stated. In his diary on 7 June Reagan wrote: ‘I swear I believe Armageddon is near.’¹⁰ Two days later, probably moved by Begin’s letter, he sounded more understanding of the Israeli action: ‘We are not turning on Israel – that would be an invitation for the Arabs to attack. It’s time to raise H-I worldwide for a settlement of the “middle-east” [*sic*] problem.’¹¹

On 30 June, Begin won the elections for the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. Three months before, Shimon Peres’ Labour Alignment was leading by 25 per cent in the opinion polls. In the elections, the two parties got more or less the same share of votes but the conservative Likud party got one seat more than the Alignment. The new Begin cabinet was the first one in the history of the Jewish state formed entirely by right-wing parties. The lack of a stable parliamentary majority was compensated by the ideological cohesion of the Israeli right.¹² In the new cabinet, Ariel Sharon, the advocate of a massive invasion of Lebanon to uproot the PLO’s infrastructure, became Minister of Defence. In less than a year, his plans and his political skill would combine with the actions of some Palestinian radicals, hostile to the PLO leadership,

and bring about the end of the two ‘ceasefires’ brokered by Habib in 1981: the one between the PLO and Israel and the one between the Jewish state and Syria.

The missing red light

Ariel Sharon became the Israeli Defence Minister in early August 1981. Sharon had some political leverage over the Israeli cabinet. As US ambassador to Israel Samuel Lewis recollected, he ‘controlled three Likud votes – his own and two others. He threatened Begin that if he did not become Defence Minister, he and his two friends would “take a walk” and make the Likud a minority party.’¹³

From that position, Ariel Sharon argued with some success that the underlying problem had not been addressed by the agreements brokered by Philip Habib. The PLO’s *raison d’être*, he argued, was still the destruction of Israel and the PLO headquarters in Lebanon were still intact.

His position, however, should not be assimilated with that of Begin. An academic commenting on the difference between the two politicians stated, ‘Begin will do what must be done; Sharon will do ten times what must be done.’¹⁴ And Sharon appeared to know very well what had to be done: a massive Israeli military operation to drive the PLO out of Lebanon once and for all. He did not speak of Beirut yet, but he was clear about the final goal of an invasion, eliminating Palestinian leaders, their advisors and their associates.¹⁵

Sharon’s plans did not come out of nowhere. He later claimed to have applied a plan devised by the IDF General Headquarters in 1979 under the guidance of Defence Minister Weizemann. The lesson that the Israeli military had learned from Operation Litani (the previous brief invasion of Lebanon in 1978) was that to deal effectively with the PLO it was necessary to target its entire ‘political and military infrastructure’ in Lebanon.¹⁶

The destruction of the PLO was just the first step of Sharon’s ‘Grand Design’. The second aim was to establish a friendly government in Beirut with Bashir Gemayel as

president. A Gemayel-led Lebanon would be expected to sign a peace treaty with Israel. The third step was expelling the Syrians from the country, which was actually the pre-condition for building a strong Lebanese central government friendly to Israel. The consequences of these military and political moves could affect the whole Middle East as the backbone of Palestinian nationalism would be weakened, thus allowing the annexation of the Occupied Territories in the Greater Israel.¹⁷

In the following months Sharon was going to give several warnings to the United States on his plans, but he received no effective red light. As US ambassador to Israel Samuel Lewis commented a few years later: ‘We knew [the invasion] was coming, [our efforts] were not half-hearted, but they were inadequate for the challenge – no major and very tough ultimatums.’¹⁸ To be effective in this sense, the US response had to contain one word, ‘sanctions’, which never became the official US policy during 1982. If the Israelis did not have to suffer any heavy consequence from their action, they did not have to fear US public condemnation of the invasion. A condemnation without the threat of sanctions was like a red light without the threat of having to pay a fine.

There was a precedent on how the US could enforce a ‘red light’ with Israel. It came during the 1978 Operation Litani when the US pressures worked effectively and the invasion stopped. As Nicholas Veliotis (former US assistant secretary of state for the Near East) recalled, Carter inserted a phrase in a letter to Menachem Begin which read: “‘Unless you withdraw,”(...) he said, “I will be forced to invoke the terms of the Arms Export Control Act.” Which meant an embargo.’¹⁹

Signalling started in September 1981, at the time when the US–Israeli relationship focused on the sale of American AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia, a move which Israel feared would threaten its own security and which was passed by Congress with a narrow majority. On 19 September, members of the NSC staff Robert McFarlane and Howard Teicher flew to Israel to discuss the sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia and the situation in Lebanon. On this subject, as Teicher recollected, the Israelis sought American cooperation but received a denial from US ambassador in Tel Aviv Samuel Lewis. The Israelis

had made it clear that they wanted to work with Bashir Gemayel while Lewis had interjected that 'Washington fundamentally disagreed with Israel's view that the Phalangists could become one with the central government.'²⁰ The Israeli officials warned that if the US did not work effectively on the stability of the country, Israel would act unilaterally to guarantee it. American cooperation was therefore sought although it was not deemed crucial to the implementation of the plan.

The position of the Reagan administration at this point, however, was open to Israeli misinterpretation. In the same month of September, Secretary of State Alexander Haig met with Begin during his visit in Washington and warned him about plans to invade Lebanon:

Unless there was a clear, internationally recognized provocation – and even then, unless Israeli reaction was proportionate to the provocation – any such course would have very grave effects in the United States.²¹

Haig spoke (and would repeat it in the following months) of two conditions for US approval, the 'internationally recognized provocation' and the 'proportionate' reaction by Israel. Deliberately, Haig spoke only of 'grave effects' but never explicitly mentioned 'military sanctions' as a possible consequence of the invasion because he was against them. For Sharon the two preconditions could be bent to his will, while the absence of real consequences for Israel made his plans ever more possible.

A similar message was conveyed by Haig in October on the occasion of the funeral of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat, killed by Islamic fundamentalists. Begin informed Haig that Israel had 'begun planning a move into Lebanon that would not draw Syria into the conflict'. Haig denied US support but, again, he did not threaten sanctions.²² As David Martin and John Walcott noted, 'to the Israelis what Haig didn't say was more important. He did not threaten to cut off the supply of American military equipment that Israel needed to sustain an operation in Lebanon.'²³

American decision-makers, at this stage, did not know about the details of Israeli military planning. On 29 September, the CIA warned that 'several members of the Begin government are pressing for a major ground operation in southern Lebanon. Even a mildly provocative act could spark a serious Israeli response on the ground.'²⁴ The Israeli Ministry of Defence elaborated two options: 'Little Pines' which included the conquest of southern Lebanon up to the outskirts of Sidon and the more ambitious 'Big Pines' which covered the occupation of a larger part of the country, up to the Beirut–Damascus Highway.²⁵ As a matter of fact, 'Big Pines' and 'Little Pines' could produce different diplomatic outcomes: occupying an Arab capital such as Beirut and clashing with Syrian troops in and around it could be a far more serious threat to the stability of the Middle East and to American regional alliances than introducing some Israeli troops in southern Lebanon. It is fair to wonder whether Haig's warnings to Begin in September and October were influenced by the lack of information on the extension of the actual plan for the invasion.

The rumours of Israeli plans for Lebanon did not affect the implementation of the Strategic Consensus, Haig's idea of building an alliance between pro-Western Arab countries and Israel. After the sale of the AWACS to Saudi Arabia was approved by Congress, the Reagan administration proceeded to sign on 30 November a 'Memorandum of Understanding'(MOU) with Israel. The memorandum clearly stated in Article 1 that it was designed against 'the Soviet Union or Soviet-controlled forces from outside the region introduced into the region'. The purpose of this statement was to confine the agreement solely on the problems which may arise from a Soviet (or Soviet-proxy) intervention in the region, thus eliminating all the 'threats to peace and security' which could arise from the Arab–Israeli conflict. Furthermore, it stated even more clearly that 'the strategic cooperation between the parties is not directed at any states within the region. It is intended solely for defensive purposes against the above-mentioned threat.' The cooperation was meant to work mainly through joint military exercises in the eastern

Mediterranean, access to maintenance facilities and cooperation in research and development.²⁶

The Memorandum was short-lived and its suspension sparked another crisis in the ‘special relationship’ In early December, the Begin cabinet approved the annexation of the Golan Heights, a territory conquered from Syria in the 1967 war. The US soon suspended the Memorandum of Understanding. This made Begin very nervous. To US ambassador Samuel Lewis he yelled: ‘What kind of talk is this – “penalizing” Israel? Are we a state or [are we] vassals of yours? Are we a banana republic? You have no right to penalize Israel.’²⁷ If the suspension of the MOU made Begin so nervous it is legitimate to wonder what his (and Sharon’s) reaction would have been in the face of sanctions on the military supplies from the US to Israel. But, at least for the moment, he had no fear of anything like this happening.

On 5 December Sharon met with US diplomats Philip Habib and Morris Draper in Jerusalem. They both agreed that stabilization of the Lebanese domestic situation was crucial to the overall stabilization of the region although Sharon’s view of what ‘stabilization’ meant was coherent with his military plans.

Our goal should be to establish a legitimate central government authority, capable of exercising its influence throughout the country, associated with the free world, and at peace with Israel. [Sharon stated that] this objective could not be realized as long as the Syrians occupied Lebanon, at least in the Beirut area and along the Beirut/Zahle corridor.

Moreover, in order to organize free elections in the country, not only Syrian presence had to be ‘confined to the Northern Bekaa and the Tripoli area’ but also something had to be done about the ‘15,000–20,000 armed “Arab terrorists” in the Southern region, extending from the Western side of Beirut to Tyre’. When Habib proposed substituting the Syrian presence in the Lebanon with a contingent formed by pro-Western Arab countries, the Israeli Defence Minister interjected ‘we will not

allow that to happen'.²⁸ If the Arab 'moderates' could not intervene in Lebanon who else would 'confine' the Syrians to the north of Lebanon and eliminate the 'Arab terrorists' who were stationed in West Beirut? It was not hard for Habib to understand how extensive Sharon's military plans were and thus replied:

General Sharon, this is the twentieth century and times have changed. You can't go around invading countries just like that, spreading destruction and killing civilians. In the end, your invasion will grow into a war with Syria, and the entire region will be engulfed with flames.²⁹

Again, the US official refused Sharon's plans (and did it in the toughest possible way) but did not threaten any sanctions. To understand why Habib did not use the threat of sanctions, one has to rely upon the account of the discussion that took place inside the administration by Howard Teicher, then member of the Political Affairs Office in the National Security Council (NSC). According to him, Haig insisted that Israel's right to self-defence could not be denied simply out of deference to US interests in the Gulf. He also denied any link between the possible war in Lebanon and the alliance with the 'Arab moderates'. For example, Haig said, the Saudis would not ask for a refund on their AWACS just because Israel was at war with the PLO in Lebanon. Weinberger, on the other side, said that Israel was exaggerating the PLO threat and was deliberately trying to split the US from its Arab allies.³⁰

Sharon had a different view of the impact of his plans on regional alliances. On 14 December he delivered a speech at the Institute for Strategic Studies at the Tel Aviv University which clearly described the strategic concept of the invasion. A coalition of Arab regimes (Syria, Libya, Iraq and South Yemen) worked to wipe out Israel from the Middle East. With Soviet support and using oil money, they planned to use the PLO as an instrument of violence against Israel and as a means to achieve Soviet influence in the region.³¹ According to Sharon, either Israel removed the PLO from the Middle East or the PLO, with its powerful allies, would remove Israel. It is

worthwhile to note that the coalition of Arab regimes that he indicated as hostile to Israel would also figure in the list of countries to be targeted by the US for their support of ‘terrorism’.

In the following months, signals of the Israeli intentions kept coming and the US continued to oppose them, albeit ineffectively. Lebanon was probably not very high on the administration agenda in those months. In a March 1982 draft of the National Security Study Decision (NSSD) 4–82 concerning US policy in the Middle East and South Asia, Lebanon did not even figure in the top ten ‘regional conflicts and instabilities’.³² No political strategy was devised for the country, which was not among the most important ones listed in the document.

This is not to say that American policy-makers did not deal with the issue or that they did not oppose Israeli plans. Only, these actions were not effective in stopping the escalation towards ‘Big Pines’. On 5 February, Secretary Haig warned Menachem Begin that any ‘precipitate action’ such as those described by Sharon in December ‘is not justifiable in the court of world opinion’. Begin, however, thought that preserving Israeli security in the face of such an existential threat was more important than global public opinion. Cold War logics, too, did not impress him. Haig wrote that the provocation for an Israeli attack might be ‘a Soviet trap and we must not fall into it’.³³

The following day Haig wrote to the president to inform him of the ‘Possible Israeli Move Against PLO in Lebanon’ and describe his secret meeting with the Israeli Chief of Military Intelligence Yehoshua Saguy. The Israeli offensive, Haig warned Reagan, would be ‘large-scale’ and would

Destroy the Palestinian military infrastructure from the Israeli border north to the southern suburbs of Beirut. It would be designed to avoid major conflict with Syria although Israel admits this could not be ruled out. The result might be to rearrange the map of the Middle East – at least for a while – and to inflict heavy casualties

on many innocent people along with a refugee flight of major dimensions.

The secretary of state, at this point, appeared to be fully aware of the extent of operation 'Big Pines' and of its disastrous consequences on US policy: strained relations with 'Arab moderates', 'fatally poison' the Camp David peace process between Egypt and Israel and isolate internationally the US. To avoid this, the US had to 'go all out to convince the PLO and Syria that they are playing with fire'. In exchange for this, Haig asked Begin to wait for US diplomatic efforts before launching an attack. The Israeli prime minister agreed, 'provided that no attack whatsoever on Israel's citizens or territory on any border or sector is carried out'. This extensive interpretation of the 1981 ceasefire was combined with Haig's condition that the US could not accept a 'major Israeli invasion of Lebanon' unless they acknowledged that 'Israel had truly been provoked in a major way'.³⁴

In other words, in February, while the full extent of Israeli planning was clear to Haig he proposed to Begin that the US would try to restrain Syria and the PLO while confining the Israeli 'major' invasion of Lebanon only in the event of a 'major', albeit undefined, provocation. The prime minister, though, had an extensive interpretation of what a 'provocation' could be and this left him ample room for manoeuvre to go beyond Haig's conditions and pursue his plans.

As a matter of fact, Begin used the ambiguity of Haig's words to his advantage. The same day of Haig's report to Reagan, Nicholas Veliotis warned the secretary of state that 'Begin's reaction to the Israeli report' of his meeting with General Saguy suggested 'a serious misunderstanding'. Talking with US ambassador in Tel Aviv Samuel Lewis, the Israeli prime minister said that Haig's reaction to Israeli plans described by Saguy 'could not be more forthcoming'. Veliotis therefore concluded that 'it appears to us that there is now a risk that Begin has interpreted your response to Saguy's presentation as a green light for major Israeli military action'.³⁵

President Reagan started to be concerned about Israeli moves. On 22 February he met Habib and Haig. The former

clarified that Sharon was interested in 'cleaning up the PLO completely and solving the Lebanese problem' and the president made clear that Begin had to

provide the world evidence of Israel's basic patience and peaceful nature. There is a limit to how many times we can be confronted with a new Israeli step which we are forced to criticize; then after we go back to our previous position, bang comes another step!³⁶

While this might be the source of Reagan's quarrels with Begin in the following summer, it did little to ameliorate the slippery slope towards the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. In late February, the new Israeli ambassador to the US, Moshe Arens, told the press that an Israeli invasion of Lebanon was 'only a matter of time'. As a matter of fact, not everyone in US public opinion feared Sharon's plans. As Joseph Kraft wrote on 16 March in the *Washington Post*, 'The theory is that the PLO and the Syrians would be forced to quit Lebanon, with Assad toppled from Office.' The consequent marginalization of the Alawites and the redrawing of the map of Syria would, in Kraft's words, 'foster a general peace'.³⁷

Little attention was devoted to the complexity of the local context. Syria and the PLO, for instance, were seen as being on the same side of the fight being both, in their own way, Soviet proxies. Divisions within the Palestinian camp were overlooked. These would prove to be crucial factors in the development of the crisis. On 31 March, in a memo to Norman Bailey (member of the Planning and Evaluation Directorate of the NSC) Howard Teicher predicted what was to actually happen some months later: 'West Bank/Lebanon. Unrest is likely to continue. Given fractionated state of PLO, radical factions may seek to disrupt Lebanon cease-fire. Would probably provoke an Israeli response.'³⁸

In May 1982 there was still a possibility that the US to could stop the invasion, but few people seemed to see it. Reagan was personally very concerned about the situation. On 15 May, after a meeting with Habib, he wrote in his diary:

A radical wing of the PLO wanting to take over from Arafat is out to provoke Israel into action. This will rid them of Arafat who is more moderate & will rally Arab & Soviet support to the radicals. We're trying to make Israel see this.³⁹

Two days later, Acting Secretary of State Walter Stoessel met with Israeli diplomats in Washington. The message they brought from Begin was quite clear: Syrian missiles and the PLO presence in Lebanon 'comprised a stronger threat to Israel during 1982 than the Soviet missiles in Cuba had presented to the United States two decades earlier'.⁴⁰ More and more, the Israeli leader would draw a comparison between the situation in the Middle East and a frightening Cold War scenario the Americans could well understand.⁴¹

Nevertheless, the invasion was not really 'inevitable' as Begin had described it. At least, not as far as the Israeli cabinet was concerned. During a meeting on 10 May, Sharon laid out maps of Lebanon for the ministers' scrutiny. They were maps of the Big Pines plan with arrows pointing north, well over southern Lebanon and towards the Christian heartland above Beirut. The Minister of Defence, however, smartly talked about a 'limited operation' and a 'police action'. He did not mention Beirut and when asked about the duration of the operation he replied, '24 hours'. He actually did not persuade the cabinet. The initial D-Day was scheduled for 17 May, the day when Stoessel met with the Israeli diplomats in Washington. The beginning of the invasion had to be postponed because of the opposition to a ground operation from seven ministers including two of Begin's deputies.⁴²

On 25 May Sharon was in Washington speaking with Secretary Haig and other officials from the State Department. It was Haig's last occasion to stop him.⁴³ The secretary of state was fully aware of the importance of the visit. Ten days earlier, he had received a cable from Samuel Lewis. The US ambassador to Tel Aviv wrote that it was

extremely important that Sharon hear clearly from top US officials what kind of complications would

inevitably result for Israel if a major operation were launched using American supplied weapons. He has considerable capacity to minimize these complications [downplaying them as] merely verbal and short-lived.⁴⁴

That day, Sharon started the plenary session by saying that virtually all terrorist operations against Jews in the world (which he considered as violations of the 1981 ceasefire) originated from Beirut. Therefore, he saw no alternative but to enter Lebanon and ‘clean out’ the terrorist headquarters. He also added that ‘it would be very hard – almost impossible – not to touch the Syrians’.⁴⁵ Haig responded that he ‘understood Israeli’s difficulties with regard to Lebanon’. Moreover, Haig said that

The US as an ally cannot tell Israel not to defend its interests but the perception of the world is perhaps as important as the reality (...). We hope you will be sensitive to the need for a provocation that will be understood internationally and any reaction must be in proportion to the provocation.

Sharon interjected: ‘How many Jews will it take to make a clear provocation?’⁴⁶

After Haig’s question about the size of the operation, the Israeli Defence Minister answered: ‘our intention is not a large operation; we will try to be as small and efficient as possible’. The Secretary commented: ‘like a lobotomy’. It is difficult to tell whether this comment expressed concern or approval from Haig, but it is hard not to think that he stopped short of giving Sharon a green light: he mentioned the possible consequences of the invasion on public opinion, not on American military supplies. Moreover, the US secretary of state showed ‘understanding’ for Sharon’s aims. Not exactly what Ambassador Lewis had advised him to do.

The same understanding was reiterated in a letter from Haig to Begin three days later:

We recognize, as I feel sure you know, how deeply we understand the very real threat of violence Israel faces.

As Minister Sharon said, no one has the right to tell Israel what decision it should take in the defense of its people. We are only expressing our belief that nations facing threats, including the US and Israel, should carefully weigh the consequences of how such challenges are handled.⁴⁷

Begin replied that ‘the man has not been born who will ever obtain from me consent to let Jews be killed by a bloodthirsty enemy and allow those who are responsible for the shedding of this blood to enjoy immunity’.⁴⁸

The Israeli cabinet was also waging a public relations campaign in the US which, thanks also to its use of Cold War arguments, did not fall on deaf ears. The link between the PLO and worldwide Soviet offensive was evident in Sharon’s words, as he had told the *Wall Street Journal*, ‘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.’⁴⁹ Incidentally, the op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* on 2 June (four days before the invasion), read:

The Syrian–PLO nexus in Lebanon has a senior partner, the Soviet Union (...). 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.⁵⁰

Conservative think-tanks also shared this pro-Israeli view. In a memo prepared in early June for Ambassador Habib, who was on his way to the Middle East, the American Enterprise Institute wrote against ‘direct linkage’ between Israeli actions and US responses. Israel could be convinced through positive incentives such as resuming the cooperation which was included in the then-suspended Memorandum of

Understanding signed in 1981. As for the coming Lebanese presidential elections, they had to become an opportunity for a major US involvement. The goal of the Habib mission was to come back with some ideas on 'candidates for president that would increase the chances of progressive isolation of the leftist forces'. Rebuilding the Lebanese Armed Forces had to be very high on Habib's agenda since it was the 'second pillar' (the presidency being the first) on which it was possible to 'build success'.⁵¹

These issues would surface again after the Israeli invasion which was just a few days away. The *casus belli* was provided, as Teicher had predicted months earlier, from a Palestinian faction hostile to the PLO leader Yasir Arafat. On 3 June the Israeli ambassador in London Shlomo Argov was gravely wounded by terrorists from the Fatah-Revolutionary Council group led by Abu Nidal (real name: Sabri al-Banna), in those years one of Arafat's worst enemies in the Palestinian camp. At the time, this group was supported by Saddam Hussein's Iraq and one could speculate that the attack was designed to provoke an Israeli assault on Arafat's headquarters in Beirut. According to Howard Teicher, Saddam's interest in the operation was keeping Syrian troops in a quagmire for a while, by triggering an Israeli clash with the Syrians. When the killers were finally arrested by Scotland Yard they soon confessed their Iraqi links.⁵²

The intra-Palestinian feuds did not interest Menachem Begin who thought that the 1981 ceasefire applied to attacks against Jews in any part of the world. On 4 June he convened a meeting of the cabinet, while Sharon was on a secret trip to Romania. He interrupted the head of the General Security Services Avraham Shalom who was elaborating on the origin of the attack and stated bluntly, 'They're all PLO.' Chief of Staff Eitan recommended that the Israeli Air Force (IAF) be sent to bomb the headquarters of the 'terrorist organizations' in Beirut.⁵³

Eitan proposed the air strike against Beirut, being fully aware from an IDF memorandum known as the 'Saguy report' (issued in mid-May) that the PLO would automatically respond by shelling northern Galilee. Some in the cabinet

observed that such an attack would lead to civilian casualties and probably to a hostile American reaction. However, Eitan, Begin and Sharon by now were convinced American hostility would not go as far as interrupting the flow of military supplies. The ministers then approved the plan with some concern, knowing that the air strike would quickly escalate into a full-scale war in Lebanon but, as Avi Shlaim wrote, ‘they felt unable to stop the snowball from starting to roll’.⁵⁴

The invasion

The Israeli bombing of 5 June hit 25 sites in Beirut and elsewhere in the country, killing more than 60 people. The Palestinians, as predicted by the Saguy report, responded with a 24-hour rocket barrage on Galilee, killing one Israeli and wounding 15. Now the ceasefire, even under Habib’s interpretation, had been really broken.⁵⁵

At the White House, the Head of the Near East Bureau Geoffrey Kemp, Nicholas Veliotis and CIA Middle East specialist Robert Ames argued in favour of a rapid US diplomatic initiative. According to them, it could prevent a total breakdown, and perhaps Israel could still be restrained. The result of this discussion was a letter from Reagan to Begin which the president finally approved on Saturday night, 5 June. The letter called for a ceasefire to take effect the next day at nine in the morning. The ambassador Samuel Lewis managed to deliver the letter a few hours later but the Israeli prime minister brushed him off and refused to consider a ceasefire.⁵⁶ On that same day, the United States voted for UN resolution (UNSCR 508) calling for Israeli restraint and a cross-border ceasefire.⁵⁷

Both efforts proved useless. Begin’s cabinet had already decided that day to start the war in Lebanon. The name of the operation was Peace for Galilee and Begin had informed the US that the goal was to drive the PLO back 40 km from the border. The operation was due to last no more than three or four days. Israel also asked the US to tell Syria that its forces were not going to attack Syrian units unless they were attacked.⁵⁸ In a cable to Washington, US ambassador in Beirut

Robert Dillon wrote that Begin's claim was 'clearly a lie'.⁵⁹ Begin's message, as a matter of fact, differed from reality in several aspects. First, he described 'Little Pines' while implementing 'Big Pines', whose political consequences were much more far-reaching. Second, the operation was far from being the blitzkrieg he described. Third, he knew from the Saguy report that Syrian units were stationed in the 40 km belt.⁶⁰ The report also warned that following the clash with the Syrian ground units, the Syrian air force would be sent into the fray. To be effective in countering this offensive, the Israelis would have had to attack the Syrian missile batteries in the Beqa'a valley, escalating the conflict even further.

A similar description of events had been provided by Sharon to the Israeli cabinet. During the meeting with his colleagues, the Minister of Defence had actually spoken of Little Pines, had ruled out any clash with the Syrians and had said clearly that Beirut was not a target of the operation. The official decision of the cabinet was a consequence of Sharon's talk as it mentioned generically the goal of Peace for Galilee was to 'place the civilian population of the Galilee beyond the range of the terrorist fire from Lebanon'.⁶¹ And the range of PLO artillery was 42.8 km.⁶²

The only time Big Pines had been submitted to the cabinet, on 20 December 1981, it had been rejected. Sharon had actually received the approval for Little Pines and then implemented Big Pines. Nevertheless, he had given the Americans enough signals in the past months of his real plans.

At 11 am on Sunday 6 June, the first units of the IDF started to cross the Lebanese–Israeli border. It took Sharon only 24 hours to go beyond the mandate of the cabinet and Begin's promise to Reagan. On the second day of the war, he ordered the IDF to move up to the Beirut–Damascus highway and to be prepared to fight against the Syrians. Begin stated later he was always informed about the IDF moves – sometimes before the decision was taken, sometimes afterwards.⁶³ On the third day of the invasion, Bashir Gemayel was brought by helicopter to meet with Eitan. He was told that he should prepare to conquer Beirut and to form a new government in Lebanon.⁶⁴ The Grand Design was at work.

In Washington, the secretary of state was well aware of the final goal of the invasion and demonstrated years later in his memoirs his appreciation for them: 'Syria and the PLO, the heart of the Arab opposition to Camp David, had been defeated (...) There would be a fresh opportunity to complete the Camp David process.'⁶⁵ Deputy National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane was less enthusiastic about the invasion. In a memo to the president written on the same day of the invasion, he proposed an international conference to work out a viable settlement among Lebanese factions and argued in favour of sanctions against the Jewish state. McFarlane wrote to Reagan that the Israeli invasion could become an opportunity for the Soviets to expand their influence among the Arabs.⁶⁶

President Reagan started to realize that the storm over Lebanon had finally begun. He was in Europe where he had attended a session of the North Atlantic Council and delivered a historic speech before the British House of Commons in which he predicted the end of the Soviet Union. In his diary, after writing about his 'fairy tale experience' in British castles and German palaces he wrote, 'Also learned though that Israel had invaded Lebanon. I'm afraid we are faced with a real crisis.'⁶⁷

Indeed, on 9 June, the war started to show its international implications. That day, Philip Habib was asked by Begin to deliver a message to Assad stating the Syrians would not be harmed if they withdrew their missiles from Lebanon. Shortly before that, Sharon obtained from the Israeli cabinet the authorization to hit the Syrian missiles. The timing of the action was spectacular, right at the moment when Habib was about to meet Assad to deliver Begin's message of false restraint. The Syrians at that point could easily believe that he was sent to give them a sense of security and facilitate the Israeli attack. The SAM-6 sites were all destroyed in the strike. Twenty-three Syrian MiGs were shot-down without losing a single Israeli aircraft.⁶⁸ American-made Israeli weapons had won against Soviet-Made Syrian arms.

The Soviet reaction came a few hours later. The Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev delivered a message to Reagan

through the 'hot line'. It was the first time this was used since the beginning of the Reagan administration. The Soviet leader was threatening to intervene if the US could not restrain Israel. Howard Teicher observed that the Soviets had moved their airborne forces in Odessa to alert status, the same forces that had been put on alert during the 1973 war.⁶⁹ Vice President Bush drafted Reagan's response which took a firm stance towards the Soviets. The president accused Brezhnev of arming the PLO and undermining the Camp David accords. He asked Moscow to use its 'strong influence' on Syria to bring about a ceasefire. On the same day he wrote a new letter to Begin asking Israel to accept a ceasefire for the following day.⁷⁰ The Israeli Ambassador Moshe Arens, in a press conference in Washington tried to calm down the American anxieties. 'If there are no more complications with the Syrians, I would think we are very close to achievement of the objective.'⁷¹

Meanwhile, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had met with CIA officials. According to them, Iran could possibly send some 'volunteers' to help its Lebanese allies. The *Washington Post* concluded its report that 'While it is unlikely that such troops would affect the course of the war, such support could have important political impact in the Arab world.'⁷² As Howard Teicher recalled in his memoirs, the Reagan administration officials had learned that Iran had dispatched several thousand Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran*) to fight alongside the Syrians. Assad did not want this help but could not avoid the *Pasdaran*'s settlement in the Beqa'a valley. This was the embryo of what would later become Hizbullah, the Lebanese Shiite Party-cum-militia whose terrorist attacks would eventually contribute to American withdrawal from Lebanon. At that time, however, as Teicher recognized, 'the significance [of this event] was not immediately apparent'.⁷³

By 13 June, the IDF troops had closed the ring around Beirut trapping the PLO in the city and cutting off the Syrian troops in the capital from the rest of the contingent. Assad's army had been defeated both in the air and in the lower Beqa'a valley. As Haig recognized in his memoirs, 'Operation Peace

for Galilee had become an Israeli–Syrian war and, now, the siege of an Arab capital.’⁷⁴ Sharon had counted on the Lebanese Christian Maronite Phalange Party-cummilitia to ‘clean’ Beirut of Palestinian militants. Unfortunately for the Israeli Defence Minister, Gemayel refused to do this.

This created several problems for Sharon because for the IDF to enter Beirut and conquer it could cost the lives of 2,000 Israeli soldiers and Begin did not want that many casualties.⁷⁵ Such a fight could also have other grave consequences: a bloodbath in Beirut, escalating to a Syrian–Israeli all-out war, possibly leading to a superpower confrontation. The US simply could not afford this and so the discussion in the administration on what to do was crucial in view, also, of Begin’s scheduled visit to the US one week later.

What resulted from these discussions was a multifaceted strategy that included the deployment in Lebanon of US troops to assist in the peaceful withdrawal of ‘foreign forces’ (namely, Syrians and the PLO), the strengthening of the Lebanese central government under clear Maronite and Christian influence and the support for the election of Bashir Gemayel to the presidency. Most of these elements were inspired by the Lebanese Maronite and Christian militias, and then accepted and adapted to their goals by the Israelis who would later convey them to the Americans in the weeks before and after the invasion. American policy in the summer of 1982 and beyond would bear striking similarities to Maronite and Israeli ideas put forward in June of that year.

On 11 June, Philip Habib met David Kimche, Director General of the Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry. Kimche talked extensively on ‘Israeli ideas for affecting the political scene in Lebanon’, working on the premise that there would be a ‘US backing for Bashir Gemayel’. The Israeli official relayed what he presented as a programme of the Christian forces in Lebanon: strengthening the central government which would negotiate the withdrawal of foreign forces and deployment of the Lebanese Army throughout Beirut. This government would act ‘on the assumption that Bashir Gemayel will be elected president as the preferred candidate of the Maronites and other Christians’. Moreover, according to Kimche,

Gemayel had ‘made it clear that, to make this scenario work, it would be preferable if Israel remained in the Beirut area for an adequate time (presumably through the election period some time after July 23)’.⁷⁶

On 13 June, the same day on which Sharon realized that Gemayel and the Phalange would not ‘clean’ Beirut from the PLO, the Israeli cabinet had agreed on a general proposal for a ‘multinational force’ to be deployed in a 40 km-wide buffer zone north of the Israeli–Lebanese border. The Israelis clearly stated that a US contingent was needed and that this force would be ‘multinational’ and not ‘international’, since ‘the latter could suggest a connection to the UN which Israel wants to avoid’. This contingent would have to be a ‘strong force’ of the order of 10,000 men with clear guarantees to the Israeli government that it would not allow for the infiltration of the PLO or ‘armed terrorists’ in the buffer zone.⁷⁷

With all these elements in mind, the National Security Planning Group (NSPG) convened at the White House on 14 June. The NSPG was composed of the vice president, the secretaries of state and defence, the director of the CIA, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and the national security advisor. It met weekly with the president and had an often-relevant role in shaping longterm strategies as well as crisis management. Three issues needed to be discussed about the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. First, whether the US would contribute troops to the multinational force as requested by Begin. Second, the link between this troop commitment and a parallel commitment by the Israelis to the autonomy talks about the Palestinians had to be considered. Third, the continuation of a ‘business as usual’ attitude on the arm sales to Israel in the face of their invasion of Lebanon was at stake.⁷⁸

Before the meeting, Reagan had received a memo from his National Security Advisor William Clark. He argued that the Israeli invasion was a setback for American policy in the region but it also provided an opportunity to reshape the Middle East since the position of the PLO and of Syria in Lebanon had been weakened. It was important, though, not to postpone the Arab–Israeli peace process while trying to solve the Lebanese crisis.

Clark also explained to the president the different positions in the administration between the Department of Defense, the JCS, the vice president and the CIA on one side and the Department of State on the other. The first group wanted to avoid the US military involvement and was more willing to stop the invasion through the imposition of military sanctions. In his memo, Clark said clearly that ‘Cap [Caspar Weinberger] wants to use US military assistance [to Israel] as a leverage’. Also, Vice President Bush and CIA Director Casey generally wanted to be tough on Israel.^{[79](#)}

According to an assessment by Bob Lilac (Head of the Political-Military Affairs Directorate of the NSC), a cut-off of the spare pipeline would have effects after only 30 days. He suggested switching from automatic supply to a manual one in order to assess each request on a case-by-case basis adding that something similar had been done during the fall of the Shah and during the 1973 war. Oliver North, member of the Political and Military Affairs Directorate in the NSC, noted that this switch could impose a ‘de facto sanction without a presidential decision to do so’.^{[80](#)}

Military sanctions against Israel could only be implemented in an implicit, indirect way. Advocates of this proposal knew that neither the cabinet nor Congress could approve something like that without wading into serious political trouble.

Secretary Haig’s plan, on the contrary, had many similarities with the ideas put forward days earlier by Kimche: creating a strong Lebanese central government, reducing the Syrian presence in the country, ending PLO privileges and building a peacekeeping force for Lebanon. Haig thought the Israeli withdrawal had to be linked with Syria’s, in order to reduce the Syrian presence.^{[81](#)}

Nevertheless, Haig differed from Israel on two points: the role of Major Haddad’s pro-Israel militia in southern Lebanon had to be reduced and the autonomy negotiations which were part of the Camp David agreements had to be carried out. As a matter of fact, Haig wanted to bend Israeli (and Phalangists’) local goals for Lebanon to the general context of US policy in

the region which had been shaped by the Camp David agreements between Israel and Egypt. Having 'more Egyptians' willing to side with the West and sign peace with Israel would be one of Haig's goals throughout the crisis. In this respect, he saw the invasion of Lebanon as an opportunity to strike at the enemies of that agreement, namely the PLO and Syria.

Haig's plan was based also on the analysis and the proposals coming from some members of the NSC staff. Howard Teicher, Geoffrey Kemp and Oliver North proposed a 'positive approach' to the Lebanese crisis which involved the Arab-Israeli peace process and the 'autonomy talks' included in the Camp David agreements. Begin, they argued, needed to get out of Lebanon so there was no need of US threats to force an Israeli withdrawal: indeed, after Gemayel's refusal to 'clean' Beirut, the IDF risked a dangerous quagmire. In exchange for American opposition to European and Arab pressures for a precipitate Israeli withdrawal, the Reagan administration could ask for Israeli responsiveness to achieving a credible autonomy agreement and to implementing more 'enlightened' occupation policies, freeze settlement activity in the West Bank and give voting rights to the Arabs in eastern Jerusalem. Teicher, Kemp and North proposed to Haig that the issue be raised during Begin's visit.⁸²

Haig's plan was also inspired by more prominent figures such as Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger who thought that the Israeli invasion presented some opportunities for US foreign policy and who saw events from a Cold War perspective. On 16 July 1982 Kissinger wrote in the *Washington Post* that the first victim of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was the 'mirage' that the key to the Middle East peace was to be found in a PLO-Israeli negotiation. Such a negotiation was undesirable, according to the former secretary of state, because it would give a veto power to 'the most intransigent element in the Arab world'. Even though Israel had not consulted 'adequately' with the United States before the invasion, 'it would serve nobody's interest to restore PLO control over Lebanon or Syrian pre-eminence in Beirut. The United States can have no interest in salvaging Arab

radicalism or rewarding military reliance on the Soviet Union.’⁸³

In the end, Haig’s plan won and sanctions were never implemented. Many members of the administration thought that sanctions were not necessary, that they could be counterproductive and domestically too expensive. Public pressure from the president would have worked better. Reagan, on his part, had been positively impressed by Haig’s plan, notwithstanding their deteriorating personal relationship. On the morning of 14 June (the day of the National Security Planning Group meeting) he had gone horse-riding. In the afternoon he listened to the secretary of state with some admiration, as he wrote in his diary: ‘Al H. [Alexander Haig] made great good sense on this entire matter. It’s amazing how sound he can be on complex international matters but how utterly paranoid with regard to the people he must work with.’⁸⁴

According to his diary, pressures from Lebanese Christians also had a role in his decisions. On 16 June he wrote that President Sarkis (a member of the Maronite minority) wanted ‘Israel to stay near until the PLO can be disarmed’. Despite the fact that the world was ‘waiting for us to use our muscle and order Israel out’,⁸⁵ the US administration wanted to support a strong Lebanese central government, in fact based on Maronite hegemony as it had been designed by the 1943 National Pact. To this end, the US had to support first President Sarkis and then Bashir Gemayel.

The young leader of the Phalange, however, was not exactly the right person for the job, at least as far as the US Department of State was concerned. A few days after the director general of the Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry had clearly indicated him as the best candidate for the presidency, his figure was analysed by a briefing paper prepared by the State Department and sent by Paul Bremer III, then executive secretary at Foggy Bottom, to all members of the NSC. Bashir Gemayel was described as follows:

Bashir Gemayel: The Christian Phalange militia leader (...) dedicated to the retention of absolute Maronite

supremacy in Lebanon with himself at the helm. He has excited the opposition of Muslims and other Christian leaders, who believe the country can be reunited only if the Muslim community is given a fair share of political and economic power.⁸⁶

American support for some of the Israeli and Phalangist goals in Lebanon, however, was part of the wider Haig plan which included pressures on carrying out the peace process with Egypt and the Palestinians. Reagan was supposed to make this point during Begin's visit to the US which started on 20 June. On the morning of 21 June the Israeli prime minister met with the US president. To be sure 'not to leave anything out' Reagan started by reading a note his staff had prepared for him. He recalled that they had communicated personally about 'developments in Lebanon for more than a year' and was shocked when he learned of the 'massive' invasion of a country 'whose integrity we had pledged to preserve'. He said that he had repeatedly warned the Israelis against an invasion that was not 'clearly justified by the nature of the provocation'. However, he added, 'what is done is done' and at that moment it was important to 'salvage from this tragedy a new Lebanon which will no longer constitute a threat to Israel'.⁸⁷

The first common goal, Reagan continued, should have been the establishment of a strong Lebanese central government which could not appear as an Israeli surrogate. He quoted Begin's 6 June letter to state that Israeli forces had to withdraw to the line 40 km north of the border. After such a pull-out, an international force could be deployed. He agreed with a Syrian and Palestinian withdrawal as well. He was in favour of strengthening the UNIFIL mission – which had been deployed to southern Lebanon after the 1978 invasion by Israel – but 'understood' the Israeli position in favour of a different, multinational force not linked to the UN. Israeli actions had damaged US relations with Arab moderates such as 'Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman', countries viewed by the US as important to 'counter forces of Soviet-sponsored radicalism and Islamic fundamentalism now growing within the region'.

Nevertheless, he was going to stand firm against ‘European and Arab pressure’ for a quick Israeli withdrawal. But to do so, he needed a strong commitment by Begin for a ‘breakthrough in the autonomy negotiations’, an exchange which resembled very much the one envisaged in the Haig plan. The United States’ ‘ultimate purpose’ – Reagan stated – was to ‘create more “Egypt” ready to make peace’ with Israel.⁸⁸

Begin was not shaken by this démarche and started his reply touching the president’s sensible nerve, the Cold War paradigm. According to the prime minister, three days earlier the Israelis had found and dismantled a huge ‘Soviet base’ near Sidon which he described as ‘the headquarters of an international terror organization’. He did not reply when Reagan asked to see ‘the documents’ that proved the existence of such an international terrorist base. He emphasized the importance of Israeli military moves (he denied any ‘invasion’ of Lebanon) to secure Israel’s northern border. He stressed again his points during the plenary session saying that Israel was just going out ‘to fight armed bands’. He also returned to the PLO–USSR link:

There is no doubt that far more than simply arming the PLO, the Soviets had made Lebanon the center of Soviet activity in the Middle East (...). Based on documents they had captured, it was clear that a terror network sponsored by the Soviets and involving Hungary, Bulgaria, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, Pakistan, India, the People’s Republic of China, East Germany and Austria were all involved in assisting the PLO.⁸⁹

The idea of an international terrorist network supported by the Soviet Union and composed also by the PLO was the main thesis of a book widely read in the Reagan administration: *The Terror Network* by the journalist Claire Sterling.⁹⁰ Whether or not Begin had read it, he emphasized the connection between Middle Eastern terrorists and Cold War enemies as the book

did. This was probably a good point that convinced both the US president and many others in the administration.

The Cold War paradigm was used by the president to reply to Israeli criticism on arms sales to pro-Western Arab governments. Reagan recalled how Nixon's arm sales to Egypt had paved the way for Camp David and concluded: 'A new era has now fragmented the region between those who are pro-Soviet and those who fear the Soviets.'

Secretary Haig, while supporting Reagan on the issue of arms sales and emphasizing the need to carry on the peace process, concluded the discussion on Lebanon stating that yes, the US had 'paid a price' but also that there was 'a new set of realities and we must exploit them to our collective advantage'.⁹¹

Overall, the visit could be considered a success by Begin. The prime minister had been successful in depicting the invasion of Lebanon as a step further in the fight against the Soviets and terrorism, which in his mind (and also in Reagan's) were part of the same problem. Haig and Reagan saw the opportunities opened by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon while minimizing the damage to American standing in the region. As decided previously, no sanctions were threatened and a quid pro quo was proposed between Israeli willingness to carry on the peace process and a US-led multinational force which would help Israel achieve some of its goals in Lebanon – the evacuation of the PLO and the election of Bashir Gemayel to the presidency, for instance.

The two elements of the quid pro quo, however, could not take place at the same time. As Haig had told Begin in their last meeting, 'the United States expected, after resolution of the Lebanon problem, that Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank would come to an end and rapid progress toward an agreement on autonomy would be realized'.⁹² Since 'rapid progress' towards the agreement on the autonomy would have come only *after* the resolution of the 'Lebanon problem', Begin and Sharon could quietly work to buy time in Beirut in order to delay the peace process. Moreover, Haig would leave the Department of State a few days later and his successor,

George Shultz, would have to prove that he was not hostile to Israel. As Deputy Press Secretary Bob Sims wrote, 'administration spokesmen should knock down the story that the change represents a shift in a pro-Arab direction (...). We are still supportive of the state of Israel'.⁹³

Haig and Reagan had met for the last time together in the Oval Office on 24 June. The secretary of state presented to the president a bill of complaints. This was not merely bureaucratic because it dealt also with political differences with other members of the administration. Haig, for instance, complained about a visit to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia by Bush, Weinberger and McFarlane on 16 June. According to Haig, they had stressed 'in the President's name, that he will be firm and stern with Begin', and later on Weinberger expressed his opposition to the Israeli action in Lebanon and compared it to the Argentine aggression in the Falklands. Haig linked these statements with the hardening of PLO positions in Lebanon.⁹⁴ After this meeting, Reagan told William Clark and Michael Deaver that Haig had shown him 'in his hands' a letter of resignation. Haig later denied this, but from his letter of complaints it is possible to infer that he had at least requested that Clark's influence in foreign policy-making be reduced or he was going to leave. As Lou Cannon noted, 'Haig had resigned, although he did not seem to know it.'⁹⁵

On the same day, Reagan told Clark to track down where George Shultz, then president of Bechtel Corporation, was. Clark found him in London, holding a business meeting. Shultz was brought to the US embassy to talk on a secure phone with the president who asked him bluntly if he wanted to replace Alexander Haig as secretary of state. He accepted.⁹⁶ Shultz received high praise from the press the following day and was held in high esteem. He was seen as having 'pontifical calm' and as being 'a team player' as well as being well-known and respected in Europe. Some, however, feared that a 'Weinberger/Shultz alliance could be tougher on Israel'.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, negotiations were taking place in Lebanon towards the evacuation from Beirut of the PLO officials and fighters. On 2 July, Habib met with his Lebanese

intermediaries who had just seen Arafat. The PLO had taken a 'decision in principle' to accept the US proposal for evacuation. The Lebanese government, on its part, now requested formally a multinational force (MNF) as Begin had envisaged one month earlier. Despite opposition from Weinberger and the JCS, the following day the State Department got word from the White House that the president had approved US participation in the MNF.⁹⁸

Everything seemed to be falling into place. It was just an illusion, though, as the siege of Beirut and the frantic Habib negotiations would last almost another two months. One of the largest obstacles was the PLO fighters. No Arab country was willing to take them. Finally, Tunisia accepted.

The first half of August was terrible both for the civilian population in Beirut and for US policy-makers. On the first day of the month, Israeli tanks invaded southern Beirut and the international airport. In a press conference, President Reagan stated quite clearly that he was losing his patience.⁹⁹ Reagan, though, was first of all concerned with winning the Cold War and, to that end, could deploy enormous quantities of patience with the Israelis if he thought this could help defeat Soviet proxies.

On 4 August, the IDF seemed to be invading West Beirut having started to shell this part of the city. Early that morning, the National Security Council met in Washington to discuss what to do. Israeli bombings seemed to slow down the negotiations between US Presidential Envoy Philip Habib and the PLO. According to Ambassador to Israel Samuel Lewis who had been invited to the meeting, Weinberger and Vice President Bush were in favour of a tough stance against Israel.¹⁰⁰ On the table were several options, ranging from a private letter to Begin asking him to simply stop that behaviour, to unilateral military sanctions against Israel. According to the minutes of the meeting,

Ambassador [to the UN] Jeane Kirkpatrick then stated that the group should not lose sight of the fact that the PLO is not a bunch of agrarian reformers. They are international terrorists who are working against US

interests and committing acts of violence throughout the world supported by the Soviet Union. We want them out and the US should not throw away the possibility of getting rid of the PLO by taking measures against Israel [...]. Clearly, once we have removed the PLO from Lebanon we can make fast progress in the peace process.

The president, who seemed not to pay attention to the other aspects of the discussion, intervened to say that he agreed and asked, 'How do we inform the PLO of the situation and the need to get out?' The meeting, which had started with a focus on Israeli deeds, ended with President Reagan saying that 'any statement should have half of its emphasis on the PLO. We must make it clear that the president cannot tee-off only on Israel.'¹⁰¹ But this was not the end of the story.

On 12 August, at least 300 people were killed in a heavy bombing of Beirut carried out by the IDF. Reagan was outraged and called Begin:

I told him it had to stop or our entire future relationship was endangered. I used the word holocaust deliberately & said the symbol of this war was becoming a picture of a 7 month old baby with its arms blown off (...). Twenty mins. [minutes] later he called to tell me he'd ordered an end to the barrage and pled for our continued friendship.¹⁰²

It was enough even for the too-long-silent Israeli cabinet. Sharon was stripped of his right to order the use of IDF 's military power.¹⁰³ Six days later, Reagan finally could announce to the press that the US was going to be part of the MNF and that the evacuation of the PLO would start very soon. He also added a very important caveat, if the Marines were hit, they were going to be pulled out.¹⁰⁴

The evacuation of the PLO was just one of Sharon's goals in Lebanon. He proceeded at the same time with another of his goals, namely installing Bashir Gemayel in the presidential palace at Ba'abda, near Beirut. On 23 August the young

Maronite was elected president by 57 out of the 62 deputies who attended the session of the Lebanese parliament. This, as Israeli historians Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari have documented, would have been practically impossible without the active help of the IDF troops, which controlled a large proportion of the areas containing pro-Gemayel members of parliament.¹⁰⁵

The United States cooperated in this effort, despite the State Department's briefing paper that warned against supporting Bashir Gemayel. Another State Department memo stated clearly that the US had 'played a crucial role in ensuring Bashir Gemayel's election in 1982' by, for example, protecting 'certain deputies en route to parliament'.¹⁰⁶

Two days after Gemayel's election, 800 Marines arrived in Beirut equipped 'with weapons consistent with their non-combat mission'. In his letter to the Senate's Speaker *pro tempore* Strom Thurmond, Reagan specified that 'our agreement with the GOL [government of Lebanon] expressly rules out any combat responsibilities for the US forces'.¹⁰⁷ The Marines were going to cooperate with 800 French soldiers and 400 Italians. This first multinational force had one main task, to assist in the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut. It was accomplished by 30 August when Arafat left the city. Shortly thereafter, Secretary Weinberger ordered the quick withdrawal of the US contingent which was completed by 10 September.

While he dealt with the situation in Beirut, Secretary Shultz had been planning a new start for the Middle East peace process. This was part of the quid pro quo with the Israelis during Begin's visit, or so it was perceived by US policy-makers. In order to draft a new peace plan between Israel and the Palestinians, Shultz convened several 'Saturday seminars' with Henry Kissinger and other key officials from the Department of State, the CIA and the NSC staff.¹⁰⁸ The plan was disclosed by President Reagan in a televised speech on 1 September, two days after the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut. Reagan called for a 'fresh start' and restated US commitment to the Camp David agreements and then said that

The United States will not support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and we will not support annexation or permanent control by Israel.

There is, however, another way to peace (...). It is the firm view of the United States that self-government by the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza in association with Jordan offers the best chance for a durable, just, and lasting peace.^{[109](#)}

The announcement made Begin furious for two reasons. First of all, the Israelis had been informed of it only the day before. Second, the Reagan plan, in Begin's eyes, threatened to wipe out all the political benefits of the invasion of Lebanon. Instead of postponing the discussion on the West Bank (and securing in the long term an Israeli annexation) it would have led to the birth of a Palestinian authority in those territories. After hearing the outline of the plan from Ambassador Lewis, Begin interjected: 'Sam, could you not have let us enjoy our victory just for a day or two?'^{[110](#)}

Jordan's King Hussein decided to wait before giving his response until the Arab summit that was to be held a few days later in Fez, Morocco. The Arab leaders disappointed the American policy-makers and presented a plan of their own calling for an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. There was no explicit guarantee on the existence of Israel.^{[111](#)} Without cooperation from Israel and Arab allies the Reagan plan had nowhere to go and was dead in a few days. The quid pro quo under which American policy-makers had acquiesced in the deployment of the MNF had not been completed. This did not help to face the next crisis which was just days away.

On 14 September a bomb blew up in the headquarters of the Phalange Party in East Beirut and killed Bashir Gemayel. A 26-year-old Greek-Orthodox Lebanese named Habib Tanious Sartouni was considered responsible for the murder, though to this day no one knows for sure on whose behalf he worked.^{[112](#)} Bashir's brother Amin had recently accused the

Syrian regime for the murder.¹¹³ The following day at 5 am the IDF entered West Beirut. The Shatila refugee camp located in the Sabra neighbourhood was surrounded and cut off completely from the rest of the city. Searchlights from buildings nearby were mounted to illuminate the area. A group of Maronite fighters were allowed to enter the camp. The leader of the group was Eli Hobeika, Bashir's personal bodyguard. In the end, this group would be accused of killing between 700 and 3,500 Palestinians.¹¹⁴ As the fighters had been previously evacuated, those murdered in the refugee camps were almost exclusively unarmed women, children and the elderly.

On 18 September, the US administration acknowledged the enormity and scale of the massacre via Ryan Crocker, then the political Officer of the embassy in Beirut. The embassy in Tel Aviv sent a telegram to Secretary Shultz which deeply shocked him. According to his memoirs, Sharon had told US envoy Morris Draper that

Israeli forces would remain in the areas where 'the terrorists' were located until the Lebanese Armed Forces [LAF] cleaned them out. 'Let the LAF go into the camps,'¹¹⁵ Sharon said, 'They can kill the terrorists. But if they don't, we will.' I was stunned by this cable (...). The president was deeply shaken and asked whether we had been too cautious with the marines.¹¹⁶

According to the secretary of state, Italian Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo called him on 19 September and proposed to send a new MNF to Beirut. Reagan was 'more than ready' to send the marines back but was worried 'by what he called the Vietnam problem, the reluctance of the United States to use its troops again in tough spots'.

The following day, the president announced the deployment of a new multinational force to Lebanon.¹¹⁷ According to the background for Reagan's speech prepared by the Department of State, the function of the second MNF was 'to provide a presence that will help the armed forces of the government of Lebanon to take charge of their central city'.

Also, the Department of State suggested Reagan had to emphasize publicly that it was the Italians who had proposed the second MNF several days before.^{[118](#)}

This decision was actually the result of a discussion within the administration between two alternative plans, one supported by the NSC staff and the other by Secretary Shultz. The NSC staff proposed a wide deployment of troops which would extend also to southern Lebanon showing to both Israelis and Syrians alike 'that we meant business'. The Pentagon estimated the number of troops needed for this task at 63,000. Their mission would be to disarm the militias, secure ports and borders and take over the ground held by Syria and Israel.

George Shultz thought Congress would not support a plan this large or with such potential risk. The Department of State proposed its own plan which was composed of three intertwined elements. First of all, inserting a small contingent of Marines, part of a larger multinational force, to stabilize the country and prepare the ground for the second element. This would be the diplomatic negotiations under US auspices aimed at both Israeli and Syrian withdrawals from Lebanon, enabling the Gemayel government (Amin, Bashir's brother, was elected president a few days later) to re-establish its rule over Lebanon. The third element was a programme of US military assistance to rebuild the Lebanese Army.^{[119](#)} Reagan agreed with Shultz's plan. In his diary, on 19 September, he wrote:

We are asking the Israelis to leave Beirut. We are asking Arabs to intervene and persuade Syrians to leave Lebanon at which time we'll ask Israelis to do likewise. In the meantime, Lebanon will establish a govt & the capability of defending itself. No more half way gestures, clear the whole situation while the MNF is on hand to assure order. (...). The wheels are now in motion.^{[120](#)}

On 21 September, Amin Gemayel was elected president of Lebanon with the support of the Muslim MPs who sensed he was supported by the more advantageous United States rather

than Israel.¹²¹ Three days later, 400,000 people demonstrated against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in Tel Aviv. The domestic support for 'Peace for Galilee' was collapsing. Begin's cabinet wanted to salvage the mission by signing a peace treaty with Lebanon.

The slippery slope

The Lebanese–Israeli agreement would eventually become the main goal of Shultz's diplomacy in the following months: a Lebanese–Israeli agreement, he thought, would lead to a joint Syrian and Israel withdrawal from the country. Meanwhile, the US would work to strengthen Lebanon's central government so that it could effectively rule the country after the withdrawal of foreign forces.

This plan, however, rested on two fundamental delusions: that Israel would be willing to withdraw *completely* from Lebanon and that Syria would acquiesce in a Lebanese–Israeli agreement. According to Ambassador Dillon, coming back from one of his trips to Damascus, Habib told him Assad was willing to withdraw 'but that he would not permit the Israelis to gain any political advantage from their Lebanese invasion. Both Phil and I understood that to mean that the Syrians would withdraw only if the Israelis left Lebanon entirely.'¹²²

But as negotiations went on, it became clearer and clearer the Israelis wanted to keep a 'security belt' inside Lebanon. The Israelis did not trust the ability of the Lebanese intelligence to effectively control southern Lebanon and thus thought it appropriate to keep some form of direct military presence in that part of the country.¹²³

Shultz, however, had several reasons to believe that his plan would work. First, the Israeli cabinet was faced with strong opposition at home and seemed in great need of withdrawing quickly after securing some kind of political agreement with its northern neighbour. Second, Syria had been severely beaten by Israel in Lebanon. Both conditions, however, proved temporary and by early January 1983 the situation proved harder than ever.

First, the Soviets completed the deployment of new SAM-5 missiles in Syria. Now Assad had less incentive to withdraw and to negotiate. Second, Israel had purged its leadership of those most compromised with the mistakes in Lebanon and could now deal with the US from a different position. In the wake of the Shatila massacre, an independent commission had been tasked to investigate possible responsibilities by the political and military leaders. The Kahan commission (named after its chairman) recommended the removal of top officials in the IDF and of Ariel Sharon. His replacement was Moshe Arens, a name much more palatable to the Americans.

The dangers of US involvement in Lebanon appeared more clearly on 18 April when a pickup truck loaded with 2,000 lb. of explosives was driven inside the US embassy in Beirut. The detonation provoked the collapse of the whole central part of the building. Sixty-three people were killed, including 17 Americans. The Near East Chief of the CIA, Robert Ames, was among them.^{[124](#)} Islamic Jihad, one of the names used by the forces that would eventually form Hizbullah, claimed responsibility for the attack with various phone calls to the news agencies.^{[125](#)} According to some authors, the US National Security Agency had intercepted an authorization for the attack given by the Iranian Foreign Ministry to the Iranian embassy in Damascus. However, no evidence of this intercept has been found in the records declassified as of now.^{[126](#)}

This attack, an eerie foreshadowing of that against the Marines months later, prompted the administration to step up its efforts to broker a Lebanese–Israeli agreement that would guarantee the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country, making therefore easier the redeployment of US troops. In his address to the nation on 23 April, President Reagan said that the following day Secretary Shultz was going to leave for the Middle East where he would add his personal presence to move toward successful negotiations.^{[127](#)}

Shultz put his personal weight into the negotiations and effectively brought the two parties, Israel and Lebanon, to sign it. Nonetheless, the agreement rested on shaky ground from the beginning. On 7 May, Shultz had met the Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Khaddam who had let him know that his

country was not going to support the agreement: Israel, according to him, was trying to 'impose hegemony over Lebanon' and, in his view, thanks to the agreement the 'security zone (...) put Israelis within 23 km of Damascus'.¹²⁸

The 'Agreement on Withdrawal of Troops in Lebanon' signed on 17 May 1983 (and thus later referred as the 'May 17 agreement') established a 'security zone' in southern Lebanon under the control of the Lebanese Armed Forces, the army under the Lebanese central government. This zone had to be free of any other militia and two 'supervision stations' manned by Israeli officials would be located there. In exchange, Israeli forces would withdraw within eight to 12 weeks.¹²⁹ Syrian veto power over the agreement, however, was enhanced by a side letter requested by Prime Minister Begin. It stated Israeli withdrawal would take place only after withdrawal of all armed Syrians and Palestinians. The Lebanese in turn produced their own side letter in which they stated they were not going to implement the agreement if the Israelis did not withdraw. In fact, the Syrians could stop the implementation of the agreement merely by deciding not to withdraw and thus blocking Israel's withdrawal, which would in turn stop implementation of the agreement by the Lebanese government.

Reagan was aware of these dangers. As he said in a meeting of the NSPG the day before the attack against the US Embassy in Beirut,

We run the real risk that Israel will indeed sign an agreement with Lebanon, but it will be unacceptable to Moslem elements in Lebanon and the moderate Arabs. We will then have given away things to Israel, but the agreement will be unacceptable to Syria; Syria will not withdraw, and the Israelis will stay in Lebanon as well. This will be the worst of all worlds for us.¹³⁰

A close prediction of what would actually happen in the summer of 1983. Secretary Shultz, however, was arguing that reaching an agreement quickly was crucial to avoid a further deterioration of the situation in the country. Shultz thought that

pressure from Arab ‘moderates’ would have forced Assad to withdraw, thus putting the mechanism of the two side letters into motion.^{[131](#)}

Nothing of such happened in the following months. In his meeting with Shultz before the signing of the agreement, King Fahd voiced his disapproval for a normalization of Lebanese–Israeli relations fearing the creation of the ‘North Bank’, another Israeli occupied zone beyond the already existing West Bank.^{[132](#)}

Meanwhile, Philip Habib had been declared *persona non grata* by Assad and was replaced by Robert McFarlane as US envoy to the region. McFarlane, as others in the Reagan administration, had served in Vietnam as a Marine Officer. He advocated an increasing US involvement on the side of Amin Gemayel’s central government. With this choice, however, the US was getting more and more entangled in the Lebanese civil war. This was based on the wrong assumption that Gemayel represented the non-factional central government as opposed to warring factions. On the contrary, Amin was just the head of one of the factions, the Maronite extremists under the Phalange party-cum militia. This choice of allies combined with the consequences of the May 17 agreement, put the US on a slippery slope in which the more it got involved in the Lebanese civil war, the more casualties it would suffer. These casualties, and the increasing attacks from the Syrian-supported militias, would increasingly place US credibility at stake, one of the issues that concerned Reagan the most, given the aftermath of Vietnam and the fall of the Shah.

The records of the meetings that took place in the White House that summer are a testimony of the awareness of the administration of the worsening situation in Lebanon. In his background paper for the NSPG meeting on 21 June, National Security Advisor William Clark confirmed that the ‘ratification of the Lebanon-Israeli agreement has led the Syrians to make good an earlier threat to destabilize the Gemayel Government’ while offering a great propaganda opportunity to the Soviets. Domestic pressure in Israel would, according to Clark, push the Israeli army to withdraw

unilaterally to ‘some new, more secure line in the south’. In this case,

The Lebanese will want the MNF to join their own Army in deploying behind the withdrawing Israeli. This could be physically dangerous and therefore poses some very tough questions which we will need to answer with our MNF co-contributors and the Hill.¹³³

By early September, Clark’s prediction proved extremely accurate. The Israeli army unilaterally withdrew from the Shuf plateau overlooking Beirut’s airport, where the US Marines’ barracks were located. On advice from Special Envoy Robert McFarlane, the White House approved an involvement of the US contingent on the side of the Lebanese Armed Forces. On 10 September the NSC agreed on National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 103. The new mission for US troops in the Greater Beirut area was upgraded from simple ‘presence’ to ‘aggressive self-defense against hostile or provocative acts from any quarter’. Material and training assistance to the Lebanese army, the directive dictated, had to be accelerated.¹³⁴ A few days later the US ship *New Jersey* was ordered to deploy off-shore to the Beirut area.¹³⁵ On 19 September, it started to shell the frontline near Suq-al-Gharb, north of the capital city.¹³⁶

Two days later, Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker convinced Reagan to start the War Powers Act procedure to receive formal authorization from Congress to use force. When Secretary Shultz met with the president on the same day, Reagan asked him: ‘Are we going to let the Syrians and the Soviets take over? Are we just going to let this happen?’¹³⁷

According to David Wills, the administration wanted to extend the mission for at least another 18 months. During a meeting with a large number of members from the House of Representatives, Nicholas Veliotis argued that this time-span was needed to ‘depoliticize’ the deployment – to postpone further decisions until after the 1984 elections. Even though the administration eventually got the approval for its plans, some members of Congress made it clear that, while approving a bill which allowed US troops to use force in

Lebanon for 18 months, they actually meant '3 or 4 months'.¹³⁸

In mid-October, as the situation worsened, the discussion in the White House focused on the dilemma between escalation or withdrawal. As William P. Clark summarized for the president before the 14 October NSPG meeting

One way or another some new power sharing arrangement in Lebanon is almost certain to come about. The question is whether the Syrians will dictate the outcome – with all this would imply for our own credibility and posture in one of the world's most vital regions (...) the real choice is whether we are prepared to face up to the requirements of preventing such an outcome or whether under the aura of a successful ceasefire agreement we should look for ways of distancing ourselves from the political struggle in Lebanon.¹³⁹

In these weeks, the divergence between George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger emerged strongly. The former wanted the Marines to stay, the latter wanted them to be redeployed. While the secretary of state wanted to include a 'discriminate use of force' into US diplomacy in Lebanon (and elsewhere whenever the US faced an asymmetrical threat), the secretary of defence wanted to limit the cases in which the military would be used only to the situations in which US national interest was directly at stake. This divergence, which emerged with opposite proposals in the days before the attack against the Marines in Beirut, would deepen during 1984 and 1985.

Shultz saw Lebanon as a testing ground for the global Cold War: the US was fighting against the Soviet's major ally in the Middle East. In his view, the 'basic problem in Lebanon' was that Israel's withdrawal had created a vacuum which the US had been drawn into to sustain the central Lebanese government. As a matter of fact, Israel was no longer acting as 'an effective counterbalance to Syria' and it was 'this shift in the balance of forces in Lebanon' that underlay US difficulties in the country. These difficulties, however, could not be

confined to Lebanon: if Syria won there, this would 'tilt the balance of forces in the Arab world' making US friends less willing to 'take risks for peace'. Soviet rearmament of the Syrians had boosted Assad's confidence and this made weakening Syria all the more important because, Shultz explained, 'our fundamental interest is to demonstrate constantly to the Arabs that they are better off in association with US, not the Soviets'. A US forceful stance in Lebanon, therefore, was crucial to 'accumulate all possible counterweights to Syria to block its gains and set limits to its ambitions'. Given the regional (and global) implications of the situation, Shultz argued with Reagan that the United States had to remain 'actively involved' in Lebanon and the USS *New Jersey* had to remain off the coast of Beirut. Rules of Engagement for US troops had to be broadened and economic as well as military aid for Gemayel confirmed. Israel had to be convinced not to withdraw unless it received in exchange 'a tolerable political outcome and adequate assurances of security'. Finally, Shultz thought that Lebanese national reconciliation could not come at the price of repealing the May 17 agreement which, in his eyes, represented both a commitment of US prestige and an example of another 'moderate Arab country to negotiate with Israel under our auspices'.¹⁴⁰

The deepening of the strategic cooperation with Israel was one of the issues that came under fire from the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As Robert McFarlane wrote to the president before an NSPG meeting on 18 October, Secretary Weinberger and the Chairman of the JCS Jack Vessey were 'concerned that close cooperation with Israel damages [US] interests in the Arab world and that we seldom get anything in return for our help from Israel'.¹⁴¹ The secretary of defence had actually proposed his own alternative diplomatic strategy: one of the ironies of the decision-making process about the Middle East of the Reagan administration would be to have a secretary of state advocating more use of force and a secretary of defence calling for a wider use of diplomacy. In the memo 'US policy in Lebanon and the Middle East' sent on 21 October to Robert McFarlane (who had meanwhile become national security advisor), Weinberger

wrote that the US should not assume that Syria was going to be a Soviet client forever, and thus should combine ‘firmness of purpose’ with ‘readiness to reciprocate if Syria takes some concrete steps supportive of US objectives’. Being more open on the relationship with Syria, Weinberger’s strategy felt less need to strengthen strategic cooperation with Israel. With the Jewish state, the secretary of defence asked for ‘reciprocity and balance’, keeping in mind ‘the limitations of Israeli capabilities in the event of a US–Soviet war in the region’. As a matter of fact, Weinberger, too, saw events in the Middle East through the lens of the Cold War. Only, he did not see Syria as an eternal proxy of the Soviet Union and he did not appreciate the relevance of Israel in countering the Soviet threat in the region. Last but not least, Weinberger advocated a reduction or elimination of ‘US ground presence in Beirut’ substituted by ‘naval gunfire support’.¹⁴²

Two days after he sent this paper to McFarlane, those troops would suffer the deadliest terrorist attack against Americans before 11 September 2001. At 2 am on Sunday, 23 October, Robert McFarlane woke the president with news of a terrorist bombing against the Marines’ units in Beirut. A Mercedes truck loaded with 12,000 lb of TNT had detonated in the parking lot of the Marines’ barracks, killing 241 Marines and sailors.

3 Defining the flight against terrorism

The detonation that struck the Marines' barracks in Beirut at 6:22 am (Beirut time) on Sunday, 23 October 1983 did not just kill 241 US soldiers. It caused one of the most severe humiliations for the US military (and for American credibility) after the Vietnam War. The American reaction to this bombing was crucial to the elaboration of the War on Terror under the Reagan administration and sparked a debate about the use of force that generated two alternative views: on the one hand, defence secretary Caspar Weinberger sought to minimize future uses of force against asymmetrical threats such as the one the US had faced in Beirut; on the other hand, Secretary of State Shultz championed the use of the military to pre-empt terrorist attacks.

Shultz and other members of the administration elaborated a particular narrative of the bombings in Beirut and of the ensuing American withdrawal from the country in February 1984 which focused on the 'lack of will' by the US to commit enough military force. This fundamental weakness, according to Shultz, was seen by the Syrians and their Lebanese proxies as an invitation to be more aggressive. This narrative of the events in Lebanon, in turn, helped to consolidate Shultz's advocacy of an aggressive policy against Middle Eastern terrorism which can be considered, under some aspects, as the first elaboration of some of the main tenets of the Global War on Terror declared by President George W. Bush after 11 September 2001.

pre-emption and the use of military force against terrorism would be some of the issues raised by National Security Decision Directive 138 on 'Combating Terrorism', signed by President Reagan on 3 April 1984 and recently declassified. NSDD 138 broadened the range of options available to decision-makers in the fight against terrorism but it did not start a new, comprehensive policy on the issue. Eventually, it would prove to be just a step in the debate on the use of force against terrorists which would continue throughout 1985 through the work, also, of the Task Force on Combating Terrorism chaired by then Vice President George H.W. Bush.

In this respect, the bombings of 23 October 1983 proved to be an important moment, after which ignoring or overlooking Middle Eastern terrorism became increasingly difficult in the United States. Only a small fraction of the discussion, however, focused on the nature of the enemy while most of the attention was devoted to retaliation and military posture.

Facing new enemies

A few minutes after the blast at the Marines' barracks, another suicide bomber attacked the headquarters of the French contingent, killing 58. First word of the bombings came to Washington when it was midnight, local time.¹ Responsibility for the attack against the Marines was claimed by a group called 'Islamic Jihad', one of the names used by Shiite groups which would later appear under the umbrella of the Party of God, or Hizbullah.

One of the founding members of Hizbullah, Naim Qassem, would later define this period as the 'foundation years' which shaped an 'effective jihad operation' forcing first the US withdrawal in 1984 and then the Israeli partial redeployment one year later. In this phase, however, the party was still an umbrella organization, involved in 'secret resistance activity', only to enter the public field with an 'open letter' on 6 February 1985 in which it outlined its ideological and political visions.² This secrecy around the organization did not manage to conceal its existence to the US intelligence. Just hours after the attack, the Defense Intelligence Agency wrote:

These attacks are probably the work of the pro-Iranian Lebanese Shia Hizb Allah (Party of God), led by Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah. This group was probably responsible for the April car bombing of the American embassy. It has also been responsible for much of the sniping directed at the Marines.³

Foreign sponsorship of the attack was also clear: the then head of the Iranian Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) claimed responsibility for providing 'both the TNT and the ideology' for the attack.⁴

Nevertheless, Hizbullah was not just an Iranian or a Syrian proxy. Its birth was the result of a genuine and long evolution within the Lebanese Shiite community where the disdain for old patronage politics mixed with political mobilization of the dispossessed by Imam Musa al-Sadr. Despite his mysterious disappearance in Tripoli (Libya) in the summer of 1978, his followers did not dwindle and came to be fascinated by the example of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. This gave them the stamina to carry out more decisively their struggle within Lebanon, a project which was just accelerated by the Israeli invasion of the country in 1982. In the days immediately following the outbreak of the war, some 1,500 members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards arrived in the Biqā' Valley which, though part of Lebanese territory, was under Syrian control. In the same month of the invasion, the Islamic Amal was created, a first embryo of a radical, religiously-driven, Shiite political party-cum-militia.⁵

These developments in the Lebanese Shiite community were not entirely clear to US policy-makers who had initially focused on Soviet-inspired terrorism. The ensuing debate among them tended to neglect the evidence of the changing nature of terrorism provided by the intelligence: more and more it was the work of small groups, in no way connected to the Soviet bloc and with a growing degree of autonomy from external support given the small resources needed to carry out these kind of attacks.

A memo drafted on 30 November for CIA director William Casey, stressed that the most likely types of attacks – namely car bombs, kidnappings, snipers – ‘require minimal material resources and manpower; they are, therefore, relatively easy to execute’ while being ‘particularly difficult to intercept in the planning stage’. Foreign support existed (Iran and Syria were clearly mentioned) but it had to be placed in the context of the local perception of the US intervention in the country as an actor of the civil war: the Lebanese Shiite groups, the memo argued, considered the American contingent

to be less peacekeepers than supporters of the Maronite Christian faction of the Lebanese ethnic fabric. This perception was strengthened when the United States demonstrated its willingness to use naval gunfire in support of the Lebanese Army in its battles against Muslim elements in the Shuf mountains in September.

Moreover, the CIA argued, terrorism against foreign troops was not inevitable. The assessment devoted a paragraph on why the Italian and British contingents had suffered fewer attacks and concluded that both countries were perceived as more even-handed in their approach to the Arab–Israeli conflict and had at the same time refrained from public quarrels with Iran and Syria. Also, while the British forces had ‘kept a low profile’, the ‘Italians have sought to ingratiate themselves with local Muslims by establishing personal links through public service work’.⁶

This kind of intelligence could be used to assess more clearly both the identity of the enemy and American shortcomings. Little of both was done in the aftermath of the bombing and the administration stressed the Cold War implications of the attack. Talking to both houses of Congress a few days after the tragedy, Secretary Shultz answered a question about who could be responsible for the carnage saying simply that ‘Syria, the Soviet Union and Iran have all opposed’ the presence of the multinational force (MNF) in Beirut. Framing events in the Global Cold War paradigm appeared to be crucial to get the support of the Congress. As Shultz wrote to Reagan, ‘Most members appeared to agree that

we cannot walk away and leave Lebanon to Syrian/Soviet domination.’⁷

On 27 October, Reagan addressed the nation reiterating the link between the events in Lebanon and the global flight against the Soviet Union. He acknowledged that Lebanon was ‘a small country’ but warned of the danger of letting it fall ‘into the hands of a power or powers hostile to the free world’, which would pose ‘a direct threat to the United States and to our allies’. The USSR had provoked violence in the country and provided ‘direct support through a network of surrogates and terrorists’.⁸

Two months after the Beirut bombing the independent commission created on 7 November by the Department of Defense to investigate those attacks issued its final report. The commission is also known by the name of its chairman, Admiral Long. The attack, performed with a truck loaded with 12,000 lb of TNT, was defined as ‘tantamount to an act of war using the medium of terrorism’.⁹ This definition should be taken seriously: for the first time in recent US history terrorism was compared to war, of which it was just one form. A few months later, Secretary Shultz would build on this definition, arguing that if terrorists used low-level warfare against the US, the US had to respond militarily and not just through normal law enforcement or crisis management as it had done before. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger would oppose Shultz’s views despite his acknowledgement of the seriousness of the threat. In his comments on the report for the president, he emphasized that ‘terrorist warfare, sponsored by sovereign states to achieve political objectives is a threat to the United States’.¹⁰

Some officials inside the administration had a different view and thought that the terrorist threat implied a rethinking of the traditional US military strategy. Donald Fortier, deputy director of the Policy Planning Staff and then deputy national security advisor from December 1985, wrote an interesting comment about the Long Commission report:

Throughout the history of this country, we have recognized a clear distinction between being at peace

with other states, and being at war. We have never before faced a situation in which others routinely sponsor and facilitate acts of violence against us, while hiding behind proxies and surrogates which they claim they do not fully control.¹¹

The president was aware of the danger which had emerged in Beirut and which would cause new problems also during his term in Office. In his diary on 24 December he wrote: ‘One cloud in the sky. I’ll keep to myself – the threat worldwide by the Iranian fanatics to loose terror on everything American.’¹²

This threat perception, which clearly had not started on Christmas Eve, was behind the debate inside the White House in the days after the attack. The higher the discussion went into the administration, however, the more the focus shifted from the situation on the ground and in the region to the need to restore US credibility, overall military credibility. Little attention was devoted to the nature of the enemy – its goals, its organizations, its ideology – while the focus was on the need to retaliate.

Retaliation?

The discussion about retaliation had started shortly after the bombings. The Chief of Staff had settled on one such target: the Sheik Abdullah Barracks in Baalbek, Biqā’ Valley. This was the area where the Iranian Revolutionary Guard was training its Lebanese allies. Not everyone in the administration was enthusiastic about retaliation while Reagan himself was afraid of civilian casualties and wanted a ‘strictly military target’.¹³

As McFarlane summarized for the president on 28 October 1983, a divergence existed between the national security advisor, his staff and Shultz on one side and the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) on the other side. While the former advocated a tougher stance, a show of resolve and a resumption of strategic cooperation with Israel, the latter insisted that ‘there be something in return’ for this cooperation.¹⁴

This cleavage existed before the bombings and was actually about the future of the US mission in Lebanon and more generally about American policy in the region. The secretary of defence had expressed his thoughts to McFarlane two days before the attacks.¹⁵ Weinberger thought that a comprehensive diplomatic strategy could be devised and that Syria would not be a Soviet ally forever. He proposed a more careful relationship with Israel guided by 'reciprocity and balance'. Moreover, he proposed the redeployment of Marines offshore.

To understand the opposite view, one has to look to what members of the NSC staff Donald Fortier and Howard Teicher wrote in those weeks. To them, the past US positions had a rationale which had to be preserved: the May 17 peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel was in Israel's interest and Israel would help the US to have a tougher stance in the region. Writing to McFarlane on 18 October, Donald Fortier stated that the May 17 agreement provided the rationale for Israeli 'past – and future – involvement' in the country and Israel was crucial in 'assuming a more aggressive posture in Lebanon' where one of the main goals was preventing 'a Syrian dominated outcome'.¹⁶

At least on one of his main points, namely the resumption of the strategic cooperation with Israel, Fortier's pressure would yield results: on the occasion of the visit of the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir on 29 November a new commitment to economic and military cooperation was made by the Reagan administration. The stated goal was to contain the Soviet Union: 'We examined together Soviet activities in the Middle East,' Reagan said, 'and found a common concern with the Soviet presence and arms build-up in Syria.'¹⁷ William Quandt argues that the resumption of the strategic cooperation with Israel meant sacrificing the intra-Lebanese reconciliation in the name of the May 17 agreement.¹⁸ Unfortunately for the US, without reconciliation there was no stabilization of the country and without that there was to be no security for American troops nor any honourable exit strategy.

The more the situation worsened, the more one component of the administration argued in favour of a military escalation

in the Middle East. Finally the NSC staff and the secretary of state were effective in changing the president's mind in favour of retaliation. The National Security Planning Group met on 14 November and approved the plan for an air strike against what was considered the terrorist headquarters in the Biqā' Valley. The strike, however, was never carried out. While the French air force did strike at Baalbek the following day, US planes remained on the ground. Two opposite narratives of the event come from McFarlane and Weinberger: the former says that the latter trumped the president's will and ordered the air force to stand down¹⁹ while the secretary of defence denied these charges and wrote that when on 16 November the French called to say that they were about to start the operation within a few hours, the US was not prepared. Reagan's diary seems to confirm Weinberger's version, or at least to be based on that.²⁰

A new occasion to flex American muscles came in less than two weeks. On 3 December, a US F-14 Tomcat was attacked by Syrian SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles while heading inland over Lebanon to conduct a reconnaissance flight searching for signs of impending attacks against the Marines at Beirut airport. The Syrian missiles missed the targets and the aircraft returned safely to the USS *Kennedy*.²¹ Ironically, the same administration that had proved unable to strike back when 241 of its soldiers had been killed in Beirut decided immediately to shoot back when one of its planes was targeted without casualties.

The US strike took place on the morning of 4 December. Twenty-three aircraft from the carriers *Independence* and *Kennedy* were supposed to hit the Sheik Abdullah barracks in the Biqā' Valley. Eventually, two A-6 bombers were lost to Syrian anti-aircraft fire. One pilot was killed, another was captured. Robert Goodman, the captured pilot, was later freed thanks to the intervention of Reverend Jesse Jackson.²²

An assessment issued the following day by the Intelligence and Research Bureau at the State Department (INR) helps to explain the lesson that many inside the administration learned from the intervention in Lebanon. According to the report, the Syrians were calculating that the US would not deploy ground

troops to oblige them to leave Lebanon and relinquish control over the allied militias.²³

From this analysis, US policy-makers – especially Shultz and the NSC staff – drew the conclusion that the problem in Lebanon had been solely the ‘lack of will’ to use extensive military force (the deployment of ground forces mentioned in the report) while overlooking the broader context which had hampered US efforts in the country: the fact that, as the same INR assessment explained, the Israelis had an agenda of their own and Gemayel wanted to manipulate the US in a cycle of continuous confrontation with the Syrians, substituting the painful concessions he would have had to make in a reconciliation process with American military power.

This narrative might explain also why, after 4 December, there would be other efforts toward a new retaliation, not least because of a new attack against the US embassy in Beirut later in 1984. However, retaliation proved difficult under two main aspects: first of all, it was hard to spot immediately those responsible for a terrorist attack. Second, terrorists usually hid in highly populated civilian areas, making it very hard to hit without provoking civilian casualties, something Reagan had requested be avoided. Thus, retaliation risked hitting the wrong targets, or hitting them too late or, finally, causing several civilian casualties and therefore making the cause of terrorists more attractive. These reasons would convince some members of the administration that, if retaliating after an attack was risky and politically damaging, hitting the terrorists preemptively had to become US strategy. Before getting into this part of the debate, however, the Reagan administration had to decide whether the US troops were to remain in Lebanon or not.

The road to withdrawal

The debate about retaliation intermingled with that about the future of the US contingent. Five days after the bombing against the Marines, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 111 which stepped up the US involvement in the civil war, applying to the high ground

overlooking Beirut the same strategy of support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) which had been adopted in September to defend the city of Suq Al-Gharb. The commitment to the May 17 agreement was reaffirmed, despite its apparent failure.²⁴

NSDD 111 reflected the temporary victory of the positions of George Shultz, of the NSC staff and of Robert McFarlane, just appointed national security advisor. On the contrary, Weinberger and the military argued in favour of deploying the Marines offshore: commander of the Marines Kelley proposed moving logistical and support forces for the Marines Amphibious Unit back to the ships, which according to McFarlane would send the 'wrong signal' to the French and Italians.²⁵

Reagan agreed with Kelley's proposal for a re-deployment but thought also that some form of visible US presence had to stay on the ground in Beirut.²⁶ Despite the warnings by the military about the safety of US soldiers in the city,²⁷ Reagan was concerned with the restoration of US credibility in the region, which would have been hampered in case of a hasty withdrawal just days after the 23 October attack. Commenting with journalists on the Long Commission report, the president said that the administration was working on creating conditions on the ground so that Marines could be brought home soon but, he added, 'we must not delude ourselves into believing that terrorism will vanish on the happy day that our forces come home'.²⁸

As a matter of fact, opinion polls conducted in the winter of 1983 showed how much Reagan's Achilles' heel laid in his policy in Lebanon: 52 per cent of those polled disapproved the president's policy while only 34 per cent approved.²⁹ In early January members of the administration and Congressmen from the ad hoc group on Lebanon headed by Speaker O'Neill met to discuss the situation. Congressmen were concerned about the position of the Marines and did not see any major diplomatic development that could lead to a solution. The words of Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam and of then Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security

Affairs Richard Armitage on the need to 'avoid flip-flop diplomacy' did little to turn the tide in Congress.³⁰

Problems ran deep also inside the cabinet. According to George Shultz's memoirs, Vice President Bush had started to question the Marines' presence in Beirut as early as 9 January, during a meeting of the National Security Planning Group (NSPG). Shultz himself was hopeless in defending Reagan's 10 December pledge that 'only when internal stability is established and withdrawal of all forces is assured, the Marines will leave'.³¹

Not only was domestic support for the mission plunging, the internal situation in Lebanon was getting worse and worse. The LAF, so heavily supported by the US, was disintegrating. The CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) had already predicted what was taking place: the army was far from being a unifying force because president Amin Gemayel had used it 'as a bulwark against giving the Shiites and the Druses a greater voice in government'. Druze leader Jumblatt called on all Druze soldiers to quit the army and Shiite leaders were putting pressure on Shiite soldiers to do the same. About 60 per cent of the LAF was made up of Muslims: those who continued to serve in this period did it at their own peril.³²

On 23 January 1984 the NSC met to hear a briefing on Lebanon 'and related Middle East matters from George Shultz and Don Rumsfeld'. Shultz had held talks with the other MNF foreign ministers in London and Stockholm, while Rumsfeld had concentrated on his efforts as a special envoy for negotiations in the Middle East.³³ Reagan's summary of the meeting was 'We're going to study a possible move of the Marines to the ships offshore but an Army force [will stay] on shore to train the Lebanese Army in anti-terrorist tactics.'³⁴

The effort to substitute the Marines' conventional presence with a more covert-action plan to train anti-terrorist units was also confirmed by Reagan's 26 January diary entry: 'We took up the business of Beirut again & came up with a plan for redeployment of the Marines but only after sending in Army training units who specialize in antiterrorist measures.'³⁵

This was probably the earliest phase of a strategy that was later disclosed by Bob Woodward and Charles Babcock in the *Washington Post*. According to the two journalists, Reagan authorized the CIA to train anti-terrorist units within the Lebanese army to strike at terrorists before they could hit US-related targets in the Middle East. One of those units, however, had organized an action without the CIA's consent and detonated a car bomb outside the house of one of the leaders of Hizbullah. Eighty people were killed and 200 were wounded on 8 March 1985.

The training programme was suspended but the idea of pre-empting terrorists would continue to live in the mind of many US officials. Just a few weeks after the massacre, both Robert McFarlane and CIA director William Casey would say, using the same language, 'We cannot and we will not abstain from forcible action to prevent, pre-empt or respond to terrorist acts where conditions merit the use of force.'³⁶

Before those developments, US troops were withdrawn. On 17 February, a memo by McFarlane officially informed both Shultz and Weinberger that the president had decided on the redeployment of the Marines to the ships. The pull-out had to be completed by 15 March.³⁷

At noon on 26 February the last Marines left Beirut International Airport. Their positions were soon taken by the secular Shiite Amal militia. In the following years, Lebanon was going to continue to be in the news as a site for further humiliations of the administration. Meanwhile, the withdrawal of the US troops from Lebanon would spark a debate on the best way to fight terrorism. George Shultz's campaign had actually started a few weeks before the withdrawal.

The Shultz Doctrine and NSDD 138

On 25 January 1984 George Shultz appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He started to conceptualize about the new war against terrorism and emphasized that 'state-sponsored terrorism [was] a new worldwide phenomenon'. His argument in those days was that 'American power must have more to it than a massive deterrent against

the Soviets or a relatively simple exercise like Grenada (...). The nature of the challenge is different (...). We're in a low-grade war with Iranian and Syrian terrorists.'³⁸

Shultz could be right in his definition of the intervention in Lebanon as a 'low-grade' confrontation or, as Max Boot would say, a small war. In his *The Savage Wars of Peace* Boot uses the definition of small wars (also called 'low intensity conflicts' or 'military operations other than war') given by a British Officer in the nineteenth century: 'Campaigns undertaken to suppress rebellions and guerrilla warfare in all parts of the world where organized armies are struggling against opponents who will not meet them in the open field.'³⁹

After the humiliation of the Syrian army by the Israeli Defence Forces in June 1982, few battles in those years in Lebanon were fought on the open field, Suq-al-Gharb in the autumn of 1983 being the most noteworthy exception. More frequently, the US had to face sniper fire or occasional rounds of shells coming from the Shuf plateau overlooking Beirut airport -and then the terrorist attacks, which are by no means conventional warfare.

Again, as in the president's narrative of another very recent 'small war' (that in Vietnam), the issue raised by several members of the administration was the presumed 'lack of will' by the US which could not carry out the fight until victory – or at least stability – could be achieved. This was one of the points George Shultz started to raise very soon after the withdrawal. Speaking during the TV show *Meet the Press* on 1 April, the secretary of state said the pull-out had been perceived as a lack of will by US partners in the region: 'It was perfectly apparent to the Syrians that all they had to do was keep pushing and pretty soon the United States, as they said, would be short of breath and drop out.'⁴⁰

The idea that the 'lack of will' was the main explanation for military failures was pure Reaganism. As John Arquilla has pointed out, Reagan thought the real problem facing the military after Vietnam was self-doubt, not material insufficiency. In one of his radio commentaries in 1977 he said: 'We stand in greater danger of defeat from lack of will

than from any mistakes likely to flow from a show of purpose.’⁴¹

As a matter of fact, not everyone was convinced that terrorism was a priority and Shultz was fighting to convince also a relevant part of the administration. The US military and the Defense Department were focused on the threat posed by a possible Soviet invasion of Western Europe through the Fulda Gap. During the Reagan years, according to Arquilla, army leaders identified new technologies and drafted a new military doctrine – AirLand Battle – for the proper use in future wars.

[They] turned their backs almost completely on the problems posed by irregular and guerrilla warfare, fixing instead on visions of a climatic clash with the Red Army on the plains of central Europe. Thus the least likely conflict scenario was nevertheless the one that got the most attention.⁴²

The statement of the Weinberger doctrine can be seen, additionally, as a way to further avoid small wars and prepare for a full-scale confrontation with the Soviet Union. But in the months before the speech of the secretary of defence at the National Press Club the public podium was all for Shultz and the advocates of what John Arquilla has defined a ‘de facto war on terror’.⁴³

On 24 March 1984, just eight days after William Buckley was kidnapped in Beirut, Shultz convened a day-long meeting of terrorism experts in Washington. In the chair was Brian Jenkins, then an expert for the Rand Corporation. As Jenkins recollected for Arquilla, the experts reached a consensus about how terror had become a new form of warfare for which the US was poorly prepared. The group went beyond simple analysis and articulated on the unconventional response to be given to the terrorist threat. Shultz ‘was fully persuaded by the group’s concrete recommendations and was soon arguing the case with President Reagan for waging a war on terror’.⁴⁴

Ten days after the Saturday seminar, on 3 April 1984 Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 138 on Combating Terrorism. The directive was the result of a

long process of elaboration which had started immediately after the bombings against the Marines in Beirut. Its contents were discussed in a lively meeting of the National Security Planning Group on 2 March 1984 where Shultz had made his point more clearly than in public:

It is recognized that there is a moral issue here in that the evidence will never be conclusive enough to 'win a Supreme Court case'. Everyone in this room remembers what we went through after the attack on the Marines. At some point, we have to wrestle with the issue of how 'sure' we have to be before we hit back.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Vessey reinforced what the secretary of state had just said stating that,

The JCS have the same concerns as Secretary Shultz. We need to face up to the issue of state-sponsored terrorism. We need to do more than just putting up more barriers like here at the White House, we need to decide that the next time a terrorist acts, we will hit back. We all know that Syria, Libya, and Iran have active terrorist camps. Yet no one does anything about it.

Secretary Weinberger, on his part, was a lot less vocal than in public with his opposition to this approach. He intervened to say that he shared the concern for state-sponsored terrorism and stressed the prohibition of unlawful acts in the flight against terrorism which was part of the Directive. This meant keeping the prohibition for assassination in place and thus reducing the conditions under which the use of force was convenient. Also, he mentioned an 'over-ture' by Soviet ambassador in Washington Anatoly Dobrynin on the issue of terrorism: he had proposed cooperation on this topic. Weinberger stressed 'that there are some who believe that the Soviets may be starting to be concerned about' terrorism. The US-Soviet cooperation on terrorism would come up again in the days before the attack against American soldiers in the La

Belle discotheque in West Berlin, but it did not work and the attack was not averted.

President Reagan concluded the discussion of the draft Directive on 2 March saying that re-drafting was still a possibility if the 'language' was a problem but that it was urgent to approve the NSDD because 'these all seem to be right steps'.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the final draft of NSDD 138 that Reagan signed in April left much room for ambiguity. Terrorism, it explained, destabilized friendly governments and was carried out by 'state-sponsored terrorist movements, international terrorist organizations and groups, and individual terrorists without obvious support'. Serious concern was raised over the possibility that some of these subjects were 'receiving support and perhaps guidance directly or indirectly from the Soviet Union'. In the whole Directive, neither Iran nor any other Middle Eastern state was explicitly mentioned.

While reaffirming several times the importance of Executive Order 12333 which forbade political assassination by US agencies, the Directive hinted at the possibility of using pre-emptive actions to thwart terrorist activities, though little else was said to specify, leaving more than one doubt on whether this meant acting through law enforcement agencies to capture terrorists or using military force against sponsor states.

Nevertheless, the Directive did say explicitly that 'military operations' were an option along with security measures for US personnel and installations abroad, intelligence cooperation and law enforcement. The secretary of defence was instructed to improve the 'capability to conduct military operations to counter terrorism' and to 'develop a military strategy that is supportive of an active, preventive programme to combat state-sponsored terrorism before the terrorists can initiate hostile acts'. Nothing more was said about this, apart from the necessity of developing 'a full range of military options to combat terrorism throughout the entire terrorist threat spectrum'. The director of the CIA was tasked with development 'in coordination with other friendly security

services, capabilities for the pre-emptive neutralization of anti-American terrorist groups' and 'develop a clandestine service capability, using all lawful means for effective response overseas' against terrorists.

NSDD 138 did not offer any general prescription, rather it broadened the range of options available to policy-makers in the flight against terrorism, focusing mainly on state-sponsorship: 'whenever we have evidence that a state is mounting or intends to conduct an act of terrorism against us, we have a responsibility to take measures to protect our citizens, property, and interests.'⁴⁶

As a matter of fact, though ambiguous and open to different interpretations, NSDD 138 for the first time included the use of military force as one of the options to be used against terrorism, which was clearly defined as one of the tools in the Global Cold War.

The discussion on the directive inside the administration had been lively, with the strategies of George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger conflicting. Weinberger wrote:

We had had many internal discussions within the NSPG and with the President as to the course we would follow if we could ever identify a terrorist or a group of terrorists who had carried out an attack on us or on some of our allies. A number of people, particularly in the State Department, supported what is called an 'unfocused' response; that is, an immediate retaliatory action, such as bombing a Syrian or Iranian city if we believed the terrorist act originated there. I always argued against that simple 'revenge' approach, as did the President. He very much opposed anything that could hurt or kill innocent people.⁴⁷

To understand more deeply how the directive was interpreted by some members of the administration, it is useful to read a background paper prepared by McFarlane for Attorney General Edwin Meese in August of that year.⁴⁸

McFarlane explained that the administration, while drafting the NSDD 138, had

Sought to minimize the attention placed on pre-emptive covert activities in order to preclude adverse reactions which could constrain our options. Basic purpose in view of increasingly heavy involvement of states in terrorism is to shift policy focus from passive to active defense measures and to require that resources be reprogrammed and/or obtained to support that policy focus (...). Active defense measures by the United States are expected to prompt retaliation and at least in short run to increase level of terrorist activity against us, including within the United States.⁴⁹

Within the administration, NSDD 138 opened the floor for further debate which came to little conclusion as Reagan approved, in the face of growing terrorism, diverse and contradictory policies. Meanwhile, though, the message received by the public was clear: no more reactions to attacks but ‘pro-active’ measures. As an article in *Time* magazine explained,

Rather than react after an attack, the US plans to adopt a much more aggressive policy that would establish in advance the likelihood of reprisals and would even permit pre-emptive strikes against suspected terrorists (...). Shultz is especially incensed at what he calls ‘state-sponsored terrorism’ and has accused four nations of practicing it: Libya, Iran, Syria and North Korea. He thinks the US and its allies should regard such conduct as ‘a form of warfare’ and respond accordingly.⁵⁰

Far from being a decisive turning point, NSDD 138 did not solve the basic problem of when and how to retaliate or pre-empt against terrorist attacks. In a briefing paper by the conservative Heritage Foundation issued on the same day of the second attack against the US embassy in Beirut, NSDD

138 was described as having ‘triggered some controversy because of its alleged authorization of “pre-emptive strikes” against terrorist groups or leaders’. The meaning of pre-emptive strikes was shown in all its ambiguity here since it was taken as a synonym of targeted assassination. On this point, the briefing paper criticized the administration: ‘The administration to date has not demonstrated that it has designed such measures [pre-emption and retaliation] carefully, and it certainly has not employed them.’⁵¹

NSDD 138 was signed on 3 April but some of its contents were leaked to the press some weeks later. On the evening of the same day George Shultz spoke at the plenary meeting of the Trilateral Commission in Washington, DC. The title of his address was ‘Power and Diplomacy in the 1980s’.⁵²

In this speech Shultz drew some lessons from Lebanon; proposed his way to overcome the Vietnam Syndrome; made his point about the flight against terrorism; and attacked what later came to be known as the Weinberger Doctrine, which had not yet been disclosed. This was the first time he elaborated deeply on the defeat in Lebanon:

It was precisely our military role in Lebanon that was problematical, not our diplomatic exertion. Our military role was hamstrung by legislative and other inhibitions: the Syrians were not interested in diplomatic compromise so long as the prospect of hegemony was not foreclosed.⁵³

The US, Shultz said, was ‘relatively well prepared to deter an all-out war or a Soviet attack’ and that is why these were the least likely contingencies. On the other hand, ‘terrorism – particularly state-sponsored terrorism – is already a contemporary weapon directed at America’s interests, values and allies’. It was true, he said, that the US should not engage in a military confrontation without a clear and precise mission, solid support from public opinion and the ability to finish the job. But, he asked rhetorically, ‘does it mean there are no situations where a discrete assertion of power is needed or appropriate, for limited purposes? Unlikely.’ The ‘gray area’

conflicts (another synonym for ‘small wars’) were the most likely to happen in the 1980s and beyond; ‘few cases will be as clear or as quick as Grenada’. State-sponsored terrorism was a form of warfare which the US had to address boldly because it was a ‘weapon of unconventional war against democratic societies’.

The idea that terrorism was a tool in the hands of totalitarian regimes to fight against democracies was one of the key points made at the Jonathan Institute Conference on International Terrorism some weeks later. State-sponsorship was another. At the Trilateral Commission, Shultz named the growing threat coming from Iran, Syria, Libya and North Korea only to stress the need that the ‘nations of the West face up to the need for active defense against terrorism’.⁵⁴

On 26 October, George Shultz delivered his third important speech of the year on the issue of terrorism. This time it was a public one and its importance was even more heightened because it took place during the presidential election campaign. At the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York, the secretary of state repeated his commitment to a military pre-emptive strike against terrorists:

We must reach a consensus in this country that our responses should go beyond passive defense to consider means of active prevention, pre-emption and retaliation. Our goal must be to prevent and deter future terrorist acts, and experience has taught us over the years that one of the best deterrents to terrorism is the certainty that swift and sure measures will be taken against those who engage in it.⁵⁵

And then the most controversial part of his speech which can be taken as a good summary of his doctrine against terrorism:

The public must understand before the fact that occasions will come when their government must act before each and every fact is known (...). We will need the flexibility to respond to terrorist attacks in a variety of ways, at times and places of our own choosing.

Clearly, we will not respond in the same manner to every terrorist act. Indeed, we will want to avoid engaging in a policy of automatic retaliation, which might create a cycle of escalating violence beyond our control. (...) There will be no time for renewed national debate after every terrorist attack. Fighting terrorism will not be a clean and pleasant contest. (...) There is no room for guilt or self-doubt about our right to defend a way of life that offers all nations hope for peace, progress and human dignity.⁵⁶

According to the *Washington Post*, not everyone in the administration appreciated Shultz's speech even though State Department spokesman John Hughes told reporters it had been cleared at the White House and that Shultz 'certainly was voicing an administration position'. Vice President Bush, in an interview on a Cincinnati TV station, said: 'I don't agree with that [speech]. I think you've got to pinpoint [the response to terrorism] and we're not going to go out and bomb innocent civilians or something of that nature.' As far as he knew, Bush told reporters, the administration's position was the one stated by Reagan during his last TV debate with Democratic presidential candidate Mondale: 'In dealing with terrorists, yes, we want to retaliate, but only if we can put our finger on the people responsible and not endanger the lives of innocent civilians.' As a matter of fact, it was precisely these two conditions which made retaliation very difficult to implement.

Questioned by journalists while he was campaigning in the north-east of the US, Reagan declined to comment Shultz's speech and said only: 'I don't think it was a statement of policy. He was saying all these things must be considered.' White House spokesman Larry Speakes had one more different interpretation: 'Shultz's speech was administration policy from top to bottom.'⁵⁷

Enters Benjamin Netanyahu

As a matter of fact, these concepts had been stressed even more seriously during the conference on international

terrorism held in June 1984 at the Jonathan Institute in Washington. Though farther away from the spotlight, this conference laid the ground for Shultz's successive speech at the Park Avenue Synagogue and the study of its proceedings demonstrates the degree of osmosis between the thinking of Israeli right-wingers and that of some members of Reagan's White House.

Shultz's campaign in 1984 attempted to bring about a dramatic change in what he perceived as the threat of the future: terrorism against Western democracies carried out by organizations supported by a network of states eventually linked with the Soviet Union. His 'doctrine' called for the use of the military to conduct pre-emptive strikes against sponsor states. Two elements had a decisive influence on him: first, as mentioned above, the withdrawal from Lebanon and the lessons that he, along with others, had learned from it; second, the intellectual cooperation between American conservative policy-makers and Israeli right-wing politicians such as Benjamin Netanyahu and Moshe Arens.

Netanyahu at that time was an Israeli diplomat at the UN and a commentator for CNN. The man who later became prime minister of Israel was also head of the Jonathan Institute, named after his brother who had died in the raid in Entebbe (Uganda) to free Israeli citizens who had been kidnapped by Palestinian terrorists. Jonathan, according to Benjamin, had died in 'the war against terror' and he 'believed that the battle against terrorism was part of a much larger struggle, one between the forces of civilization and the forces of barbarism'.^{[58](#)}

The Institute had organized its first international conference in Jerusalem in 1979. Representing the US was the cold warrior Democratic Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson. In Jerusalem some concepts that later became popular in the 1980s (and beyond) were discussed for the first time. First of all was the issue of state sponsorship. As the background paper for the successive meeting recollected,

Among the sponsors of terrorism discussed in the Conference were the newly transformed Iran, as well

as Libya, Iraq, Syria, South Yemen and other Arab countries (...). The Soviet Union, it was noted, used terrorism as an effective tool with which to destabilize and demoralize the West.⁵⁹

The following conference was organized, incidentally, in Washington, DC in June 1984. Several US conservative and neoconservative policy-makers and intellectuals attended along with members of the Israeli Likud party. The proceedings were to be published in the summer of 1986 in a book edited by Netanyahu and titled, not by chance, *Terrorism: How the West Can Win*.⁶⁰ Reagan read the book when it came out and was enthusiastic about it as it is evident from a letter written by Shultz to Netanyahu.⁶¹

In his review for the *New York Review*, Shaul Bakbash highlighted the cornerstones of Netanyahu's thought about terrorism: first, the primary target of terrorists are Western democracies; second, all the terrorists are linked in an international network; third, the network survives because of support from 'terrorist states' such as Syria, Libya, Iran and South Yemen with the looming presence of the Soviet Union; finally, there is no root cause of terrorism apart from terrorists themselves ('the root cause of terrorism is terrorists'). Netanyahu, according to Bakbash, established a link between 'Communist totalitarianism and Islamic radicalism'.⁶²

Shultz's speech at the Jonathan Institute in 1984, as other authors have pointed out,⁶³ was a crucial one. Governments which oppose terrorism, he said, had to penetrate terrorist groups much better than before and be willing, with that intelligence, to take 'appropriate pre-emptive measures'. Shultz talked about a 'League of Terror' made up of Libya, Syria, Iran, North Korea and the PLO all supported by the Soviet Union with the goal of shaking 'the West's self-confidence and sap its will to resist aggression and intimidation'.⁶⁴

The idea of pre-emptive strikes did not come out of nowhere. The Israelis, in most recent times, had included pre-emption in their military doctrine. In 1979, the then Israeli Minister of Defence Ezer Weizman, 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.⁶⁵ Menachem Begin had then transformed pre-emption into a semi-doctrine with his speech at the Israeli National Defence College on 8 August 1982 (just in the middle of the offensive in Lebanon). There, Begin defended his policy, saying that proportionality was, as Lawrence Freedman summarized, ‘always open to interpretation and that passivity risked disaster’. Furthermore, ‘Begin spoke of a war of choice rather than one of necessity.’⁶⁶

Moreover, the Israeli model was not just based on pre-emptive strikes – an expression which was subject to different interpretations. The use of military force to counter and uproot terrorist groups was another cornerstone of their flight against terrorism: ‘Experience shows,’ Netanyahu concluded in his book, ‘that far from engendering a cycle of violence, the application of military force, or the prospect of such application, inhibits terrorist violence.’⁶⁷

The War on Terror *à la Netanyahu* was a long one: ‘A successful war on terrorism will involve a succession of blows and counterblows, and some unavoidable casualties along the way. What is required is a commitment to a continuous campaign against its sponsors.’⁶⁸

Netanyahu’s ideas would turn out to be successful many years later. In the meantime, events seemed to indeed confirm how long and extensive the flight against terrorism could become. On 12 October 1984 an IRA bomb destroyed the Brighton hotel in which British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was staying. She escaped unwounded. On the thirty-first of the same month, Sikh terrorists succeeded in killing Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The following month would see the statement of the Weinberger Doctrine which, in its evolution as the Powell Doctrine, would be the prevailing military doctrine in the US for many years to come.

The speech considered the foundation of the Weinberger Doctrine was delivered at the National Press Club on 28 November 1984.⁶⁹ The secretary based his speech on several

‘lessons learned’. Among them Lebanon had clearly played a role. Weinberger argued that the US had to deploy its troops only in areas deemed vital to its national interest, having in mind clear political and military objectives and ‘with the clear intention of winning’. Thinking probably about Lebanon, he added: ‘If we determine that a combat mission has become necessary for our vital national interests, then we must send forces capable to do the job – and not assign a combat mission to a force configured for peacekeeping.’

In his memoirs, George Shultz criticized his colleague’s approach saying that ‘in the face of terrorism, or any other of the wide variety of complex, unclear, gray-area dangers facing us in the contemporary world, however, his was a counsel of inaction bordering on paralysis’.⁷⁰

Following the bombing in Beirut and the withdrawal of US troops from Lebanon, the debate inside the Reagan administration seemed to focus on the use of force against terrorism with alternative views presented by the secretary of state and the secretary of defence. Little attention, as far as declassified records show, was devoted to the analysis of the enemy. With that respect, what seemed relevant was the problem of state-sponsorship and therefore the real issue was how to discourage states from supporting terrorists. Moreover, at least as far as public statements are concerned, the Soviet Union seemed to be the looming master-minder of this network of sponsor states. Not everyone, though, shared this concern.

In the last days of 1984, while the transition between the first and the second Reagan administration was under way a paper titled ‘A New Approach for the Second Term’ was delivered to Reagan’s staff.⁷¹ It was presumably written by former President Nixon. Who else would write ‘as I reflected on this historical pattern after my landslide win in 1972, I decided to develop a new strategy (...) Watergate aborted my plans’?

The goal of this paper was to give some advice to Reagan for his second term in office and to share with him some ideas on a wide range of issues. On the Middle East, Nixon rejected

the idea that the Soviet Union was behind all the troubles in the region and that an anti-Soviet 'strategic consensus' between Arab countries and Israel could solve all US problems in this part of the world.

The major danger of war in the next ten years is not in Europe but in the Third World. And the most crucial area is the Mideast and the Persian Gulf (...). We must recognize that the major destabilizing and dangerous factor in the Middle East is not the communist revolution but the Moslem/Fundamentalist revolution (...). Even without Soviet assistance, the Khomeinis and the Qadafs will continue to try to export their revolutions.

The nature of this new struggle was also examined:

Military power will not decide this conflict in the Third World. We could have military superiority across the board and still lose. Nuclear weapons are irrelevant (...) conventional weapons and rapid deployment forces serve a purpose but are not effective when aggression is not over borders, as in Korea, but under borders by Soviet-and radical Moslem-supported revolutionaries.^{[72](#)}

1985, the annus horribilis

Nixon's words on the need to flight radicalism in the Middle East sound prophetic, given what was going to happen in 1985. Despite the debate that had taken place inside the Reagan administration and despite NSDD 138, the flight against terrorism by the US government did not have a sudden improvement: as far as terrorism was concerned, 1985 turned out to be a complete nightmare for US policy-makers, carrying with it an impressive series of attacks directed more clearly than in the past against American civilians. America was again 'held hostage', this time not just in the embassy in Tehran: it happened first with TWA 847 flying from Athens to Rome and

then on the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro*. The year ended with the shootings in the Rome and Vienna airports carried out by the Abu Nidal Organization presumably with help from Qadhaf's Libya.

American public opinion grew more and more concerned about terrorism which, in a Roper poll conducted shortly before the TWA 847 hijacking in June, ranked second in relevance after crime and scored 78 per cent of citizens declaring it as something on which the government had to take 'more action', the same percentage as the issue of negotiations on the reduction of nuclear weapons.⁷³

In the eyes of the Reagan administration, the enemies in this new flight increasingly had a definite address: along with Libya, which had been spotted since early in 1981, evidence about Iran's involvement in terrorism abroad was now considered irrefutable. In January 1984 the Department of State had added Iran on its list of states sponsoring terrorism.⁷⁴ One year later, a cable sent by the secretary of state to all major embassies in the world read:

The USG [US government] has fresh and convincing evidence that radical elements highly placed within repeat within the government of Iran are giving operational policy advice to terrorists in Lebanon, specifically terrorists operating under the name 'Islamic Jihad' or Hizballah (...). We want recipient countries to make the drive against Iran's sponsorship of terrorism a significant part of their respective agendas with that country.⁷⁵

This cable, according to Timothy Naftali, was part of a growing tension between the US government, Iran and Hizbullah. Indeed, Lebanon had continued to generate troubles for the US even after the withdrawal of the Marines in February 1984. On 16 March, William Buckley, the CIA chief of station in Beirut, was kidnapped by Islamic terrorists. His kidnapping was not the first of this sort and would not be the last. In January 1985, Hizbullah threatened to try and sentence to death five American hostages it held captive in Beirut. The

cable had been issued in this context and was part of a strategy which involved also a possible military operation. An NSPG was scheduled for 18 January to discuss this issue. The preferred target, as it had been after the bombing against the Marines, was the barracks of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Pasdaran*) in the Biqā' Valley. This location had been spotted again after another bombing of the US embassy in Beirut which occurred on 20 September 1984, killing two servicemen.⁷⁶ No retaliation, however, took place on that occasion. Nevertheless, in 1985 the Pasdaran's barracks continued to be the favourite target because Weinberger did not want to hit inside Iran believing that this required too many assets in order to be carried out and may eventually bring in the Soviets. In the end, the military planning did not go ahead because Hizbullah did not follow through with its threat.⁷⁷ Since the hostages were not yet killed, no retaliation against Tehran was needed.

Gradually, 1985 would see the differentiation of the policies of the Reagan administration toward states that sponsored terrorism, above all Iran and Libya. While that against Iran would develop into the Iran–Contra scandal in which the US government would eventually negotiate arms deals in order to free the hostages in Lebanon, confrontation and covert actions bordering with regime change would become the main features of the US relationship with Libya.

The two policies would run parallel during 1985 and the pursuit of the flight against terrorism was made all the more necessary by the TWA 847 hijacking that lasted for more than two weeks in the summer of 1985. On the morning of Friday, 14 June two Shiite terrorists seized control of flight TWA 847 while it flew from Athens to Rome. The plane was diverted to Beirut where it was allowed to land only after the pilot warned the control tower that one of the hijackers was going to blow up a bomb on the plane if it was denied permission to land.

Once on the ground, the two hijackers (a third had been arrested at Athens by the Greek police) demanded the immediate refuelling of the aircraft. Calling themselves the 'Oppressed of the Earth' they read a statement asking for the release of Arab prisoners captured during the Israeli invasion

of Lebanon in 1982 and held by Israel in the Atlit prison. The hijackers condemned US involvement in the Middle East, its support for Israel and the car bombing in South Beirut that targeted Hizbullah's spiritual leader Sheikh Fadlallah. This attack had been carried out by the Christian-dominated Lebanese intelligence on 8 March 1985 and suspicions, later confirmed, were that it was the work of one of the units that had been trained by the US government to fight terrorism with pre-emptive strikes. The first implementation of the strategy of pre-emption against terrorism had actually backfired: not only the Shiite leader was not killed (80 Lebanese died in his place) but his organization had one more reason to hit the US.

During the 16 days of the TWA 847 hijacking, the plane would move back and forth between Beirut and Algiers. During one of the stops in the Lebanese capital, on 15 June, the hijackers demanded that a negotiator from the secular Shiite Amal organization reach the airport. When one did not arrive quickly enough they singled out among the passengers Navy Petty Officer Robert Stethem. He was shot in the head and murdered, his body thrown on the tarmac. Subsequently, 12 armed men from Amal and Hizbullah surrounded the plane and quickly took control of it. The leader of this new squad was Imad Mugh-niyya, one of the most important figures in the history of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in Lebanon who would die in a mysterious blast in Damascus in 2008. Now the hijacking was officially in the hands of Amal and Hizbullah, with the former claiming official responsibility for the safety of the hostages.

At this point of the hijacking, the US authorities started to develop a diplomatic strategy to free the hostages. According to the summary of events issued at the end of the hijacking by the US press secretary, after Stethem's murder the 'US [urged] Syria to contact Iranian/Shia leaders to influence hijackers to release prisoners to Algerian authorities'. The plane, meanwhile, had in fact reached Algiers, where 61 passengers and all five flight attendants were released in stages. For the rest of those on the plane, the hijacking would last two more weeks. The plane left Algiers and landed again in Beirut, were

the remaining passengers were brought to several secret locations in the city.

From this moment on, the hijacking would head toward a stalemate: the hijackers could not retreat from their requests without risking a political defeat, the American government could not accept negotiating openly but neither could it conduct a rescue operation since the hostages were kept in unknown locations within the city of Beirut, which was not exactly a friendly place for US troops by then. Finally, the Israelis could not change their mind and release the Atlit prisoners without incurring domestic criticism. Freeing the hostages implied a complex negotiation which could be conducted only once the exact affiliation of the hijackers was assessed and their international sponsors convinced to exert some pressure.

According to the Director of the CIA William Casey, the hijacking had been initially carried out by Hizbullah but once the plane had finally landed in Beirut there had been an Amal takeover with the fundamentalists marginalized and given just a small portion of the hostages. Syria had all its interests in a positive solution of the crisis and in strengthening the secular Amal over the Iranian-backed Hizbullah.⁷⁸ The Syrian regime would indeed play an important role in the solution of the crisis, although its role in the organization of the hijacking was unclear.

Nevertheless, negotiations were carried out at the same time with muscle-flexing, in this case especially in the media. On the night of 18 June Reagan gave a televised address on terrorism. Oliver North, a man whose sudden rise to success and influence in the NSC would be one of the main features of this *annus horribilis*, was one of those in charge of writing Reagan's speech. In North's draft of Reagan's statement, the president was meant to say: '[Robert Stethem's] murder and the fate of the other American hostages still being held in Beirut underscore an inescapable fact: the United States is tonight a Nation *being warred against* by international terrorists.'⁷⁹ The expression in italics was clearly a reflection of what North and others thought about terrorism: that it was warfare and demanded a military response. If terrorists

attacked the United States, the United States were at war. Someone in Reagan's powerful speech-writing elite must have thought that that expression was too harsh or just inappropriate. In the actual speech that the president delivered it was substituted by the phrase 'a Nation being attacked'.⁸⁰ Still an expression of high concern but not yet a declaration of a state of war which would imply a military response by the US. Terrorists in Lebanon would also flight the media war on the Western press. On the sixth day of the hijacking they started to give interviews and journalists would eventually end up having press conferences with them.

While apparently the situation was in a stalemate with both parties flexing their muscles before the cameras, back-door negotiations started to take shape. The US strategy was decided during a meeting of the NSPG on 20 June. The Algerian government had relayed through US ambassador Michael Newlin that the leader of Amal, Nabih Barri, was willing to free the hostages if he had 'a date certain' when Israel would release the Atlit prisoners. President Reagan, therefore, proposed his strategy which was approved by the meeting: 'what if I call Barri and ask [him to] give [the hostages] back, and work on the Israelis, but not as a quid pro quo?' As a consequence, back channels were opened with the Israelis both through the ambassador at the UN Benjamin Netanyahu and through NSC official Howard Teicher who was in touch with one of the advisors of Prime Minister Peres.⁸¹ Peres soon replied that all the prisoners could not be freed under the threat from the hijackers but that, due to an appeal which had been accepted, 31 out of 735 prisoners would be freed from the Atlit prison on 24 June.

On the other side of the negotiations, Barri could not free the hostages without approval both from Syria and Iran, the foreign supporters of Amal and Hizbullah. The backing came on 23 June when the speaker of the Iranian parliament Hashemi Rafsanjani stopped in Damascus on his way back from Libya to speak with the Syrian president Hafez al-Assad. Rafsanjani publicly criticized the TWA 847 hijacking saying that 'had [Iran] known in advance about this kind of action, it would have acted to prevent it'. According to David Wills, the

Iranian politician did not stop at public relations: he spoke with Hizbullah's spiritual leader Sheikh Fadlallah and pushed him to release its group of prisoners.^{[82](#)}

According to Reagan's biographer Lou Cannon, with the meeting in Damascus on 23 June, the Iranians had actually helped the United States by pressuring Assad into negotiations with Barri for the freedom of all American passengers.

McFarlane told me cryptically afterward that Iran had been of help, and Casey suggested that Reagan send a message of thanks to Rafsanjani, which he did. By emphasizing Rafsanjani's role in their discussions with the president, Casey and McFarlane were also watering the seeds of their intended Iran initiative.^{[83](#)}

As for Syria, negotiations would involve directly Reagan and Assad. On 28 June, the US president phoned his Syrian counterpart to assure him once more that Israel would release all the Lebanese prisoners at Atlit once all the American passengers of TWA 847 were freed. The US government would issue a statement guaranteeing the sovereignty of Lebanon, thus promising that no retaliation would take place against those who had carried out the hijacking. The hostages were freed on 30 June while on 1 July the Israeli State Radio announced that 300 more prisoners from Atlit would be released within 48 hours.^{[84](#)}

Reagan would try to exploit the momentum of these negotiations to achieve one more result: the liberation of the other American hostages captured by Shiite groups in Lebanon in earlier years. In a cable to President Assad on 30 June Reagan thanked him for the 'central responsibility' his government had had in the positive solution of the crisis but also invited him to 'intensify the effort' toward the release of other American hostages who had been kidnapped by terrorists in previous years and were still captives in Beirut.^{[85](#)} On 1 July, a new phone call between the two did not bear new results. Reagan reiterated his request for Assad's cooperation in the liberation of the other seven Americans held hostage in that moment in Lebanon. Also, he asked for arrest of the hijackers

of TWA 847. Assad replied that he was not the president of Lebanon and could not deliver and reminded him that the agreement was reached thanks to his declaration on the 'preservation of Lebanon's security and sovereignty so that it could erase from the mind of the Lebanese the possibility of a military retaliation'. In the conclusion of the phone call, Assad reiterated that the 'next step is rather important, and it concerns the Atlit camp'. No promise was made on the fate of the other American hostages in Lebanon.⁸⁶

There is no successive evidence of contacts between the Reagan administration and Syria both from Reagan's diary and from archival sources. It is worth wondering whether the failure of this channel caused Reagan's approval for the first arms shipment to Iran in August.

Iran had been under the spotlight since the bombing against the Marines, but events in the summer of 1985 precipitated the involvement of the Reagan administration in the scheme that eventually resulted in the Iran–Contra scandal. Since the spring of 1983, the US had championed Operation Staunch, a worldwide arms embargo against the Islamic Republic which had partially worked and had put Iranians in an uncomfortable position on weapon supplies. This policy, which had been indeed very effective, was terminated in the summer of 1985. On 17 June 1985 then National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane submitted to Reagan a draft NSDD on 'US Policy Toward Iran' which basically proposed to put aside for the time being the concern for Iranian sponsorship of terrorism and raised a serious concern in relationship to the much more familiar Cold War paradigm. McFarlane's paper stated that

Instability caused by the pressures of the Iran–Iraq war, economic deterioration and regime inflighting create the potential for major changes in Iran. The Soviet Union is better positioned than the US to exploit and benefit from any power struggle that results in changes in the Iranian regime.⁸⁷

In those weeks the national intelligence officer for the Middle East, Graham Fuller, wrote a memo for William Casey outlining the difficulties for the US coming from a presumed Iraqi victory in the war with Iran. The memo titled 'Toward a Policy on Iran' was the result of months-long pressure on Fuller by Casey who thought that he had to find a way to get the US back in Iran. The pressure, according to Lou Cannon, was coming also from specific members of the NSC staff such as Donald Fortier and Robert McFarlane himself who had been convinced of forthcoming opportunities in this sense by the report of a visit to Israel and Europe by former Haig's advisor Michael Ledeen. In that visit Ledeen had been told by 'a high intelligence officer from a European country' that the situation in Iran was 'more fluid'.⁸⁸

McFarlane's proposal to shift US policy versus Iran was therefore rooted in the thinking of other members of the administration with deep Cold War concerns and it was supported by some pieces of intelligence. McFarlane's draft included a programme of indirect assistance to Iran which, according to Kornbluh and Byrne 'caught everyone's eye'. The plan was to 'encourage Western allies and friends to help Iran meet its import requirements so as to reduce the attractiveness of Soviet assistance (...). This includes provision of selected military equipment.'⁸⁹ Kornbluh and Byrne convincingly argue that 'in short, the authors [of the draft NSDD] proposed authorizing Western arms sales to Iran, and effectively bringing an end to Operation Staunch'.⁹⁰

The end of Operation Staunch would not happen suddenly, nor would it follow a clear path. Weinberger and Shultz, for once siding with one another, momentarily killed McFarlane's memo. The secretary of defence wrote to Colin Powell: 'this is almost too absurd to comment on (...) like asking Qadhaf to Washington for a cozy chat'.⁹¹ Despite the opposition of both the defence and state secretaries, the proposal went on through the decision-making process. On 6 August the idea was discussed more formally at a White House meeting attended by Reagan, Bush, Shultz, Weinberger and White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan. By this time, the proposal had become more specific: whether to allow Israel to provide Iran with 100

TOW anti-tank missiles in exchange for four hostages held by the Islamic terrorists in Lebanon. The arms deal would be part of a wider, renewed dialogue between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States government. Shultz and Weinberger again killed the idea, with Shultz being so prophetic as to say that ‘we were just falling into the arms-for-hostages business and we shouldn’t do it’.⁹² On 11 August Reagan left for vacation in California to recover from the cancer operation he had undergone some weeks earlier. According to his diary on 23 August he had received a ‘secret phone call from Bud McFarlane’:

It seems a man high up in the Iranian govt. believes he can deliver all or part of the 7 Am[erican] kidnap victims in Lebanon sometime in early Sept[ember]. They will be delivered to a point on the beach north of Tripoli [Lebanon] and we’ll take them off to our 6th fleet. I had some decisions to make about a few points – but they were easy to make. Now we wait.⁹³

Those ‘easy decisions’ were indeed taken, according to both the Congressional Committee and the president-appointed Tower Board, which investigated on the Iran–Contra scandal, even though no record of such authorization exists to this day. On 20 August 1985, Israel delivered its first shipment of TOW missiles to Iran. No hostages were released.

The deal with Iran could start and continue to unravel for more than a year, among other causes, because as Martin and Walcott argued, the terrorist incidents of 1985 had enhanced the role of the NSC staff (where both McFarlane and Oliver North, the major architect of Iran–Contra, worked) in crisis management of terrorist situations increasingly cutting off both Defense and State Departments.⁹⁴

After the TWA 847 hijacking, US citizens would again be held hostage although this time by a different terrorist brand. The hijacking of the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* was carried out by a Palestinian group and would momentarily strain US relations with two key allies in the Mediterranean: Egypt and Italy.

On Monday afternoon, 7 October 1985 the cruise of the *Achille Lauro* was interrupted when a group of terrorists came into the dining room carrying submachine guns and quickly separated American passengers from the others. At the time the hijacking started there were only 97 passengers on the ship which was supposed to proceed to Israel.⁹⁵

As it had happened in the TWA 847 hijacking, the crisis management apparatus was set in motion. It took some time to understand who the hijackers were. Finally, an official in the Jordanian government who met with an American diplomat in Amman said that the group that had seized the ship was a splinter, independent group from the 'Front for the Liberation of Palestine' who had recently split into a pro-Arafat faction, a pro-Syrian one and the independent faction that was now on the ship.⁹⁶ As for the number of hijackers on board, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Giulio Andreotti declared on 10 October that there were only four terrorists on the ship.⁹⁷

The second day of the hijacking two simultaneous manoeuvres started to take shape: on one side the Egyptians were trying to negotiate with the terrorists, on the other side the Americans, with some help from the Italians, were trying to stage a rescue attempt. According to the Italian scholar Alessandro Silj, the *Achille Lauro* gave to the US administration the first chance to hit terrorists with 'a precise address': they were on the ship and the US could not miss this occasion to 'teach terrorists a lesson'.⁹⁸

Meanwhile, the ship had approached Syrian waters and Syrian Foreign Minister Naib met with American and Italian diplomats to convey the hijackers' demands and threats. If the two Western countries decided not to negotiate, the hijackers threatened to start killing one hostage every five minutes starting from 2:30 pm local time.⁹⁹ The hijackers asked for the liberation of 51 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons and convicted as terrorists.¹⁰⁰

In a few hours the terrorists would kill one of the hostages, Leon Klinghoffer, a US Jew in a wheelchair. For the moment, no negotiations were taking place because Americans and Italians were taking into consideration a rescue attempt,

although Italian Prime Minister Craxi was trying to buy time.^{[101](#)} Meanwhile, the ship had moved into Egyptian waters. Egyptian President Mubarak, on his part, was eager to reach a negotiated settlement to rebuild his country's credentials on the Palestinian issue after the agreement with Israel at Camp David in 1978. To this end he had enlisted Abu Abbas, leader and founder of the Palestinian Liberation Front, as negotiator. This strategy developed quickly and at 1 pm on 9 October a cable by US Ambassador Rabb in Rome read:

Badini, Craxi's diplomatic advisor, just called to say the Italians have received a report that the Egyptians have resolved the Achille Lauro affair. The elements of the deal are that the hijackers will release hostages, they will leave the ship and leave the country. In other words, the hijackers will go free. The Italians hear that the deal is already accepted by the hijackers who are ready to surrender.

The last line of the cable read 'Badini said this would end consideration of other options' meaning probably that the deal put an end to any Italian efforts (if there ever were any) to storm the ship to liberate the hostages.^{[102](#)}

As a matter of fact, the hijackers were now in the hands of the Egyptians and the Americans did not trust them on the prosecution of terrorists. As Shultz wrote to Reagan, 'We want to avoid the precedent set in 1974 when two of our diplomats were assassinated in Khartoum. The Egyptians prosecuted the terrorists but then only placed them under fairly comfortable house arrest for several years.'^{[103](#)}

The US plan, initially conceived by James Stark, a Navy captain assigned to the NSC staff, was to intercept the plane while it flew over international waters in the Mediterranean and force it to land at the NATO base at Sigonella, Sicily. According to Holmes, no objection came from Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs Michael Armacost.^{[104](#)} The secretary of defence, on the contrary, was completely against the intercept. As Robert McFarlane recalled, Weinberger warned Reagan that such an action would have

damaged US relations with the Arab world but the president replied that the US could not let the terrorists go.^{[105](#)}

No intercept could take place until the exact location of the plane with the hijackers on board was discovered. To this end, the NSC staff turned to the Israelis. The operation was coordinated by Howard Teicher and Oliver North who were in touch with the military attaché of the Israeli embassy in Washington, Uri Simhoni. Simhoni then called Chief of Intelligence General Ehud Barak and asked him to track down the hijackers' plane. Within an hour, according to Simhoni, Barak called back to give the tail number and the runway number from which the plane was to take off at a precise time that he also gave to Oliver North.^{[106](#)} What happened later could not take place without this crucial, quick and reliable Israeli intelligence.

At Sigonella, the plane was surrounded first by the US special forces and then by the Italian *carabinieri*, one confronting the other. According to Alessandro Silj, the Italian government had been consulted on the landing of the Egyptian plane but not on the landing of US special operations forces and their C-141 plane. Amid strong tensions between the two governments, the plane with the hijackers on board was then transferred to Ciampino airport, in the outskirts of Rome.^{[107](#)} Meanwhile, an agreement was apparently reached with the Italian government for the arrest of the hijackers by the Italian authorities who would then answer an extradition request by the American government.^{[108](#)}

What emerges through both archival research and the Reagan diary, however, is that there was confusion first of all in the White House over what to do with the hijackers: whether to hand them to the Italians or to ask for extradition. Also, the confusion was about the identity of those to be held. According to his diary, Reagan asked Craxi to hand over the four hijackers, not Abbas or the sixth man who was on the Egyptian plane but who had not carried out the attack on the ship.^{[109](#)} This confusion is further confirmed by two cables that are stored in Donald Gregg files at the Bush Library. The first message sent by Reagan to Italian Prime Minister Craxi urged him to do 'the utmost to insure that those who committed this

murder be delivered to Italian government or another legitimate government for prosecution and punishment'.^{[110](#)}

The misunderstanding was about who were 'those who committed this murder'. The American government, as can be seen from another cable, considered all six terrorists on board as responsible for the death of Leon Klinghoffer while the Italian government considered under that label only the four hijackers. Abu Abbas and the other PLO official were smartly considered as mediators and therefore were let go. The second cable from Reagan to Craxi therefore read:

According to our understanding, these proceedings [in Italian courts] would include US extradition requests for the four Achille Lauro hijackers, and Italian development (with US assistance) of cases against the additional two Palestinians. Our understanding indicated that Italy would hold all six persons.

I would respectfully urge you in the strongest terms that the Italian government not waver on keeping all six in custody pending further legal developments. The crimes of the four who were aboard the ship are only a part of the picture.^{[111](#)}

Ironically, the four hijackers were prosecuted more effectively by the Italian judiciary than would happen in US courts. The US government had to request extradition through a District of Columbia judge since the murder of an American citizen abroad was still not a federal crime for which the FBI and the Attorney General could act. The Italian trial took place in Genoa, the city from which the *Achille Lauro* had left, and ended by November 1987: not only the four hijackers were condemned but also Abbas who was given a life sentence *in absentia* for his role in the hijacking. The presumed 'negotiator' was considered to be the mastermind of the original plan which was to take place in Ashdod. The court considered all that had happened on the ship as the result of the actions of the four hijackers alone.^{[112](#)} Abbas, however, was condemned thanks to Article 192 of Italian criminal procedure which allow courts to give life sentences on the basis of simple

clues, not evidence, given that they are ‘precise, serious and converging’.¹¹³ That type of clues were not the kind of hard evidence that would be requested by a US court and not by chance the US request for extradition was later dropped.¹¹⁴

Predictably, the Egyptians were quite angered by the intercept of their plane with the terrorists and the ‘negotiators’ on board. The anger was wide-spread not only in Egypt, where anti-American disorder and demonstrations lasted for some days, but throughout the Islamic world. Bitter comments on the American ‘cowboy attitude’ were wide-spread in the Arab newspapers in the days following the intercept.¹¹⁵

A different feeling prevailed in the Reagan administration. As National Security Advisor John Poindexter told Timothy Naftali, the interception of the *Achille Lauro* hijackers had demonstrated that ‘If the White House and the NSC wanted to, we could move fast.’¹¹⁶ The last weeks of 1985 did much to destroy this enthusiasm with new, dreadful, terrorist attacks at the Rome and Vienna airports. Meanwhile, decision-makers in Washington struggled with efforts to draft a more effective policy against terrorism.

The Bush Task Force on Combating Terrorism

The ‘Task Force on Combating Terrorism’ under the supervision of George Bush was established on 20 July 1985 with National Security Decision Directive 179. Retired Admiral James Holloway was chosen as the executive director of the commission. Representatives of several cabinet departments (Defense, State, Treasury, Justice, Transportation), the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the FBI, the NSC staff, the White House and the Office of Management and Budget were going to be part of it.¹¹⁷

NSDD 179 accepted the definition of terrorism as a war against civilized society:

International terrorism poses an increasing threat to US citizens and our interests. Terrorists are waging a war against, not only the United States, but all civilized

society in which innocent civilians are intentional victims and our servicemen are specific targets.^{[118](#)}

To this end the United States had to involve its allies as much as possible but also be ready 'to act unilaterally when necessary'. The Task Force had therefore to establish a policy that could work even in the absence of a multinational anti-terrorist coalition. The commission was due to hand in its recommendations by the end of the year.^{[119](#)}

Before discussing the conclusions, which were included in NSDD 207, it is worthwhile to take a look at some elements of the debate that took place in the commission and between Bush and his closest advisors.^{[120](#)}

In the early months of the work of the Task Force, Bush and his advisors were looking to the past to find some useful lessons in the flight against terrorism. Doug Menarchik, a former US Air Force officer who was serving now as military advisor to the Vice President, had studied the US response to nineteenth-century piracy. He extracted some lessons which he reported in a memo to his boss: first, 'bold unilateral leadership and military action were necessary'; second, the US needs to find the 'address' for the power which backed the terrorists; third, 'piracy and terrorism are profitable and will continue so long as these forms of violence have no consequences'; fourth, bilateral approaches had proved more effective than 'leagues'.^{[121](#)}

Joseph Stanik, in his book about the US strike against Libya, decided to start exactly from what he called 'Mr. Jefferson's war', namely the flight against piracy and the 'Barbary states' of North Africa that supported it. Initially, the US government had decided to pay the pirates in order to avoid attacks against its ships; in the end, however, it fought them with war.^{[122](#)} Not very far, after all, from what happened with the Reagan administration: the only difference was that Jefferson had a sequential approach, while Reagan pursued the two policies virtually at the same time.

The second issue which was dealt with by Bush's aides was the confusion between 'freedom fighters' in Third World countries, which were supported by the Reagan administration,

and terrorists which instead had to be fought by the US. Shultz had spent some time in his 1984 speeches outlining the main difference between the two categories: his argument was that freedom fighters did not deliberately attack civilians as terrorists did. To this distinction, in his press conference on 4 July, the vice president added one more feature that had to do with the overall political ends of freedom fighters, i.e. with their Cold War allegiance:

The Contras were Freedom Fighters fighting for freedom and democracy while the Sandinistas were self-acclaimed Marxist-Leninists, a totalitarian regime, squelching democracy and suppressing freedom, preventing their own-espoused revolutionary goal of democracy.^{[123](#)}

The use of Cold War paradigms was not exclusive to the Reagan administration, rather it was shared by more realist policy-makers. Bush's Task Force on combating terrorism led consultations with former top officials and terrorism experts. Henry Kissinger was among them. In a memo for Vice President Bush, Admiral Holloway reported that Kissinger's

Public statements [during 1985] accentuate the super-power implications of the US response in specific [terrorist] incidents. If the US appears to lack resolve (...) it will encourage the Soviets to exploit our perceived weaknesses and ultimately destabilize the strategic balances (...) innocent lives must and will be sacrificed in pursuit of this higher purpose.^{[124](#)}

Given the confusion on definitions of terrorism and given past lessons, Bush's advisors tried to understand if there were any lessons to be drawn from contemporary experiences in other countries. Israel stood as an example to many in the Reagan administration and the cooperation with politicians like Netanyahu had been important in shaping Shultz's view on the issue.

The Israeli model, however, was not shared by everyone: those who opposed it, actually opposed the idea of fighting

terrorism with pre-emptive or retaliatory military strikes. In a memo to the vice president, Donald Gregg reported on a meeting he had had with Richard Helms, director of the CIA from 1966 to 1973 and then ambassador to Iran until 1976. Gregg wrote that he and Helms both agreed that 'we cannot and should not go as far as the Israelis have in fighting terrorism with terrorism'. Helms did not share the hard line anyway. As Naftali wrote, Helms' opposition to the use of force against terrorism was grounded on the idea that while Israel believed that its very existence was threatened by terrorism, the United States was a superpower which could not be undermined by this phenomenon.¹²⁵ In an interview with Strobe Talbott for *Time*, Helms clarified his proposal: 'Terrorism, of course, is a serious challenge (...). But to declare a "war on terrorism" is just to hype the problem, not solve it. The quiet, steady approach is better than bombast.'¹²⁶

The problem with such people, as Helms or Weinberger, who opposed the use of the military against terrorism was that they did not propose anything more significant than a 'quiet, steady approach' that to many officials seemed much like the waiting game which had made Reagan so frustrated during the TWA 847 crisis.

Bush's Task Force could not propose any convincing policy on any crucial issue: what was terrorism and what was 'freedom fighting'; what were the implications of a declaration of war on terrorism; what balance should be established between the no-ransom policy and the safety of US citizens under captivity; and how and when to use force and by what decision-making process.

The report of the Bush commission can be summed up in three main recommendations. First, the creation of a 'counterterrorism czar' operating outside of the NSC. This proposal never reached the president because Poindexter thought that such a figure would need Congressional approval. This would imply that the czar would have to testify before Congress. On the other hand, there was already a coordinator for counterterrorism at the State Department, namely Robert Oakley, and Foggy Bottom did not see the point of losing its role as leading agency in counterterrorism. Second, the report

suggested the creation of a 'fusion centre' where all the intelligence regarding terrorism and coming from different agencies would be gathered. This recommendation, too, fell victim to bureaucratic feuding as well as the third one, which implied the training of counterterrorism professionals across the government.^{[127](#)}

What was left of the report after the elimination of its three major recommendations became the background of NSDD 207 on 'The National Program for Combating Terrorism'. The directive was issued on 20 January 1986 after other bloody terrorist attacks were carried out in the autumn and at a time when the build-up toward the strike against Libya was all but reversible.

The directive restated the no-concession policy along with its main caveat: 'every available resource will be used to gain the safe return of American citizens who are held hostage'. Further on, the directive excluded the payment of ransom, the release of prisoners and 'any other condition that could serve to encourage additional terrorism'. The issue of unilateral actions was dealt with by repeating more or less what was said in the directive which actually created the Task Force: '[The US] is prepared to act in concert with other nations or unilaterally when necessary to prevent or respond to terrorist acts.' The directive did not specify what this meant concretely. Instead, it delegated to the secretary of state the task of submitting a policy framework on the use of force.

While decision-makers struggled with the complexity of the issue, some opinion-makers argued that bowing to terrorists as they thought the president had done during the hijacking of TWA 847 could produce negative consequences also in the confrontation with the Soviet Union. The neoconservative intellectual Norman Podhoretz voiced his outrage in an editorial in the 2 July issue of the *Washington Post*:

What the American heart and the Israeli heart alike know in this case is exactly what our mutual enemies also know: that they have won and we have lost (...). More dangerous yet, the Soviet Union has now seen

that the United States, even under the fearsome Ronald Reagan, is unwilling to use force even against an aggressor with the power to threaten only a few American lives.

Why then should the Soviets or anyone else believe that we will risk millions of American lives in response to a Soviet attack on Europe – or for that matter a threatened attack on the United States itself?^{[128](#)}

Conservative think tanks continued to advocate a more forceful response. Ben Wattenberg, a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote an editorial on the *Washington Times* calling for reprisal against states sponsoring terrorism. Specifically, he argued in favour of strikes against Iran and Syria.

We can [retaliate]. While it would be nice if we had name, rank, and serial number of every terrorist involved, the absence of a specifically known culpable group living in a neat geographical area should not deter us from retaliation (...). Successful combat against terrorism means establishing a logical and appropriate mailing address, even if one did not exist before (...). Thus the plan: After the hostages have been returned, hit the Syrians moderately hard (...). Same with the Iranians: Strike them and let them know they will be hit harder if Shi'ite extremists attack us.^{[129](#)}

The alternative vision was not very popular. In the midst of the TWA 847 crisis, House Representative Newt Gingrich wrote to the president to present his view on the issue of terrorism based on the teachings of Sun Tzu:

It is possible to build a pattern of firmness, preparedness, and toughness strategically without (underlined in the original) taking immediate tactical actions involving force. Eisenhower, on numerous occasions in the 1950s, and Kennedy, in the 1961 Berlin crisis, were successful in building a show of

force without using force. In Sun Tzu's phrase, 'The greatest of all generals win bloodless victories'.^{[130](#)}

Terrorist attacks in 1985 would actually work in favour of those who did not believe in 'bloodless victories' and argued for a show of force against terrorism. 1986 would witness new terrorist attacks but also America's military reaction to them. The target would be Libya, a country which had been spotted for its support of international terrorism since the early days of the Reagan administration.

4 Libya

Pre-emptive strikes and regime change

The events in Lebanon described in the previous chapters yielded a significant influence on the anti-terrorism policy of the Reagan administration. Nevertheless, the US had not got involved in Lebanon because of terrorism. Rather, terrorist attacks were a consequence of its involvement, not a cause of it. Libya and the regime of Colonel Qadhafi, on the contrary, had been spotted since the first days of the Reagan administration as one of the places where the crucial battle against terrorism could be fought. Until late in 1986, this country would be the litmus test of one of the two main approaches of the Reagan administration to the fight against terrorism: while against Qadhafi the United States would try to show 'resolve' and apply simultaneously isolation and growing degrees of military pressure, Iran and Syria would receive a different treatment based on, often secret, negotiations. Incidentally, both strategies would end in the autumn of 1986: with the emergence of the Iran–Contra scandal, the reshuffle inside the administration would bring to the fore men more inclined to a regionalist, diplomatic approach to Qadhafi's regime.

In terms of threat perception, Libya came under the spotlight for several concurring reasons: its use of terrorism; its relationship with the Soviet Union; its efforts at destabilization of US-friendly regimes in the Middle East, in Africa and in Latin America; its development of weapons of mass destruction.¹

As in other fields of foreign policy, the Reagan administration was partially in continuity with the Carter years

and built its confrontation with Qadhafi on an already strained US–Libyan relationship.

Indeed, the first US sanctions against Libya were started by President Jimmy Carter in 1978 when Qadhafi was denied aircraft for military use and tractors capable of hauling tanks.² On 2 December 1979 an angry crowd had assaulted the US embassy in Tripoli and the Libyan government had done little to prevent that. Following this outrage, the US curtailed its diplomatic presence in Libya and moved its remaining personnel within the Belgian embassy. Finally, after attacks against French and Tunisian embassies, all American diplomats were withdrawn from Libya.³

Geographically, the main area of friction was the Gulf of Sidra, in the 1970s as well during the Reagan years. Since the days of the Arab–Israeli Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Libyan government had declared its sovereignty over the part of the Mediterranean south of 32 degrees, 30 minutes north latitude, a limit later called ‘the line of death’ by Qadhafi. This area was virtually the whole Gulf of Sidra which Tripoli identified as a bay despite the fact that it exceeded the parameters set by the 1958 Geneva Convention on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone. The US government did not accept this claim and thus conducted several ‘Freedom of Navigation’ (FON) exercises in the area in the following years.⁴

Politically, with its confrontation with Libya, the Reagan administration tried to kill several birds with one stone. By striking at Qadhafi, the US could oppose both an Arab radical regime and what it believed was a Soviet proxy. The first political goal was therefore to fight the Global Cold War in this particular part of the world. The second goal had to do with the hostage crisis in Tehran where 52 Americans had been held hostage by local extremists for 444 days. Reagan thought that Carter’s inability to deal with this threat had doomed his administration and was determined not to suffer anything similar. The goal was to show resolve against states, like Iran, that supported terrorists and whose actions undermined American credibility. Teaching a lesson to Qadhafi was a way to warn Iran, Syria and other sponsor states to stop their support for anti-American terrorists. Strictly

connected to the second goal was the third one: to restore American military credibility which had been damaged by Vietnam and by the failure of the rescue mission for the hostages in Tehran organized by the Carter administration. Thus, Reagan's need was not just to isolate Qadhafi diplomatically but to show the world that the US was still ready and able to use military force as a tool of its foreign policy. The fourth goal, too, had to do with US credibility: American regional standing had been damaged by the fall of the Iranian Shah, a bastion of US policy in the Gulf rather than just an American ally. Friendly regimes in the region, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, had to get the message that the United States would defend their stability in case someone threatened them. Qadhafi had a long record of support for radical, anti-establishment, violent groups in the greater Middle East and beyond.

Moreover, all these goals seemed attainable because Libya was a relatively easy target: its military and demographic situation was not comparable to that of Iran while its relationship with the Soviet Union was not as close as that of Syria. Finally, Qadhafi was a regional outsider for whom few regimes would shed tears. Borrowing the words of later National Security Advisor John Poindexter, Libya looked as a 'low hanging fruit'.⁵

Terrorism as Part of the Global Cold War

To understand the confrontation between Reagan and Qadhafi in 1985 and 1986, one has to take a step back and describe the early elaboration of the administration on terrorism. Libya, indeed, had come under the spotlight early on in the Reagan presidency because of its worldwide support of terrorism and subversion, two synonyms to many members of the administration. Terrorism was a serious cause of concern for the president: he was well aware that the hostage crisis had doomed the Carter administration and that the challenge to American credibility in the region posed by the Iranian Islamic revolution needed some kind of response. Not by chance, Reagan declared his peculiar war on terror at the welcoming ceremony for the recently liberated hostages of the US embassy in Tehran on 27 January:

Let terrorists be aware that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution. We hear it said that we live in an era of limit to our powers. Well, let it also be understood, there are limits to our patience.⁶

Map 2 Libya



(courtesy of Limes, Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica).

A promise which the president had hardly kept, for instance, during the negotiations with the Syrian and Iranian regimes to end the TWA 847 hijacking in 1985. Previously, the intervention in Lebanon had emphasized one problem with ‘swift and effective retribution’, namely the identification of the enemy. In the early months of the Reagan administration, terrorism was on a par with subversion and therefore included in the Global Cold War paradigm despite many signs, for instance, that the Iranians who had held American hostages for more than a year had little to do with the confrontation with the USSR. Reagan himself thought, as his diary and his public statements show, that the worldwide Soviet offensive of the second half of the 1970s had been seriously underestimated by the Carter administration. His radio commentaries in that decade had linked terrorism to the Soviets.⁷

Libya was one of the places where this course could be reversed and a message sent to those using terrorism as a tool to destabilize the West. Reagan's analysis dovetailed nicely with those of the Committee on Present Danger. According to these conservatives, it was now time for a counteroffensive which should overcome the legacy of inhibitions left by the Vietnam War. Fifty members of the Committee had been appointed inside the Reagan administration. This agenda was supported also by the Heritage Foundation, a well-organized conservative think tank which had identified eight extra-European countries where Soviet influence could be rolled back. Among them there was Libya.⁸ Coherently with this view, Director of the CIA William Casey saw Libya as one of the places in the world where the idea of supporting 'freedom fighters' against Soviet proxies, which later became the Reagan Doctrine, could be applied.

On 28 January 1981, Secretary of State Alexander Haig stated during his first press conference that 'terrorism will take the place of human rights in our concern, because it is the ultimate abuse of human rights'.⁹ And since human rights had been one of the focuses of Carter's policy toward the Soviet Union, it is fair to consider Haig's view of terrorism as yet another tool in the ideological and political confrontation with Moscow. The new secretary of state put forward a new charge against the Soviets: 'They today are involved in conscious policy, in programs, if you will, which foster, support and expand this activity [terrorism] which is hemorrhaging in many respects throughout the world.'¹⁰

The link between the Soviets and the rising threat of terrorism was not just propaganda. Many people inside the administration and in the intelligence community believed this was true. To understand why it was so, we must keep in mind two things. First, terrorism in 1981 was still quite different from what it was going to become just two years later. Leftist, secular and nationalist terrorist groups were still more powerful and effective than Islamic organizations. Second, a confusion existed, and continued to exist throughout the Reagan administration, between subversion and guerrillas on one hand and terrorism on the other. As Timothy Naftali notes, throughout the 1960s and for most of the 1970s the words 'insurgent' and 'terrorist' had been used as synonyms in the language of the US intelligence and in the analysis of the policy-makers. This confusion came together with the idea of state-sponsorship: behind every insurgent there was in some way either the USSR or China.¹¹ A language and a conceptual framework conceived for Latin America or Asia (the

locations of insurgencies in the 1960s and 1970s) was then partially used for the Middle East of the 1980s.

According to this analysis, not only the Soviet Union supported terrorists, it was also behind a network of subversive groups and states like Libya which supported them politically, logistically, financially.

The idea of a global terrorist network was the basis of a book by journalist Claire Sterling titled *The Terrorist Network* and it served as a source of inspiration on the issue of international terrorism for many members of the administration. In an interview on the ABC news programme *20/20* on 2 April 1981, Richard Allen supported Haig's view that the Soviets were behind the phenomenon. He said that he based his views on Claire Sterling's book which he stated was 'a significant landmark work on the subject of terrorism, and something about which we have to be better informed'. Asked for evidence of this involvement, Allen said he could not disclose it but was ready to defend the idea that 'Soviet involvement is organic'.¹²

Claire Sterling's book was outdated for the 1980s. She wrote about 'left-wing, or Red, terrorists who dominate [the] world scene'. They would be out of fashion in the Middle East just a few short years past its publication date, as the events in Lebanon between 1982 and 1985 would further demonstrate. When the hardcover edition of the book came out in late 1980, the major terrorist threat to the US had come from Iranian 'students' who had stormed the embassy in Tehran and had held 52 Americans hostage throughout 1980 and early 1981. They had little or nothing to do with the Italian Red Brigades or the Irish IRA, their 'patron' was not Giangiacomo Feltrinelli as Sterling wrote, rather Ayatollah Khomeini. The kidnapping, according to the US journalist, was the work of people 'who might have been Black or Red or both' and was the first event of what she called 'Fright Decade II' (the 1970s being the first one). The main feature of this new era was terrorism used as 'continuation of war by other means' to destabilize the West. The facts in Tehran were put in the same box as the kidnapping of Italian statesman Aldo Moro or the actions of the German Baader-Meinhof Gang.¹³

For some time, Sterling's ideas influenced the administration's policies which in turn tried to influence US intelligence. According to then Director of Casey's Executive Staff Robert Gates, following his press conference Alexander Haig had requested a national intelligence estimate on Soviet support for terrorism. The first draft by the office of Soviet Analysis in the CIA 'proved beyond a

shadow of doubt that Haig had exaggerated the Soviet role'. Casey did not like it and directed the Defense Intelligence Agency to write a new one which he liked more. This started bureaucratic infighting lasting from January 1981 to late May when a 'an old hand in the estimates business' crafted the final version of what became SNIE 11/2-81 on 'Soviet Support for International Terrorism and Revolutionary Violence'.¹⁴ Two of its key judgements were: first, that Soviets were highly involved in the support of revolutionary violence around the world and they did not care whether it took the form of terrorism; second, the Soviets supported states like Libya which in turn supported terrorists. The report admitted that 'the demarcation between terrorism and guerrilla and paramilitary activities is sometimes murky'. The conclusions actually denied the relevance of Soviet support in the fight against terrorism:

Even a complete withdrawal of Soviet support would not put an end to international terrorism. Libya and the extreme Palestinian groups have ample independent resources. The weapons needed for terrorist activities are relatively cheap and readily available in the world.¹⁵

The focus on Soviet involvement in terrorism should not be ascribed completely to ideological zeal or ignorance. In light of the evidence disclosed after 1989,¹⁶ it would be unfair and inaccurate to say that there was no link whatsoever between the Soviet bloc and terrorist groups, even in the Middle East. The Austrian journalist and scholar Thomas Riegler has provided wide evidence of the involvement of the German Democratic Republic in the support and training of groups like Abu Nidal's Fatah-Revolutionary Council.¹⁷ Support, however, did not mean political control, as emphasized by the study of the relationship between the Palestinian Wadi Haddad and the Soviets. Also, this support was not essential to the survival of these groups: terrorism, as the SNIE 11/2-81 tried to point out, was at the same time effective and cheap and could be carried out with or without powerful patrons. Last but not least, the analysis of the events in London in 1982 (the assassination attempt against the Israeli ambassador) and of the attacks in Rome and Vienna in December 1985 shows that terrorist groups pursued mainly local, regional goals and manipulated their eventual international patrons to this end. Abu Nidal's aim, in London in 1982 as well as in Rome and Vienna in 1985, was to undermine Arafat and his friends in the West. If he could win the support of foreign patrons all the good, but the lack of international sponsors would have hardly stopped him. These general evaluations on the nature of terrorism in the 1980s

were not highly popular in the Reagan administration which continued to pursue its globalist agenda in the fight against terrorism and specifically against Qadhafi.

The first confrontation in 1981 and 1982

If Libya was a ‘low hanging fruit’, as John Poindexter said, then the Reagan administration started the harvest early on. The escalation throughout 1981 and early 1982 would lead first to the closing of the Libyan embassy in Washington, then to Freedom of Navigation exercises in the Gulf of Sidra which eventually developed into a short air battle and finally to the evaluation, during the autumn and the winter, of a wider range of options which included military contingency plans to retaliate in case of a Libyan-sponsored attack. Eventually, the administration would decide to implement rather symbolic sanctions early in 1982 which were meant to send a signal to Qadhafi (and to American regional allies, for that matter) but were also designed as not to hurt Western Europeans, already under stress because of the sanctions approved because of the implementation of martial law in Poland.

The first meetings about Libya of which we have some form of record were held in March 1981. In a Senior Interagency Group held on the eighteenth a paper was presented by the Department of State which the other attendees considered ‘mild’. It contained a series of options which could not be ‘disseminated in writing’.¹⁸

In May the situation started to deteriorate. On Monday, 4 May Reagan approved the closing of the Libyan embassy (official name: People’s Bureau) in Washington. In his diary he wrote:

Heard from Haig & Dick Allen – approved closing the Libyan embassy here. One of their officials linked to a terrorist killing in [Chicago]. Our embassy there was burned down & there has never been compensation or rebuilding.¹⁹

Reagan referred to events that had occurred during the Carter years and which had made his decision easier to justify and more consequential, although this was part of a wider strategy against Libya. Publicly, the Department of State’s spokesman listed all the attempts by the Libyans to kill members of the opposition exiled to the US and all the Libyan ‘subversive’ activities in Chad, Sudan and Egypt. And then added, ‘The United States (...) has been worried that the Libyans were serving as an indirect Soviet “proxy” in Africa by interfering militarily and politically in various countries.’²⁰

Chad was among the countries subject to Libyan interference. A few days after the closing of the embassy, Reagan approved a 'plan for a diplomatic strategy to remove Libyans from Chad' as a 15 May memo from National Security Advisor Richard Allen recalled.²¹ Nevertheless, given the broad political goals attached to its policy on Libya, it is fair to think that closing the Libyan embassy in Washington and annoying Qadhafi in Chad was not enough for the president.²²

On 1 June Reagan wrote in his diary about the NSC that was held that day:

I approved naval man-oeuvres in Mediterranean waters that Khadafi of Libya has declared are his territorial waters. I'm not being foolhardy but he's a madman. He has been harassing our planes out over international waters & it's time to show the other nations there Egypt, Morocco, *et al.* that there is different management here.²³

The goal was therefore 'to put Qaddafi back in the box' as Secretary of State Alexander Haig had said to Robert McFarlane, his deputy at the time and later national security advisor.²⁴ The Libyan dictator played well into Reagan's hands on several occasions: during the naval exercises in the Gulf of Sidra between 18 and 20 August 1981 (the ones discussed in the 1 June meeting) a Libyan aircraft fired upon two American F-14s and was eventually shot down. Moreover, the subsequent autumn was marked by the threat of Libyan assassination squads at work in the US with the goal of murdering the president. Three days after the confrontation over the 'line of death' in the Gulf of Sidra, Qadhafi had met Ethiopian dictator Menghistu and, in the presence of a high-level CIA source, had promised that 'he was going to have president Reagan killed' as Bob Woodward wrote in his *Veil*. The threat became even more serious when the National Security Agency intercepted a phone conversation in which Qadhafi vowed again to kill the US president. 'Both reports,' Woodward added, 'received prominent mention in the President's daily brief.'²⁵

A constant flow of intelligence kept the threat alive for the whole autumn, turning Qadhafi's Libya in an emergency issue which lasted until December 1981. On the sixth, the Libyan dictator appeared on American TV to deny any assassination attempt against US officials: 'We refuse to assassinate any person (...). This is silly, this administration and this president.'²⁶

Though being anthropologically and politically unconventional, Qadhafi was not the 'mad man' or the 'clown' that Reagan described in his diary: he was a rational actor who understood that a trap was ready for him: any kind of provocation, be it a terrorist attack or an assassination attempt against Americans, would trigger an American reaction.

Indeed, in those weeks several options were under scrutiny by the interagency meetings in Washington. They remained valid despite the end of the assassination threat because all the other, more strategic, reasons for concern about Libya remained in place. Secretary of State Alexander Haig summarized them in a memo to the president issued in November:

Withdraw US Business Personnel from Libya; Unilateral US Oil Embargo of Libya; Complete US Economic Boycott of Libya; Enhanced US Security Assistance to Friendly Regional States; Increased US Military Presence in the Region; Increased Military Cooperation with Regional Forces; Further Contingency Planning Concerning US Military Response to Libyan Aggression.^{[27](#)}

In a memo to Richard Allen, member of the Political Affairs Directorate of the NSC Raymond Tanter explained that, once the evacuation of US nationals was carried out,

Direct military action may be considered in response to a Qadhafi move. Military options include open assistance to anti-Libyan elements in Chad and elsewhere; urging of Egyptian military action against Libya; and blockade of Libyan ports.^{[28](#)}

On 10 December, Americans living in Libya were encouraged by their government to leave the country. By the end of January there would be only 200 Americans left there.^{[29](#)} The evacuation order was actually part of National Security Decision Directive number 16, signed by the president on that day and still classified. Another crucial element of the directive, namely a private démarche to the Libyans, can be inferred from other records such as the document prepared by Dennis Ross and Francis Fukuyama, at the time both part of the Policy Planning Staff headed by Paul Wolfowitz, and drafted in view of top level discussions in January and February 1982.^{[30](#)}

As a lesson for the future, this paper stated clearly that while a public confrontation would lead to escalation of Qadhafi's actions instead of restraint, a privately conveyed message would alter his behaviour as had the December démarche. Indeed, the Libyan dictator had sent an emissary to convey the message that he was restraining terrorist attacks and that he would dismantle training camps. The Policy Planning staff, however, did not take these claims too seriously and thought this was 'a tactical manoeuvre'. Nonetheless, Qadhafi was described as a 'survivor' and as acting much more rationally than previously predicted.³¹

Eventually, the Reagan administration would implement a limited oil ban against Libya through National Security Decision Directive 27, signed by the president on 9 March 1982. Under the heading 'Economic Decisions for Libya', the Directive explicitly called for the prohibition of the importation of Libyan crude oil into the United States.³² The following day the General Accounting office released a study on the effects of the oil ban on Libya. In the short-term there might have been a revenue loss but in the long-term the effect on either Libyan or US economy would be small.³³ The Ross-Fukuyama paper helps to explain why, despite the limited effects of the oil ban, this option was preferred.

Arab allies, in the first place, would not have understood a US strike in the absence of a clear-cut provocation and therefore military options which had been reviewed during the autumn had to be ruled out. For any convenience, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had granted a lead time of 96 hours to start military operations although risks of a failure along the lines of the Desert One operation in Iran, the two experts warned, had to be carefully taken into consideration in order not to give the wrong message to countries like Oman and Egypt which cooperated militarily with the US.³⁴

The paper, therefore, argued for the implementation of a unilateral oil ban which, though it would not decisively affect Libya's economy, would signal American willingness not to support or fund terrorist activities. Being unilateral it would not further strain relations with the Europeans: the allies in the old continent, especially after the imposition of sanctions against Poland and the USSR, thought that the US was using this measure too much around the world. Sanctions, they thought, would further isolate Qadhafi and push him into the arms of the Soviets. Consequently, the export ban had also to be carefully designed in order not to disrupt the business activities of Western Europeans already under stress and, therefore, it would not be enforced extraterritorially.³⁵

The Ross–Fukuyama paper was reviewed by the other agencies and finally became the ‘Libya NSC paper’ drafted by Elaine Morton in view of the 18 February NSC meeting on Libya. Minor changes were brought by the Treasury on the phasing of sanctions while the major options remained unchanged.³⁶

Confrontation between Libya and the US would wind down in the following two years as the Reagan administration would get involved in the Lebanese civil war because of the Israeli invasion of 6 June 1982. Qadhafi, on his part, was already experiencing economic problems before the oil ban went into effect and had to take care of the domestic situation and of the war in Chad. Libyan oil production fell by 70 per cent from the last quarter of 1981 to the first quarter of 1982, while actual revenues dropped only by 50 per cent. This decline was due to the combination of several factors of which the end of deliveries to the US was just one: worldwide recession, the oil glut, the ‘phase-outs in production and the annulment of existing contracts by multinational companies’ which were due, in part, to the ‘chilling effect’ on the relations between the European oil companies and the Libyan government generated by the ‘spontaneous takeovers’ of the economic sectors which followed the publication of the ‘Green Book’. This decline in oil revenues (which accounted for almost 100 per cent of the country’s total revenues) deprived the regime of its main weapon in addressing popular concerns and stabilizing its rule over the country. Moreover, Libya was not just overly dependent from just one source – namely oil – it was also relying heavily on the contribution that expatriates gave not only in that sector but in management and agriculture as well. To make things even worse, the purchase of sophisticated weapons did not stop while the costs of the military adventure in Chad rose, thanks also to the joint French and US commitment.³⁷

The main problem for Qadhafi was therefore the loss of oil revenues due mainly to the world economy and to his domestic choices, not the confrontation with the US which, instead, was politically welcome for him. In his speeches and publications, the Libyan dictator emphasized the confrontation with the Italian colonialists and with Westerners in general as crucial elements of a common national history. Later on, Qadhafi would bluntly state that ‘the Americans today are like the Italians yesterday’.³⁸ The rhetoric used by the Reagan administration only reinforced the ‘David-versus-Goliath image Qadhafi was able to use for his own internal purposes’.³⁹

Meanwhile, one part of the Reagan administration, namely the CIA, was still to be active on Libya in the subsequent years. According to Robert Gates, in April 1982, the CIA director visited several countries in the Greater Middle East: Tunisia, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Oman. When William Casey got back he wrote to Reagan that he was very much concerned about the progress ‘the Soviets and their proxies’ were making in the Third World. According to him, in each country he visited, dissidents were being brought out and trained usually in Libya and South Yemen, equipped and sent back into the country ‘to organize, propagandize, or practice terrorism against the government’. Libya, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Afghanistan and Syria were ‘all working together or under Soviet influence’ and surrounded ‘our friends Egypt and Israel and the oil fields of the Middle East’. The conclusions of his memo to the president outlined a worldwide strategy while providing a policy recommendation for the administration:

Through Libya, South Yemen and Ethiopia, the Soviets have mounted subversion and insurgency threats to countries which control the most strategic choke-points in the world: Oman and the Strait of Hormuz; North Yemen and Somalia at the mouth of the Red Sea, the pathway to Suez; and Morocco at the Straits of Gibraltar. In the past eight years, the Soviets and their proxies have promoted insurgencies in over a dozen countries, five of them successful and seven now under way (...). Most of these states cannot effectively use and do not need sophisticated high-priced weapons. What they need is light arms, transport, and communications to deal with multiple, widely scattered hit and run forces. This security and counter-subversion assistance [by the US] should be low-profile.⁴⁰

In other words, Libya was again seen as part of the Global Cold War and as a proving ground for what came to be called the ‘Reagan Doctrine’ which called for US overt and covert support for anti-communist insurgencies and governments around the world. The doctrine was made public a few weeks after Casey’s trip in a speech at the Eureka College.⁴¹

Even though no serious confrontation with Libya had occurred during 1981 and early 1982, the ground had been laid for the events of 1985 and 1986. The threat posed by Qadhafi had been analysed and dramatized for US public opinion; a policy had been set in

motion and some of the economic as well as military tools to confront him had been devised.

The two following years did not pass without events on the Libyan front. In February 1983, the secret operation 'Early Call' was organized by the US: the goal was to attract Qadhafi's Air Force into Sudan and then destroy it. Before implementation, however, it was leaked to the press and it had to be cancelled.⁴²

In 1984 tension had started to rise again. On 17 April in London a shooting broke out between Libyan diplomats and the British police which was monitoring an anti-Qadhafi demonstration. Eventually, one British policewoman was killed and the United Kingdom terminated its diplomatic relations with Libya. In May, the execution of Libyan exiles living abroad started. Six of them would be killed in 1984 and four more in 1985. On 8 May a *coup d'état* was staged by the NSFL, the united front of the Libyan opposition, but it failed and provoked wide purges in the military by Qadhafi.⁴³

Some of the exiles who had founded NSFL in 1981 were formerly affiliated with the Islamic Association of Libya, described by other exiles as 'very close to the Muslim Brotherhood' but also suspected of being linked to the CIA, which had actually been authorized to support the NSFL by a presidential finding the same year. The secretary general of the Front, Muhammad Mugharyif, Qadhafi's former ambassador to India, was considered as 'strongly fundamentalist-oriented'. According to the review *Focus on Libya*, significantly stored in Donald Fortier files at the Reagan Library,⁴⁴ Mugharyif had received strong political and financial support from the Saudis which enabled him to become the main opposition leader. After the failure of the coup on 8 May, he was expelled both from Morocco and from Sudan. He finally established himself in Iraq where, by associating himself with what the review called the 'crass brutality' of Saddam Hussein, he lost all his credibility with the other exiles.⁴⁵

The pattern used by the Reagan administration in Libya was not light years away from that used for Afghanistan: reliance on Islamic fundamentalists to overthrow a presumed Soviet puppet. In Libya, however, there was no Soviet occupation to stir up a popular opposition and Qadhafi, although challenging the authority of Islamic scholars, had been in fact much more cautious than the Afghani communists in preserving Islamic traditions. Probably not everyone in the NSC had thought about these differences and by

May 1984 the activities of the Libyan opposition were seriously damaged.

The Flower plan: regime change in Libya?

Despite these ‘incidents’ seeming to curtail American hopes of beating Qadhafi, some members of the administration started to focus again on Libya after the 1984 presidential elections, looking at it as a place where American credibility could be restored after the failures in Lebanon of 1983 and 1984.

The relationship between American withdrawal from Lebanon and Qadhafi’s renewed aggressiveness had been highlighted by an analysis from the State Department’s Bureau of Analysis which reported a ‘mental shift causing Qadhafi to feel less inhibited, a shift linked perhaps to what he sees as the “great victory” in Lebanon over the Americans – the “latter day crusaders”’.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, the events of 1984 and 1985 had convinced Shultz and other members of the Reagan administration that it was time to fight seriously against states that sponsored terrorists. In January 1985, the US secretary of state prompted Casey and the CIA to find what could be done to ‘develop more aggressive action against terrorists’. According to Gates’ memoirs, the secretary of state ‘wanted to see some action to let the terrorist groups know that there is a risk in this’.

On Valentine’s Day Robert Gates sent to Casey ‘a first assessment of Iranian, Syrian, and Libyan support to terrorism and their respective vulnerability to retaliation (...). We did targeting studies of Libyan and Iranian ports and military facilities, and examined similar targets in Syria.’ Syria and Iran were ruled out: the former because of its links with the Soviet Union; the latter because economic pressure might bring it closer to the Soviets while military retaliation was ‘too hard’.

So, as Gates wrote, ‘The process of elimination brought CIA to Libya’ which was ‘in the poorest position to sustain itself against US actions – military or economic’ and thus ‘became the target for US retaliation against all state-supported terrorism’.⁴⁷

Again, Qadhafi provided the opportunity to kill several birds with one stone. On 15 February, Vincent Cannistraro⁴⁸ and Donald Fortier wrote a memo on ‘the Qadhafi problem’ to the National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane in which they argued for a more ‘active’ US policy against Libya saying that it could have ‘sobering

effects not only on the Soviets, but on Tehran and Damascus as well. This could in turn promote other positive political-military trends.’

After the Lebanese setback, Fortier and Cannistraro argued, there was a pressing need to show ‘that we can protect our friends’ on the one hand, and that ‘being a friend of the Soviets is not cost free’ on the other. Therefore, they proposed a multifaceted strategy based on four elements: first, ‘spending Qadhafi into bankruptcy’; second, support for domestic opposition given that ‘we now have a relationship with Iraq that might allow for some options along these lines’; third, working immediately with Egypt towards a ‘reorientation of its military posture toward the Libyan border’ in order to ‘create hedges against further improvements in the Soviet posture in Libya’; and fourth, ‘conduct a sustained campaign of diplomatic, military and economic pressure’ in order to force Qadhafi to turn inward. ‘Without foreign policy victories’, they predicted, ‘and with a steadily deteriorating economic position, Qadhafi’s internal position could slowly erode until he was deposed.’⁴⁹

Regime change and Qadhafi’s overthrow had been one of the topics for discussion inside Reagan’s White House since early 1982. During an NSC meeting on 21 January, Casey had predicted that ‘given the fact that Libya is already on the road toward instability, an attempt to accelerate its slide may be feasible’.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, no concrete planning for regime change had been started after that meeting, at least as far as currently declassified records show, apart from supporting the NSFL.

Fortier’s and Cannistraro’s suggestion that the US get involved in the overthrow of Qadhafi was therefore part of a relatively old line of thinking within the administration. This would be the main goal of the ‘Flower’ plan which would develop during the summer of 1985. The plan actually included two different options: ‘Tulip’ was a covert operation to overthrow Qadhafi with the help of Egypt and through the dissident NSFL; ‘Rose’ on the other hand was a pre-emptive military strike on Libya in concert with Egypt.⁵¹

Flower was presented on 22 July to the NSPG by Robert McFarlane, the same man who was carrying out the Iran–Contra plan: while proposing negotiations with the main sponsor of terrorism he was advocating action against the easiest one. The goals were similar to the ones described in Fortier’s and Cannistraro’s February memo: send a signal to other countries supporting terrorism and hitting a Soviet friend. The will to test the new Soviet

leadership under Gorbachev was also mentioned in Fortier's notes for McFarlane's presentation in the NSPG. Moreover, action against Libya would signal a policy shift: 'finally,' wrote Fortier to McFarlane, 'what we are after is not so much punishment as pre-emption – and we can already identify important new threats to pre-empt.'⁵²

The Rose option, however, was the one which included a pre-emptive strike and it got the coolest reception. According to Gates, at the 22 July meeting 'not a single principal' in the NSPG supported it. With that meeting the invasion plan 'was dead' as he wrote.⁵³ The president, instead, signed a finding that gave support and assistance to Egypt and Algeria which in turn were going to support the NSFL.⁵⁴ This made pursuing the 'Tulip' option possible.

Backed by Secretary Shultz, the covert operation to overthrow Qadhafi was presented to the Senate and House intelligence committees which approved it with the thinnest possible majorities: 8–7 in the Senate, 9–7 in the House. Congressmen feared that supporting dissidents in Libya meant supporting assassination. Also, they wanted to avoid the start of another secret war like the one that was currently raging in Nicaragua.⁵⁵

Despite this approval, even the 'Tulip' version of the Flower plan was never fully implemented. It had encountered several problems especially after it was disclosed in the press by Bob Woodward on 3 November.⁵⁶ The leaks, according to a 1986 memo by John Poindexter, had provoked the withdrawal of Algerian support while Egypt's had been wavering because of Qadhafi's own pressure on Mubarak.⁵⁷

By the time Woodward's article appeared in the *Washington Post*, however, events were heading in a different direction. First the hijacking of the Italian ship *Achille Lauro* would prove how unreliable a law enforcement approach could be in the fight against terrorism as it was increasingly conceived by some members of the Reagan administration. Then, at Christmas time 1985, the shootings in the European airports by Libyan-supported terrorists would lay the ground for a direct US intervention against the Libyan dictator.

Christmas shootings (and military planning)

Qadhafi and Libya came to be increasingly linked with terrorist attacks, especially in December 1985. The connection seemed even more dangerous after the shootings in the airports, which made talks

and planning of a US retaliation more concrete. Leaks in the press and doubts from the president and the secretary of defence, however, would lead to a postponement of the US strike. Instead, a slow-motion process was set in place which included sanctions, Freedom of Navigation (FON) exercises with peculiar rules of engagement and diplomatic pressure on Western Europeans to isolate Qadhafi.

The 27 December shootings had had an eerie foreshadowing in the hijacking of an Egyptian plane on 23 November which, according to the CIA, was carried out by terrorists supported by Libya.⁵⁸ The hijacking was the result of the alliance between Qadhafi and Abu Nidal, whose real name was Sabri al-Banna. Al-Banna had broken away from the PLO in 1974 when Arafat claimed to have banned terrorist attacks outside Israel and the Occupied Territories. He received support first from Saddam's Iraq and then from Syria. In 1985 he was still changing patron and was temporarily working mainly on his own. His common cause with Qadhafi was therefore an alliance between outsiders.⁵⁹ Finally, a joint Egyptian–Maltese rescue attempt ended in a disaster: a total of 60 people died, the bloodiest hijacking on the record.

On Friday, 27 December the cooperation between Qadhafi and Abu Nidal produced new bloody attacks against civilians. In all, 19 people were killed by terrorists in Fiumicino Airport in Rome and in Schwechat Airport in Vienna. More than 100 were wounded in both attacks.⁶⁰

Shortly after the attacks, a man called a Spanish news service to claim that the actions had been carried out by the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO, also called *Fatah* – the Revolutionary Council). The same was claimed by Muhammad Sarham, the lone surviving terrorist of the Rome assault. The official Libyan news agency Jana defined the attacks 'daring' and 'heroic operations'.⁶¹

The following day, the contingency planning for retaliation started. With a cable to several military posts around the world, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff had communicated the willingness of the US administration to conduct a strike for which targeting had to start immediately. The codename for the operation would be 'Prairie Fire'.⁶² It was never implemented and not just because of the, by then usual, leaks.⁶³

President Reagan, in the first place, was cautious. As he wrote in his diary in those days, 'We all feel we must do something yet there are problems including thousands of Americans living & working in the mad clown's country.'⁶⁴ The 'mad clown' being Qadhafi. Within

the administration two distinct positions coexisted: one, represented in the NSC staff by Donald Fortier and at the cabinet level by George Shultz, asked for a military response to the attacks; the other, represented by Weinberger was strongly against any retaliation on the ground that it could bring about American casualties and that it would upset relations with the Arab countries traditionally allied to the US. Finally, Weinberger agreed with what Reagan had written in his diary: the threat to the life of those Americans still living in Libya could be too high in case of an attack.⁶⁵

Having ruled out, for the moment, a military retaliation, the administration agreed on a more incremental strategy towards confrontation based on the one hand on more extensive economic sanctions (which would be included in NSDD 205) and on the other hand on new Freedom of Navigation exercises. Both measures were approved during the NSPG meeting which was held on 6 January.⁶⁶ The following day, the executive order about economic sanctions was signed by the president. Writing to House Speaker Tip O'Neill he summed up the main features of this new package which provided for a prohibition of purchases, imports and exports from and to Libya; a ban on maritime and aviation relations; a ban on credits and loans; a ban on travel to Libya.⁶⁷

On 14 March, the NSPG gave the final go-ahead to the FON exercises going beyond the line of death. They were meant to give something more than just the impression of an on-going military build-up against Libya. The hope of many inside the administration was that, in case of confrontation, unspecified 'opposition forces' would act against Qadhafi.⁶⁸ Indeed, the big decision taken by the NSPG was that not only US aircraft would trespass the line of death, they would also respond 'proportionally' to enemy fire.⁶⁹ These rules of engagement made a confrontation more likely since US planes were allowed to fire not just against aircraft already firing at them but also against 'possible sources of fire'.

The exercise started on 23 March. The question, as Reagan noted in his diary, was: 'Will he (Qadaffy) open fire or not?'⁷⁰ The following day, the mission 'Attain Document' turned into what many hawks had hoped: a provocation to which Qadhafi would respond and which in turn would imply a US reprisal. During the Freedom of Navigation exercise, some US F-14 aircraft were spotted and missed by Soviet-made SA-5 Libyan missiles. This was, according to Shultz, one of the cases which had been predicted when elaborating the contingency planning in Washington. US missiles soon hit a base from which SA-5 missiles could be shot and in which

some Soviet advisors were working. Also, the two Libyan patrol boats *Wahid* and *Ean Mara* were hit and sunk by US aircraft. Seventy-two Libyans were killed and six Soviet technicians were wounded in the operation.⁷¹

The model strike

The incidents during the Freedom of Navigation exercises set in motion a chain reaction which would lead to the US strike on Libya. On 2 April a bomb on TWA flight number 840 killed four Americans. Investigators found out that it was the work of a Syrian-supported group.⁷² Libyan terrorism took just three more days to hit.

On the night of 5 April a bomb blew up in the La Belle discotheque in West Berlin where many US servicemen spent their free time. Two people, one of them a Turkish woman, were killed and 155 were wounded, a third of them Americans. According to Bernd Schäfer's research in the Stasi archives, the terrorists had acted on instructions from the Libyan embassy in East Berlin with the knowledge of the East German intelligence agency. They later sent a cable to the Libyan intelligence headquarters in Tripoli to confirm the 'execution of one of the actions' which eventually were intercepted by the US intelligence.⁷³

On the same day, while the administration was devising its plan for the attack against Qadhafi, William Casey spoke at the AIPAC⁷⁴ annual conference and celebrated the success of US policy in the Third World. The Soviet offensive, Casey reiterated, involved the Middle East too. Its instruments were Syria and Libya, two 'bridgeheads' that, according to Casey, Gorbachev had decided to strengthen. In those two countries, more than 6,000 Soviet advisors had been located and terrorism had been picked as a new, low-cost weapon in the fight against the US. The Soviets, according to Casey, had two geostrategic goals: Central America and the oil fields of the Middle East. In this latter area, the threats to stability came from any direction: from the north with Syria; from the west with Libya; from the south with Yemen; from the east with Iran and Iraq. Casey was happy to celebrate, however, that this offensive had finally been stopped: in the 1980s, he claimed, the USSR had not acquired any new 'colony' in the Third World.⁷⁵

While many inside the administration shared Casey's ideological motivations, the most urgent task was rather practical. Before striking back at Qadhafi, two issues had to be dealt with by the president and his cabinet: targeting and garnering the support of

West Europeans. On the first issue, the president was clear: 'I'm holding out for mil[itary] targets', he wrote in his diary, 'to avoid civilian casualties because we believe a large part of Libya would like to get rid of the Col[onel].'⁷⁶

On the second issue, two countries were specifically needed in support of what became El Dorado Canyon, the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi: Great Britain where the F-111 planes were located and whose participation in the attack was the precondition to have enough firepower; France, who had to guarantee over-flight rights to these planes. The French government eventually denied over-flight rights because it had not received the request far enough in advance. This, the American press would remark after the strike, forced US planes to a long detour around continental Europe with a deviation of 1,200 nautical miles.⁷⁷

Margaret Thatcher, on her part, managed to win approval from her cabinet where some members were reluctant to approve the plan on anti-terrorism grounds, as they preferred the justification proposed by the State Department's legal counsellor Abraham Sofaer which focused on the right to self-defence guaranteed by Article 51 of the UN Charter.⁷⁸ The British Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe recalled the discussion that went on in the cabinet:

The original purpose that was put to us disconcerted Margaret Thatcher and myself almost equally because, again, it was a demonstration of the recurrent failure of American presidential foreign policy, with its willingness to talk in terms of retaliation. Americans, for whatever reason, so often talk about: 'We must have a response on this.' On the other hand, self-defence is legitimate; it was possible to make a case for the bombing of Libya on the ground of self-defence.⁷⁹

Margaret Thatcher's private secretary, Charles Powell, recalled how his boss overruled the doubts that were 'pretty well unanimously' present in the cabinet.

She simply overruled them and said, 'This is what allies are for' (...). She was absolutely determined to do it, against the advice of the bureaucracy – the Foreign Office and the institutions. (...) But it was absolutely clear in her mind that Libya was supporting terrorism – and was caught virtually

red-handed in support of terrorism – and the way to deal with that sort of thing was a pre-emptive strike.^{[80](#)}

While Thatcher was trying to convince her cabinet, Reagan was discussing targets with Admiral Crowe, chairman of the JCS. The attack was scheduled for Monday, 14 April. After the meeting he sent a long message to Prime Minister Thatcher describing to her the US plans in general terms. As he wrote ‘she has replied with a long message pledging support but expressing concern about possible civilian casualties. That’s our concern also.’ According to Reagan’s diary, Thatcher was the only leader with whom he spoke personally about the attack, apart from Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone on 13 April.^{[81](#)}

Reagan faced divisions in his own administration, too. On 9 April a meeting in the Oval office took place. The president, George Shultz, John Poindexter, William Casey and Weinberger’s representative William Taft were attending. The agenda and the talking points provided by the NSC staff to the national security advisor demonstrate that even in the days of preparation for the strike, the hawks inside the administration were thinking beyond pure retaliation. Poindexter suggested that it was the president’s task to decide ‘whether we will use this opportunity to deal decisively with Qadhafi or whether to engage in escalating conventional American strikes and Libyan terrorism’. Therefore, Poindexter reminded the meeting that the president had expressed his preference for targets that could damage the dictator as much as possible without harming those inside Libya who could work with the US. Plans for follow-on attacks, ‘depending on Qadhafi’s response’ had to be prepared by the military. Finally, Poindexter asked Casey ‘what are the prospects for political alternatives to Qadhafi should we get lucky’, meaning with that the case in which American bombs would ‘accidentally’ kill Qadhafi.^{[82](#)}

While hawks wanted to bring Qadhafi to his knees, Weinberger wanted just a show of American resolve after the terrorist attacks. He tried to play down the risks for American soldiers while surgically hitting specific targets. Obviously, it was Reagan who chose the final targets: Tripoli and Benina’s air bases, Tripoli and Benghazi naval bases, a terrorist training camp at Sidi Bilal, Qadhafi’s intelligence headquarters and guard barracks. Shultz admitted that the administration had considered other, ‘more devastating attacks, for instance, on Libya’s oil installations but rejected these options as disproportionate’.^{[83](#)} For the moment, the supporters of a hard strike had lost.

On 10 April the Navy was delivered the executive order for the attack, codenamed 'El Dorado Canyon'. A short time later, Margaret Thatcher gave her cabinet's go ahead to the use of the bases for the F-111s. This approval was the first (and only) success of the mission of Vernon Walter, US ambassador to the UN, to Europe where he had been dispatched to gather the support and the assistance of the US allies. He was not as lucky in France and Spain: both President Mitterrand and Prime Minister Gonzales denied over-flight rights. The French denial was what upset the US government most. The agreement reached in January with Mitterrand's *chef de cabinet* Jean Saulnier was that the US would present the request for over-flight rights some time in advance. The request was actually presented on Saturday, which was considered not enough by Mitterrand.^{[84](#)}

Qadhafi, on his part, was aware that something was coming against him. According to the evidence from the Stasi archives cited by Bernd Schäfer, on 13 April the Soviets had warned Qadhafi and his military that, according to their intelligence, an air strike against Libya was imminent. Moscow recommended that the Libyans put their armed forces on full alert and in combat readiness. The Qadhafi regime apparently did not take the advice seriously and chose to ignore the warnings.^{[85](#)}

Western Europeans, meanwhile, were increasing their diplomatic pressure on his regime while refusing both economic sanctions and military actions. On the morning of 14 April, the foreign ministers of the European Economic Community met in The Hague to discuss the Libyan issue. The 12 ministers decided to implement restrictions on the Freedom of movement of Libyan diplomats, reductions of the staff of the Libyan People's Bureaus and to tighten requirements and procedures for visas. According to a British spokesman, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands had asked for the complete closure of all Libyan embassies throughout Europe. The Italians, the Greeks, the Spanish and the Germans had been the most reluctant on this issue. The Spanish and the German foreign ministers had argued right from the beginning of the meeting against economic sanctions.^{[86](#)}

Later that day, the US president met with the Congressional leadership to win its approval for Operation El Dorado Canyon. According to John Whitehead, the president said that the US planes were in the air at that moment and, since they had to take a long route to Libya he could 'call off the operation' at the end of the meeting if they so wanted.^{[87](#)}

No one protested even though the Republicans were not enthusiastic about the strike: they feared civilian casualties and the possibility of US planes being lost.⁸⁸ Other members of the administration spoke during the meeting: evidence against Qadhafi was presented (and, to this day, remains classified), connections between the strike and future terrorist attacks were denied. Within 48 hours from the strike, the administration promised to send to Congress a written report.⁸⁹

On 14 April, while the NATO exercise 'Salty Nation' provided the necessary cover to the movement of US aircraft and aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean, Operation El Dorado Canyon started to take place. At 7 pm, Washington time, NBC and CNN broadcast the attack live from Tripoli. As Roland Bruce St. John commented, 'conducted on a Monday evening during national news, the Reagan attack was the first prime-time bombing in the nation's history'.⁹⁰ As soon as the US bombers approached their targets, the Libyans started shooting SA and Crotale missiles. In the end, an F-111 was shot down and the two US pilots were killed. Eventually, the French embassy in Tripoli was hit by mistake.⁹¹

The strike, however, had not been completely successful. According to Robert Gates, the damage inflicted was less than that intended by the US military planners. Moreover, Qadhafi had just left his residence when it was hit by American bombs. Other targets were also not destroyed completely as had been planned.⁹² Finally, the goal of avoiding as much as possible any civilian casualties was not completely fulfilled: 37 Libyan civilians were killed, 93 wounded. In all, five tons of bombs had been dropped on civilians.⁹³

Nevertheless, at 9 pm, Washington time, the president went on air to speak about the strike. He defined the evidence of the Libyan responsibility for the La Belle disco bombing as 'conclusive' and promised: 'Today we have done what we had to do. If necessary, we shall do it again.' The mission was defined both as 'fully consistent' with Article 51 of the UN Charter and as a 'pre-emptive action against terrorist installations'. Reagan concluded saying: 'I said that we would act with others, if possible, and alone, if necessary, to ensure that terrorists have no sanctuary anywhere. Tonight we have.'⁹⁴

The Libyans responded to the strike with new terrorist as well as military actions, though their responsibility in the attacks was not always clear. Two assassination attempts against American diplomats were carried out allegedly by Libyan-sponsored terrorists

in Sudan and in South Yemen. In Lebanon, US hostage Peter Kilburn and the British Leigh Douglas and Philip Padfield were bought from their captors by the Libyans and immediately executed. On the afternoon of 16 April, Libya shot two missiles against a base of the US Coast Guard in the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, the closest point of Europe to the African continent. The missiles fell in the sea, not far from the island. On 17 April an attempt to bomb an El Al airliner in London was foiled by Israeli security. On 18 April, four Libyans were arrested in Ankara for attempting to attack the US Air Force Officers' Club. Other attacks were reported in the following days, the most serious one taking place in Madrid against a building housing British Airways and American Express in which four Spanish security officers were killed.⁹⁵

Despite receiving high domestic support for the strike,⁹⁶ Reagan's decision had a cool reception with America's Western European allies while stirring up a mild reaction from the Soviets. Even though Qadhafi was not part of the Soviet bloc, the USSR leadership could not just sit idly by while a friendly regime was bombed by the rival superpower. The first reaction was a letter from Gorbachev to Qadhafi reported by the Tass official news agency. The Soviet commitment to the defence of Libya was restated, more in terms of a continuation of the previous weapon supplies than as direct military support in case of new attacks, not to mention retaliation for what had just happened. According to the *Washington Post*, in 1983 alone Libya had spent \$20 billion on Soviet weapons. However, while Syria, Iraq and Yemen had a formal treaty of friendship with the USSR, the same could not be said of Libya. On the contrary, during Qadhafi's last visit in Moscow in October 1985, no such agreement had been struck, probably because of the Soviet disappointment over the sale of Libyan weapons to Iran.⁹⁷

Nonetheless, as the Soviet leadership perceived it, its credibility in the Global Cold War was at stake. At the conference of the East Germany Communist Party (SED) the Party Secretary Erich Honecker had strongly criticized the attack, defining it as an act of aggression. Gorbachev, who was attending, clapped.⁹⁸ Gorbachev could not accept that the Soviets had to show restraint in the Third World when at the same time the US was on the offensive. At the Politburo meeting of 15 April the chairman lambasted the Reagan administration: 'We just cannot work with this gang. Shevardnadze will not go to Washington in May.... We should drop hints that we will not be able to solve serious problems with this administration.'⁹⁹ Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze was scheduled to meet with

Shultz to set the agenda for the next summit between the leaders of the two superpowers. As Joseph Stanik commented, 'after a short interlude Gorbachev was satisfied that he had demonstrated sufficient solidarity with Qadhafi. He then agreed to reschedule the Shultz–Shevarnadze talks.'¹⁰⁰

The US strike, predictably, did not have an enthusiastic reception in Western Europe, although differences existed between the allies. The Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi stated the US decision to strike on the same day as the European Foreign Affairs Ministers' meeting 'did not take into due account the value of the European–American partnership'. The conservative French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, speaking in the French Senate, deplored the 'escalation of terrorism' but remarked that the US retaliation 'itself [revived] the chain of violence'. The Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzales clarified that his country had not been asked for over-flight rights but if it had, it would have said no. The *New York Times* reported that according to French policy analysts the refusal of the use of French airspace had stemmed more from the desire to preserve French 'freedom of action in the Middle East' than from mere opposition to the strike itself. Germany had a more nuanced position: Chancellor Helmut Kohl criticized the use of force but said he 'understood' the American response which he significantly defined as a 'a preventive strike against a further escalation of terrorism'. Kohl confirmed that the German government was in possession of clear evidence of Libyan responsibility in the bombing in West Berlin.¹⁰¹

The fact of the matter was that the Libyan policy of the Reagan administration had diverged from the policy of its European partners since 1981, with the notable exception of the Franco-American cooperation in Chad. The US had renounced seeking a factual European cooperation in its decision to escalate the military confrontation with Qadhafi and had sought only to obtain over-flight rights for its unilateral action. As the Italian Foreign Affairs Minister Andreotti sardonically remarked in late March after the confrontation in the Gulf of Sidra, 'when an action is unilateral, maybe it is a matter of good manners not to embroil other nations by giving them advance notice'.¹⁰²

Moreover, the debate that had taken place inside the US administration over the use of force (whether pre-emptive or retaliatory) against terrorism was a purely American one, with some Israeli link. The Europeans had not been involved and had not

walked even a single inch of that path, as they could not share the rationale behind the strike against Libya.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the debate inside the administration continued. During a press conference on 17 April, Secretary Shultz had to concede that the strike did not put American anti-terrorism policy on a 'automatic pilot' that would react militarily to each single terrorist attack. More significantly, in light of what would happen in the following months, he stated that 'if a coup [in Libya] takes place, that's all to the good'. Finally, he revealed that the Soviets had been told in advance not exactly of the strike but of 'the nature of the problem'.¹⁰³

His *post facto* narrative of the strike defines it as a model and as a personal victory. When recalling his meeting with Reagan the day after the attack, Shultz wrote in his memoirs that both agreed that the US had

emphatically put down a marker that the United States was ready and able to take military action against states that perpetrated terrorism. We had come a long way since the initial reaction to my speech at the Park Avenue Synagogue (...). By midyear of 1986 I felt that our war against terrorism and the policy that informed it were taking shape in an effective way.¹⁰⁴

Shultz was partially right: with El Dorado Canyon the United States had, for the first time, hit a state that sponsored terrorism. Moreover, American public opinion was behind the administration. A *CBS–New York Times* opinion poll found that 77 per cent of Americans approved the raid and the overall support for Reagan's foreign policy rose from 51 per cent to 76 per cent.¹⁰⁵ Qadhafi was certainly experiencing some internal troubles, on which many inside the administration would speculate and elaborate in the following months. Europeans had certainly reacted and most countries had realized that a middle-of-the-road position between Washington and Tripoli was untenable.¹⁰⁶ This awareness, however, did not imply that the Western Europeans would follow the military path that had been picked by the US, given the fact that they had been reluctant even to approve economic sanctions and had in effect just approved diplomatic and security measures. Shultz's most significant achievement was in purely doctrinal and political terms: for the first time the word pre-emption had been part of US policy toward terrorism and had been used to publicly legitimize the attack. A

breach had been opened in the Weinberger Doctrine on the limitation of the use of force.

Contrary to Shultz, the secretary of defence and other members of the administration did not hide their scepticism on the political use of the strike: as reported by the *New York Times*, Weinberger had commented that the strike against Libya was 'a decision that we did very reluctantly, and we are very hopeful that it will send the message that terrorism of this kind has too high a cost'. Weinberger presented El Dorado Canyon as a last resort to which the United States had to look since the allies had failed to cooperate in the implementation of sanctions against Libya. 'Senior Reagan Administration officials' quoted by the *New York Times* said that 'no consensus [had] developed within the Government on how far to go in repeating such attacks to counter an expected rise in anti-American terrorism around the world'. The problem, other anonymous sources quoted by the newspaper argued, was that 'the public support that developed for the bombing of Libya would not necessarily be repeated if Washington became engaged in a regular pattern of tit-for-tat retaliatory raids'. Another anonymous State Department official explained quite bluntly that 'Libya was a relatively easy target, and we lost one F-111. Syria and Iran are more dangerous. We probably won't get away with such minimal losses.'¹⁰⁷

In some aspects, however, the strike against Libya *did* provide a model for the future: a surgical strike, using exclusively the Air Force on a precise target related to terrorism. The model strike allowed the US to use force to achieve a foreign policy goal without committing ground troops and having to devise an exit strategy. For the first time the military strike had been shown live on TV, a pattern which would become even more consistent with the first Gulf War in 1991. Moreover, the losses reported in El Dorado Canyon were quite close to the goal set by the president of striking at terrorism without having to deal with too many American body bags.¹⁰⁸

In its 28 April issue, *Newsweek* significantly titled its article about El Dorado Canyon 'A New Kind of War'. The conclusions of the article seem prophetic: 'In 11 minutes over Tripoli and Benghazi, America had swept into a new kind of war that it neither seemed to understand nor knew how to win.'¹⁰⁹

El Dorado Canyon, as a matter of fact, did not signal a definitive change in US national security strategy, rather it set an example for further use in the future. No other raids, either pre-emptive or

retaliatory, took place during the remaining part of the Reagan administration. The no-concession policy expressed with Libya went along with the 'all-concessions' policy which was being carried out in the same months with Iran. The 'new kind of war', the 'model strike' against Libya would have to wait a few more years before being put into practice again. For the moment, the strategy of the administration would be a different one: while still taking into consideration military strikes, the administration would be forced by several constraints to think about other means to put pressure on Qadhafi. Moreover, the apparent disarray of his regime in the days after the strike led many inside the administration to pursue their designs of regime change.

The last attempt at regime change

Indeed, striking against terrorist-related targets was not the only goal that a significant part of the Reagan administration, and the president himself, attached to Operation El Dorado Canyon. For some officials in the administration there was actually a second stage of the operation, namely regime change in Tripoli. This position was shared mainly by the NSC staff along with the secretary of state and the director of the CIA. Reagan, to say the least, did not like Qadhafi and would have shed no tears had his regime collapsed. The president was enthusiastic about any news of unrest in Tripoli, as he wrote in his diary on 16 April: 'A meeting with Geo[rge] S[hultz] & John P[oindester] – we're getting reports that there may be a revolution (which we would welcome) kicking up in the streets of Tripoli.'¹¹⁰ More than one official in the administration did not simply stand by waiting for Qadhafi to collapse on his own.

A Department of State memorandum titled 'Next Steps to Deter Further Libyan Terrorism' was drafted in the days after the strike. According to the memo, the Libyan internal situation was full of opportunities for regime change: there had been several rebellions in the armed forces and many officers both in the military and in intelligence were ready to turn their backs to the dictator. The memo warned that this window of opportunity could close very quickly, as soon as Qadhafi regained control of the situation.

Therefore, the US had to move quickly, choosing between two options: conducting feints against Tripoli 'to heighten the sense of threat within the city and maintain the perception of Qadhafi's vulnerability' was the first option while the second was, assuming

that Qadhafi was located at Sebha, to launch ‘an airstrike against his residence and command facility’.¹¹¹

The impression supported by this kind of document was that just a little push was needed to provoke the collapse of Qadhafi’s regime, either by generating chaos and fear in the population or by directly killing the dictator. Nonetheless, the window of opportunity seemed to be closed less than ten days after the attack. The *New York Times* reported that the dictator was regularly receiving the visits of diplomats from many different countries as well as that of the Soviet ambassador. Libyan TV had showed him visiting the wounded in the hospitals.¹¹² This, however, did not stop those in the administration who pursued his overthrow.

Their plans started to be leaked to the press. According to *Newsweek*, Reagan’s Libya policy was now clear: the main goal was to get rid of Qadhafi. Targets were being reviewed for a second strike: Qadhafi’s desert hideout in Sebha (indicated in the State Department memo) was cited as one of them. CIA analysts had told the news magazine that the US could exploit Qadhafi’s psychological weaknesses (‘midlife crisis, depression, troubles tolerating failures’) by harassing him with military action and psychological warfare. The focus was now on Qadhafi’s person, rather than on Libya’s policies: in analysing the terrorist threat, the Reagan officials anonymously quoted by *Newsweek* down-played the so-called ‘root-causes’ of terrorism while one ‘top official’ said clearly that ‘the demise of Kaddafi is an end in itself’.¹¹³ As Netanyahu said, the ‘root cause of terrorism is terrorists’ and so the rationale seemed to be that if one killed terrorists and those who sponsored them one could count on eliminating terrorism as a whole.

Direct assassinations, however, could not be used against terrorists and terrorist-sponsors as Israel was doing. Assassination was ruled out as an official US policy by President Ford in the wake of the reports by the Senate’s Church Committee that highlighted the officially sanctioned efforts to kill Castro and Lumumba. In 1981, Reagan had signed Executive Order 12333 restating clearly that ‘no person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination’.¹¹⁴ Having ruled out assassinations, two other options were left out for examination: a new conventional strike against Qadhafi and a more complex strategy involving psychological warfare.

The former presented both political and practical problems. Politically, there was a lack of consensus inside the administration on new strikes which had surfaced in the press in the days after the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi.

Practically, as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted in a memo to James Stark and Oliver North, this time the F-111s would not be available, thus sharply reducing the firepower available.^{[115](#)} After the strike, Margaret Thatcher emphasized that in allowing the use of British bases, Great Britain had not given a blank cheque. 'Not only had she not given a blank check', noted Martin and Walcott, 'she had quietly told the Reagan administration not to ask again.'^{[116](#)}

Further advice for military restraint came from an assessment of the Soviet reaction to a possible intensification of the confrontation with Libya that the former US ambassador in Moscow Jack Matlock produced for John Poindexter in late April:

So far, despite the cancellation of Shevarnadze's scheduled visit in May, the Soviets have indicated that they want to keep the Libya problem from completely derailing US–Soviet dialogue. Nonetheless, if the Libyan confrontation escalates, they may fear a loss of face in the Third World – particularly in the Middle East and feel compelled to take further actions.^{[117](#)}

The alternative option focused on the use of psychological warfare and was discussed in a memo to Richard Armitage, drafted three days after the strike by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Pelletreau. According to him, the dictator was very vulnerable to an uprising in the Army and could count only on his personal security apparatus. Pelletreau therefore suggested:

We have an opportunity to exploit these circumstances, in a very simple and unrisky fashion, which will add to his vulnerability and hopefully promote further confusion. By use of disinformation and the Press, we may be able to, in effect, remove one or more of Qadhafi's key security or military officers. However, it will be Qadhafi himself, who out of fear will eliminate these officers from his staff.

The details of Pelletreau's plan are still classified but we know that the idea was welcomed at least by two top officials in the administration since it was handwritten on this same memo 'Fred

[Iklè] and I like this a lot!!' with John Poindexter's signature.¹¹⁸ Fred Iklè was the under-secretary for defence.

Indeed, the idea of regime change gained ground despite Qadhafi reappearing only ten days after the strike. The US intelligence gave conflicting signals denying on the one hand that his overthrow would bring any good to the superpower while, on the other hand, predicting that he would fall soon. A CIA report in April had predicted two possible outcomes, both presenting risks for the US: either a military government which would have to prove its anti-Western stance to 'dispel the inevitable suspicions at home and abroad that the US put it in power' or an 'extremist-dominated government that could become an even greater threat to US interests than the Qadhafi regime'.¹¹⁹ Still, in the following weeks, Casey's CIA fuelled the perception that Qadhafi's hold on power was not as solid as in the past: a mid-July memo predicted that his 'chances for political survival, (...) are only slightly better than even through the end of the year' and therefore 'additional US military action, particularly if it focused on attacking Jamahiriyah Guard facilities and other symbols of regime support, would encourage potential plotters to try to oust him'. This memo did not rule out the psychological warfare option either, saying that 'short of another military strike, a conviction that Qadhafi is losing control could prompt increased infighting among members of his inner circle'.¹²⁰

Actually, according to St. John, the raid had rallied 'revolutionary elements' behind Qadhafi and his regime. The dictator had seized this opportunity and strengthened the 'revolutionary committees', an event which also the CIA had reported. These committees were watchdog organizations first established in 1976–1977 which were now used to silence any opposition. Predictably, on the other hand, 'the relative impunity with which the raids were executed thoroughly demoralized and discredited the Libyan armed forces, the institution the Reagan administration had counted on to force change in Libya'. Qadhafi, therefore moved to abolish the 'formal military hierarchy and to replace it with a vaguely-defined people's army'. The military headquarters were relocated in the desert, far from Tripoli and less dangerous in case of a new coup attempt. In March 1987, several dissenting members of the army would escape to Egypt. Finally, the exiled opposition became, in the eyes of many Libyans, a pawn of the US and was therefore greatly discredited with the Libyan public opinion.¹²¹

These were of course long-term trends which might not have been evident when the CIA report was drafted, but it is also possible that they had been down-played by the US intelligence which greatly responded to a globalist political agenda during the Reagan years.¹²² The intelligence did not recognize that, in fact, the Reagan policy that led to the strike might have helped to change Qadhafi's policies but had also damaged the very forces on which the US could count in case of regime change: the dissenting military and the exiled opposition. However, this failure was still not evident in the summer of 1986 and the discussion of the programme for regime change in Libya went on.

The plan evolved during the summer and led to an NSPG meeting on 14 August which approved new actions against Qadhafi. In an article in the *Washington Post's* 2 October issue, Bob Woodward described a two-fold strategy: on the one hand, conducting military man-oeuvres in the Mediterranean to give Qadhafi the impression that a new strike was imminent; on the other hand, a plan of orchestrated leaks to the press which would strengthen this idea.¹²³ While strong evidence exists of the first component,¹²⁴ the second element is confirmed only by a *Wall Street Journal* article issued on 25 August 1986¹²⁵ and by its endorsement by National Security Advisor Poindexter while Larry Speakes, Reagan's press secretary, labelled the article as 'authoritative'.

The president approached this last effort at regime change with some degree of hope. In his diary he explained his feelings about the situation: '[Qadhafi]'s got some problems & I'm pleased to say a lot of his people are unhappy with him. He's been pretty quiet but if he lets go with another terrorist act we're ready to respond immediately.'¹²⁶

A multifaceted plan based on a State Department document was discussed during the 14 August NSPG meeting. While in the previous summer not everyone had agreed with the Flower plan, now there was a more wide-spread consensus within the administration both on the necessity and on the feasibility of the plans for regime change. Reading the memorandum of conversation of the meeting, one finds only a single dissenting voice: that of Admiral Crowe, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹²⁷

The fact of the matter is that, when stories came out in the US press about the willingness of the US government to strike against the colonel, the man-oeuvres by the US Navy seemed to give exactly that impression. In other words, even in case there was no open

deception plan as described by Woodward, part of the US press had played into the administration's strategy of scaring the dictator and leading him to believe that he was going to be attacked again.

The process had been set in motion a few days after the NSPG meeting. On 20 August, Secretary of Defense Weinberger described the military actions to National Security Advisor Poindexter. Manoeuvres had been carefully planned to give Qadhafi the impression of an ongoing build up. Also, the exercise Sea Wind, carried out jointly with the Egyptians, was 'a dissimilar air combat exercise and in itself should be noticed by the Libyans'.¹²⁸

Five days later, the presumed disinformation component of the plan started to work: a *Wall Street Journal* article claimed that 'the US and Libya' were 'on a collision course again'. According to the article,

After a lull, Colonel Qaddafi has begun plotting new terrorist attacks, US and European intelligence say. And the Reagan administration is preparing to teach the mercurial leader another lesson. Right now, the Pentagon is completing plans for a new and larger bombing of Libya in case the president orders it.¹²⁹

National Security Advisor Poindexter embraced the newspaper article and Larry Speakes, Reagan's press secretary labelled the article as 'authoritative'. Manoeuvres described in Weinberger's memo only reinforced the impression that something even bigger than the April strike was being prepared: by 1 September US aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean would grow to three, one more than when the April strike had occurred.

Actually, it would not be true to portray these Manoeuvres as meant only to scare Qadhafi: Reagan *did* want to use them for retaliation in case of a new terrorist attack. During the 14 August meeting, he had stated that 'with reference to plans, it is absolutely necessary that there be no delay in hitting Qadhafi again when the evidence links Libya to a terrorist act'¹³⁰ and in his 20 August memo Weinberger had clarified that 'at all times, the Department of Defense shall maintain a level of forces in the Mediterranean sufficient to respond promptly with a range of options, upon Presidential direction, to Libyan-supported terrorist attacks against US interests'.¹³¹

Stage two of the strategy against Libya collapsed on 2 October when Bob Woodward in the *Washington Post* disclosed his narrative

of the plan.¹³² The credibility of the administration's policy toward terrorism was questioned. The president responded with a press conference on the same day the article came out. His main message was that the administration's strategy was to make 'Mr. Gadhafi go to bed every night wondering what we might do'. He then denied having headed any meeting in which such a plan to deceive the American press could have been prepared.¹³³

The day after, it was Shultz's turn to hold a press conference at the United Nations Plaza Hotel in New York.

I know of no decision to have people go out and tell lies to the media. I think, however, that if there are ways in which we can make Gadhafi nervous, why shouldn't we? (...) There's a wonderful book that you might read that was written about World War II. And the title is a quote from Winston Churchill who said, "in time of war, the truth is so precious, it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies". And the book is about the very great effort to deceive the Nazis and to float reports of one kind or another that would make them think that something was about to happen that wasn't about to happen and so on.¹³⁴

When a journalist noted that against the Nazis there was a formal declaration of war while there was nothing of the sort against Qadhafi, Shultz gave quite an illuminating answer: 'I think that insofar as Gadhafi is concerned, we don't have a declaration of war but we have something pretty darn [*sic*] close to it.'¹³⁵ The matter of fact, however, was that the plan for regime change against Qadhafi had to be abandoned after Woodward's article.

In a matter of a month, the alternative strategy in the fight against terrorism would be dead, too. While the administration was discussing a new round of strikes against Libya and assessing the possibilities to bring about a regime change in Tripoli, its attitude toward Iran remained exactly the opposite. On 25 May, a delegation composed among others by former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, Oliver North and Howard Teicher arrived in Tehran to discuss the arms-for-hostages deal. Incidentally, this visit had been prepared by a meeting with a presumed Iranian intermediary just three days after the strike against Libya. The visit to Tehran had been a disaster and no hostage had been released.

Nonetheless, the US government had continued the Iran-Contra programme for the whole summer of 1986, the same weeks of the

escalation against Libya. The last shipment of TOW missiles to Iran through Israel (which was immediately resupplied by the US) was on 28 October. During that week, a student faction in Iran and a group within the Lebanese Hizbullah published accounts of arms-for-hostages negotiations between Iran and the US.

On 2 November, for the first time, the White House chief of staff admitted to the press that negotiations with Iran had been carried out. The day after, the Lebanese weekly *Ash-Shirā* published an account of McFarlane's May visit in Tehran.^{[136](#)}

It was the beginning of the Iran–Contra storm. In about a year, many of the protagonists of the most creative plans about Libya were either dead (Fortier and Casey) or had been indicted in the Iran–Contra investigation (North, Poindexter, McFarlane) or their name had been in some way associated with the negotiations with Iran, as in the case of Howard Teicher.

The re-shuffle inside the administration would bring to the fore people like Powell and Carlucci who supported a more nuanced, regionalist and diplomatic policy toward the Middle East. This shift is evident when reading the memorandum of conversation of the 24 February 1987 National Security Planning Group meeting on 'terrorism'. President Reagan started the conversation recognizing that

Experience has taught us there is no clear, easy solution to this problem. Dealing with it requires patience, restraint and flexibility. While there may be instances in which a military response will work, the terrorists are becoming more sophisticated and the targets for such a response are disappearing.^{[137](#)}

Even the concept of pre-emption had drastically changed its meaning,

The best approach to a terrorist incident is to prevent its occurrence – this means emphasis on good intelligence, international coordination, and a controlled approach to public handling of terrorist incidents. The more the media is given an opportunity to hype terrorism, the more likely we are to have future incidents.^{[138](#)}

The approach of the new National Security Advisor Carlucci was rather different from that of some of his predecessors:

Terrorism is not our number one priority. Terrorism is primarily a police and intelligence problem rather than a foreign policy problem. In some ways terrorism presents the same kind of problems as does organized crime. It is very hard to bring the power of the US government to bear on most terrorism situations. In the case of state supported terrorism our policy and procedures are clear. But, in most instances, we will be facing terrorism conducted by small groups whose ties to supporting nations will be unclear and tenuous (...). When we respond with a military reaction, it can play into the hands of the small terrorist organizations. We must find ways to reduce the political value of hostages to the hostage-takers.¹³⁹

When talking about ‘small groups’, Carlucci was probably thinking about the likes of the Abu Nidal Organization which had carried out both the terrorist attack that provoked the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the assaults to El Al counters in Vienna and Rome that started the process toward the raid on Libya. Untouched by America’s first pre-emptive strike against terrorism, four ANO terrorists attacked a Pan Am airliner in Karachi, Pakistan, exactly 15 years before 9/11, killing 21 and wounding 120 before the hijacking ended.¹⁴⁰

On the other hand, Carlucci could speak of terrorism as ‘not a number one priority’ also because of the temporary cooling down of Libyan-supported terrorism and of the change of strategy adopted by Qadhafi. According to the State Department, the number of terrorist incidents linked to Libya dropped from 19 in 1986 to six each in 1987 and 1988. However, as Foggy Bottom noted, Qadhafi had just become more covert and disciplined about the use of terror as an instrument of foreign policy. He had started to enlist more competent surrogates and had made his terrorist network more secure.¹⁴¹ As Ronald Bruce St. John argued, even though the Libyan policies experienced a significant shift after the strike, few of these changes

supported the objectives articulated by the Reagan administration when it launched the attack. After a period of seclusion, Colonel Qaddafi returned to the world stage with the major tenets of his policies intact. His support for state-sponsored terrorism might now be more circumspect, but he remained adamantly opposed to the international status quo

and determined to employ all of Libya's resources to overthrow it.¹⁴²

Nonetheless, the Reagan administration could be happy to close its second term without new major Libyan-sponsored attacks although 'peace' did not last long: during the transition with the Bush administration Pan Am Flight 103 was blown up over Lockerbie in Scotland. All the 259 people on board, 189 of them American, were killed as well as 11 people on the ground. Neither the US government nor the British and the French decided to use force in their reaction despite the involvement in the attack of members of the Libyan intelligence.¹⁴³

The strategy of the Bush Senior administration would focus on internationally approved sanctions, voted by the UN Security Council on 31 March 1992 and included in Resolution 748. The diplomatic isolation of Libya would start to be eased only in the late 1990s under the presidency of Bill Clinton. The Democrat president and the British Prime Minister Tony Blair would propose the institution of an international court in The Hague to be chaired by a Scottish judge. Its authority was accepted in 1999 by the Libyan government under the condition that UN sanctions be lifted. This happened only on 5 April 1999 when Qadhafi handed over to the Dutch government the two Libyan men convicted by the international court for the attack: 'Abd al-Basit al-Maqrhi and Amin Khalifa Fahima.'¹⁴⁴

In the end, rather than provoking a military reaction the Lockerbie attack (far more deadly than the one at La Belle discotheque in 1986) led to a complicated and lengthy process which involved diplomatic sticks and carrots and a punishment of those responsible through a carefully devised law-enforcement structure. As Reagan had said in the 1987 NSPG meeting, an approach which mixed 'patience, restraint and flexibility'.

Conclusions

Between the Cold War and the Global War on Terror

This book has investigated whether the policies of the Reagan administration in the Middle East were the origin of the Global War on Terror declared by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. The Reagan presidency can be considered as the breeding ground for many of the main elements of the so-called Bush Doctrine although one should never forget that the two administrations worked in two different periods and in the context of two different international systems, namely the Cold War and post-Cold War.

Some of the main features of the Bush Doctrine had already been discussed under the Reagan administration and some of them were actually experimented with: the definition of terrorism as a form of warfare, not as a criminal act; the debate over pre-emptive strikes; the attempts at executive overstretch in the name of the terrorist emergency; the emphasis on the technique (i.e. 'terrorism') rather than on the enemies that used it; the focus on networks of sponsor states rather than on transnational organizations like the Abu Nidal Organization or intra-state actors like Hizbullah; the efforts toward regime change against those regimes that were considered as sponsors of terrorists; the possibility of acting unilaterally, without the approval of international organizations or Western allies.

Nevertheless, there are often profound differences as to the concrete meaning of these ideas and policies under the Reagan and the Bush administrations. During the 1980s, though, these elements would never form as comprehensive a strategy as that envisioned in the US National Security Strategy issued in September 2002 – probably the most important document of the Bush Doctrine. Finally, wide divergences existed within the administration and probably even President Ronald Reagan would not have signed up for all of these elements in the fight against terrorism.

Some of them were implemented for the first time under his presidency, especially with the strike against Libya in 1986: this was a unilateral action, presented to the American public as a 'pre-emptive strike in self-defence' against a regime deemed to be a sponsor of terrorists which the Reagan administration had unsuccessfully planned to overthrow in the summer of 1985 with the Flower plan. The strike against Libya was also the result of the lessons that some US policy-makers, most of all the Secretary of State George Shultz, had drawn from the failure of the US intervention in Lebanon: the supposed weakness the US had shown had invited a more aggression by terrorists.

The Reagan administration inspired some of the policies of the Bush administration also because many officials worked for both. Donald Rumsfeld, for instance, was George W. Bush's secretary of defence and one of the main advocates of the Global War on Terror. Under Reagan, he worked as the president's special envoy to the Middle East and dealt with Lebanon in the aftermath of the attack against the Marines in Beirut. In his memoirs, he described the days of the attack against the Marines in Beirut as the 'beginning of the modern war waged by Islamist radicals against the United States of America'.¹ To him the lesson of Lebanon was, as Bacevich summarized, that military strength alone would guarantee security because weakness invited aggression.

To be safe, the US must be strong, with strength measured by readily available military might. Yet merely possessing military power does not suffice. Since perceptions shape reality, the US must leave others in no doubt as to its willingness to use power. Passivity invites aggression. Activism, if successful, enhances credibility.²

And terrorism, in Tehran in 1979, in Beirut in 1983 or, for that matter, in New York City in 2001, showed how an asymmetrical attack conducted by poorly equipped terrorists could pose a serious credibility threat to the superpower.

Nevertheless, the credibility that the US was seeking in the Middle East of the 1980s was not the same as that which was challenged by the attacks of 9/11. The global confrontation with the Soviet Union played a role in the shaping of Reagan's policy in the Middle East and he thought that, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the collapse of the pro-Western Iranian Shah, a show of resolve and firmness was needed in order to restore American credibility vis-à-vis its regional allies. The events of 1979,

as has been emphasized in the introduction of this book, deeply influenced American reaction to the challenges of the Middle East of the 1980s. The return to the Cold War that had occurred during Carter's last years in office actually favoured Reagan's continuity with some of the main features of American policy in the region since the beginning of the global confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Continuities with US policy in the Middle East during the Cold War

Reagan emphasized the Cold War dimension of every aspect of regional politics. He saw events and designed alliances based on the confrontation with the Soviet Union. The main security framework that his administration pursued, at least before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon made it all the more difficult, was Strategic Consensus, namely the alliance of Arab pro-Western regimes and Israel to counter the Soviet threat. Reagan and his secretary of state, Alexander Haig, thought this was feasible, and regional allies would care more about the Soviet threat than about more regional, divisive issues like the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Map 3 The Middle East today



(courtesy of Limes, Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica).

As a consequence of this continuity with patterns followed in the previous phase of the Cold War, the Reagan administration continued to see Middle Eastern actors as either ‘moderates’ or ‘radicals’: the former because of their alliance with the West, the latter because of their opposition to it. Interestingly enough, this distinction has survived to the end of the Cold War. On 21 July 2006, in a press conference about yet another war between Israel and Lebanon, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained that the region was divided between ‘violent radicals’ and ‘moderate reformists’. As Valbjörn and Bank specified,

The former were represented by the Lebanese Hizballah and the Palestinian Hamas which were charged with strangling the new democratic governments in the region. The

‘moderates’ were led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan and represented, according to Rice, a consensus of the leading regional powers that Islamist extremism constituted the key source of the Middle East’s problems.³

A classification of regional actors borne during the Cold War, and whose origins in the 1960s have been described in [Chapter 1](#), was thus used again some years after 9/11.⁴

Generally, Reagan continued the policy of aversion to revolutionary change in the region that had characterized his predecessors, including Carter in 1979. The policy that the Republican president carried out in Lebanon and Libya fits into this pattern. In Lebanon, US policy supported the central government controlled by the Maronites and provided military support and assistance which effectively allowed Amin Gemayel to delay the revision of the 1943 National Pact that assigned the majority of seats and government offices to the Christian minority. Furthermore, Qadhafi was under the spotlight not only because of his support of terrorism worldwide but also for his role in the subversion of friendly regimes in the region, Tunisia and Egypt to name but two. Incidentally, the private conversations with Arab pro-Western dictators and monarchs after the 1986 strike expressed more often relief than opposition. A cable from the State Department two days after the attack read:

GOJ [Government of Jordan] officials expressed strong private support for the action and said that they hoped we would not be deterred should Qadhafi strike again (...) Egypt criticized us mildly in its public statement, but private reaction on balance was favorable.⁵

The relevance of the fight against the Soviet Union and the division of regional actors between ‘moderates’ and ‘militants’ was not the only element of continuity between the Reagan administration and traditional US policy in the Middle East during the Cold War – and one could argue, as the aforementioned Rice statement demonstrated, that the continuity stretched as far as the presidency of George W. Bush.

As a matter of fact, the Reagan administration further developed the ‘special relationship’ with Israel. This happened not so much because of the influence of the ‘pro-Israel lobby’ but, as discussed in [Chapter 1](#), because of shared interests and goals: Israel successfully made the case that, in the fight against the USSR and its proxies, it

could be a valuable asset rather than a liability. In [Chapter 2](#), the convergence between American and Israeli policies over Lebanon has been described and the conversation between Begin and Reagan only two weeks into the Israeli invasion of Lebanon proved how much the Israeli prime minister could strike a sensible chord with Reagan by presenting it as a new step in the fight against Soviet proxies like the PLO. In the end, the US intervention in the country helped to achieve some of the goals that were initially pursued by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Minister of Defence Ariel Sharon: the removal of the PLO from Beirut; the election of Bashir Gemayel to the presidency of the Lebanese government; and the conclusion of an ambitious albeit fragile peace treaty between Israel and Lebanon. This agreement, signed on 17 May 1983, would be so important that some officials in the National Security Councils thought that it could not be dropped in order to achieve Lebanese national reconciliation, a pre-condition for the orderly extraction of the Marines from Beirut.

Further, the ideological common ground between Reagan's conservatism and the Israeli Likud right that emerged in the late 1970s had a big role in the strengthening of the alliance. During the conference held at the Jonathan Institute in Washington in June 1984, Israeli right-wing politicians like Benjamin Netanyahu and Moshe Arens would cooperate with members of the Reagan administration like George Shultz or the ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick to elaborate a new view of the fight against terrorism which has been described in [Chapter 3](#). It is precisely this vision of the war on terror that bears the most resemblance with Bush's Global War on Terror: its emphasis on terrorism as a threat to Judeo-Christian values and Western civilization, the need to wage pre-emptive war against regimes that support terrorism, the necessity of acting unilaterally and without the support of the UN if facing terrorists.

These ideas were developed to face what was perceived as a new form of warfare, namely terrorism, used by actors inspired by the rising force of Political Islam. In fact, the Middle East of the 1980s already showed some of the elements of the post-Cold War world.

A changed world: Political Islam, new wars and the 'age of risk'

The interplay between new ideas about the fight against terrorism and the continuity with past US policies in the region should be kept

in mind, especially in light of the new realities that the Reagan administration had to face in the Middle East and beyond.

The events of 1979, along with other developments in that decade that have been described in the introduction to this book, demonstrated the rise of Political Islam as a crucial actor in regional politics. This was reflected also in the political affiliation of the groups that used terrorism as a means. As David Rapoport argued, the 1980s were already part of a new 'wave' in the history of political violence: one inspired less by Marxism and secular nationalism and more by religious fundamentalism.⁶ The Islamist Revolution in Iran was the most feasible sign of the rise of Political Islam and in a matter of a few years Khomeini's ideas and policies would take from the hands of the communists the monopoly of anti-imperialism, at least as far as the Muslim world was concerned. This process was accelerated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which further undermined whatever Marxist ideological influence in the Middle East existed. As Westad wrote, this event opened a 'foodgate': an entire generation of young people turned from Marxism to Political Islam. 'In many cases the people involved stayed the same – all of the radical Islamist leaders in Afghanistan had been involved with Left-wing groups in their youth.'⁷ Lebanon and Libya would both be influenced by these developments. The Islamist Revolution in Iran served as an example to the young Lebanese Shiites who later formed Hizbullah.⁸ American policy-makers in Lebanon, however, seemed more concerned with Syrian (and thus Soviet) influence than with the shockwaves of the Islamist revolution in Iran.

Qadhafi, on his part, had from the beginning more to do with Islam than with Marxist-inspired nationalism as witnessed by the first acts of his military junta which forbade alcohol and discouraged a Western lifestyle. The three volumes of his summa theologica, the *Green Book*, only confirmed his disdain for communism and his attempt to reinterpret Islam politically. His regime in Libya was one of the most important examples of that 'Islamization of Arab nationalism' which has been described by Roy and by Burgat.⁹ This nature of Qadhafi's regime was clearly overlooked by those members of the Reagan administration that included Libya in a destabilization coalition led by the Soviet Union.

The rise of Political Islam was part of a broader change in the structure of the regional system, namely the growing relevance of 'societal actors led by Islamists' competing and fighting against the pro-Western regimes.¹⁰ Hizbullah or Hamas, to name but two of

these actors, were both created in the 1980s and proved to be crucial elements of the regional system in the 1990s and 2000s. Inter-state conflicts were still important in the Middle East of the 1980s – the Iran–Iraq war being the most important example – but they increasingly coexisted with an intra-state dimension in which a ‘societal actor’, often inspired by a particular form of Political Islam, would fight against the, often authoritarian, regime.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Shiites of Lebanon, as many other social groups in today’s Middle East and North Africa, felt dissociated from their national government that had marginalized them. Hence, the creation first of Amal and then of Hizbullah, two structures in which political empowerment was a crucial factor along with the religious discourse.¹¹

The Middle East of the 1980s was, therefore, already moving towards the complex structure that it has today: an interplay of authoritarian states and Islamist non-state actors, fighting ‘old’ and ‘new’ wars.¹² Not only actors were changing, but also the means they used against Americans and their regional allies.

One of the clearest theoretical definitions of the distinction between old and new warfare can be found in Münkler’s work on *The New Wars*. The model for ‘old wars’ were ‘the inter-state wars in Europe from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth century’.

This form of warfare [was] based upon the concentration of forces in space and time. War was both declared and concluded in accordance with certain rules. It therefore had a precise definition in time, beginning with the declaration of war and ending with the peace settlement (...). It is this model of inter-state conflict which still essentially shapes our idea of war: that is, a contest between soldiers fought in accordance with codified laws of war. Only if some acts are not permitted in war can there be talk of war crimes that must be punished.¹³

On the contrary, the course of the ‘new wars’ is determined ‘by the dispersion, not the concentration of forces in space and time, usually in accordance with the principles of guerrilla warfare’. The decisive battle never takes place in the ‘new wars’, which lack a clear beginning as well as a clear end: indeed, rather than a decisive peace agreement, there is usually a ‘peace process’ in which actors are gradually induced to behave differently from the past. In these new

conflicts, 'there is no time or place where all the threads converge and decisive result is sought'.¹⁴

As Mary Kaldor has argued, terrorism is indeed one form of 'new war'. In her definition, 'new wars' are beyond classic warfare, organized crime and wide-spread violations of human rights because they include some of the features of all of these situations. While in the 'old wars' the main goal was to conquer territory, the main aim of those who fight in the 'new wars' is to control the population through hatred and terror.¹⁵

Münkler's and Kaldor's conceptual frameworks partially overlap with that of Christopher Coker in *War in an Age of Risk* where he stresses the evolution of war towards a never-ending management of risk and security. To draw a distinction from the past – which he clearly identifies with the Cold War order – Coker emphasizes the difference between identifiable threats of the past (missile gaps or the nuclear balance for instance) and general, unknown risks of the present; the substitution of states with non-state actors or rogue regimes as the main foes; the collapse of international regimes such as the non-proliferation treaty and the emergence of a 'global disorder' which can only be managed, never fully pacified.¹⁶

9/11 did indeed force us to recognize that everything had changed. Homeland security is not national security; the defence of the citizen is much harder than the defence of the state. Unlike states, non-state actors cannot be deterred. We have also been forced to think seriously about pre-emptive strikes, for non-state actors may be more dangerous than states and rogue regimes may be more dangerous still. Instead of a cold war marked by armistices as well as periods of détente and co-operation, we have entered a world in which we may find ourselves permanently denied peace of mind.¹⁷

Münkler's, Kaldor's and Coker's books were all written having in mind either the events of 11 September 2001 or the wars in the Balkans and Caucasus of the 1990s and one should be careful not to extend to the 1980s all of the features of 'new wars' that they describe.¹⁸ The process, however, did start in the 1980s as the United States reached a level of military might which could not be paralleled by neither a single rival (in fact, the Soviet Union was declining and would eventually disappear in 1992) nor a coalition of other nations. This 'asymmetry of global political constellations' as

Münkler argued, has increasingly made the recourse to asymmetrical warfare, of which terrorism is one form, more and more convenient. While the 'impotence of military apparatuses in the face of asymmetrical strategies was first brought home to the United States during the Vietnam War', Lebanon in the 1980s and then Somalia in the 1990s exposed even further the United States' vulnerability to asymmetrical warfare.

The message from Beirut and Mogadishu, eagerly taken up by the enemies and opponents of the USA, was that the world's mighty superpower was vulnerable – especially when it was fought on other fields and with other means than those traditionally associated with war.¹⁹

The message that the Reagan administration got from Lebanon, as described in [Chapter 3](#), was different and not univocal: George Shultz thought that, in order to win asymmetrical conflicts, the United States had to be more willing to use pre-emptively military force; Caspar Weinberger, with his Doctrine, sought to avoid situations in which the United States would be faced again with asymmetrical threats and civil wars. Thanks also to the escalation of terrorist attacks against Americans during 1985, George Shultz would partially convince Reagan of the utility of using pre-emptive force against Libya in 1986 but this would by no means set the administration's policy on 'the automatic pilot' as the secretary of state himself would admit.²⁰ If Libya was a 'new kind of war' as an headline from the *Newsweek* read in its aftermath,²¹ this was less a model for the new War on Terror than for surgical strikes using the Air Force and causing few or no American victims. The 'model strike' allowed the US to use force to achieve a foreign policy goal without committing ground troops and having to devise an exit strategy.²² A pattern which would be used again, for instance, in the Balkan wars of the 1990s or in the international intervention in Libya in 2011.

Furthermore, with the 1986 US bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi, for the first time the military strike had been shown live on TV, a development which would be even more apparent with the first Gulf War in 1991. This spectacularization of war, however, would make terrorism all the more attractive through the years: the 'image warfare', as Münkler argued, 'considerably increased the effectiveness of terrorist strategies'.²³ The goal of terrorists, indeed, was not so much to kill many people but rather to have many people watching and being scared.²⁴

As a matter of fact, the ‘Shultz Doctrine’ was partially implemented with the strike on Libya in 1986 but never became the official policy of the administration. National Security Decision Directive 138, issued in 1984 and discussed in [Chapter 3](#), had widened the range of options available to US policy-makers to fight terrorism, including the use of military force. The Task Force chaired by Vice President Bush in 1985 had not brought the discussion any further and ambiguities remained as to, for instance, what ‘pre-emptive strikes’ meant. In the autumn of 1986, as described in [Chapter 4](#), the Iran–Contra scandal brought to the fore officials less willing to use force against terrorism and less convinced of its relevance. As Reagan himself concluded during a meeting of the National Security Council in 1987, ‘While there may be instances in which a military response will work, the terrorists are becoming more sophisticated and the targets for such a response are disappearing.’²⁵ Not by chance, no other military strikes against terrorists and their sponsors would take place neither during the Reagan administration nor in the aftermath of the Lockerbie terrorist attack in 1989.

The lessons of the 1980s, however, would bear fruit in the 2000s. The US withdrawal from Somalia in 1993 after reporting 18 victims in a battle with a local militia further convinced Bin Laden and al-Qa’ida that the US was vulnerable to ‘new wars’. This would in turn spur him to declare war on the US in 1996 and eventually to organize the 9/11 attacks. As Lawrence Freedman wrote, ‘Bin Laden remarked on how those who had fought in Somalia had been surprised by the “low spiritual morale” of the Americans. He noted how “the largest power on earth” left “after some resistance from powerless, poor, unarmed people”.’²⁶

American policy-makers, on their part, in their reaction to the events of 9/11 would be so much inspired by the ‘Shultz Doctrine’ of the 1980s that the second of Reagan’s secretaries of state would actually be defined as the ‘father of the Bush doctrine’.²⁷

The Reagan legacy and Bush’S War on Terror

The attacks against the US on 11 September 2001 produced enormous reverberations in American foreign policy of the ensuing decade. They were, as Finlan wrote, ‘breathhtakingly asymmetric’ overcoming America’s defences that were designed for traditional methods of attack: those of the ‘old wars’ or those of the terrorist bombings of the past.²⁸ These attacks highlighted other innovative

aspects of the post-Cold War international system: they were carried out by a transnational group, not by a state, and they were rooted in the increasing globalization of politics, of the economy and of communications: 'the plotters', Paul Pillar wrote, 'took advantage of the ease of movement and efficient long-distance communications associated with globalization as they travelled, transferred funds, and issued instructions over thousands of miles'. Together with these very modern features, the terrorism carried out on 9/11 used unconventional weapons, though not the likes of those usually associated with this term: no chemical or nuclear weapons were used by al-Qa'ida which instead relied on 'pilot training and box-cutter knives'.²⁹ Again, as the 1981 Special National Intelligence Estimate on Soviet Support for terrorism had concluded, terrorism proved lethal by using simple and relatively cheap weapons available to small groups of individuals.³⁰

The most important American policy document that arose in reaction to these attacks was the National Security Strategy of 2002 which highlighted in its foreword the 'position of unparalleled military strength' of the United States.³¹ Exactly the 'asymmetry of global political constellations' that had made terrorism a relevant means to oppose the US was cited by the US president to create a new balance of power that would preserve American primacy in the new environment.

The thrust of the Bush Doctrine was summarized by Robert Jervis into four elements: the importance 'of a state's domestic regime in determining its foreign policy' and thus the need to carry out regime change and to fight 'tyrants' along with the terrorists that they support; the need to use 'preventive war' against the new threats that emerged with 9/11; the 'willingness to act unilaterally when necessary'; the importance of asserting American primacy in world politics in order to ensure peace and stability.³²

While these elements do resemble the discussion about terrorism in the Reagan years it is necessary to analyse them more profoundly to understand what words really meant. 'pre-emptive strikes', as emphasized in [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#), were not a clear prescription during the Reagan years: pre-emption could come through air force strikes against regimes deemed to be supporters of terrorists or through covert actions against single terrorists. Moreover, as Arthur Schlesinger argued, there is a clear difference between pre-emption and prevention:

The Bush administration prefers to talk about ‘pre-emptive war’, and too many have followed its example. The distinction between ‘pre-emptive’ and ‘preventive’ is well worth preserving. It is the distinction between legality and illegality. ‘pre-emptive’ war refers to a direct, immediate, specific threat that must be crushed at once; in the words of the Department of Defense manual, ‘an attack initiated on the basis of incontrovertible evidence that an enemy attack is imminent’. ‘Preventive’ war refers to potential, future, therefore speculative threats.³³

Robert Singh concludes that, ‘while it remains unclear whether the leading administration figures’ references to pre-emption were deliberate or inadvertent’, the invasion of Iraq was ‘as clear an instance of preventive war as possible’ and therefore under the UN Charter it was illegal.³⁴

To avoid an evident breach of international law, the Reagan administration had gone to great lengths to describe its attack against Qadhafi as, yes, a pre-emptive strike, but in ‘self-defence’.³⁵ This had been done, as described in [Chapter 4](#), also to make it easier for Margaret Thatcher to convince her reluctant cabinet to support the US. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration had a ‘smoking gun’ which allowed it to link its strike over Libya with Libyan sponsorship of the bombing at the La Belle discotheque in West Berlin: the intercepts of communications between the regime in Tripoli and the attackers in Berlin.

Unilateralism had also been a feature of Reagan’s policy in the Middle East, especially against Libya. Attempts were made to have the cooperation of Western Europeans, although this proved very hard right from the beginning of the confrontation with Qadhafi in 1981. Unilateralism, however, would also be theorized as in NSDD 179 which stated that, since ‘Terrorists are waging a war against, not only the United States, but all civilized society’, the United States could ‘act unilaterally when necessary’. In practical terms, however, a night of strikes against Libya was about as unilateral as the United States could afford to be during the Cold War. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), not only had many Western European governments been disturbed by the unilateral attack against Qadhafi but also the supportive Margaret Thatcher had let it be known that she did not want to be asked for support again.

The Libyan dictator had also been targeted for regime change and not just once: the first time with the Flower plan in 1985 and the second time in the aftermath of the 1986 strike. Regime change in the Reagan years, however, had little to do with the Theory of Democratic Peace which postulates that democracies do not wage war at each other, hence the more democracies in the world, the more peace and stability. The influence of this theory in the Bush administration led Robert Singh to describe some of its members as 'democratic imperialists'.³⁶

Reagan, on the contrary, had been impressed by Jeanne Kirkpatrick's article on 'double standards' in which she argued that the Carter administration had been wrong to chastise pro-Western dictators in the face of the Marxist threat and of communist totalitarian regimes.³⁷ Reagan's policy in the Middle East would be of staunch support for whatever government was considered as pro-Western: as he said to Begin about American support for Egypt's Hosni Mubarak or weapons to Saudi Arabia, 'A new era has now fragmented the region between those who are pro-Soviet and those who fear the Soviets.'³⁸

Only in the last years of the Reagan administration, and not in the Middle East, would the policy start to shift: the Filipino dictator Marcos, a pro-Western autocrat, being one of the first cases. Interestingly, the official who, according to James Mann, had promoted this partial change of policy was the leading neoconservative Paul Wolfowitz, then assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and successively Donald Rumsfeld's deputy at the Department of Defense under President Bush.³⁹

Both the Reagan and the Bush administrations thought that regimes supporting terrorists were linked into a network: what Shultz called 'League of Terror' bears many similarities to Bush's 'axis of evil'. Nevertheless, while the list of countries in the 'League' and in the 'Axis' is similar, the view during the Reagan years was that this was all coordinated and supported by the Soviet Union. This was a consequence of the basic belief, underscored more clearly in the first years of the administration, that terrorism was a tool in the Global Cold War, not a technique used by new political actors.

As a matter of fact, the emphasis, both in the Reagan and in the Bush presidencies, was placed on 'terrorism' as an enemy in itself rather than as a technique of warfare used by different enemies. As Finlan warned, though, 'the declaration of a "war on terror" after

9/11 certainly runs the risk of an almost infinite conflict because it raises the question of whether an abstract noun can be defeated'.⁴⁰ In fact, this definition of the struggle allowed Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to say that 'Our challenge in this new century is a difficult one. [It is] to defend our nation against the unknown, the uncertain, the unseen and the unexpected.' As Coker concluded,

The logic of risk colonization since 9/11 has fundamentally changed traditional concepts of security. It has led to the concept of a long or never-ending war, an astrategic, tactically driven risk management policy which locks the west into an endless process of risk management.⁴¹

If terrorism, therefore, is an undefined enemy and if the US fights a war which is actually 'an endless process of risk management', then also the powers to be entrusted in the executive branch cannot be defined and limited. The 'risk management' approach, according to Coker, implies an over-stretch of executive and government powers, not only on public life but also on private life.⁴²

The Shultz Doctrine clearly implied the expansion of executive powers: as the secretary of state explained in his 1984 speech at the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York, once the principle of pre-emptive strikes was accepted, there could be no time for a public debate before each strike took place. The people would have to trust the government, which was fighting a climactic struggle for the survival of civilization. Nevertheless, with regards to the control of the executive branch over the fight against terrorism little or nothing comparable to the Bush years happened under Reagan's watch. More than with other concepts, the Reagan administration, which came just a few years after the Watergate scandal, could not be as explicit as the Bush presidency after 9/11.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the declaration of a Global War on Terror legitimized a change in the balance between the constitution, the presidency and Congress. 'Keeping America Safe' in the age of globalized terror, as Bacevich pointed out, justified claims of presidential prerogatives not only to start wars but to expand them, to engage in greater domestic surveillance, to order the abusive treatment of prisoners and to detain prisoners without trial.⁴³

This was more a voluntary surrender of Congressional powers than a presidential usurpation. On 14 September 2001 a joint resolution authorized the president 'to use all necessary and

appropriate force against those nations, organizations or persons' that had perpetrated the attacks and also called upon him 'to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States'.⁴⁴

Lawrence Freedman could rightly argue that a new 'world war' had been declared as both the United States and the terrorists who had carried out the attacks described the conflict 'in terms that suggested that the future of the international system was at stake'.⁴⁵ It was the 'state of exception' caused by this 'world war' that allowed the Bush administration to pursue goals which would have been unthinkable in the Reagan years. As Inderjeet Parmar argued, the policy pursued by the Bush administration was 'merely made more acceptable by 9/11, not made by 9/11 itself'.⁴⁶ The need to expand executive powers had been theorized in the Reagan years, but only the attacks of 11 September 2001 made it 'acceptable' to public opinion. This, along with the nature of the Cold War international system, is a crucial difference that should be kept in mind when drawing analogies between the two administrations.

Making sense of the present through the past

It is probably too early to write an historical assessment of the War on Terror under President George W. Bush: currently classified records would be crucial to determine whether public statements matched private understandings and the more or less secret aspects of this policy like renditions and covert actions would have to be fully disclosed. Not by chance, this work aimed at investigating the origins of that endeavour that can be found in the Reagan years for which declassified records do exist.

The policies of the Reagan administration in the Middle East served as a source of inspiration for those working under the presidency of George W. Bush. Two of the most important groups within his administration were the Conservative Nationalists and the more famous Neoconservatives.⁴⁷ While the former had a more realist vision centred on American national interest, the latter emphasized America's mission in the world. Both groups were convinced of the non-negotiable need to preserve American primacy, first during the Cold War and then in the Global War on Terror.

Neoconservatives advocated a moral foreign policy which would substitute negotiations with 'evil' tyrants with overwhelming military might. These people who in the 1970s opposed Détente with the Soviet Union, in the 1990s and in the 2000s supported regime change against the rogue regimes – with a special emphasis on Iraq

and Saddam Hussein.⁴⁸ The use of pre-emptive strikes advocated by Shultz and later transformed into official policy with the Bush Doctrine, gave to the executive branch the power to preserve America's primacy by eliminating all 'evil' tyrants.

Nonetheless, the Cold War mindset was crucial in Reagan's policy in the Middle East. It shaped ideas which have been used in a different international system, that of the 'age of risk'. Also, association between terrorism and Cold War totalitarianism (see for example the debate at the Jonathan Institute in 1984 that has been described in [Chapter 3](#)) has allowed transferring to this fight the same vision of a climatic struggle that was initially conceived for the fight against the Soviet Union. Ultimately, diplomacy and politics would subdue under the weight of what Andrew Bacevich has defined as the New American Militarism, since there were few negotiations to be conducted in this struggle for the survival of Western civilization.⁴⁹

The Reagan years also help us to understand two other aspects of recent US foreign policy: the strengthening of the 'special relationship' with Israel in the aftermath of 9/11 and the growing transatlantic divide. The 'Shultz Doctrine' had been elaborated in cooperation with Israeli right-wingers – incidentally, some of them still hold important positions in Israel – while the Western Europeans had mostly expressed different positions, as highlighted by their reactions to the 1986 strike against Libya. The war on terror as conceived during the Reagan years, however, did not just change America's relations with its allies.

The Reagan administration saw state supporters of terrorism as one of the key elements in the phenomenon of terrorism. Again, this was connected with the Cold War paradigm: the over-arching supporter of the 'League of Terror', the 1980s' version of the 'axis of evil', was the Soviet Union and terrorism was seen as one of its tools in the fight against the West and democracy. Already in the Reagan years, though, terrorism was carried out by transnational actors like Abu Nidal or domestic, 'societal actors' like Hizbullah. The importance of non-state actors had been already underscored by the CIA in 1976 but was neglected during the Reagan years. Nevertheless, Abu Nidal would organize the terrorist attack that provoked Israel's invasion of Lebanon while groups that would later form Hizbullah hit the US in what remained, before 9/11, the deadliest terrorist attack against Americans, eventually causing the withdrawal of the Marines from Beirut.

State-sponsorship became relevant again under the Bush doctrine, although Pillar might be partially right in saying that it was more due to 'policy-making purposes' than to any crucial role played by rogue regimes in enhancing terrorists' capabilities or inciting them to action.⁵⁰ This emphasis on states, however, was a legacy of the Cold War international system. It did not deal with the international system of the 'age of risk' where terrorists thrived not because of state support but actually for the opposite reason. As Pillar argues, it was precisely the weakness of state authority that enabled the creation of those 'safe havens' that were exploited by those transnational or 'societal actors' that had started to emerge in the 1980s.⁵¹ Iranian support was important, for instance, for the creation of Hizbullah but its success rested as well on the dissociation of the majority of Shiites from the Lebanese state, which they perceived as both unjust and ineffective.

Hizbullah's terrorism in the 1980s had many elements of what have been defined as 'new wars'. As some authors argued, many of the 'new wars' took place in countries that simultaneously had a weak state structure and were formerly part of great empires. More specifically, countries of the Middle East, North Africa, the Caucasus or the Balkans that witnessed civil wars and instability in the past 30 years were mostly all part of the Ottoman empire until the late nineteenth century.⁵² Colonialism and empires were not outdated in the years of the Cold War.

In the conclusions of his *The Global Cold War*, Odd Arne Westad argued that the Cold War was, in part, a continuation of colonialism through slightly different means. As colonialism, it centred on domination and control. The methods were also remarkably similar: giant social and economic projects, promises of modernity to the supporters of the regime and death to the opponents. In this view, the continuum of which the Cold War forms a part did not begin in 1945 but can be dated back as far as 1415 when the first Portuguese colony was founded. The Third World's 'identitarianism' – an emphasis on non-Western identity to which also Political Islam could be associated – was according to Westad a form of resistance to this 'colonial modernization'.⁵³

American policy in the Middle East during the Cold War was indeed based on the idea that the West held the monopoly over modernity. Modernization theories which have been discussed in [Chapter 1](#) and which were implemented, to a different degree, in Iran, Iraq and Libya were based on this assumption. As Daniel Lerner wrote in his *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing*

the Middle East, the premise on which these policies rested was that ‘What America is, the modernizing Middle East seeks to become.’⁵⁴ These ideas, along with Cold War concerns, were the basis for growing American involvement in the process of state-building in the Middle East and elsewhere. Unfortunately, state-building, whether carried out by Americans or by the Soviets, nearly always ended in a disaster.⁵⁵ As Douglas Little summed up, ‘Africa, Asia, and the Middle East were likely to pursue a path to the future very different from the one travelled by the United States.’⁵⁶

It is worth asking how much of this monopoly of modernity was present in the fight against terrorism under Reagan and how much existed in the Bush Doctrine. Both administrations, however, did not deal effectively with the link between the weakness of state authority and the rise of violent non-state actors – and one could argue that to date few, if any, Western governments have dealt with this issue effectively.

Finally, the events of this book can be compared to facts which follow on from the Global War on Terror. The strike against Libya in 1986 set a military precedent, namely the use of the Air Force to carry out a foreign policy goal without reporting casualties (‘a war without tears’ as Lawrence Freedman defined this kind of warfare⁵⁷) and without dealing with the issues of formal Congressional authorization and exit strategies that had so much concerned the US after Vietnam. One could argue that the use of the Air Force in Libya has eventually evolved in the so-called ‘drones war’ conducted by American unmanned aerial vehicles during the Bush years and, more extensively, under the Obama administration. Ironically, one of the countries in which the ‘drones war’ took place was Libya, this time in 2011. No public debate on these operations ever occurred in Congress, no vote took place in seven years. Needless to say, American casualties were not reported (if there were any).⁵⁸

But this is a different story, which is not to be told here and which would be difficult to write given the current absence of declassified records which instead are available for the Reagan years. That presidency, however, is crucial to understand the present: this book has tried to investigate not how much of recent American foreign policy was already there in the Reagan years but rather how much of the Reagan legacy influences current American foreign policy – and Western thinking in general – over the issue of Middle Eastern terrorism.

Notes

Introduction: revolutions

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- [4](#) E. A. Cohen, ‘World War IV: Let’s call this conflict what it is’, *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern edition), 20 November 2001, A.18; and D. Pipes, ‘Who’s the Enemy?’ *Commentary* 113 no. 1, January 2002, p. 22.
- [5](#) A.J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 179–204.
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- [8](#) F. Halliday, ‘The Middle East, the Great Powers, and the Cold War’, in Y. Sayigh and A. Shlaim (eds), op. cit., p. 20.
- [9](#) G. Kepel, *Jihad: Expansion et déclin de l’islamisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 2003, p. 193. Author’s translation from French.
- [10](#) R. Schulze, *Il Mondo Islamico nel XX secolo*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2004, pp. 225–270, Italian translation by Andrea Michler.
- [11](#) The most important example of this kind of transformation is the highly symbolical Palestinian movement, see Kepel, op. cit., pp. 221–253.
- [12](#) On the White Revolution, see M.E. Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War*, Harlow: Longman, 1996, pp. 330–331.
- [13](#) M. P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind. The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2007, p. 300.
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