

From Beirut to Bin Laden

Instead of maintaining its independence of action in the Mideast, the U.S. has backed one dangerous regime after another.

By James Webb

IN THE LATE SUMMER and early fall of 1983, I spent time as a journalist in Beirut, covering the Marine peacekeeping force that in October of that year lost more than 240 dead in a suicide bombing at the Beirut airport. The governing structure of Lebanon in the 1980s closely resembled that of Iraq today: a weak central government surrounded by powerful, armed militias engaged in a many-sided civil war, with a stronger nation—in this case Syria rather than Iran—looking menacingly over its shoulder.

On any given day in Beirut, one never knew who was going to shoot at whom, or for what reason. Travelers could not even fly into the Beirut airport in mid-1983. The United States Marines were defending it on the ground, but the Druze militia had pockmarked the airfield with artillery shells and kept it under continuous surveillance from the nearby Chouf Mountains, making the airfield unusable. To reach Beirut, our television crew took a flight from Athens to Larnaca, Cyprus, where at midnight we boarded a reeking old steamer that crossed an ocean passage in the darkness, bringing us to the Beirut seaport. The steamer was packed with a mix of Lebanese and international customers, and the old man who operated the small ship was very happy because the closed airport in Beirut was bringing him a bonanza. We sat all night in his dining area, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, and eating his homemade sandwiches. It

seemed as though he was selling the beer and sandwiches for five of anything—five francs, five dollars, five marks. There was no alternative, and the food in Beirut would be just as random, so we were glad to pay.

In the early morning, we docked at the port of Beirut. Just next to us, a French military ship was unloading fresh troops, weapons, and supplies. A British army unit was also in Beirut, just off a tour in Northern Ireland. An Italian army unit also had joined the four-nation peacekeeping effort. The French, who along with our Marines would suffer a serious suicide bombing attack in October, were all business as their ship unloaded its cargo. A platoon of their soldiers had set up in a hasty perimeter, lying on the dirt-packed berms above the water's edge. Even though the port activities and the customs house near the harbor seemed to bustle with normalcy, their rifles were pointed toward the city.

It sprawled before us, brightly colored, sand-burnt, many parts of it broken into pieces by years of conflict. From the water's edge inward, Beirut was a place of latent chaos, scarred with memories of violence. The streets leading from the port opened up into the infamous Green Line, a dividing street between different ethnic and religious sects where a once beautiful part of the city was now obliterated, cratered, and ruined. The Green Line was haunting, lifeless and silent. Driving through it, I

was reminded of the pictures I had seen of Dresden following the Allied bombings of World War II.

Beirut, once the playground of the Arab world, was now living inside a conundrum, still pulsing with energy yet powerless to recapture its former stability and charm. Various Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Druze militias and submilitias, and factions and subfactions, were slugging it out with a vicious randomness in a civil war that had begun eight years before. And the Syrians, who have historically considered Lebanon part of Greater Syria, had a habit of rising like armed referees every now and then from over the horizon to join the fray.

In one typical engagement that I covered, a United States Marine outpost was brought under fire by a Druze militia position after the Druze had been shot at by Lebanese army soldiers from a checkpoint on a nearby road. Eventually, a Syrian unit began firing heavy machine guns at both the Marines and the "Lebs" from a position on the far side of a distant string of hills. All the while, in the far distance, the Christian Phalange militia was engaged in an artillery duel with another unit that we were unable to identify. Artillery shells hammered into six-story apartment buildings, smacking their outside walls and making sprays of dust. The lights were out inside the buildings. The occupants had already fled to return only if there were to happen, somehow, to be a ceasefire.

What was the reason for all of this? Borrowing a thought from my frustrating days as an unwilling engineering student, I began to call it cultural entropy. An entire region had fallen into a pattern of destructive behavior, just as all the water in a soon to be boiling pot reaches the same temperature no matter where the flame touches the pot. The only way to avoid the heat was to somehow leave the pot, and in fact the brain drain of successful professionals from Lebanon, particularly among its Christian population, was palpable. But for those who stayed, this was simply the reality of the Middle East. Unexplainable violence was the norm.

And so all of that shooting was just another random afternoon in Beirut. As one Marine succinctly put it, "It never pays to get involved in a five-sided argument."

Another Marine was even more precise. The Beirut air was constantly filled with dust, so heavy that the Marines had largely stopped smoking cigarettes. The horizon was filled with destruction in a city that had not too long before been viewed as one of the crown jewels of the Middle East.

"Sir," he said, "It's time for us to get out of here. This is the armpit of the world."

All right, I'll be honest. He didn't say "armpit."

Journalism has its flaws, particularly when one comes into a situation with a preconceived political bias. But good journalism, coming from honest, perceptive journalists, has a far better track record with respect to the challenges in the Middle East than do the policies of our political leaders. Sometimes it is easier to comprehend harsh realities when one is able to observe them closely without direct involvement and without having to feel accountable for their end results. And sometimes politicians are so blinded by their policy positions and by the filtering process through which they

receive their information that they will never fully understand the realities of the problems they are trying to fix.

In any event, I came away from this experience with a strong feeling that the United States should tread softly in the Middle East, that it should never give up its military or diplomatic maneuverability by occupying territory in a region so fraught with multilayered conflicts.

As it was in Beirut, so is it in the Persian Gulf. By 1987, the Iran-Iraq War had dragged on for years, a furious bloodletting that Cap Weinberger once dismissed as "a war between the worst regime in the world and the second-worst regime in the world—and you can take your pick as to which is which." But with major allies in the Sunni Arab world—including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain,

and Egypt—concern grew regarding the prospects of an ever more powerful theocratic and fundamentalist Iran. Not unlike what one hears in some defense circles today, a movement took hold to develop a "pan-Arab" strategy that might over time seal off and contain Iranian expansionist desires. Unfortunately, as part of this strategic shift, the Reagan administration abandoned American neutrality and tilted toward Iraq.

that had taken power in 1979, something needed to be done to convince Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other friendly regimes that despite these shipments we had not secretly tilted toward Iran. Thus began a cavalcade of counterintuitive but nonetheless connected events that resulted, finally, in the strategic paralysis of the United States military trapped inside the unending tribal warfare of Iraq. Is the Middle East byzantine? Is it unpredictable, filled with diplomatic U-turns and clever, vicious ethnic ambushes? Does it make sense for the United States to have directly injected itself into the daily workings of a region where violence is the very emblem of its history and where political loyalties shift like the powdered sand?

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I have my own theories, but the actual diplomatic journey toward this overt tilt is still historically unclear. Suffice it to say that in February 1987, the Reagan administration announced a policy whereby Kuwaiti oil tankers would be "reflagged" as American vessels, technically making them American commer-

Well, yes, yes, and no.

Most Americans remember that Iraq attempted to annex Kuwait in the summer of 1990, which led to our involvement in the first Gulf War. What many forget is that during the Iran-Iraq War, the government of Kuwait was the strongest supporter of Iraq and that it also happened to be the major friend of the Soviet Union in that region. By reflagging the Kuwaiti tankers and calling them our own, the American government not only provoked Iran but overtly tilted toward Iraq. This caused Iran to respond by escalating its rhetoric and intensifying its efforts to interfere with Kuwaiti shipping. In May 1987, as these efforts were gaining steam, an Iraqi air-

minesweepers, CIA helicopters on covert “black” missions, and barges sitting in the middle of the Gulf, to be used as platforms to counteract Iranian Boghaminer patrol boats.

From a classical strategic perspective, this new policy made absolutely no sense at all. As secretary of the Navy, I found myself near enough to observe the circus but because of the legal and traditional restrictions of my job too far removed to affect the operational environment. Finally, on Aug. 7, 1987, I wrote a memorandum to Secretary Weinberger laying out my concerns with this approach, consistent with the strategic theories I had advocated in the past and complemented by the on-the-

Second, it is difficult for many of our military leaders to see how we can evince a “clear intention of winning” when the nature of our commitment has afforded us no measurement of what it would take to “win.” It is dramatically clear that we have offered up a myriad of ways to lose in this endeavor: any time a tanker is hit, any time we fail to be fully successful against an attack on one of our warships, any time a bomb goes off in an airport or a government official is assassinated, we will be perceived as having lost. There is no definitive action that will be accepted as evidence we have won, or when our commitment will be viewed as having been successfully completed. ...

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We have not to this point clearly defined our political and military objectives ... and as a result we have no way of structuring our missions so that we can claim our military forces have accomplished these objectives. The issue is made more difficult by the political volatility of the region, and by our having lost the tactical initiative when we agreed to re-flag and escort Kuwaiti tankers. ...

craft attacked and severely damaged an American frigate, the USS *Stark*, killing 37 American sailors. Ostensibly, the Iraqi pilot thought that the *Stark* was an Iranian ship. On the other hand, rumor had it that Saddam Hussein rewarded the pilot with a new car when he landed back home in Iraq.

ground realities I had experienced while in Beirut. The memorandum reflected my decision to go on the record regarding the dangers of picking sides in a no-win region, with ramifications for the policies that later resulted in the invasion of Iraq.

In part, I wrote:

Despite the attack on the *Stark*, and despite the ugliness of both regimes in the Iran-Iraq confrontation, the shift continued. We had chosen sides. Diplomatically, the Iraqis told American officials that they needed better intelligence on American naval operations in order to prevent future miscalculations. A defense official was soon sent to Baghdad to provide the Iraqis with help. Wild ideas started sprouting like toadstools in the Pentagon. This was a war—or, well, something like a war—and everybody wanted to play. The region began filling up with Special Forces units,

Freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf is beyond doubt a vital national interest. But it is not clear why it became vital to our national interest to re-flag Kuwaiti tankers, thus forcing a freedom of navigation issue that had not existed beforehand. ... In fact, as we learned in Beirut, it could be argued that it was actually against our national interest to become directly involved in a many-sided argument that has been going on for a couple thousand years.

The optimum scenario would be a multinational naval force of reduced size, dedicated to a mission of preserving international waterways for commercial use and committed to using force to defend against the Iranians or anyone else who resumes attacks on shipping. This of course means the Iraqis as well, who as you recall have gained the most in this endeavor. ... Our commitment is to the free transit of all ships ... and not simply to tilt toward the Iraqis. If our desire had been an Iraqi tilt we should not be doing this at all.

But directly involved we now were, and thus began a mind-boggling roller-coaster ride that has yet to end. I left the Pentagon in February 1988, as the squabbles in the Persian Gulf continued. By that summer, the USS *Vincennes*, from some accounts operating in violation of international law inside Iranian waters and perhaps attempting to draw the Iranian military into a fight, accidentally shot down a commercial Iranian Airbus, killing hundreds of Iranian civilians.

True to the seesaw traditions of the region, by the summer of 1990, Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait, announcing his intention to annex his former ally. The United States made yet another return to the region, this time readying to fight the same country that it had tilted toward three years earlier. I initially supported President George H.W. Bush's decision to send troops into the region in order to stand down the Iraqis, but I did so with different premises and a different logic from those who were pushing for an immediate war. This was the third time since 1961 that Iraq had moved on Kuwait. One of those moves had been defused diplomatically by the British, the other by the Soviet Union, a friend of both countries. With the right form of diplomacy it seemed predictable that, as with the other two ventures, a deal would be cut between the two countries and Iraq would soon withdraw.

Instead, the diplomatic rhetoric escalated on a daily basis. Kuwait was heavily invested in the British economy, making their government nervous about the instability the invasion had created. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher showed up in Washington, urging President Bush to be firm, as she had been during the Falklands Islands crisis eight years earlier. Bush, criticized for years as a nonassertive aristocrat, drew his now famous "line in the

There is considerable buzz in the intelligence community about the Senate Intelligence Committee "phase 2" report on Iraq released June 5. The mainstream media has focused on the Bush administration taking liberties with the truth to support the march to war. But insiders are more intrigued by whether the neocons were themselves duped, not only by the Iraqi National Congress's Ahmad Chalabi but also by a sometimes comical sting operation of the Iranian government. The oil industry and Israeli interests are often cited as being instrumental in the decision to invade Iraq. Often ignored is the fact that Iran also wanted to see a threatening Saddam Hussein overthrown and replaced by a friendly Shi'ite regime.

The Senate report stated that Pentagon officials obtained fabricated intelligence on Iraq and Iran from several Iranian exiles who could have "been used as agents of a foreign intelligence service ... to reach into and influence the highest levels of the US government." The names of the Iranians redacted from the report are apparently known to the committee's investigators. At least two of them were introduced to American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Ledeen by Manucher Ghorbanifar, an exiled Iranian arms dealer whom the CIA in 1984 labeled a "fabricator." The revelation suggests that Iran may have manipulated Ledeen, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith and his Office of Special Plans compatriots, and several like-minded officials in Vice President Dick Cheney's office by feeding them bogus intelligence on Iraq. One of the Iranians Ghorbanifar introduced to Ledeen and Pentagon Iran experts Harold Rhode and Larry Franklin in Rome in 2001 was described as a Revolutionary Guard defector, but both he and his colleague, an Iranian living in Morocco, were almost certainly double agents working for Iran. Ghorbanifar, who wanted the U.S. to invade Iraq, was probably a party to the deception.

Ghorbanifar and his "defectors" established their credibility by providing phony information on Iran as well as Iraq. They outlined on a napkin a proposal requiring \$5 million seed money to bring down the Iranian government by creating a huge vehicle jam around Tehran through "the simultaneous disruption of traffic at key intersections." Similar to Chalabi in the lead-up to Iraq, they also invented hit teams targeting U.S. troops in Afghanistan and described secret tunnel complexes criss-crossing Tehran. In subsequent meetings in 2003, the Iranians described how Saddam's WMD had been secretly moved to Iran. A gullible Ledeen, clearly convinced that the information he was being given was reliable, made sure that it wound up on the desk of his good friend Doug Feith.

The Ghorbanifar meetings were kept secret from CIA, DIA, and the State Department. U.S. ambassador in Rome, Mel Sembler, was allegedly briefed by Ledeen, though judging from the Senate report, he did not inform Washington. Sembler, a supermarket magnate and major Republican fundraiser, is a leading neoconservative who sits on the board of the American Enterprise Institute. He also headed the Scooter Libby Legal Defense Fund and founded Freedom's Watch.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a fellow at the American Conservative Defense Alliance.