



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

A Legacy of Anti-Terrorist Failure in Lebanon

by James Bovard

The Bush administration is fond of favoring tough measures against terrorists. With the Bush team cheer-leading all the way, Israel reinvaded Lebanon in July in response to Hezbollah's seizure of two Israeli soldiers. Israel and Hezbollah had been exchanging bombs and missiles for months — actually, years — prior to Israel's launching a bombing campaign that soon expanded to include much of Lebanon.

Unfortunately, neither the Israeli government nor its friends in the U.S. government appear to have learned anything from the prior Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon. As with the last time, there is a danger that U.S. military forces will be sent to Lebanon to try to assuage the chaos.

In June 1982, a terrorist organization headed by Abu Nidal (the Osama bin Laden of the 1980s) attempted to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in London. Nidal's forces had previously killed many Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) officials in numerous bomb and shooting attacks, since they considered Yasir Arafat a traitor for his stated willingness to negotiate with Israel.

Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel exploited the shooting in London to send the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) into Lebanon to crush the PLO. Yet, as Thomas Friedman noted in his book *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, “The number of Israeli casualties the PLO guerrillas in Lebanon actually inflicted [was] minuscule (one death in the 12 months before the invasion).” The Israeli invasion was originally scheduled for the previous summer but was postponed after U.S. envoy Philip Habib negotiated a cease-fire between Israel and the PLO.

Defense Minister Ariel Sharon told the Israeli cabinet that his 1982 “Operation Peace for Galilee” would extend only 40 kilometers into Lebanon. However, Sharon sent his tanks to Beirut, determined to destroy the PLO once and for all. As David Martin and John Walcott noted in their 1988 book, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War against Terrorism*, the U.S. embassy in Beirut “sent cable after cable to Washington, warning that an Israeli invasion would

provoke terrorism and undermine America's standing in the Arab world, but not a word came back."

The Palestinian Red Crescent estimated that 14,000 people, most of them civilians, were killed or wounded in the first month of the operation. When Palestinians fought back tenaciously, the IDF responded with indiscriminate bombing, killing hundreds of civilians. The American media found themselves on the front-lines, no matter where they were. The IDF bombed the buildings housing the local bureaus of the *Los Angeles Times*, United Press International, and *Newsweek*. The Israelis cut off Beirut's water and electricity supply and imposed a blockade.

The UN brokered a peace deal by which the United States and other multinational troops entered Beirut to buffer a cease-fire to allow the PLO to exit to ships that would transport them to Tunisia, which had agreed to provide a safe haven. The U.S. government signed an agreement with Arafat, pledging that U.S. forces would safeguard civilians who stayed behind:

"Law-abiding Palestinian non-combatants remaining in Beirut, including the families of those who have departed, will be authorized to live in peace and security. The U.S. will provide its guarantees on the basis of assurances received from the Government of Israel and from the leaders of certain Lebanese groups with which it has been in contact."

Once the PLO withdrew from Beirut, the U.S. troops were pulled out and put back on Navy ships.

Shortly after the U.S. troops withdrew, Lebanese president-elect Bashir Gemayel was assassinated. The IDF promptly invaded Muslim West Beirut, violating the fragile peace agreement that had been worked out with Muslim forces and the government of Syria. Prime Minister Begin declared, "The terrorists cheated us. Not all of them got out.... They left behind a considerable number of terrorists together with their arms."

Attacking the refugee camps

The Israeli army encircled Palestinian refugee camps in the area and prohibited anyone from entering or leaving without its permission. An IDF spokesman announced, "The IDF is in control of all key points in Beirut. Refugee camps harboring terrorist concentrations remain encircled and closed." As the *New York Times's* Thomas Friedman noted, "Although the Israelis confiscated the arms of all of the Moslem groups in West Beirut, they made no attempt to disarm the Christian Phalangist militiamen in East Beirut."

Sharon invited Lebanese Phalangist militia units trained and equipped by Israel to enter the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Sharon and the IDF chief of staff, Gen. Rafael Eitan, met with Phalangist commanders before they entered the camp, and, as Sharon later explained, "We spoke in principle of their dealing with the camps." General Eitan told the Israeli cabinet that

when the Phalangists went into the camps, there would be “an eruption of revenge.... I can imagine how it will begin, but not how it will end.” The Phalangists were enraged about the killing of President-elect Gemayel, who had been Christian.

The militia entered the camps and over the next 48 hours more than 700 Palestinian women, children, and men were executed; many corpses were mutilated. Palestinian sources estimated that the death toll was much higher. Israeli troops launched flares over the camps to illuminate them throughout the night and provided the Phalangists with food and water during their respites from the killings. Palestinian women sought to escape the slaughter but “the Israelis encircling the area refused to let anyone cross their lines.”

After the first day’s carnage, a Phalange leader reported to the IDF that “until now 300 civilians and terrorists have been killed,” according to the *Jerusalem Post*. After the Phalangists finished, they brought in bulldozers to create mass graves. More Palestinians may have been killed at the two camps than the total number of Israelis killed by the PLO in the previous decade. (Thomas Friedman did a superb job of reporting and analyzing the killings for the *New York Times*.)

The Begin government initially blocked proposals in the Knesset for a formal inquiry into the massacre; Ariel Sharon declared that his critics were guilty of a “blood libel.” One left-wing Israeli paper, *Al Hamishmar*, declared, “This slaughter has made the war in Lebanon the greatest disaster to befall the Jewish people since the Holocaust.” Former Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban denounced the invasion of Beirut as “the most deadly failure in Israel’s modern history.”

United States enters the quagmire

The massacre at the refugee camps threatened to plunge Lebanon back into total chaos. Two days afterward, the Lebanese government requested that the United States send its troops back to Beirut. Reagan repeatedly called for Israeli withdrawal from Beirut and declared, “Israel must have learned that there is no way it can impose its own solutions on hatreds as deep and bitter as those that produced this tragedy.” In late 1982 Congress rewarded Israel for invading Lebanon with a special appropriation of \$550 million in additional military aid and other handouts, on top of the \$2 billion Israel was already scheduled to receive that year from the U.S. government.

The massacres of the Palestinian refugees hurled the United States much deeper into the Lebanese quagmire. As clashes continued between Israelis and Muslims, the situation became increasingly polarized in the following months. On April 18, 1983, a delivery van pulled up to the front door of the U.S. embassy in Beirut and detonated, collapsing the building and killing 46 people (including 16 Americans) and wounding more than 100 others. The U.S. embassy was a sitting duck for the terrorist assault; unlike many other U.S. embassies in hostile environments, it had no sturdy outer wall.

As fighting between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon escalated, the original U.S. peacekeeping mission became a farce. The U.S. forces were training and equipping the Lebanese army, which was increasingly perceived in Lebanon as a pro-Christian, anti-Muslim force. By late summer, the Marines were being targeted by Muslim snipers and mortar fire. On September 13, 1983, Reagan authorized Marine commanders in Lebanon to call in air strikes and other attacks against the Muslims to help the Christian Lebanese army. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger vigorously opposed the new policy, fearing it would make American troops far more vulnerable. Navy ships repeatedly bombarded the Muslims over the next few weeks.

On Sunday morning, October 23, 1983, a lone Muslim male drove a Mercedes truck through a parking lot, past two Marine guard posts, through an open gate, and into the lobby of the Marine headquarters building in Beirut, where he detonated the equivalent of six tons of explosives. The explosion left a 30-foot-deep crater and killed 243 marines. A second truck bomb moments later killed 58 French soldiers.

Shortly afterwards, Reagan withdrew most of the U.S. troops from Lebanon. His actions enraged neoconservatives who seemed to believe that America was obliged to pay any price to ensure the success of Operation Peace for Galilee.

Israel's quagmire

Israel's would-be whirlwind invasion of Lebanon turned into an 18-year quagmire that cost the lives of more than 1,500 Israeli soldiers and many thousand Lebanese civilians. Israel maintained control over a swath of land in South Lebanon to protect itself from terrorist attacks by Hezbollah and others.

Israel also trained, equipped, and paid the South Lebanon Army (SLA). From 1993 to 1999, the IDF and its SLA proxies killed at least 355 Lebanese civilians while Muslim guerrillas in Lebanon killed 9 Israeli civilians, according to B'Tselem, Israel's premier human rights organization. In 1993 and 1996 Israel launched massive shelling campaigns on Lebanese villages in order to stampede hundreds of thousands of people north toward Beirut. The Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, stated the goal of the 1993 attack: "We want to cause a wave of flight and damage to everyone involved in Hezbollah activity."

Though the Israeli army initially justified the incursion as seeking to "root out terrorist nests" in southern Lebanon, the subsequent occupation by the IDF would spur terrorist attacks on Israeli forces far beyond what Israel suffered before the invasion. The clearest legacy of Israel's Operation Peace for Galilee, launched in 1982, is Hezbollah. Muslim guerrillas rallied to fight the IDF throughout the Lebanon occupation zone. Aided by Iran and later by Syria, Hezbollah developed into a fighting force that could hold its own against the IDF.

The recent offensive resulted in the deaths of more than 1,000 civilians in Lebanon and dozens of civilians in Israel. There is no indication that the killing will end any time soon.

Neither Hezbollah nor the Israeli Defense Forces have any right to murder innocent people, yet each targets civilians on the other side.

Americans need to pay attention to what is happening in Lebanon because there are many politicians and political appointees in Washington who want to see U.S. troops join the fray. This would be as foolish now as it was in 1982. Inserting the Stars and Stripes into the crossfire will achieve nothing more than overcrowding Arlington National Cemetery.

James Bovard is the author of [Attention Deficit Democracy](#) [2006] as well as [The Bush Betrayal](#) [2004], [Lost Rights](#) [1994] and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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