

The Funnel Effect: Failure of the United States' Involvement in Lebanon 1982-1984

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Abstract

While the United States remains involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, perhaps it would be useful to reflect upon one of its past involvements: The War of Lebanon. Also referred to as the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), it was one of the most complex conflicts in the modern Middle Eastern history. In its culminating period (1982-1984) the United States became involved within the multinational peacekeeping framework. In the same period Lebanon also saw the involvement of Israel and Syria. In the persisting anarchy and chaos, the U.S. authorities failed to properly plan the mission, despite the U.S.'s technological, military, intelligence, and diplomatic superiority. The U.S. under Reagan Administration did not understand the complex Lebanese political and wartime reality; they underestimated the threats; and most importantly, failed to be neutral peacekeepers. To easily observe this complex period and tragic events that took place, I propose an allegoric comparison of the features of the Marine's mission failure to that of a funnel. Any funnel normally has broad and narrow parts. When this set of features is attached to the Mission in Lebanon, it becomes rather clear that from the outset, the U.S. involvement suffered from general, broad, and very fundamental shortcomings. These discrepancies, such as the ones within their general approach, policy, unawareness of complexities, and a burden of unwisely chosen alliances, translated into "narrow parts" i.e. specific situations in the field, which made it impossible for the mission to be carried out successfully and safely. As a result of political

discrepancies, disunited American leadership, and the abovementioned shortcomings, the U.S. Marines could not adapt to Lebanon's ruthless environment. Hence they were exposed to brutal terrorist attacks, the deadliest of which took place in October 1983, when the headquarters of the Marine Battalion Landing Team were heavily bombed. 241 Marines died in this attack, and shortly after, the U.S. was forced to withdraw its forces, which altogether made this mission a failure.

Introduction

On the dawn of October 23, 1983, a terrorist detonated explosives wrapped around gas cylinders of his truck, with which he forcefully ran into the headquarters of the United States Marine Battalion Landing Team. The buildings were destroyed with the force of approximately 12,000 pounds of TNT, whose explosion killed 241 and wounded 78 U.S. Armed Services personnel (Clyde 1984: 1). Thorough investigations started to take place immediately after this tragic event. Roughly two months later, on December 19, 1983, the Investigations Subcommittee, which was the part of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives, concluded a report titled *Adequacy of U.S. Marine Corps Security in Beirut* (hereafter referred to as the HASC report). This report addressed the following crucial questions: "(1) What [were] the U.S. policy objectives in Lebanon; (2) How [did] the marine mission contribute to those objectives; and (3) Whether the risks to the marines were adequately assessed and whether adequate precautions were taken to counter them" (HASC 1983).

Apparently, this attack was the culmination of failures that took place in the period of 1982-1984. After they had more or less successfully escorted the withdrawing Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) upon the Israelis' reaching of the Beirut area, the United States Marines, who together with the French and Italian Forces used to form the Multinational Forces mission (MNF) also withdrew on September 10, 1982. This quick withdrawal created a security vacuum in the Beirut area, resulting in the assassination of the Christian Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel, and quick Phalangist response—the slaughter of

the Palestinian civilians in their refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila (Quandt 1984: 240). President Reagan ordered the Marines to return and immediately form a new Multinational Force, which together with the U.S.'s diplomatic apparatus ultimately failed to serve the U.S. interests and successfully execute the U.S. policy towards Lebanon.

When analyzing the causes of this overall failure, one becomes confronted with a multitude of developments in various areas: 1) policy shortcomings; 2) ineffective communication and chain of command; 3) failure to understand the complexity of the military, cultural, and political situation in Lebanon; 4) technical difficulties and physical in-the-field security shortcomings; 5) conflict of interests in local, regional and international political arenas; as well as 6) "uneasy" alliances rooted in historical backgrounds. Not all of these liabilities were of the same magnitude, but it was indeed a sum of all of these issues in the equation that ultimately produced the failure and withdrawal of the US Marines and Personnel shortly after the bombing.

In order to understand the matter, one needs to scrutinize it systematically. One may realize that the result of the aggregate of those issues can be observed as, what I would dare to call, the *Funnel Effect*. Just like water in the upper part of a funnel, in the broader area broader concepts such as general approach, policy, administration, and alliances play a role. The issues around these broad and general concepts ultimately translate or "trickle down" into more specific problems in the narrower areas—namely to those in the Lebanese battlefield. What we are ultimately left with is a draining whirl and the "leaked-out water;" in other words the failure to achieve successes regarding policy, stability, and security.

I hereby argue that the United States' involvement in the Lebanese arena had been sentenced to failure from the very beginning: unrealistic policies, unawareness of the situational, sociopolitical and cultural complexities, disunited administrative and political approach, as well as obstacle-benefit duality regarding the relations with Israel and the Lebanese government, in the long run all translated into specific shortcomings in the field. These shortcomings mainly pertain to the overall perception and execution of the mission, as well as security of the marines and officers involved. As a result of this *funnel effect*, hundreds of these people died, and the net impact of the mission turned out to be virtually nonexistent, if not hazardous for the Lebanon's political future.

Policy and Approach Issues

In the early 1980s, when the Lebanese Civil War had already taken its shape, the Reagan Administration outlined the elements of the United States policy towards Lebanon. The policy was brought with respect to Lebanon's wartime political situation, which has a fairly complex background. In 1975, the Christian Phalangist Party (known as the *Phalange*), invited Syria to intervene on its behalf against the Shiite and Druze militias. Despite the fact that the *Phalange* later regretted the move, Syria under Hafez al Assad managed to earn legitimacy from the Arab League in 1976. Declaring itself the Arab Deterrent Force, Syria specified that it will not leave Lebanon unless Arab League requested it to do so (Weinberger 1983: 342; Kasperski and Crockett 2004). Besides Syria, Israel under the government of Menachem Begin also invaded Lebanon in 1982 with the goal of destroying the PLO and thus making possible the eventual annexation of the West Bank. Lebanon, which was already divided into sectarian enclaves, each having its own ethnic and religious militias, experienced even more hardships upon the entrance of the two foreign armies, each supporting "their" selected militia groups (Cleveland 2004: 386-387).

To remove this complication, and enable the creation of order and eventual ceasefire, the Reagan administration devised the following set of policy goals: "Withdrawal of all foreign forces, support for an independent Lebanese government with control over all of its territory, peaceful relations between Lebanon and Israel, and encouragement for the process of political reconciliation within Lebanon" (Quandt 1984: 250).

Despite the fact that this policy and its objectives sounded plausible, they were, however, marked by the use of completely unrealistic tools for their implementation. One of the early tools applied for this policy was the so-called Reagan Plan, issued on September 1, 1982. This initiative made an explicit linkage between the Lebanese and West Bank issues, since Reagan believed that settling the problems of the West Bank would simultaneously provide tools for solving issues in Lebanon, even though he did not bother to properly include and mention Syria in this process. This initiative was ultimately rejected by all involved parties, especially Israel, who sabotaged it since the settling of the West Bank issues did not necessarily coincide with Begin's plans of the area's annexation to Israel's territory. The Policy-overstretch was quite obvious: "The Reagan Plan

expanded the administration's agenda, making it difficult to handle either Lebanon or the Palestinians" (Spiegel 1985: 422).

Even though the application of this tool failed, its result, as William B. Quandt (1984) put it: "made the Administration even more eager for a success in Lebanon, especially since the situation there was becoming more costly for American interests" (p. 244). The Administration's eagerness became significantly amplified when, after the assassination of the Lebanese President Gemayel, Israelis entered the Beirut area and turned a blind eye to the Phalange's slaughter of the Palestinian refugees and sacking of their camps as an act of revenge for the previously mentioned assassination of Phalangist President Gemayel. However, prior to this tragic development the Multinational Force had departed. They were desperately needed to come back to prevent future potential onslaughts. The MNF was reestablished in Lebanon, but the condition were now became entirely different—and for the future of the U.S.' mission—not very favorable.

In these situations, it would be logical to expect the involvement of the United Nations peacekeeping forces who would aim to create stability and prevent further bloodshed. However, this motion was unacceptable to Israel. As the HASC Report (1983) testifies: "The Israeli's would not trust any international force unless the United States participated." Furthermore, there was already a planned UNIFIL force in place, which was not able to operate due to the physical and operational intensity of the Israeli invasion of 1982. Nevertheless, the Resolution 425 defined UNIFIL's objectives as "confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces, restoring international peace and security and assisting the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area" (Weinberger 1983: 342). Even though these objectives looked satisfactory and were apparently in accordance with the U.S. policy, the decisive and immediate enforcement of this resolution did not coincide with Israeli interests. Instead, the Multinational Force (MNF), led by the United States had to perform the peacekeeping work, with the emphasis on *neutrality*.

The notion of *neutrality* was perhaps one of the greatest paradoxes of the U.S. involvement in Lebanon. As the HASC Report concludes, the key objectives of this new mission were: "the withdrawal of *foreign* forces from Lebanon, re-establishment of Lebanese sovereignty after the withdrawal, and assurance that Lebanon would not be used as a base for attacks against Israel" (Clyde 1984: 3).

Apparently, these same objectives made the core of the previously discussed United States' policy towards Lebanon. Furthermore, the mission's objective put less emphasis on the withdrawal of *all* foreign forces from Lebanon, while it introduced a new concept, namely that Israel shall be *protected* from attacks. The peacekeeping goal of the mission which was supposed to be multinational and neutral had been compromised. Also, the Report clearly states that another key objective of the MNF mission "was to support, help train and arm the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)" (HASC Report 1983). It is now necessary to recall that the LAF was predominantly Christian, and commanded by the Phalange Party. This means that the United States would indirectly be aiding one of the sectarian militias, camouflaged as the national army. The scandal becomes greater if one learns that Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the LAF had long maintained close political connections with Israel, particularly with the Israeli Defense Minister of the time, Ariel Sharon, hoping that the Israeli invasion would make his rise to power easier (Quandt 1984: 240; Cleveland 2004: 387). The LAF was, as such, unacceptable to virtually all other powerful factions, especially the Druze and the Shiite militias. Whether the Reagan Administration was aware of these issues can be left to debate, but the truth remains: the U.S. Marines were not the neutral peacekeepers, and were thus exposed to attacks and security threats coming from the antagonist factions. Finally, one instance which surely proves the United States taking clear side, is when it supported the LAF with naval gunfire during the fighting at Souq el Gharb in September 1983. This was a clear sign to Muslim population that the United States is no peacekeeper, but a Christian supporter. It is interesting that President Reagan, when introducing the mission in his letter to the Speaker of the House on September 29, 1982, clearly stated: "In carrying out this mission, *the American force will not engage in combat*" (HASC Report 1983).

Israeli Alliance Issue

Speaking of the withdrawal of the foreign armies, as specified in the mentioned U.S. policy, another broad issue enters the game: the historical alliance with Israel. It can be argued that this alliance had served the U.S. in geopolitical sense, but in this case, the alliance handicapped the United States by making it unable to pressure Israel to withdraw

and to allow the UN to take over the peacekeeping affairs. This, above all, was a true dilemma for the U.S. at its home front, since the support of Israel was one of the keys to the Administration's preservation of power.¹ This may also be one of the clues why, in their last MNF policy, the Americans grew more "protective" of Israel. Hadar (1992: 32-33) provides an account that links the issue of the U.S.-Israeli alliance to the American domestic politics:

One element of the Middle Eastern foreign policy triangle is the Israeli lobby that includes a network of American Jewish organization headed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which delivers favorable votes and financial support for members of Congress in exchange for their securing votes for financial aid and other benefits for Israel. The Israeli lobby also mobilizes congressional support for policies advanced by the bureaucracy in exchange for rewards (e.g., transfer of sophisticated arms) to Israel from the executive branch... The American support for Israel, framed in moral and historical terms, was largely the result of domestic political considerations, in particular the need to court the Jewish vote.

President Reagan himself earned a great deal of the initial domestic popularity exactly because of his stance on the issues concerning the Middle East: as a Republican, besides winning a large Jewish vote (39 percent), he initially won great support from pro-Israel evangelical groups such as the Moral Majority (Spiegel 1985: 397). Apparently, the United States has been linked to Israel from the outset, and it was not possible for them to act entirely on their own while being involved in the Lebanon crisis. Along with the costs that the alliance inflicted in this particular situation, the U.S. also exhibited a poor understanding of the complexities present in the Lebanese arena. The U.S. failed to fully understand other factions' issues and features, and above all, their influence in the war.

¹ For more insights on the ways Israel impacts the U.S. foreign policy see Mearsheimer John J. and Walt. Stephen. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.

Reagan's Unaware and Divided Administration

The United States' failure to understand the actual complexity of the situation had catastrophic consequences. Ever since the beginning, when he announced his Peace Plan, Reagan kept leaving out Syria and other opposing factions in the war, having thought of them as weak and not entirely relevant. However, Syria suddenly became resupplied by the Soviets, which helped them obtain the dictating power in Lebanon in the critical year of 1983. Logically, Shiite and Druze militias received a strong backing from Syria, whose potential was not completely understood by the opposing powers, especially the United States (Quandt 1984: 241-242). Only after the U.S. Embassy in Beirut suffered a terrorist bombing attack which killed 57 people did the United States try to reach out for Syria and bring them to the table.

When the Secretary of State Shultz for the first time visited Damascus in May 1983, he learned that Syrian President Assad rejected the implication that his forces would receive the "same legal status as those of Israel," and that he refused to leave Lebanon under their conditions (Quandt 1984: 244). This unawareness of the situation put the United States in a more difficult situation, as the attacks proceeded in 1983. It seemed as if they were caught off-guard as a result of the flaws within their earlier approach, and now had less political means to confront the challenges.

Generally speaking, throughout this period the Administration never succeeded in acquiring realistic means to achieve its policies, it did not have a good sense for priorities, and it lacked a fully dedicated leadership, as well as a deep knowledge of local Lebanese realities (Spiegel 1985: 398-400). Reagan, on the other hand, had a somewhat naïve good-vs.-evil image of the world, which made his way of thinking and his general approach highly inapplicable to the complex Lebanese situation. His approach to this Middle Eastern crisis was marked by a combination of emotion, ideology, and a lack of knowledge. Before the beginning of the involvement, he reportedly said: "I can't see why they're fighting. After all, they're all Lebanese" (Spiegel 1985: 400).

Another feature, which also may have had a negative influence on the overall mission was the fact that the Administration was internally divided around the Lebanese and other Middle Eastern affairs. For instance, both of Reagan's Secretaries of State George Shultz and Alexander Haig philosophically differed from, and were often

at odds with the Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. Yet, all three happened to dominate the early decision-making. The fact that they often stalemated and opposed each other when military questions were concerned created a decision-making chaos, thus severely affecting how and what decisions were brought, and how they were implemented in the face of the Lebanese War and the U.S. involvement. The effect of these divisions finally transpired in 1984, when Reagan's political advisers, who were affected by the domestic political considerations, took "advantage of his divided foreign policy team, [and] urged him repeatedly in late 1983 and early 1984 to withdraw" (Spiegel 1985: 398). It is true that the deadly attack on the Marine Battalion Landing Team headquarters in October 1983 greatly contributed to the eventual U.S. withdrawal, making the mission very unpopular in the American public's eyes. However, the quick withdrawal also proves the extent of the inter-Administrational divisions: the attack, no matter how horrific, did not manage to unite the American political elite of the time to even more decisively stand up to terrorism and factional provocations.

These broad decision making problems within the highest ranks had devastating effect on the workings in the field. The whirl in the funnel was starting to run faster as these shortcomings directly translated onto MNF's everyday functioning on the Lebanese warring soil.

The Funnel Turns Narrow: Security and the Mission Execution Shortcomings

The previously discussed discrepancies within the broader issues ultimately had a great impact on the specific mission aspects in the field. Even though the United States-led Multinational Marine Force was not entirely neutral, they were *nominally* installed as the "neutral" peacekeepers who were supposed to stabilize the deeply divided war-driven country of Lebanon. As such, they were initially supposed to carry out their mission by exhibiting high visibility among the Lebanese population, thus giving them some "visual" sense of security and presence. The Marines had to continuously show flags, participate in civil service engagements, public meetings, etc. Having been responsible for this high visibility, it was not appropriate for the Marines to deploy excessive security measures in the physical sense, since this would create alienation from the people that they

actually had to serve (HASC Report 1983). In simple words: visibility took precedence over their own physical security.

Apparently, the security measures were rather poor and insufficient to fully protect the Marines from terrorist attacks. The fact that visibility tipped the balance at the expense of security (following the initial idea of the mission set by the shaky Administration), had hazardous consequences, as it was attested by the attacks on the U.S. Embassy and then on the Battalion Landing Team (BLT) headquarters—the culmination of the unsuccessful campaign.

The BLT and the Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) headquarters were both located at the Beirut International Airport, which was relatively close to the Shiite neighborhoods. Furthermore, the Investigations Subcommittee proved that the Battalion was protected only by the fence made off the low quality concertina wire, which most of the time had its gates open. The actual access to the buildings was supposed to be blocked by three large sewer pipes, which were later discovered to have been improperly placed, hence allowing the truck to drive in (HASC Report 1983).

Speaking of the conduct of the mission, one needs to closely observe the so-called Rules of Engagement (ROE), which had to be strictly adhered to. After the first attack on the Embassy, the ROE were changed, but only for the Marine team responsible for the Embassy. The ROE for the Marines at the BLT headquarters remained the same, which clearly indicates that the lessons from previous attack were insufficiently learned to protect the remaining people and assets. These unchanged rules asked for some things which are hard to believe by some logical warfare standards. For instance, one of the rules specified that the guards at the Marine compound had to have their weapons unloaded (Clyde 1984: 5). Had the Marines' weapons been properly loaded, perhaps the terrorist truck driver would have been prevented from blasting the buildings.

As mentioned above, no specific measures were taken by the Marines after the Embassy was attacked. One reason for this may have been a very complex chain of command through which information and orders had to pass before becoming implemented. Also, whenever a decision was to be made by the field generals or captains, they had to take serious political considerations, given the fact that besides them, the present influential forces were those of Israel and the LAF (Clyde 1984: Appendix).

Clearly, all decisions and orders came from “above” and were indirectly coined in high-level politics, which, when

trickled down to the actual on-the-field operations created some absurd phenomena, leaving the Marines vulnerable to attacks. As mentioned earlier, the U.S. was caught off-guard, and even though it stayed for another four months (until February 1984), the bloody October 23, 1983 proved that, as the investigation addressed it, the Marine security was highly inadequate. Even though they were caught off-guard, the United States still had numerous instruments that they could have applied to prevent such tragic incidents, namely those of diplomacy, intelligence and information, as well as military and technological superiority (Kasperski and Crockett 2004). Since the mission was marked by failure to properly and carefully organize, plan, and adapt to the new environment, these strengths could simply not have been used effectively.

As the U.S. presidential election of 1984 approached, the bitter and critical public reaction to these developments grew in importance and political relevance. Reagan, for the first time since the MNF's deployment stated that the U.S. forces "could be withdrawn if there [were] a collapse of order in Lebanon" (Quandt 1984: 249). One needs to recall that the objective of the U.S. forces was to help restore this order. Ultimately, it is clear that the U.S. succumbed to the combination of pain inflicted by the attacks and the public opposition. The mission failed.

Conclusion

The shortcomings within the general approach, the U.S. Policy towards Lebanon, the obstacles created by the United States- Israel alliance, as well as the problems within the Reagan Administration regarding both divisions and unawareness, all together create a core of broad and fundamental problems. If a highly delicate situation, such as the one that history has witnessed in the War of Lebanon, is approached with such fundamental flaws, contradictions and inconsistencies, the success is hardly possible. The United States was not sensitive to local Lebanese realities, and did not have a unified and carefully elaborated approach. Furthermore, it did not employ all the diplomatic instruments to contain its ally—Israel. Finally, its Policy was highly unrealistic and paradoxal in its implementation, since the MNF was everything but neutral. Unfortunately, these big inconsistencies spilled over into specific situations that the Marines had to face in Lebanon, which ultimately helped making them an easy target. Just like water in the funnel, the

United States mission initially ran broadly, while accompanied by the equally broad problems. It finished with a withdrawal, and had no positive effect on the Lebanese warring society.

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