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Conflicting Relations in 1982: The Lebanese Civil War as an American, Global, and Israeli Issue

ABSTRACT: *In 1982, U.S. President Ronald Reagan announced that a "multinational peacekeeping force" was to restore peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Since the United States associated a Christian-led government with democracy, they considered Lebanon a natural ally that would promote America's other geopolitical goals. This article argues that U.S. intervention was based on supporting the Lebanese Maronite Christian political party to secure a Westernized Middle Eastern ally for Israel's political and economic interests, better aligned with the United States, because America related Christianity to the West and Islam to anti-American, pro-Soviet sentiments.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; United States of America (USA); Cold War; Lebanese Civil War; Lebanon; Israel; Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO); Maronite Christians; U.S. Marines; democracy*

Introduction

One by one, members of my family left Lebanon and came to the United States during the Lebanese Civil War. They came with just their clothes, their business, and the memories of what had happened to their country. My mother arrived in 1981, one of her brothers in 1982. They returned to Lebanon just a year later. My mother did not officially move to the United States until 1985, when the war was at its worst. The difference between 1975, when the war began, and the early 1980s, when my family arrived in America, was drastic—due to both the Israeli invasion and the arrival of the U.S. Marines in 1982. And yet, for my uncle, what made the war worse was what had essentially started it. Having been expelled from neighboring Jordan, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) arrived in Lebanon in 1975 to attack Israel from Lebanese territory; Palestinian refugees soon followed; and then war erupted, beginning as an Israeli-Palestinian conflict that awakened something with much deeper roots in Lebanese society between Christians and Muslims, upper-class and lower-class alike. It was a clash of various Lebanese factions divided by sectarian identities, Israelis, Palestinians, and Syrians—all vying for power in the region, yet the only question my uncle ever asked was, "What the hell was America even doing there?" Questions like this are relevant because history currently seems to be repeating itself in the region. On September 27, 2024—when I began working on this article—the Israeli bombing of Beirut killed many civilians. Almost a year later, on August 28, 2025, the United Nations announced its plan to withdraw its peacekeeping forces by 2027, hoping to disarm the Hezbollah political party (founded in 1982) which Israel has been at war with since 2023.¹ For many, including my family, it is 1975 all over again. Thus, reviewing the U.S. policy and ideology that led to the American intervention in the Lebanese Civil War is of the utmost importance, because—as Americans, Lebanese, and immigrants—we know the consequences of a war with false predispositions.

¹ Al-Jazeera, "UNIFIL's mandate in southern Lebanon was renewed. What happens next?" August 30, 2025, [online](#).

On September 20, 1982, U.S. President Ronald Reagan (in office 1981–1989) addressed the nation after the atrocious massacre of Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp in Beirut by members of the Right-wing Lebanese Phalange militia, supported by Israel:

"The scenes that the whole world witnessed this past weekend were among the most heart-rending in the long nightmare of Lebanon's agony. Millions of us have seen pictures of the Palestinian victims of this tragedy. There is little that words can add, but there are actions we can and must take to bring that nightmare to an end. [...] now is a time for action—to act together to restore peace to Beirut, to help a stable government emerge that can restore peace and independence to all of Lebanon, and to bring a just and lasting resolution to the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, one that satisfies the legitimate rights of the Palestinians, who are all too often its victims."²

A "multinational peacekeeping force" was to be deployed the following year to ensure that the Lebanese government itself could restore peace to the region. According to Palestinian scholar Naseer Aruri, the United States was in deep diplomatic discussions with King Hussein of Jordan (in office 1952–1999), PLO leader Yasir Arafat (in office 1969–2004), and even Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (in office 1971–2000) during this time,³ which places the Lebanese conflict and U.S. involvement into a larger global context. Yet the United States sent direct military support only to Lebanon (besides Israel, of course), and it did not withdraw its Marines from the country until after the bombing of their Battalion Landing Team headquarters on October 23, 1983, which killed 241 U.S. soldiers. But what had caused America to deploy its Marines to Lebanon in the first place, or as my uncle so frequently asked, "What the hell was America even doing there?"

In his critique of Reagan's policy, American political scientist William B. Quandt suggests that Americans severely misunderstood Lebanon's underlying social and political conditions.⁴ The Lebanese government was indeed a Christian government, because the president was supposed to be a Christian—usually a Maronite Christian, as they were the dominant group of that faith—such was the sentiment of the people's misrepresentation, particularly on a religious scale. Was America supporting liberty and democracy, or simply just Christianity? While Reagan was outspoken about a more humanitarian fight to uphold democracy and end death and violence against civilians, I argue that the United States associated a Christian-led government with Western-style democracy, which is why they considered Lebanon a natural ally that would promote both America's other geopolitical goals in the region as well as Israel's interests.

In American culture, there has been a long-standing association of Christianity and democracy with the West and Islam and Soviet communism with the East, which undoubtedly influenced U.S. policy—specifically Reagan's—in the Middle East in general and in Lebanon in particular. In his essay on "The Clash of Civilizations," British-American historian Bernard

² Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation Announcing the Formation of a New Multinational Force in Lebanon," September 20, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, [online](#).

³ See Naseer H. Aruri, "The United States' Intervention in Lebanon," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1985): 59–77.

⁴ See William B. Quandt, "Reagan's Lebanon Policy: Trial and Error," *Middle East Journal* 38, no. 2 (1984): 237–254.

Lewis summarizes the cultural understanding that permeated the Iran-Contra Affair, the Lebanese Civil War, and the Cold War, writing that the Muslim world was standing in direct opposition to the West and moving “backwards” instead of “advancing,”⁵ while Christianity was linked to Western nations’ democracy and secularism.⁶ Thus, the world was divided based on what people were “in relation to who and what they were not,”⁷ as American historian Zachary Lockman has put it. During the Cold War, when Soviet communism was already viewed in direct opposition to American-style democracy, Islam fit perfectly into this mold of the “other.” Both Soviet communism and Islam were portrayed as antagonists to the American-led, Christian, and democratic West.

My research considers both government documents on U.S. foreign policy in the region and firsthand accounts of the war itself. My sources consist of Lebanese and Palestinian-Lebanese authors, including Jean Said Makdisi (b. 1940), as well as American voices, namely those of Marines, politicians, and reporters, who were in Lebanon during this time. I aim to explore how U.S. policy and ideology affected the people on the ground. Since most of the respective documents from the Reagan administration have yet to be declassified, I utilize Reagan’s public statements on Lebanon and the Marines deployed to Beirut as part of the multinational peacekeeping force. My approach is that of a political historian, as I am reviewing firsthand accounts and analyzing policy.

1. The War

The Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975. Following a drive-by assassination of one of its prominent members, the Maronite Phalangist party bombed a bus carrying Palestinian refugees, killing at least 27.⁸ Contrary to common perceptions, this was not a religious attack. Lebanese economists Samir Makdisi and Richard Sadaka have argued that the Lebanese Civil War was steeped in purely religious “fractionalization.”⁹ It seems that the Lebanese constitution had doomed the country from the outset by establishing a religious state that was supposed to represent a multi-religious people. Indeed, Lebanon was host to many Christian and Muslim sects that opposed each other during the war, namely the prominent Maronite Christians, the Druze, Shia and Sunni Muslims, as well as Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians. Based on demographics, the country’s president was to be a Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the leader of parliament a Shia Muslim. However, the PLO’s arrival in 1975 altered Lebanon’s demographics. Thus, in some sense, the war did have

⁵ Bernard Lewis, “The Clash of Civilizations” (1990), in *The Middle East and Islamic World Recorder*, ed. Marvin Gettleman and Stuart Schaar (Grove Publication, 2003), 346.

⁶ Lewis, “Clash of Civilizations,” 345.

⁷ Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 57.

⁸ Joseph Chamie, “The Lebanese Civil War: An Investigation into the Causes,” *World Affairs* 139, no. 3 (1976): 176.

⁹ Samir Makdisi and Richard Sadaka, “The Lebanese Civil War, 1975–90,” in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, ed. Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (World Bank, 2005), 59.

religious connotations, but strife among the Lebanese existed on political and economic levels as well, compounded by various rivaling religious affiliations.

Lebanon's 1970 election highlighted the government's internal issues that would become the main reasons for the war five years later. It established a tripartite alliance "between the three principal Maronite Christian parties and was backed by the Patriarch Ma'usha"¹⁰ to oppose growing Muslim power on both political and religious levels.¹¹ The alliance represented a new political era as it displaced the Shihabist (Chehabist) political approach,¹² which had dominated the country since 1958, and marked another year in which "the president had gained considerable influence."¹³ The situation in Lebanon was fragile even before the war. The country's socio-economic makeup showed Christians at the top, Druze in the middle, Sunni Muslims below, and Shia Muslims at the bottom.¹⁴ The Christian government's growing power and the rising Muslim population (due to Palestinian migration) intertwined religion with political and economic issues. Just as the 1970 election was "between those who advocated to preserve the existing political and economic structure and those who sought to adapt," so too was the Lebanese Civil War; the progressive Left viewed the Rightist Christian government as "corrupt" and "strongly biased in favor of one sectarian community."¹⁵ Instead of simply being a war about religion, it became the determination of past and present realities, conservative and liberal ideologies, and future change.

The Lebanese Civil War lasted from 1975 until 1990, and during this time many different contenders seized control temporarily and attempted to resolve the situation. The United States supported the Christian government's Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), while Syria, Iran, and the Soviet Union supported various liberal militias, which tended to be majority Muslim, as well as the PLO. Many outside regimes favored the establishment of a Lebanese government that would cater to their respective needs, interests, and ideas for future change. As far as Israel, Syria, and the neighboring Arab states, as well as the Lebanese government and the warring militias were concerned, much revolved around Palestine. Liberal and progressive groups, including Lebanon's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP),¹⁶ "resorted to

¹⁰ Moran Mor Paul II Peter Meouchi (1894–1975), the 74th Maronite Patriarch of Antioch (1955–1975), whose political intent was to reconcile Muslims and Christians in the region.

¹¹ Meir Zamir, "The Lebanese Presidential Elections of 1970 and Their Impact on the Civil War of 1975–1976," *Middle Eastern Studies* 16, no. 1 (1980): 54.

¹² A political ideology that hoped to build relations between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon through dialogue and moderation.

¹³ Chamie, "Lebanese Civil War," 172.

¹⁴ Chamie, "Lebanese Civil War," 180.

¹⁵ Chamie, "Lebanese Civil War," 177.

¹⁶ Tom Russell, "A Lebanon Primer," *MERIP [Middle East Research and Information Project] Reports*, no. 133 (1985): 18. Russell identifies sixteen total militias and parties fighting during the war, namely (in alphabetical order), Amal (Shia); Communist Party of Lebanon (CPL, with strong Shia base); Free Army of Lebanon/South Lebanon Army (Israel-supported); Guardians of the Cedars (anti-Palestinian); Hizb Ullah/Hezbollah (radical Shia); Islamic Amal ("militant split from Amal"); Lebanese Forces ("military wing of the Lebanese Front," Maronite-supported); Lebanese National Movement (progressive); Lebanese National Resistance Front ("leading armed resistance to Israeli occupation"); Murabitun (Sunni-supported, including "October 24 Movement" and "Popular Nasserist Organization"); National Liberal Party (Maronite); Organization of Communist Action in Lebanon (CPL offshoot,

retaliation and armed struggle in conjunction with the more militant elements” of their respective movements and thus allied themselves with the Palestinian cause.¹⁷ The Christian government did not do so, to say the least: not only did it consider the Palestinian presence in Lebanon as encroaching upon Israel-Lebanese relations and drawing Israel into Lebanon, it also viewed the Palestinians as the cause of “the collapse of Lebanon” and its own rule.¹⁸ The Palestinians had allied themselves with progressive Muslims and Christians—as well as with traditionalist Muslims—against the traditionalists within the Lebanese government.¹⁹ Indeed, their presence provoked the Lebanese Right, but it also provoked Israel, which retaliated against Palestinian attacks launched from behind the Lebanese border.

The Lebanese Civil War featured many political and economic factors that ran parallel to religious “fractionalization;” however, it would be too simplistic to call it a war about religion or a war about any one political ideology for that matter. Unlike the impression created by Lewis’s “Clash of Civilizations,” the world in general and Lebanon in particular are too complex to be cast in broad terms without intersection. Misunderstanding the multi-religious and multi-ethnic realities of a country like Lebanon—and thereby misunderstanding the world in general—led the United States under the Reagan administration to greatly mismanage its expectations, goals, and influence in Lebanon. The war was not a grandiose battle between East and West, Muslims and Christians, or even communism and democracy. In reality, the Lebanese Civil War began because of a rigid and static constitutional legacy, which created social inequality on both economic and political levels.

2. The Intervention

When the United States intervened in the Lebanese Civil War, it did so at the height of the conflict and after the Carter administration’s years of disregard and neglect. U.S. foreign policy in Lebanon under previous administrations greatly differed from that of the Reagan era. U.S. President Jimmy Carter (in office 1977–1981) had pursued a hands-off, almost negligent approach, because he had deemed the situation in Lebanon as “helpless.”²⁰ In 1958, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (in office 1953–1961) had sent troops to Lebanon upon the request of the country’s former president, Camille Chamoun (in office 1952–1958). Eisenhower was interested in military intervention to “protect U.S. resources and interests,” as evidenced by the Eisenhower Doctrine, which promoted economic development in Arab countries to advance U.S. political influence.²¹ Reagan’s policy in Lebanon was predicated on his own belief in America’s “role as a leader for world peace,”²² but his action to enforce it

Arab nationalist); Phalange Party (fascist, Maronite); Progressive Socialist Party (PSP); Syrian National Socialist Party (Sunni, secular nationalist); and Zghorta Liberation Army (pro-Syrian).

¹⁷ Michael C. Hudson, “The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War,” *Middle East Journal* 32, no. 3 (1978): 268.

¹⁸ Hudson, “Palestinian Factor,” 276.

¹⁹ Chamie, “Lebanese Civil War,” 177.

²⁰ Corrin Varady, “Discontinuity and Legacy: US Policy in Lebanon and the Middle East,” in *US Foreign Policy and the Multinational Force in Lebanon: Vigorous Self-Defense* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 67.

²¹ Varady, “Discontinuity and Legacy,” 65.

²² Reagan, “Address to the Nation,” September 20, 1982.

was influenced by these former administrations. In an address to the American public regarding the formation of a “multinational peacekeeping force” including U.S. Marines, he condemned Israeli actions and called for their withdrawal from Lebanon, while stating that U.S. intervention would “restore internal security to [...] [Lebanon’s] capital” with the goal of “enabling the Lebanese government to resume full sovereignty over its capital.”²³ Reagan had also asked Congress for \$20 million in relief to Lebanon and \$5 million in emergency assistance.²⁴ And yet, he declared the need for military assistance in anything but name, inspired by Eisenhower’s approach.²⁵ From a superficial perspective, Reagan called for U.S. intervention to end the conflict in Lebanon and provide stability to the region. Why then did the war last so much longer, even after the American presence had ended?

When first deployed on September 10 and arriving in the country on September 29, 1982, the peacekeeping mission maintained strict guidelines with regard to what the Marines were and were not allowed to do. In his firsthand account, U.S. Marine Michael Petit, who was stationed in Lebanon in 1982 as part of Reagan’s multinational peacekeeping force, discusses the limits of being a “peacekeeper,” namely, carrying loaded magazines and not firing their weapons unless provoked.²⁶ U.S. Marines trained LAF soldiers, and it was reported to the American public that they were making great strides. In reality, to the Marines, the LAF were “incapable of spreading its influence outside the city.”²⁷ The Marines themselves deemed the LAF as incompetent, “scoff[ing] at the Lebanese soldiers behind their backs” with the general consensus being that “[they] couldn’t count on them.”²⁸ The goal laid out by the Reagan administration prior to the Marines’ deployment fell apart in more ways than one. There was conflict between everyone, even within those sects who—to the casual, non-native observer—were supposed to be on the same side.

The Israeli invasion eventually reached Lebanon’s Chouf Mountains, located to the south-east of Beirut, where Maronite and Druze militias, heavily armed and assisted by Syria, were already at war against each other. According to one scholarly survey, “[s]ome of the worst fighting during the civil war was between militias of the same sect, often over control of a region, economic resources, or positions of power.”²⁹ Because of their compromising and exposed position backing the Christian forces, the Marines were both sitting ducks and active participants in the war. They left the country in 1984 as a consequence of the October 23, 1983, bombing of their barracks. Yet even after the departure of both the Marines and the PLO, fighting continued between various militias, some belonging to the same sect, including

²³ Reagan, “Address to the Nation,” September 20, 1982.

²⁴ Ronald Reagan, “Statement on the Conflict in Lebanon,” June 9, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, [online](#).

²⁵ Varady, “Discontinuity and Legacy.”

²⁶ Michael Petit, *Peacekeepers at War: A Marine’s Account of the Beirut Catastrophe* (Faber and Faber, 1986), 40.

²⁷ Petit, *Peacekeepers at War*, 93.

²⁸ Petit, *Peacekeepers at War*, 93.

²⁹ Lara Deeb, Maya Mikdashi, Tsolin Nalbantian, and Nadya Sbaiti, “A Primer on Lebanon—History, Palestine and Resistance to Israeli Violence,” in *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, January 29, 2025, [online](#).

Shia militias Amal and Hezbollah, as well as Maronite factions backing or opposing Lebanon's future presidents Elias Hrawi (in office 1989–1998) and Michel Aoun (in office 2016–2022).³⁰ For the native Lebanese, the war was not about religious factions but, rather, about which of these factions should take power and best serve the people's needs. After 15 long years of fighting, the Taif Agreement—also known as the National Reconciliation Act of 1989—formally ended the Lebanese Civil War in 1990.

3. The Reasons

The Lebanese government was not—and would not be—able to stand on its own without American intervention and continued external assistance. What is especially interesting, however, is the American support for only one side of the war effort. Rather than work with many militia leaders to achieve a peace treaty, the U.S. Marines were required to support the LAF and the LAF only. Clearly, the Reagan administration did not understand the implications of supporting a Maronite Christian government, for the Lebanese Left would soon deem their internal enemies and American Marines as “all the same.”³¹ Many Lebanese militia groups sought out journalists for media coverage of their cause, among them the American TV correspondent Lawrence (Larry) Pintak, whose 1988 monograph *Beirut Outtakes* discusses the legal and illegal ins and outs of militia groups. Various militia members also expressed their respect for American soldiers. According to Pintak, “[l]ater officers privately admitted that the Marines probably wouldn't have become directly involved if they had not been standing alongside the Lebanese army [...] At one point, they said Amal militiamen went so far as to approach the Marines and told them to go back.”³² Militias expressly did not see the Americans themselves as the problem, simply the side they represented. It was this stance that transformed the U.S. Marines from “peacekeepers” to active agents in the war. The Americans could not just pick a side and remain on the sidelines, and the Marines on the ground knew this well. U.S., Israeli, and Syrian politics were routinely understood in reference to Lebanon, and there were a myriad of peace talks between the various states.³³ Yet unlike what was happening in Lebanon, there were no attempts to force any change upon these states, nor were there any attempts to alleviate Lebanon's political tensions by engaging with the opposing sides among the Lebanese people themselves. The Marines were not there to mediate; they had chosen a side (or, rather, the U.S. administration had chosen for them).

Due to their role as “peacekeepers,” the Marines were technically prohibited from taking part in the fighting, unless it was purely for defensive measures. And yet, contrary to what Reagan was telling Congress, what commanding officers were telling their own superiors, and what radio broadcasters were telling the public, the Marines, as Pintak recalls, “knew how often the line companies returned fire. The Marines were obviously in combat, but the politics of

³⁰ Deeb et al., “Primer on Lebanon.”

³¹ Larry Pintak, *Beirut Outtakes: A TV Correspondent's Portrait of America's Encounter with Terror* (Lexington Books, 1988), 113, 118.

³² Pintak, *Beirut Outtakes*, 128.

³³ Magnus Seland Andersson and Hilde Henriksen Waage, “Stew in Their Own Juice: Reagan, Syria and Lebanon, 1981–1984,” *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 4, (September 2020): 664–691.

the situation forced [their] commanders to insist that [they] were not involved."³⁴ Why lie about the situation on the ground? The 1983 "War Powers" debate between Congress and the President, which questioned whether the latter needed Congressional approval to deploy soldiers to a region and what circumstances would warrant such a deployment, demonstrated the Reagan administration's determination not just to measure presidential power against Congress but also to stay in the war effort. Revealing the reality about the situation on the ground would make Congress either pull out of Lebanon entirely or prohibit deploying more American soldiers. Thus, on the American homefront, the Marines' endeavors were considered a success and continued to focus on "keeping the peace." Setting aside these obvious lies, why perpetuate a failing mission?

Scholars have interpreted the American intervention in the Lebanese Civil War as simply another war intended to support the U.S. administration's international and domestic policies, but not—as Reagan had told the public—as an effort at establishing peace.³⁵ Economic aid and military training for opposing militias came from Syria, Iran, Israel, and the Soviet Union alike. With the spread of Pan-Arabism throughout the Middle East, Syria, the Leftist Lebanese, and the Palestinians became natural allies, despite the fact that, early in the war, Syria had supported the Maronite Christian government's efforts to drive the Palestinians from Lebanon, because the Palestinians' continued presence and activism in the country brought the Israelis closer to Syria's own borders. The Israelis, for their part, were "arming both sides" during the Lebanese Civil War so that, no matter how it turned out, they could come out on top.³⁶ This reveals the reasons why America intervened: it saw Lebanon at the center of a broad global struggle. The sheer amount of help from abroad made the Lebanese Civil War, at least to the White House, a part of the greater Arab-Israeli war, which, from the American perspective, was a war between the Islamic world and the Western-associated Israeli state.³⁷ Israel's consistent involvement on both sides of the Lebanese cause, as well as its relations with Arab states like Syria and Jordan, and with the United States, has led American political scientist Anne Marie Baylouny to conclude that U.S. foreign policy during the Lebanese Civil War was grounded in Israeli priorities as evidenced by both direct and indirect U.S. support for Lebanon's Christian military.³⁸

Ever since the U.S. oil pipeline interests of the 1950s, U.S. foreign policy had been consistent in "support[ing] Lebanon's ruling elite who [...] allied] with U.S. interests,"³⁹ but this changed under Reagan in 1982. It was Reagan's plan to settle the conflict between Israel and Palestine to secure America's interests in the region. According to Quandt, Reagan "chang[ed] priorities" toward "political reconciliation," shifted emphasis "from military engagement" to diplomacy, and promoted a re-focusing "from global strategy concerns to local and regional

³⁴ Pintak, *Beirut Outtakes*, 137.

³⁵ See, for example, Quandt, "Reagan's Lebanon Policy."

³⁶ Pintak, *Beirut Outtakes*, 154.

³⁷ Andersson and Waage, "Stew in Their Own Juice."

³⁸ Anne Marie Baylouny, "American Foreign Policy in Lebanon," in *Handbook on U.S. Middle East Relations*, ed. Robert Looney (Routledge, 2009), 310.

³⁹ Baylouny, "American Foreign Policy," 310.

realities."⁴⁰ Aruri argues that the American intervention was "intended to shore up a Right-wing minority regime that owed its very existence to the Israeli invasion,"⁴¹ thereby advancing the United States' own "national security" interests in the region.

Thus, scholars have interpreted the American intervention in Lebanon as evidence of a self-interested U.S. appeasement of the state of Israel. But why Lebanon specifically? Reagan's own rationale hints at broader global interests beyond the initial goal of "restoring peace." Condemning the Israeli attacks on Beirut in 1982, Reagan claimed that,

"[d]uring the negotiations leading to the PLO withdrawal from Beirut, we were assured that Israeli forces would not enter west Beirut. We also understood that following withdrawal, Lebanese Army units would establish control over the city. They were thwarted in this effort by the Israeli occupation that took place beginning on Wednesday."⁴²

The Reagan administration clearly viewed the Lebanese Civil War as part of the greater Israeli-Palestinian issue. It was not alone in doing so. In her memoirs, Palestinian-Lebanese scholar Jean Said Makdisi argued that the war was indeed an extension of the Israeli-Palestine issue. When Israel invaded in 1982, they forced the PLO out of Lebanon, but—to civilians on the ground—the constant air raids made it "less clear that the Israelis were only after the PLO and not Beirut itself."⁴³ According to the American political scientist Michael C. Hudson, if the PLO, Israel, and Syria had all withdrawn from Lebanon, peace could have been restored.⁴⁴ If they stayed, Reagan argued, LAF soldiers and the American-backed Lebanese government would not be "permitted to restore internal security in its capital."⁴⁵ Reagan's perspective linked the strife in Lebanon directly to the presence of external actors, perhaps leading him to the conclusion that American intervention would make a difference. The Reagan administration focused its energies on diplomatic exchanges between Israel and its surrounding Arab countries, as well as Lebanon. Reagan had hoped that the Israeli invasion of 1982 would "build on the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty," and that Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan—all under the "American auspices"—would work to push back the Syrians who were viewed as "Soviet surrogates."⁴⁶ Focusing on external actors, however, ignores the actual causes for the outbreak of the war in Lebanon itself.⁴⁷ Under the Reagan administration, the Lebanese Civil War was taken into the global arena, where Eastern and Western ideologies were pitted against each other. Subscribing to the notion of Christian states as natural allies of the West, an idea articulated in Lewis's "Clash of Civilizations," the United States—and the larger global community—misunderstood and disregarded the valid complaints of the native

⁴⁰ Quandt, "Reagan's Lebanon Policy," 254.

⁴¹ Aruri, "United States' Intervention," 60.

⁴² Ronald Reagan, "Statement on the Murder of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon," September 18, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, [online](#).

⁴³ Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (Persea Books, 1990), 173.

⁴⁴ Hudson, "Palestinian Factor," 277.

⁴⁵ Reagan, "Address to the Nation," September 20, 1982.

⁴⁶ Aruri, "United States' Intervention," 60, 61.

⁴⁷ Hudson, "Palestinian Factor," 277–278: "The fishermen's strike, which set off the war in 1975, dramatically illustrated the explosive social inequalities which beset Lebanon and, more importantly, the incapacity of a 'consociational' governmental structure for dealing with them effectively."

Lebanese against their own government, leaving the country's political and economic woes unresolved. What chance did Lebanon ever have to attain the "lasting resolution" so superficially envisioned by Reagan?

One has to remember that the war in Lebanon began as a domestic reaction to the government's failure to alleviate domestic issues before it was internationalized. Failing to appreciate this, the U.S. administration worked diplomatically with external contenders like Syria, Israel, and Jordan to establish peace. Thus, resolving the war in Lebanon was defined by other countries' concerns and interests, specifically Israel's. As Aruri has pointed out, "[w]hile ensuring residual rights for Israel on the pretext of security," the United States did not consider Syrian interests to the same extent, for "not only were Syrian water and hydro-electric resources vulnerable to Israeli raids, but the Syrian capital itself was within Israeli artillery range."⁴⁸ The Shultz Agreement (1988) especially focused on what was—and what was not—acceptable with regard to the Israeli-Syrian relations but paid no heed to Lebanese interests. In addition, the Reagan administration did not intervene elsewhere (be it Israel, Palestine, or Syria) when turmoil broke out in Lebanon, nor did they act to resolve the true causes of the war by working with opposing Lebanese militias; instead, they chose a specific side to support, train, and defend, namely, the Lebanese government and the LAF. This points to the conclusion that America did not intervene in Lebanon to restore peace; rather, America intervened in Lebanon to shore up a pro-Western, Christian government that would support Israel and U.S. geopolitical interests in the Middle East and fight any and all Arab, Muslim, and Soviet influences on its doorsteps.

Lebanon's geographical location makes it vulnerable to be caught up in any Israeli-Palestinian crossfire. What is more, scholars tend to view the country as a "Cold-War proxy," because its civil war took place during the Cold War.⁴⁹ The respective ideologies summarized in Lewis's "Clash of Civilizations" are certainly evident in President Reagan's public discourse. Reagan's various pronouncements pertaining to Lebanon make it clear that American intervention should halt "Soviet-bloc nations" because "the region is central to the economic vitality of the Western world."⁵⁰ In a radio address on December 10, 1983, Reagan insinuated that the PLO, among other Muslim groups, was associated with the Soviet Union, and he used the presence of "more than 7,000 Soviet military advisers and technicians" in Syria as a justification to stay in Lebanon.⁵¹ Thus, U.S. policy was shaped by a binary perception of the Lebanese Civil War's underlying causes, in which—supposedly—Christians were pitted against Muslims, Rightists against Leftists, democracy against communism, the United States against the Soviet Union, and the West against the East. Whether or not it was true, Lebanon—or, rather, the Rightist Lebanese government—represented the Western, Christian democracy of Lewis's "Clash of Civilizations." Anything and everything else had to be considered the opposition. White House officials merely brought Lebanon into this global

⁴⁸ Aruri, "United States' Intervention," 63.

⁴⁹ Andersson and Waage, "Stew in Their Own Juice," 665.

⁵⁰ Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Lebanon," December 10, 1983, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, [online](#).

⁵¹ Reagan, "Radio Address," December 10, 1983.

conflict of ideologies because of the country's perceived Christian nature—a false understanding of Lebanon's religious makeup. It becomes clear then that there was a misunderstanding of the realities on the ground. The Reagan administration assumed they were fighting on the "right side" simply because of the Lebanese government's Christian and Western attitudes, which aligned with those of the United States and, by extension, supported the Israeli nation. Yet a shared religion did not turn any of Lebanon's warring factions into natural allies: Muslim and Christian groups were not just at war with each other but among themselves as well.

Conclusion

President Reagan's public language clearly underscored his association of Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims with something "other" than the United States, which forced these groups into the Cold War's dichotomies. Because of the religious and cultural association of Christian-led governments—such as that of Lebanon in 1975—with the West, said West believed that these governments would better align with U.S. and Israeli interests. One could speculate to what extent Reagan was aware of these associations and simply wished to restore peace and a stable government to the region; perhaps he himself could not escape the subconscious prejudices of the time. Whatever the case may be, these associations did not just affect foreign policy; they impacted actions on the ground: on October 23, 1983, 241 U.S. soldiers in Beirut were killed in a single explosion after repeated warnings for them to leave the country.⁵² More died over the course of their year-long stay, sometimes simply from crossfire between militia groups. Many did not even know what they were dying for, because, truly, there was no reason for them to be deployed there—at least no reason that the White House was willing to admit to. This is not something to be taken lightly. The American intervention in Lebanon serves as a warning against future meddling in other countries' domestic affairs, especially if such meddling arises out of self-interest and not for the benefit of the native populations. Considering the U.S. involvement in the Middle East since the Lebanese Civil War, it appears that this warning is not being heeded and that lessons are not being learned.

It could be argued that the Reagan administration as well as subsequent U.S. administrations knew exactly—to quote my uncle one last time—"what the hell" they were doing in Lebanon and the greater Middle East. Israel's government has repeatedly acted against American promises of ceasefires or treaties with Arab countries in favor of military actions that better suit Israel's own goals, which raises the question of who was and is in control of U.S. foreign policy in the region. None of what has been said here amounts to a critique of religions or their practices. There is, after all, a difference between a religion, a religious people, and a political state that uses religion. Thus, it is far too simplistic to deem the Lebanese Civil War or any subsequent war in the Middle East a mere religious game, in which Christians and Jews side against Muslims. By posing as an international moral compass and a world power, the United States engages in a dangerous balancing act. Public discourse would not admit to any hidden agendas during the Reagan administration, but intervention—then, today, and

⁵² Pintak, *Beirut Outtakes*, 128.

in the future—is a power play for international domination by means of alliances forged under the guise of humanitarian aid and the alleged liberation from governments portrayed as oppressive, non-democratic, and non-Western.

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