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MIDDLE EAST HISTORY

IT HAPPENED IN MARCH

Beirut
1982

Israel Charged With Systematic Harassment of U.S. Marines

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MARCH 1995, Pages 79-81

It was 12 years ago, on March 14, 1983, that the commandant of the Marine Corps sent a highly unusual letter to the secretary of defense expressing frustration and anger at Israel. General R.H. Barrow charged that Israeli troops were deliberately threatening the lives of Marines serving as peacekeepers in Lebanon. There was, he wrote, a systematic pattern of harassment by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) that was resulting in "life-threatening situations, replete with verbal degradation of the officers, their uniform and country."

Barrow's letter added: "It is inconceivable to me why Americans serving in peacekeeping roles must be harassed, endangered by an ally...It is evident to me, and the opinion of the U.S. commanders afloat and ashore, that the incidents between the Marines and the IDF are timed, orchestrated, and executed for obtuse Israeli political purposes."¹

Israel's motives were less obtuse than the diplomatic general pretended. It was widely believed then, and now, that Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, one of Israel's most Machiavellian politician-generals, was creating the incidents deliberately in an effort to convince Washington that the two forces had to coordinate their actions in order to avoid such tensions. This, of course, would have been taken by the Arabs as proof that the Marines were not really in Lebanon as neutral peacekeepers but as allies of the Israelis, a perception that would have obvious advantages for Israel.²

Barrow's extraordinary letter was indicative of the frustrations and miseries the Marines suffered during their posting to Lebanon starting on Aug. 25, 1982, as a result of Israel's invasion 11 weeks earlier. Initially a U.S. unit of 800 men was sent to Beirut harbor as part of a multinational force to monitor the evacuation of PLO guerrillas from Beirut. The Marines, President Reagan announced, "in no case... would stay longer than 30 days."³ This turned out to be only partly true. They did withdraw on Sept. 10, but a reinforced unit of 1,200 was rushed back 15 days later after the massacres at the Palestinian refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila that accompanied the Israeli seizure of West Beirut. The U.S. forces remained until Feb. 26, 1984.⁴

During their year-and-a-half posting in Lebanon, the Marines suffered 268 killed.⁵ The casualties started within a week of the return of the Marines in September 1982. On the 30th, a U.S.-made cluster bomb left behind by the Israelis exploded, killing Corporal David Reagan and wounding three other Marines.⁶

Corporal Reagan's death represented the dangers of the new mission of the Marines in Lebanon. While their first brief stay had been to separate Israeli forces from Palestinian fighters evacuating West Beirut, their new mission was as part of a multinational force sent to prevent Israeli troops from attacking the Palestinian civilians left defenseless there after the withdrawal of PLO forces. As President Reagan said: "For this multinational force to succeed, it is essential that Israel withdraw from Beirut."⁷

"Incidents are timed, orchestrated, and executed for Israeli political purposes."

Israel's siege of Beirut during the summer of 1982 had been brutal and bloody, reaching a peak of horror on Aug. 12, quickly known as Black Thursday. On that day, Sharon's forces launched at dawn a massive artillery barrage that lasted for 11 straight hours and was accompanied by saturation air bombardment.⁸ As many as 500 persons, mainly Lebanese and Palestinian civilians, were killed.⁹

On top of the bombardment came the massacres the next month at Sabra and Shatila, where Sharon's troops allowed Lebanese Maronite killers to enter the camps filled with defenseless civilians. The massacres sickened the international community and pressure from Western capitals finally forced Israel to withdraw from Beirut in late September. Troops from Britain, France, Italy and the United States were interposed between the Israeli army and Beirut, with U.S. Marines deployed in the most sensitive area south of Beirut at the International Airport, directly between Israeli troops and West Beirut.

It was at the airport that the Marines would suffer their Calvary over the next year. Starting in January 1983, small Israeli units began probing the Marine lines. At first the effort appeared aimed at discovering the extent of Marine determination to resist penetration. The lines proved solid and the Marines' determination strong. Israeli troops were politely but firmly turned away. Soon the incidents escalated, with both sides pointing loaded weapons at each other but no firing taking place. Tensions were high enough by late January that a special meeting between U.S. and Israeli officers was held in Beirut to try to agree on precise boundaries beyond which the IDF would not penetrate.¹⁰

No Stranger to the Marines

However, on Feb. 2 a unit of three Israeli tanks, led by Israeli Lt. Col. Rafi Landsberg, tried to pass through Marine/Lebanese Army lines at Rayan University Library in south Lebanon. By this time, Landsberg was no stranger to the Marines. Since the beginning of January he had been leading small Israeli units in probes against the Marine lines, although such units would normally have a commander no higher than a sergeant or lieutenant. The suspicion grew that Sharon's troops were deliberately provoking the Marines and Landsberg was there to see that things did not get out of hand. The Israeli tactics were aimed more at forcing a joint U.S.-Israeli strategy than merely probing lines.

In the Feb. 2 incident, the checkpoint was commanded by Marine Capt. Charles Johnson, who firmly refused permission for Landsberg to advance. When two of the Israeli tanks ignored his warning to halt, Johnson leaped on Landsberg's tank with pistol drawn and demanded Landsberg and his tanks withdraw. They did.¹¹

Landsberg and the Israeli embassy in Washington tried to laugh off the incident, implying that Johnson was a trigger-happy John Wayne type and that the media were exaggerating a routine event. Landsberg even went so far as to claim that he smelled alcohol on Johnson's breath and that drunkenness must have clouded his reason. Marines were infuriated because Johnson was well known as a teetotaler. Americans flocked to Johnson's side. He received hundreds of letters from school children, former Marines and from Commandant Barrow.¹² It was a losing battle for the Israelis and Landsberg soon dropped from sight.

But the incidents did not stop. These now included "helicopter harassment," by which U.S.-made helicopters with glaring spotlights were flown by the Israelis over Marine positions at night, illuminating Marine outposts and exposing them to potential attack. As reports of these incidents piled up, Gen. Barrow received a letter on March 12 from a U.S. Army major stationed in Lebanon with the United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization (UNTSO). The letter described a systematic pattern of Israeli attacks and provocations against UNTSO troops, including instances in which U.S. officers were singled out for "near-miss" shootings, abuse and detention.¹³ That same day two Marine patrols were challenged and cursed by Israeli soldiers.¹⁴

Two days later Barrow wrote his letter to Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, who endorsed it and sent it along to the State Department. High-level meetings were arranged and the incidents abated, perhaps largely because by this time Ariel Sharon had been fired as defense minister. He had been found by an Israeli commission to have had "personal responsibility" for the Sabra and Shatila massacres.¹⁵

Despite the bad taste left from the clashes with the Israelis, in fact no Marines had been killed in the incidents and their lines had been secure up to the end of winter in 1983. Then Islamic guerrillas, backed by Iran, became active. On the night of April 17, 1983, an unknown sniper fired a shot that went through the trousers of a Marine sentry but did not harm him. For the first time, the Marines returned fire.¹⁶

The next day, the U.S. Embassy in Beirut was blown up by a massive bomb, with the loss of 63 lives. Among the 17 Americans killed were CIA Mideast specialists, including Robert C. Ames, the agency's top Middle East expert.¹⁷ Disaffected former Israeli Mossad case officer Victor Ostrovsky later claimed that Israel had advance information about the bombing plan but had decided not to inform the United States, a claim denied by Israel.¹⁸ The Iranian-backed Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility. Veteran correspondent John Cooley considered the attack "the day [Iranian leader Ayatollah] Khomeini's offensive against America in Lebanon began in earnest."¹⁹

Still, it was not until four months later, on Aug. 28, that Marines came under direct fire by rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons at International Airport. They returned fire with M-16 rifles and M-60 machine guns. The firefight resumed the next day with Marines firing 155mm artillery, 81mm mortars and rockets from Cobra helicopter gunships against Shi'i Muslim positions. Two Marines were killed and 14 wounded in the exchange, the first casualties in actual combat since the Marines had landed the previous year.²⁰

From this time on, the combat involvement of the Marines grew. Their actions were generally seen as siding with Israel against Muslims, slowly changing the status of the Marines as neutral peacekeepers to opponents of the Muslims.²¹ Israel could hardly have wished for more. The polarization meant that increasingly the conflict was being perceived in terms of the U.S., Israel and Lebanon's Christians against Iran, Islam and Lebanon's Shi'i Muslims.

Accelerating the Conflict

Israel accelerated the building conflict on Sept. 3, 1983 by unilaterally withdrawing its troops southward, leaving the Marines exposed behind their thin lines at the airport. The United States had asked the Israeli government to delay its withdrawal until the Marines could be replaced by units of the Lebanese army, but Israel refused.²² The result was as feared. Heavy fighting

immediately broke out between the Christian Lebanese Forces and the pro-Syrian Druze units, both seeking to occupy positions evacuated by Israel, while the Marines were left in the crossfire.²³ On Sept. 5, two Marines were killed and three wounded as fighting escalated between Christian and Muslim militias.²⁴

In an ill-considered effort to subdue the combat, the Sixth Fleet frigate *Bowen* fired several five-inch naval guns, hitting Druze artillery positions in the Chouf Mountains that were firing into the Marine compound at Beirut airport.²⁵ It was the first time U.S. ships had fired into Lebanon, dramatically raising the level of combat. But the Marines' exposed location on the flat terrain of the airport left them in an impossible position. On Sept. 12, three more Marines were wounded.²⁶

On Sept. 13, President Reagan authorized what was called aggressive self-defense for the Marines, including air and naval strikes.²⁷ Five days later the United States essentially joined the war against the Muslims when four U.S. warships unleashed the heaviest naval bombardment since Vietnam into Syrian and Druze positions in eastern Lebanon in support of the Lebanese Christians.²⁸ The bombardment lasted for three days and was personally ordered by National Security Council director Robert McFarlane, a Marine Corps officer detailed to the White House who was in Lebanon at the time and was also a strong supporter of Israel and its Lebanese Maronite Christian allies. McFarlane issued the order despite the fact that the Marine commander at the airport, Colonel Timothy Geraghty, strenuously argued against it because, in the words of correspondent Thomas L. Friedman, "he knew that it would make his soldiers party to what was now clearly an intra-Lebanese fight, and that the Lebanese Muslims would not retaliate against the Navy's ships at sea but against the Marines on shore."²⁹

By now, the Marines were under daily attack and Muslims were charging they were no longer neutral.³⁰ At the same time the battleship *USS New Jersey*, with 16-inch guns, arrived off Lebanon, increasing the number of U.S. warships offshore to 14. Similarly, the Marine contingent at Beirut airport was increased from 1,200 to 1,600.³¹

A Tragic Climax

The fight now was truly joined between the Shi'i Muslims and the Marines, who were essentially pinned down in their airport bunkers and under orders not to take offensive actions. The tragic climax of their predicament came on Oct. 23, when a Muslim guerrilla drove a truck past guards at the Marine airport compound and detonated an explosive with the force of 12,000 pounds of dynamite under a building housing Marines and other U.S. personnel. Almost simultaneously, a car-bomb exploded at the French compound in Beirut. Casualties were 241 Americans and 58 French troops killed. The bombings were the work of Hezbollah, made up of Shi'i Muslim guerrillas supported by Iran.³²

America's agony increased on Dec. 3, when two carrier planes were downed by Syrian missiles during heavy U.S. air raids on eastern Lebanon.³³ On the same day, eight Marines were killed in fighting with Muslim militiamen around the Beirut airport.³⁴

By the start of 1984, an all-out Shi'i Muslim campaign to rid Lebanon of all Americans was underway. The highly respected president of the American University of Beirut, Dr. Malcolm Kerr, a distinguished scholar of the Arab world, was gunned down on Jan. 18 outside his office by Islamic militants aligned with Iran.³⁵ On Feb. 5, Reagan made one of his stand-tall speeches by saying that "the situation in Lebanon is difficult, frustrating and dangerous. But this is no reason to turn our backs on friends and to cut and run."³⁶

The next day Professor Frank Regier, a U.S. citizen teaching at AUB, was kidnapped by Muslim radicals.³⁷ Regier's kidnapping was the beginning of a series of kidnappings of Americans in Beirut that would hound the Reagan and later the Bush administrations for years and lead to the eventual expulsion of nearly all Americans from Lebanon where they had prospered for more than a century. Even today Americans still are prohibited from traveling to Lebanon.

The day after Regier's kidnapping, on Feb. 7, 1984, Reagan suddenly reversed himself and announced that all U.S. Marines would shortly be "redeployed." The next day the battleship *USS New Jersey* fired 290 rounds of one-ton shells from its 16-inch guns into Lebanon as a final act of U.S. frustration.³⁸ Reagan's "redeployment" was completed by Feb. 26, when the last of the Marines retreated from Lebanon.

The mission of the Marines had been a humiliating failure--not because they failed in their duty but because the political backbone in Washington was lacking. The Marines had arrived in 1982 with all sides welcoming them. They left in 1984 despised by many and the object of attacks by Muslims. Even relations with Israel were strained, if not in Washington where a sympathetic Congress granted increased aid to the Jewish state to compensate it for the costs of its bungled invasion, then between the Marines and Israeli troops who had confronted each other in a realpolitik battlefield that was beyond their competence or understanding. The Marine experience in Lebanon did not contribute toward a favorable impression of Israel among many Americans, especially since the Marines would not have been in Lebanon except for Israel's unprovoked invasion.

This negative result is perhaps one reason a number of Israelis and their supporters today oppose sending U.S. peacekeepers to the Golan Heights as part of a possible Israeli-Syrian peace treaty. A repeat of the 1982-84 experience would certainly not be in Israel's interests at a time when its supporters are seeking to have a budget-conscious Congress continue unprecedented amounts of aid to Israel.

RECOMMENDED READING: