The 1980s: Appeasing Terrorism

The Middle East: the West on the run

On 20 August 1982 Reagan announced that the United States would participate in (and thus in effect lead) a multinational force to bring order to Lebanon. By 25 August US troops were in Beirut, as was a strong contingent of French forces, a smaller group of Italians and a token presence of British troops (pointedly kept to a minimum by a sceptical Thatcher). Secretary of State Shultz, writing in his memoirs, claimed that this development caused him to hope for ‘far better prospects in the Middle East’ and that he saw, above all, ‘a chance for a more stable Lebanon on the horizon’. But within 18 months the US mission had had to be abandoned in the face of terrorism, some of it state-sponsored, and Lebanon was essentially lost to the West. In short, a US Administration which had set out with the strongest possible rhetoric about restoring national prestige in the world had been decisively humiliated and terrorists had been appeased.

Formerly part of the Ottoman Empire and then under French rule deriving from a League of Nations Mandate, Lebanon had emerged from the Second World War as an independent sovereign state. At that time Christians (mainly Maronites) were a majority of the population and were assured the Presidency in perpetuity by constitutional provision. Lesser posts were likewise allocated to other religious groups such as Sunni Moslems, Shia Muslims and Druze. By the mid-1970s, however, the dynamics of demography had reduced the Christians to minority status but they tried to cling on to the leading role the constitution gave them. This proved unacceptable to many non-Christians who accordingly turned for redress to terrorism. Many Muslim countries naturally sympathised with this development. And Syria, in
particular, welcomed any insurgency, for it might result in Beirut becoming a mere satellite of Damascus. The situation was further complicated by the presence in Lebanon of significant PLO elements who had been expelled from Jordan in 1970 and by a determination on the part of Israel to resist changes in Lebanon that threatened its security. A bloody civil war ensued during 1975 and 1976. This ended in a truce that weakened but did not destroy the Christians’ control over at least parts of the country.

The multifaceted struggle resumed early in 1981 bringing the issue to the top of the Reagan Administration’s Middle East agenda. For soon Israel and Syria became directly involved in the fighting on Lebanese territory. But in July 1981 the Israelis were with difficulty persuaded by the Americans to agree to a precarious ceasefire.

A year later this broke down after the PLO had organised an assassination attempt on Shlomo Argov, the Israeli Ambassador in London. Israel responded by bombing Beirut, where many PLO activists were based. This led to rocket attacks from southern Lebanon on northern Israel and, finally, on 6 June to a full-scale Israeli invasion of Lebanon. During the next month Beirut was surrounded, many PLO people were killed and the rest of the PLO was compelled to face exile as an alternative to capture. The United States was thus persuaded to head up a multinational force (MNF), assisted by France, Italy and the United Kingdom, in return for the Israelis’ withdrawal and the Palestinians’ departure (most of them for Tunis).

The Americans and their three Western associates were now left to try to end the anarchy in Lebanon and this of course raised in acute form the question about whether to try to shore up the position of the Christian minority in the country. Anxious not to be seen to reward Syria and their Soviet backers, Reagan and Shultz threw their lot in with the Christians and chose to see the latter’s enemies as terrorists. In adopting this conservative, neo-Metternichian course, they were in a sense ‘correct’ just as they were similarly ‘correct’ to see the insurgents in El Salvador and Guatemala in the same light. But the Americans were a long way from home in Beirut and in the event proved not to have the collective resolve to last the course.

The West’s role as the defender of the old order in Beirut was first centrally challenged on 18 June 1983 when the US Embassy there was bombed, 47 people being killed. The Reagan Administration chose to soldier on – even though in September an ominous indication of growing domestic opposition came when an eighteen-month extension of the US mission was only narrowly approved in the US Senate