

Will Moscow pick up lost U.S. influence in the Middle East?

by Robert Dreyfuss, Middle East Editor

Thanks to the treachery of Secretary of State Alexander Haig, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon has not only left tens of thousands dead and half of Lebanon homeless, but it has virtually eliminated the remaining vestiges of American influence in the Middle East. A Soviet military and political power play is now set to unfold that will establish the U.S.S.R. as the region's only true superpower.

Further, with Israeli troops teetering at the brink of an invasion of Beirut, the region could become the scene of a superpower confrontation, since, from all available evidence, the Soviet Union will not permit the destruction by force of its allies in Syria and Lebanon.

From the beginning of the Israeli invasion, the U.S. government has followed a British script. Lord Carrington—who still runs foreign policy—and the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) triggered the Israeli blitzkrieg by orchestrating the attempted assassination of the Israeli Ambassador to Britain, Shlomo Argov, withdrawing the ambassador's security screen without warning. The shooting of Argov in London on June 3 gave Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon the pretext he sought to unleash the Israeli armed forces against Lebanon's cities and Palestinian camps.

The British, who, with the French, have rebuilt the World War I-era "Entente Cordiale," viewed Israel's move into Lebanon as an opportunity to displace the American influence in the Arab world—particularly in Saudi Arabia—with a European-led "Third Force." By supporting Israel's massacre and refusing to demand an immediate Israeli withdrawal, a policy guided by Haig, President Reagan has ensured that Arab faith in commitments from the American superpower has evaporated.

But the Anglo-French alliance will soon discover that Western Europe is a feeble force for stability in the world's hottest hotspot. Instead, as a result of the war in Lebanon, the powerful regional influence of the Soviet Union will gradually assert itself, not only among the area's radicals and in Khomeini's Iran, but in the eyes of the moderate Arab states like Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and even Egypt.



Stuart Lewis/NSIPS

Israel's General Ariel Sharon addressing a May 23, 1982 conference of the American Zionist Youth Foundation in New York City. Sharon double-crossed his Anglo-American backers by extending the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

The successful sweep of the Israeli armies through southern Lebanon to the gates of Beirut, made Sharon and Prime Minister Menachem Begin obscenely manic with visions of reorganizing the entire Middle East at once. Stating that what Israel has done in Lebanon is "no worse than what the Allies did in bombing Dresden in World War II," Begin declared that the Lebanese population welcomed the genocidal blitz. "Sharon was received with fanfare," a deluded Begin announced. "They almost called him 'King of Lebanon.'"

With Israeli forces tightening their grip on the Lebanese capital, occupying suburb after suburb, almost no one believed the Israelis' pious declarations that they would not eventually move into Beirut itself. In their euphoria, Israeli officials cavalierly dismissed the Soviet threat, despite mounting evidence that the U.S.S.R. is preparing action. "Let Moscow try to stop us," said one Israeli official. "We will attack their force too."

Evidence that such insanity prevails even among Israel's top leadership is the statement on June 17, after a Soviet warning to Israel, by Sharon. In a televised interview, Sharon declared that beside the Soviet Union, "there is another superpower in the area," referring to the presence of a huge U.S. naval flotilla in the eastern Mediterranean.

From the Soviet side, Admiral Gorchkov's navy is not impressed by Sharon's suicidal bravado. Following the Soviet government statement warning Israel on June 15, additional Soviet ships were dispatched to the sea near Israel and Lebanon and a Soviet airborne division was placed on alert in the Caucasus region. According to

UPI, Moscow informed Israel that it will not tolerate an attack on Beirut, the destruction of the Palestine Liberation Organization, or any threat to Syria.

In Washington, not a single official repudiated Sharon's suggestions that Israel is operating in Lebanon under an American nuclear umbrella. Furthermore, all U.S. official and unofficial sources seem unaware that the Soviet Union will not permit its vital interests to be damaged. In effect, America's leaders and policy makers have written off the threat of Soviet intervention. "There are no real alerts here, and nobody believes that Moscow can do anything," said a source at the Defense Intelligence Agency.

The last shred of American reality-orientation in the crisis disappeared when, on June 17, the Reagan administration rejected out of hand an emergency proposal made jointly by the Egyptians and the PLO. Having coordinated their role at the United Nations, Egypt and the PLO proposed that in exchange for American dialogue with the Palestinians, the PLO would lay down its heavy arms in Beirut, accept the sovereignty of the Lebanese army command, and abide by a ceasefire. But the proposal was flatly turned down by Washington, angering Egypt and probably making inevitable a catastrophic battle for Beirut.

After rejecting the Egypt-PLO plan, President Reagan accepted—again, on Haig's Rasputin-like advice—a proposal to meet with the butcher of Lebanon, Menachem Begin, on June 21. At that meeting, Begin intends to portray Israel's blitz as part of the worldwide fight against communism and terrorism.