

# MERIA

## HOW THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION TAUGHT IRAN THE WRONG LESSONS

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*The prospect of peacefully preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons looks bleaker by the day. Iran appears more emboldened than it has in decades, and support for the Bush administration's foreign policy is at an all-time low. As a presidential election year approaches, conservatives are seeking to distance themselves from Bush by eulogizing Reagan. Yet they forget or ignore that the present predicament is in large part Reagan's legacy. This article examines how the Regan administration, through a seemingly endless series of self-deceits and capitulations, nurtured the ambitions of Iran's current leadership, ruined U.S. credibility, and eroded America's power to deter the Islamic Republic. Still, while Democrats may welcome any shifting of blame from the failed Iran policies of Reagan's predecessor, it is they who have the most to learn from Reagan's mistakes; for Reagan's errors were realist errors, and the influence of realism is now rising most markedly on the left. Carter gave birth to the decades-long U.S. appeasement of Iran; Reagan fostered it.*

*What experience and history teach is this—that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.*

-G.W.F. Hegel

On December 31, 1977, in the banquet room of Tehran's Niavaran Palace, the president and the first lady of the United States attended a dinner hosted in their honor by the shah and the shahbanou of Iran. An hour and a half before the New Year, Jimmy Carter proposed a toast. "Iran," he said, "because of the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world. This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership, and to the respect and the admiration and love which your people give to you."<sup>1</sup>

The waves of mass demonstrations that would culminate in the shah's downfall began less than a week after Carter's visit; barely a year after he raised his glass, the shah and the shahbanou fled Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's first and future supreme leader, returned from exile just over two weeks later. Carter's ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young, welcomed the chaos with words both comforting and delusional—an

augury of the approach taken by later administrations. "I would be willing to bet," Young said, "that in another year or so... Khomeini will be [seen as] some kind of saint when we finally get over the panic of what is happening there."<sup>2</sup>

Within months, members of Carter's National Security Council (NSC)—which had been the main promoter of "the Pahlavi supremacy premise," the idea that the shah would continue to rule—were meeting with Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's successors. On November 1, 1979, at a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the Algerian revolution, Iran's new prime minister, foreign minister, and minister of defense hosted Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in the suite of their Algiers hotel.<sup>3</sup> Accompanying Brzezinski as a note-taker was a promising young NSC staff member, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. The Iranians demanded that the terminally ill shah, who had been brought to the United States the week before, be turned over to them for trial.

Brzezinski—who had fought Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to permit the shah’s entry to the United States—refused. “To return the Shah to you,” he said, “would be incompatible with our national honor.”<sup>4</sup>

Three days later, the U.S. embassy in Tehran was seized. Carter responded with attempts at conciliation, another tactic that would be employed, in extremis, by his successors. Yet his letter to Khomeini (“from one believer to a man of God”), seemed only to reinforce the supreme leader’s oft repeated conviction that “America cannot do a damn thing.”

Official diplomatic ties between Iran and the United States have now been severed for nearly three decades. As a new crisis escalates between them, the two countries have little more than shared history on which to rely in gauging one another’s intentions. For Iran, this history consists of the CIA’s role in the 1953 overthrow of Muhammad Mossadegh, American support for the repressive shah, U.S. aid to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, and U.S. capitulation to extortive hijacking and hostage-taking. For the United States, it consists of the virulently anti-American Islamic Revolution, the hostage crisis, and the decades of terrorism that followed. Now this history is used, by partisans in each country, to advance the next steps in the quickening confrontation.

Yet other histories now also play a role in shaping U.S. policy toward Iran. Two rival analogies, *détente* with China and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and appeasement of Nazi Germany on the other, each attempt to frame the debate over the central question of whether or not Iran can be contained. Properly addressing that question, however, requires turning to the history of the Islamic Republic itself; for the assertiveness displayed by Iran’s present leaders can be traced to the impressions they formed in their first decade of interacting with the United States.

## A WARNING

No year is more important to understanding current U.S.-Iranian relations than 1983.

Differing perceptions of the causes and consequences of that year’s events delineate, more than the events of any other year, those today who are willing to accept a nuclear Iran from those who are not.

The year 1983 is also of special relevance to the contemporary United States, because the year’s events brought about an American troop withdrawal (or redeployment, as it was then called) from Lebanon, an unraveling Arab country whose long-suppressed and Iranian-backed Shi’a plurality was on the rise. The U.S. withdrawal resulted from three primary factors, all of which exist in 2007. First, as America’s adversaries knew too well, domestic support for the American military presence was dwindling and would only shrink further as the upcoming presidential election approached. Second, Iran possessed the power to create conditions that would alter U.S. public opinion and effectively force America’s expulsion. Third, America failed to perceive, in the tangled web of Middle Eastern politics, how its actions and interests throughout the region were intertwined; only after considerable and repeated injury did America discover that it could be punished in the Mediterranean for its actions in the Gulf.

For all the change in U.S.-Iranian relations that 1983 brought about, the year began with relative constancy. The United States was still viewed by Iran as the Great Satan, the source of all the world’s ills, the national embodiment of what the Koran’s final *sura* (chapter) calls “the insidious whisperer who whispers in the hearts of men.” Iran’s leadership was still consolidating its power, prosecuting its domestic policy of Islamization, and pursuing its two primary foreign policy objectives of defeating Iraq and exporting the Islamic Revolution. The United States, by leading the multinational force in Lebanon, providing aid to Iraq, and attempting to broker an Arab-Israeli peace, continued to stand in the way of, and on the most fertile soil for, the Islamic Revolution’s export.<sup>5</sup>

The changes that were taking place at the beginning of the year were largely positive. A sense of relative normalcy had returned to Lebanon. In those first, optimistic months of

the year, many Lebanese who had fled their bloodstained country were returning. The multinational force, despite a March grenade attack that wounded five Marines, was encountering few problems. Israel had withdrawn from most of the country, and a peace agreement that would assure its complete withdrawal appeared near.

These developments came to an abrupt end on the afternoon of April 18, 1983. A dented, late-model GMC pickup truck, laden with hundreds of pounds of explosives, slammed into the main entrance of the U.S. embassy in Beirut. It was the first large-scale attack against a U.S. embassy anywhere in the world. Seven stories of the building collapsed and 63 people died, 17 of them Americans. The wedding ring of Robert Ames, CIA's national intelligence officer for the Near East, was found floating a mile off the coast of Lebanon, still affixed to his severed hand.

The Shi'a group al-Jihad al-Islami, Islamic Jihad, claimed responsibility. The name was one of several used by a wing of Hizballah, the Party of God, in the organization's early years. Islamic Jihad also claimed responsibility for a number of kidnappings of Americans that took place in Lebanon at the time. Several of the abducted, including the CIA's station chief in Beirut, William Buckley, were held by the Pasdaran, or Iranian Revolutionary Guards, in eastern Lebanon's Shaykh Abdallah Barracks. Located in Shi'a-populated Ba'albak, the barracks had been seized from the Lebanese Army, on Lebanon's Independence Day in November of 1982, by several hundred Pasdaran and a group of Khomeinist Lebanese Shi'a led by Hussein Mussawi, a future commander of Hizballah. Algeria informed the United States that Hizballah's chief of operations, Imad Mugniyah (who is said to go by the nickname "the Fox"), had kidnapped Buckley and others. To its everlasting discredit, the United States later sold arms to Iran in exchange for the release of some of those hostages; but in the case of Buckley, who had been severely beaten and died in captivity, the representatives of Iran could trade only a 400-page transcript of his interrogation.

For all its boldness, the embassy bombing had little impact on U.S. foreign policy. The United States effectively ignored what turned out to be a warning and remained focused instead on its primary regional objective of achieving an Israeli-Lebanese agreement that could serve as a foundation for a broader Arab-Israeli peace. When Secretary of State George Shultz flew to the region for that purpose only days after the attack, the first stop on his itinerary was not changed to Beirut. Reagan's response was nothing more than perfunctory. "This criminal attack on a diplomatic establishment will not deter us from our goals of peace in the region," he said. "We also remain committed to the recovery by the Lebanese Government of full sovereignty throughout all of its territory," and will "continue to press in negotiations for the earliest possible total withdrawal of all external forces."<sup>6</sup>

The administration hoped that a negotiated Israeli withdrawal would encourage Syrian, Pasdaran, and Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) forces operating from Syrian-occupied territory to follow suit. Though Shultz succeeded in brokering a Lebanese-Israeli agreement in May, hopes for a broader Arab-Israeli peace, national reconciliation in Lebanon, and foreign troop withdrawal all proved illusory. As a result, the United States was forced to change tactics: Weeks after negotiating Israel's withdrawal, the Reagan Administration began pressing it to stay, now hoping that its presence in Lebanon would force the departure of other foreign fighters.

Yet Israel's presence brought only mounting casualties and overwhelming domestic opposition. In July 1983, the Israeli government approved plans for a unilateral redeployment to a position south of Lebanon's Awali River. Meanwhile, the Reagan Administration began facing growing internal opposition of its own: While Reagan and Shultz remained committed to obtaining their objectives in Lebanon and had, in addition, concerns about the effects of appearing to have been driven out, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who had opposed the

deployment from the start, was strengthening his case. "We shouldn't be the Beirut police department," Weinberger said.<sup>7</sup>

### THREATS OF SUICIDE

By the end of August 1983, the United States appeared unlikely to remain in Lebanon. Israel was packing its bags, and its beleaguered prime minister, Menachem Begin, announced his intention to resign. The Marines in the multinational force took their first casualties the following day. Iran, Syria, and the PLO knew then that they would only have to bide their time. For the first time since it was adopted ten years before, Congress invoked the War Powers Resolution, which requires the president to either withdraw troops within 60 to 90 days or gain Congressional approval for their use in combat; but Shultz then helped to turn the tide with an effective testimony before the House and Senate, arguing that a withdrawal from Lebanon would have disastrous consequences.<sup>8</sup> On October 12, 1983, Congress approved the extension of the Marine deployment for an additional 18 months.

The blindsiding of the Marines that would propel their premature and ignominious departure came less than two weeks later. It was caused by three developments which conspired in the fall of 1983 to cause Iran to drastically escalate its actions in Lebanon. The first was the congressionally approved extension of the Marine deployment. The second was America's inaction in the face of attack. The third (which stemmed, ironically, from Iran's successes in fighting Iraq), was the aid provided to Iraq by France, another member of the multinational force in Lebanon.

The promise of French aid came amid reports that Iraq might soon lose the war. America's primary concern was that neither side would become so desperate that it would threaten oil flows in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. Defense Guidance report, the Pentagon's statement of strategy and policy for the 1984-1988 period stated that "Whatever the circumstances, we should be prepared to

introduce American forces directly into the region should it appear that the security of access to Persian Gulf oil is threatened."<sup>9</sup> As its financial ability to continue fighting was almost entirely dependent on its export of petroleum, and because it was then winning the war, Iran lacked the incentive (but not the aptitude) to threaten that access. Yet as a desperate Iraq appeared poised to receive from France an October delivery of five Super Etendard planes—with which it could use French Exocet anti-ship missiles to attack Iranian petroleum shipments—Iran had newfound cause for alarm; so much so that what it promised in return—to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately two-fifths of globally traded oil, as well as Iran's own petroleum, passes—brought to mind Bismarck's characterization of preventive war: "Suicide from fear of death."

It was not only the economies of Western and Gulf countries that were menaced, however. In the weeks before the French plane delivery, Iranian officials made a series of escalating public threats. Iran closed both the French consulate and the Society for French Culture in Isfahan. Iran's then-President and future supreme leader, Ali Khamene'i, said that delivery of the aircraft would not go unanswered.<sup>10</sup> Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, speaker of the Iranian *Majlis*, or parliament, and later president of Iran, delivered a Friday sermon warning that if France went through with the delivery it would be regarded as "Iran's enemy," and that Iranians would "take revenge."<sup>11</sup> On another occasion, he said that those who supply Iran's enemies would not escape punishment. Muhammad Bakir al-Hakim, the head of the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), promised that after deposing Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi people would also avenge the French delivery.<sup>12</sup> In October 1983, there were large anti-French demonstrations in Tehran and in front of the French embassy in London. The demonstrators warned France that the delivery would "seriously endanger its interests throughout the world."<sup>13</sup> Iran's prime minister, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, said that the arms delivery was "an act of suicide" and that

neither France nor the United States would have “a minute of rest.”

Over U.S. objections and complaints to France, Iraq received the planes in October. Seeking to deter the possible consequences of France’s actions, the United States met Iran’s threats to close the Strait with a mid-October increase in its presence in the Gulf. America’s willingness to defend its access to Gulf oil and to appear to be France’s protector came as no surprise to Iran, however; indeed, this was likely to have been among the reasons that Iran had already decided, weeks before, to use an alternative theater—one of less vital interest to the United States and less danger to itself—to compel Western powers to rethink their presence in the Middle East.

### ACTS OF SUICIDE

In the final week of September, 1983, U.S. naval intelligence intercepted a message sent to the Iranian ambassador in Syria from Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security, which operationally controlled Hizballah.<sup>14</sup> The message directed the Iranian ambassador to contact Hussein Mussawi (the Hizballah commander who had previously seized the Shaykh Abdallah Barracks together with the Pasdaran). Mussawi, the message said, was to be instructed to lead attacks against the multinational force in Lebanon and to “take a spectacular action against the United States Marines.” The ambassador proceeded to contact the leader of the Pasdaran’s Lebanese headquarters. The Pasdaran leader then met in Ba’albak with three future secretary generals of Hizballah—Shaykh Subhi Tufayli, Shaykh Abbas Mussawi, and Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah—where, according to deposition testimony by a Hizballah member (whose reliability was avowed by an expert witness from U.S. intelligence), they planned simultaneous suicide attacks on the Marines and the French paratroopers.

The Marine compound was cased and a Mercedes stakebed truck acquired.<sup>15</sup> The truck was taken to an underground warehouse near a gas station, fitted with explosives, and painted to resemble the yellow water delivery truck

that regularly stopped near the barracks. In the early dawn of Sunday, October 23, 1983, Hussein Mussawi’s group ambushed the real water delivery truck and sent its replacement on its way. The fake water truck, driven by an Iranian named Ismalal Ascari, sped toward the compound, broke through the protective barrier of sandbags and concertina wire, and detonated in the center of the barracks at approximately 6:22 a.m. Like the political leaders who had sent them, most of the Marines were sleeping.

“The resulting explosion,” as described in *Peterson v. Islamic Republic of Iran*, the U.S. District Court case that found Iran responsible for the bombing, “was the largest non-nuclear explosion that had ever been detonated on the face of the Earth.”<sup>16</sup> While the official inquiry of the Department of Defense—the Long Commission—found only that the bomb was “laden with the explosive equivalent of over 12,000 pounds of TNT,” and was “the largest conventional blast ever seen by the FBI’s forensic explosive experts,” the Memorandum Opinion of the *Peterson* case states that the force of the explosion was equal to 15-21,000 pounds of TNT. “The force of its impact,” the Memorandum Opinion states:

ripped locked doors from their doorjambs at the nearest building, which was 256 feet away. Trees located 370 feet away were shredded and completely exfoliated. At the traffic control tower of the Beirut International Airport, over half a mile away, all of the windows shattered. The support columns of the Marine barracks, which were made of reinforced concrete, were stretched, as an expert witness described, “like rubber bands.” The explosion created a crater in the earth over eight feet deep. The four-story Marine barracks was reduced to fifteen feet of rubble.<sup>17</sup>

Two hundred and forty-one American servicemen died, and many more were injured. The attempted simultaneous suicide truck bombing of the French barracks came

approximately twenty seconds later; it was partially thwarted when the truck's driver was shot and killed as he steered toward the French barracks, but the bomb was then detonated by remote control, and 58 French soldiers died. The United States designated Iran a state sponsor of terrorism three months later. The State Department's annual report, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1983*, concluded:

radical Lebanese Shias, using the nom de guerre Islamic Jihad, operated with Iranian support and encouragement from Syrian-controlled territory [in Lebanon]. They were responsible for the suicide bombing attacks against the US Embassy and the headquarters of the US and French contingents of the Multinational Force (MNF) in Beirut, which resulted in unprecedentedly high numbers of casualties.<sup>18</sup>

In a single blow, Iran had simultaneously advanced its two primary foreign policy objectives of defeating Iraq and exporting the Islamic Revolution. The attacks dissuaded Western support of Iraq and forced the expulsion from Lebanon of the Western powers that had been keeping the country from complete disintegration. As the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon stated in an interview two and a half months later, "if activities continue as they are, Lebanon will reach the stage of an Islamic revolution." Governmental authority is "the biggest obstacle to starting Islamic movements in the world," he said. "But since the Lebanese government does not have much power, there is no serious obstacle in the way of the people of Lebanon. We can conclude," he went on, "that the existence of an Islamic movement in that country will result in Islamic movements throughout the Arab world."<sup>19</sup>

In his memoir, Reagan called the day of the barracks bombings "the saddest day of my presidency, perhaps the saddest day of my life."<sup>20</sup> Yet as with the embassy bombing, the American response was rhetorically firm but substantively hollow. The day after the attacks, Shultz spoke before the House

Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "President Reagan is determined that we will not be driven out of Lebanon by the enemies of peace," he said. "We will stay, and we will carry out our mission."<sup>21</sup> The Reagan Administration then deliberated over joining France in an aerial bombing of the Pasdaran's Lebanese headquarters at the Shaykh Abdallah Barracks. Yet Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who had repeatedly expressed concerns about stoking Muslim anger and had consistently opposed the U.S. military presence in Lebanon, prevailed. "I'm not an eye-for-an-eye man," he said.<sup>22</sup>

Weinberger offered his French counterpart a wish of good luck and sent him off to strike alone. "Unfortunately," Weinberger told him, "it is a bit too late for us to join you in this one."<sup>23</sup> According to then National Security Advisor Robert "Bud" McFarlane, "Secretary Weinberger aborted it [the planned retaliatory joint-attack] out of a sense that it could have a harmful effect on our relations with other Arab states."<sup>24</sup> The defense secretary had the USS *New Jersey* lob several shells into an empty hillside instead—an episode that calls to mind a scene from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent... and nothing happened. Nothing could happen."<sup>25</sup>

The position of the Reagan Administration's realists—Weinberger, Baker, and Vice President Bush among them—were well encapsulated by current Defense Secretary Robert Gates (a co-author, together with Brzezinski, of a 2004 report that argued against using military force to prevent Iran's nuclearization and an early member of the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group).<sup>26</sup> Gates wrote in his memoir that when he was at the CIA in the mid-1980s, "The downside of an attack on Iran, to everyone's regret, outweighed how much Iran deserved punishment.... Thus Iran proved 'too hard'—a limited attack would, as a participant in one meeting delicately put it, 'just piss them off' and make things worse."<sup>27</sup>

Still, three months after the barracks bombings—despite the upcoming presidential elections, invocations of Vietnam by Baker, and pressure from Weinberger and George H.W. Bush—Shultz and Reagan continued to resist calls for a troop withdrawal. “Yes, the situation in Lebanon is difficult, frustrating and dangerous,” Reagan said in a February 4, 1984 radio address from Camp David. “But that is no reason to turn our backs and to cut and run. If we do, we’ll be sending one signal to terrorists everywhere. They can gain by waging war against innocent people.”<sup>28</sup>

Again the administration’s strong words belied its forthcoming deeds, and three days later Reagan caved in. At the end of February 1984, under the ridicule of their French partners, the last Marines departed Lebanon; to this Tripoli’s shores, they have not returned.

#### **CASPAR’S FRIENDLY GHOST: RESIDUALS OF A REALIST DEFENSE SECRETARY**

*If we are driven out of Lebanon, radical and rejectionist elements will have scored a major victory.*

-Secretary of State George Shultz, October 24, 1983

Would the withdrawal prove mistaken? At issue was whether perceptions of America’s resolve would be affected, and, if so, whether those altered perceptions would harm U.S. national security. As Weinberger wrote in a memoir of his Pentagon years:

The arguments raged back and forth, with the President always concerned about how it would look to the rest of the world if the MultiNational Force were removed. The State Department and the NSC staff played to this worry of the President by telling him that it would always appear that we had ‘cut and run,’ that we had been ‘driven out,’ and similar phrases designed to encourage the belief that only if we stayed in Lebanon could we demonstrate our manhood...”<sup>29</sup>

Others who shared Weinberger’s view that the costs of withdrawal would be negligible included Baker, Vice President Bush, and Weinberger’s Military Assistant, Major General Colin Powell. Shultz, however, saw the importance of signaling American resolve differently. “If we are driven out of Lebanon,” he said on the day after the barracks bombings,

it will be a major blow to the American position in the Middle East. If we want the role and influence of a great power, then we have to accept the responsibilities of a great power. If we as Americans decide we do not want the role and influence of a great power, then I shudder to think what kind of world of anarchy and danger our children will inherit.<sup>30</sup>

President George W. Bush is certainly closer in his views to Shultz than to the Reagan realists. Like Shultz, he sees a direct and unacceptably costly link between the withdrawal from Beirut in 1984 and the terrorism confronting contemporary America. In a speech delivered in the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington DC, Bush said:

Al Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, has called on Muslims to dedicate, quote, their “resources, sons and money to driving the infidels out of their lands.” Their tactic to meet this goal has been consistent for a quarter-century: They hit us, and expect us to run. They want us to repeat the sad history of Beirut in 1983...<sup>31</sup>

Bin Ladin too has spoken of the connection between al-Qa’ida’s attacks and America’s withdrawal from Beirut. “We have seen in the last decade,” he said in a 1998 interview, “the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier who is ready to wage Cold Wars and unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut

when the Marines fled after two explosions.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in 2005, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said: “Are you Lebanese afraid of the American naval fleets? These naval fleets have come in the past, and were defeated, and if they come again, they will be defeated again.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite bin Ladin’s rhetoric, many scoff at any implied connection between al-Qa’ida and the Iranian-backed Shi’a terrorism of 1983. Yet the connection exists. In the mid-1990s, Hizballah chief of operations Imad Mugniyah, reportedly the operational architect of the 1983 Beirut Embassy and Marine barracks bombings, met in Sudan with bin Ladin to discuss the exchange of Hizballah training for al-Qa’ida weapons. According to *The 9/11 Commission Report*:

Not long afterward, senior al Qaeda operatives and trainers traveled to Iran to receive training in explosives. In the fall of 1993, another such delegation went to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon for further training in explosives as well as in intelligence and security. Bin Ladin reportedly showed particular interest in learning how to use truck bombs such as the one that had killed 241 U.S. Marines in Lebanon in 1983. The relationship between al Qaeda and Iran demonstrated that Sunni-Shia divisions did not necessarily pose an insurmountable barrier to cooperation in terrorist operations.... al Qaeda contacts with Iran continued in ensuing years.<sup>34</sup>

A February 11, 2007 *Washington Post* article reported that “Tehran has refused to hand over a number of senior al-Qaeda operatives it has claimed to be holding under ‘house arrest’ for years.”<sup>35</sup> The *Post* reported more than three years earlier that U.S., European, and Arab officials had stated that many members of al-Qa’ida’s leadership were operating from Iran under the protection of the Qods, or Jerusalem, Force—the extra-territorial operations wing of the Pasdaran. According to these officials, the al-Qa’ida

leadership operating from Iran includes Sa’d bin Ladin, one of Usama bin Ladin’s eldest sons; Sayyif al-Adel, al-Qa’ida’s chief of military operations; Abdallah Ahmad Abdallah, the organization’s chief financial officer; and “perhaps two dozen other top al Qaeda leaders.” “Al-Adel and Abdullah,” the *Post* reported, “are considered the top operational deputies to Osama bin Laden and his second-in-command, Ayman Zawahiri...”<sup>36</sup>

For many, September 11 added credibility to Shultz’s notion that perceptions of America’s resolve had more consequence than what Weinberger dismissed as a concern with demonstrating “manhood.” Indeed, after September 11, even Weinberger stated in a *Frontline* interview that America’s displays of weakness had invited attack. “Some people are asking why deterrence failed,” he said.

Why did these people feel that they could launch an attack on our Trade Center and on the Pentagon and all of that? Why did they feel they could get away with it? And I'm afraid it's because our responses in the past, during the Clinton administration, had been too weak, too feeble, too unconcentrated.<sup>37</sup>

This blaming of his successors was, of course, less a concession to Shultz’s position than a devious attempt to exonerate himself; at least when it came to defending his own honor, Weinberger could be quite bold.

Yet though Reagan’s realists favored withdrawal and disdained, as Weinberger phrased it, talk of “cutting and running and all that nonsense,” they were not entirely unconcerned with perceptions of America’s resolve. Weinberger wrote in a memoir of his Pentagon years that he had been determined to do all he could to “prevent America from continuing down that path of drift and self-disparagement and weakness that I was sure could lead to another war.” More bluntly, Gates wrote of how the Reagan Administration’s fear of confronting Iran did not prevent it from choosing an alternative,

relatively defenseless target on which to display American strength. “The process of elimination brought CIA to Libya,” Gates wrote, referring to the bombing raids on that country in April 1986:

Ironically, Libya had been reluctant to attack the United States directly out of fear of retaliation. But because it was in the poorest position to sustain itself against U.S. actions—military or economic—it became the target for U.S. retaliation against all state-supported terrorism.<sup>38</sup>

Such displays of Bismarckian realpolitik reinforce realists’ reputation for ruthless expediency. Indeed, in the first edition of a still central realist text, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939*, the British historian Edward Hallett Carr argued for appeasing Hitler. Yet as was all too clearly demonstrated, first to Carr (he omitted the infamous prescription from later editions), and then to Weinberger, some states intend to attack long after concessions have been made and long after the defender has fled. Absorbing Iran’s attacks without retaliating was only the beginning, however; before long, the Reagan Administration was subsidizing the kidnapping and bombing of its own citizens.

### THE CALL UNANSWERED

*An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last.*

-Winston Churchill

The sad tale of the Reagan Administration’s further descent begins on the morning of Monday, December 12, 1983. Several weeks after the truck bombings of the French Paratrooper and U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, two vehicles exploded in short succession at the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait. Over the next two hours, four car bombs would explode at separate locations throughout the country: at the control tower of the Kuwait airport, at Kuwait’s main oil refinery, at a government-owned power

station, and at the residential area for the employees of the American corporation Raytheon. A seventh bomb was defused. Including the suicide truck bomber of the U.S. embassy, the coordinated explosions resulted in six deaths and more than 80 injuries. Once again, responsibility was claimed by Islamic Jihad—the Iranian-backed perpetrators of the barracks and embassy bombings in Beirut.

The Kuwaiti authorities apprehended the organizer of the attacks, Mustafa Yusuf Badreddin. His co-conspirator was his brother-in-law (some reports say brother-in-law and cousin), the alleged architect of the Beirut embassy and barracks bombings, Hizballah chief of operations Imad “the Fox” Mugniyah. Yet the majority of those arrested and tried for the Kuwait bombings were not members of Hizballah. They belonged to a different Iranian-backed Shi’a group, al-Da’wa, or the Call, an Iraqi opposition party that trained in Iran and fought alongside it against Saddam Hussein.<sup>39</sup> Da’wa members in Iran issued repeated threats to the Kuwaiti government while their associates stood trial for the bombings. Kuwait nevertheless sentenced several of the apprehended to death.<sup>40</sup> Five others were acquitted. The remaining group, though it included Lebanese members of Hizballah (including Mugniyah’s brother-in-law), was primarily Iraqi. It became known as the Da’wa 17, the Kuwait 17, or simply the Da’wa prisoners.

Seeking the release of the Da’wa 17 would be central to the subsequent anti-American violence initiated by Iran and Hizballah. It was as the sentencing of the Da’wa prisoners approached that the Islamic Republic, perhaps encouraged by the little cost incurred from its previous experience in taking Americans hostage, began acquiring collateral: prisoners of its own.<sup>41</sup> Over the coming years—on some occasions directly through representatives of the Iranian government and on others through hijackers whom Iran claimed not to control—Iran and Hizballah would make a priority of attempting to negotiate the release of these and other American hostages in exchange for the Reagan Administration’s guarantee that the

Kuwait-held Da'wa prisoners would be freed.<sup>42</sup>

After the Da'wa sentencing, events quickly escalated. The string of March 1984 Beirut kidnappings was followed by an April Hizballah bombing of a restaurant near a U.S. Air Force base in Spain. Eighteen servicemen died, and more than 80 people were injured. Several months later, and more than half a year after the last Marines had departed from Lebanon, a Hizballah truck bomb killed 24 people outside the relocated U.S. embassy in East Beirut.<sup>43</sup> The next demand for the release of the Da'wa prisoners came ten weeks later.

On the day after another Islamic Jihad/Hizballah-abducted American was declared missing—a librarian at the American University of Beirut—Kuwait Airways Flight 221 was hijacked and diverted to Mehrabad Airport in Tehran. An American employee of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was forced out of the plane and handed a bullhorn. Appearing in a white t-shirt before Iranian television cameras, he nervously pleaded for the hijackers' demands to be met—primary among them, the release of their “innocent brothers,” the Da'wa 17—and warned that the hijackers were “serious about their threats.” Five minutes later, the American appeared again, screaming. With the cameras still rolling, he was shot six times and thrown onto the tarmac. Another USAID employee was also killed by the hijackers. The director of the state department's office of counterterrorism at the time, Robert Oakley, said of the hijacking, “we feel there is a great deal of sympathy, if not support and active collusion, on the part of the Iranian government.”<sup>44</sup> Reagan was milder. The Iranians, he said, “have not been as helpful as they could be in this situation, or as I think they should have been.”<sup>45</sup>

The next months saw more Americans kidnapped in Beirut. In May 1985, an alleged Da'wa member took a suicide car bomb to the emir of Kuwait, Shaykh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah, but failed to assassinate him. On June 11, members of the popular Lebanese Shi'a Amal party—which is led by Nabih Berri, then Lebanon's Minister of Justice and in

2007 its speaker of parliament—hijacked a Royal Jordanian Airlines flight at the Amal-controlled Beirut Airport. The plane flew to Cyprus, Sicily, and back to Beirut, where the hijackers released the passengers, blew up the plane, and escaped into the Shi'a neighborhoods that surround the airport. The lead hijacker, Fawaz Yunis, soon returned to help with another operation. This one—organized by the Pasdaran and Mugniyah—sought the release of the Da'wa 17. Reagan's response would lay the foundation for the final, fateful year and a half of his administration's dealings with Iran.

### PRELUDE TO A KISS

Three days after the Royal Jordanian's detonation, Hizballah hijacked TWA 847, a daily flight from Athens to Rome that regularly carried many Americans traveling westward from the Middle East. On June 14, 1985, it contained eight crew members and 145 passengers, 135 of them American. Wielding grenades and guns, which had been encased in glass to pass through airport x-ray machines, the hijackers' first demand was the release of the Da'wa prisoners.

Their second demand, which proved to be the more realistic, was the release of 766 detainees held by Israel, most of them Lebanese Shi'a who had been captured in attacks against Israeli forces in Southern Lebanon. Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin told the U.S. embassy in Israel that if asked to release its prisoners in exchange for the American TWA hostages, “it would be hard for Israel to refuse.”<sup>46</sup> The United States, however, was displeased with Israel's offer, because it effectively forced America to take public responsibility for any capitulation. The objection of the United States wasn't so much to the idea of an exchange as it was the appearance of one; throughout the crisis, the Reagan Administration tried to make it seem as though it hadn't requested anything of Israel and that Israel had in fact been planning to release its prisoners all along.

The plane was diverted to the Beirut airport, where it refueled, released several

passengers, picked up two more gunmen, and flew to Algiers. There it refueled again, released several more passengers, and again took off for Beirut. Without naming Mugniyah, Nabih Berri, who was negotiating on behalf of the hijackers, explained to the U.S. ambassador in Lebanon that he had little leverage over an “inner group” of the terrorists because some of them were related to members of the Da’wa 17. In Beirut, the hijackers beat a U.S. Navy diver, shot him in the head, and threw his body on the tarmac. When the air traffic controller censured the shooter for the killing, the shooter replied, “Did you forget the Bir al Abed massacre?”—a reference to the March 1985 car bombing that failed to kill Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, a Shi’a leader in Lebanon with close ties to Da’wa, Hizballah, and Iran.<sup>47</sup>

Fadlallah is sometimes described as the spiritual leader of Hizballah. The car bomb left him unscathed but killed 80 civilians and injured more than 200. Lebanese Shi’a held the CIA responsible. At the bombing site, a banner that read “Made in USA” was placed in front of a building blown out by the bomb. Bob Woodward’s *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* asserts that the failed assassination had been a joint U.S.-Saudi effort formalized when CIA Director Bill Casey gave Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, a handwritten note with the number to a Geneva bank account that contained three million dollars.<sup>48</sup>

The U.S. role in the attempted assassination of Fadlallah was corroborated by Counterterrorism Director Robert Oakley, who, when asked in a 2001 interview whether the United States had supported the failed attempt, said, “we never actually provided any support to the group. They got frustrated and went off on their own.” When pressed further on whether the Reagan Administration had considered using its own forces against terrorists in Lebanon, he revealed more. “There were differences of opinion within the executive branch, but in the final analysis the president decided, ‘No, we’re not going to go that route.’ So we did try to organize the

Lebanese hit squad that might have been able to do this for us, but they failed to do the job.”<sup>49</sup> Thus even in its attempt at retaliation, the Reagan Administration, by hoping to attack anonymously, and through calamitously unreliable proxies, sent Iran and Hizballah yet another signal of American impotence.

With little reason to believe the United States would risk another failure in Lebanon, the hijackers, having demonstrated their resolve through the dead American on the tarmac, brought several more gunmen on the plane and raised their demands. One of their associates had been caught at the Athens airport. They said that if he was not immediately flown to meet them in Algiers, several Greek passengers would be executed. They soon picked up their co-conspirator, released several dozen passengers, and returned to the safety of Beirut. The remaining 40 passengers, all of them Americans, were dispersed to secret locations in West Beirut, leaving only a few hijackers and crew members on the plane. The passengers with Jewish-sounding last names were controlled by Hizballah; Amal and the remaining hijackers jointly controlled the rest.

Neither Weinberger nor Vice President Bush had any intention of returning to Beirut. They had pushed for withdrawal the year before and now argued that the United States should simply ask Israel to release the 766 prisoners. Shultz disagreed and succeeded in persuading an initially reluctant Reagan of his position. On June 18, 1985, Reagan declared: “America will never make concessions to terrorists—to do so would only invite more terrorism—nor will we ask nor pressure any other government to do so.” Berri called Reagan’s bluff. Although he maintained that the hijackers were not Amal members but “pious Shi’is who followed the line of Hizballah,” Berri added a demand for the release of two Amal members jailed on terrorist charges in Spain. Shultz, meanwhile, persisted in requesting that a final deal include the release of the seven American hostages that had been previously abducted in Beirut. In a speech on June 26, 1985, when 39 TWA passengers remained captive, Shultz declared,

“We insist on release of our hostages, all 46 of them, immediately.”<sup>50</sup>

U.S. intelligence would later discover that several of the original seven, as well as other Americans who were later abducted in Lebanon, were held by Hizballah and the Pasdaran at the latter’s headquarters in Ba’albak. Yet knowledge of the hostages’ whereabouts would not have been enough to impel action on the part of Weinberger’s Department of Defense, which was still reeling from the Marine barracks bombings and wary of returning to Lebanon in even the most limited capacity. According to the memoir of then CIA case officer Robert Baer, whose station chief in Beirut, William Buckley, was among the abducted, the Pentagon “wouldn’t even agree to send a Delta Force team, the army’s elite counterterrorism unit, unless a Delta member had ‘eyes on’ the hostages at least twenty-four hours in advance—a condition that could never be met.”<sup>51</sup>

During the TWA hijacking, there was a Delta Force team in the area and rumors swirled of its possible use. “But,” as Reagan put it in his memoir, “it couldn’t be used in the hostile atmosphere of Beirut.”<sup>52</sup> Memories of the Delta Force’s previous attempt to rescue hostages held by Iran—those in the seized U.S. embassy in Tehran—may have contributed to the Pentagon’s reluctance: In April 1980 Carter had belatedly aborted Operation Eagle Claw, a Delta Force mission that left a transport plane, seven helicopters, and eight dead servicemen behind in the Iranian desert.

When ten days into the TWA crisis Israel released 31 prisoners, Berri held fast, announcing that it meant nothing until all 766 were released. Berri was continuing to hold up a final deal in part because he feared, it turned out unnecessarily, that Reagan might have meant it when he said “terrorists, and those who support them, must, and will, be held to account.” Once he received assurances that this was no more true than Reagan’s vow not to make concessions to terrorists, Berri publicly announced both America’s promise not to retaliate and Israel’s pledge to release

the remaining 735 detainees. The half month-long crisis finally ended. Israel released 300 prisoners a few days later, and the last of the 766 was freed by mid-September.

Neither the Da’wa prisoners nor the seven previously abducted Americans were released. Reagan’s public approval ratings had soared during the crisis, and he appears to have deemed his handling of it a success. He claims in his memoir to believe that Israel’s release of 766 hostages didn’t constitute an exchange. “Although one American lost his life during the hijacking of TWA Flight 847, thirty-nine others went home safely,” Reagan wrote. “After seventeen days, we had gotten them back without making any deals with the terrorists.”<sup>53</sup> Reagan gave a televised address to the nation and headed off with Nancy to a jubilant dinner hosted by Shultz. “We all felt a sense of relief that the TWA 847 hostage crisis had been resolved successfully,” Shultz wrote in his memoir. “Nancy, departing from her usual practice, had a hard drink ‘just to celebrate with you boys.’”<sup>54</sup>

Mugniyah, who was seen planeside with a Pasdaran officer at the height of the crisis, was indicted for the hijacking but never caught. CIA Director Bill Casey and National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane emphasized to Reagan that the deal could not have been made without Iran’s consent. They told Reagan that the speaker of Iran’s parliament, Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, had played a critical role; and since Iran had been gracious enough to allow the ordeal to end without killing more than the single American navy diver, President Reagan sent Rafsanjani a message of thanks.<sup>55</sup>

### **AN UNREQUITED ANNIVERSARY GIFT**

It is hard to know which effect of the TWA crisis has been the most damaging. The experience taught Reagan that he could capitulate to Iran and Hizballah, go back on his word, and publicly deny that he had done so, all while enjoying extraordinarily high public approval. Iran learned that it could send its speaker of parliament to secure Hizballah’s

release of the TWA hostages—hostages held in order to free the bombers of the U.S. embassy in Kuwait—without paying a political price. Rafsanjani’s display of direction over Hizballah removed any reasonable doubt about whether control of the organization lay in some unwieldy faction of the Pasdaran or in Iran’s very centers of power; and when Reagan sent Rafsanjani his thanks, he, too, removed doubt—that held by Iran about whether the preceding two years of American inaction had been driven by ignorance or cowardice; Reagan’s message made clear that his administration had been driven by both.

Yet the most damaging aspect of the ordeal, more damaging, even, than the myopic encouragement provided to Iran and Hizballah or the lies to the American public about the exchange that had taken place, was the self-deception that the crisis had initiated. The twin fictions that America was negotiating with moderates and that moderates could control Hizballah opened the United States to the further extortion that finally culminated in the largest blight on the Reagan Administration’s legacy. Once Reagan could believe that no exchange was made with Israel’s release of several hundred Shi’a prisoners, or that Rafsanjani could be thanked for having the hostages released but not blamed for having them taken, it was but a small, casuistic step to believe what Reagan wrote in his memoir: that heavy arms could be sold to “the moderate Iranians” because they would “use their influence with the Hizballah and try to get our hostages freed.”<sup>56</sup>

Not only did the TWA crisis form the moral and strategic foundation for the series of arms-for-hostages deals that would become known as Irangate, but it was on the very day that the TWA hostages were transferred to Hizballah safe houses in West Beirut that the NSC circulated the first National Security Decision Directive that proposed the United States break with its policy by encouraging its allies to provide arms to Iran. The slippery slope that started with the exchange of American TWA hostages for prisoners held by Israel, at a ratio of nearly one to 20, descended

into American hostages exchanged for Israeli-owned, American-replenished arms, and, finally, the direct exchange of American hostages for America’s arms.

The first deal was to consist of an August 1985 delivery of 100 TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) anti-tank missiles exchanged for the release of a single American hostage. When the missiles arrived in late August, they were picked up at Iran’s Tabriz airport by the Pasdaran—another clear indication that it was the vanguards of the revolution, not some moderate Iranian faction, whom the United States was strengthening. Even though Israel was in the midst of releasing the last of the 766 Lebanese prisoners, as had been demanded by the TWA hijackers, Iran reneged on the promise of its prime minister, Mir Hussein Mousavi, to release one of the seven kidnapped Americans.

Mousavi, having gauged the nearly boundless credulity of his adversaries, then proposed another deal: the release of all seven hostages in exchange for Iran’s receipt of 400 more TOW missiles. America agreed. On September 14, 1985, Israel delivered to Iran, with the U.S.’s authorization and promise of replenishment, 408 TOW missiles. Again Iran reneged on its promise. Instead of receiving all seven hostages, the Americans were told they could select one. They chose William Buckley, the CIA Beirut station chief whose abduction was a source of embarrassment and guilt for the administration. Buckley was believed to have been tortured. He had known Vice President Bush when they were both at the CIA and had been quite reluctant, in spite of CIA Director Bill Casey’s pressure, to take the Beirut assignment—in part because his identity had been outed some years before. The Iranian response came that Buckley was too ill to travel. In fact, he had been dead for three months. A different hostage, Reverend Benjamin Weir, was released within hours of the second TOW delivery. Accompanying Weir was a note from his captors conveying a familiar message: a demand for the release of the Da’wa 17.

“We were disappointed, yes,” Reagan wrote in his memoir, “but we had succeeded in

bringing home one of the hostages, and I felt pretty good.”<sup>57</sup> So the negotiations continued, facilitated in part by the Iranians’ ability to tell the Americans exactly what they wanted to hear—that receiving additional weapons would strengthen the moderate forces in Iran and serve as a bulwark against an inflated threat of Soviet encroachment. The Americans, now practiced in self-deception, were only too happy to believe in notions that might help to justify their continuing betrayal of a repeated promise to “never make concessions to terrorists.”

The next deal was to consist of 120 HAWK (Homing All The Way Killer) anti-aircraft missiles, at a price of nearly \$25 million, exchanged for Iran’s promise that no more hostages would be abducted and that those remaining would be freed. With Weir released and Buckley presumed dead, there were thought to be five hostages left.<sup>58</sup>

The first attempted HAWK delivery failed; the second—18 HAWK missiles that belatedly arrived in Tabriz on November 25, 1985—was a disaster. The 18 HAWKs were to compose the first of five shipments; but the missiles were old and, worse, bore Israeli markings, including, on nine of them, stars of David. The Iranians were outraged. They test-fired one at an Iraqi plane, then insisted that the remaining 17 be returned. No hostages were released. Prime Minister Moussavi relayed a message to Reagan through Manucher Ghorbanifar, Iran’s broker: “We have fulfilled our every promise, and now you have cheated us. You must immediately remedy this terrible situation or else dire consequences will follow.”<sup>59</sup>

Within a week and a half, Reagan convened a National Security Planning Group meeting to discuss an even larger arms deal in exchange for the release of the five remaining living hostages. In one of their rare moments of agreement, Shultz and Weinberger expressed strong disapproval of continuing any such barter. Reagan was undeterred. He sent Bud McFarlane, who had resigned as National Advisor several days before, to meet Ghorbanifar in London the next day. By all accounts, the meeting went horribly. Reagan’s

diary entry from December 9, 1985, records McFarlane’s report:

Bud is back from London but not in the office yet. His meeting with the Iranians did not achieve its purpose which was to persuade them to free our hostages first and then we’d supply the weapons. Their top man said he believed if he took that proposal to the terrorists they would kill our people.<sup>60</sup>

NSC staff member Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, who had taken notes at the London meeting, in his December 9 NSC summary of the encounter, wrote: “Ghorbanifahr noted that nine Hezbollah leaders had been summoned to Tehran on Friday [December 6] and that, given the pressures inside Lebanon, all it would take for the hostages to be killed would be for Tehran to ‘stop saying no.’”<sup>61</sup> Yet Ghorbanifar, in his testimony before the Tower Commission, recalled telling McFarlane more than that. “I told him what the hell is this, what is the problem, you leave a mess behind,” Ghorbanifar said, referring to the failed HAWK delivery, “and if you want to continue this way, I said, just is better you cut off and don’t put us, the blame on us, and by the fire on your side because then there will be fire back on your interests.”<sup>62</sup> Like Brzezinski at his meeting with Iran’s leaders three days before the 1979 U.S. embassy seizure, McFarlane, no less portentously, held to that derided, antiquated notion of national honor. He told Ghorbanifar to “go pound sand” and left the room.<sup>63</sup>

Four days later, on the second anniversary of the six Da’wa bombings in Kuwait, there was quite literally “fire” on America’s interests. As Reagan wrote in his memoir:

On December 12, our nation got another reminder of the high price we were having to pay for the continuing strife in the Middle East and our efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict: Nearly 250 American soldiers returning home after six months of

duty as members of the international police force posted in the Sinai under the Camp David accords were killed when their plane crashed after a refueling stop in Newfoundland.<sup>64</sup>

It was the largest single-day loss of life for the U.S. Armed Forces since the invasion of Normandy. As with the bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut, the kidnappings in Lebanon, the truck bombings of the French Paratrooper and U.S. Marine barracks, and the Da'wa bombings in Kuwait, Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility.

Yet Reagan's admission in his 1990 memoir that the crash was a "reminder of the high price we were having to pay for the continuing strife in the Middle East" is the closest that any high ranking U.S. official has come to acknowledging terrorist involvement. In fact, all responsibility for the official investigation and report on the crash was deferred to the Canadian Government. Though the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Transportation Safety Board, FBI, and CIA all investigated the crash, their findings were not released to the Canadians. "The Canadian Aviation Safety Board was unable to determine the exact sequence of events which led to this accident," the Board's official report states.

However, a dissenting opinion was issued by four of the Board's nine members:

In our judgment, the wings of the Arrow Air DC-8 were not contaminated by ice—certainly not enough for ice contamination to be a factor in this accident.... Accordingly, we cannot agree—indeed, we categorically disagree—with the majority findings.... The evidence shows that the Arrow Air DC-8 suffered an on-board fire and a massive loss of power before it crashed. ... [The fire] may have been associated with an in-flight detonation from an explosive or incendiary device.<sup>65</sup>

Until the U.S. declassifies its findings, the public cannot know if the results of U.S. investigations were withheld by the Reagan Administration because they would have pointed to its secret negotiations with Iran. The historic catastrophe is not so much as mentioned in most memoirs of Reagan Administration officials. What is a matter of public record, however, is how rapidly in the wake of the crash the administration, in its all too familiar and masochistic pattern, advanced toward more intimate contact with Iran. These negotiations slipped, at first unknowingly, from contact with shady arms brokers to witting, formal meetings with the hostage-takers themselves.

Just weeks after the Arrow crash, in the first month of 1986, Reagan wrote in his diary, "I agreed to sell TOWs to Iran."<sup>66</sup> To the outrage of America's Arab allies, by the next December, at the last meeting of Iranian and Reagan Administration officials, the U.S. had provided Iran over \$50 million in arms, the release of hundreds of Lebanese Shi'a, intelligence to help it defeat Iraq, and pledges to arrange for the freeing of the Da'wa 17. This was all in exchange for the death of two American hostages, the release of three others (each of whom was replaced by other kidnapped Americans), and a host of unfulfilled promises—that the remaining hostages would be released, that no more would be kidnapped, that Buckley's body would be returned, and that Iranian-supported anti-American terrorism would cease. There were more kidnapped Americans in Lebanon at the end of Reagan's arms-for-hostages initiative than there were at its beginning.

### **AMERICA CANNOT DO A DAMN THING**

It is commonly stated that Iran ceased to be a revisionist power in the 1980s; that after the war with Iraq, its leaders and foreign policy became "quite pragmatic."<sup>67</sup> Yet each of the four most commonly cited instances of the Islamic Republic's pragmatism--or, in some versions, magnanimity--came in the wake of

impressive displays of force in Iran's immediate vicinity. When Iran finally sought to end its war with Iraq, it was after the latter had started to turn the war around and after the United States had attacked Iranian ships, oil installations, and, inadvertently, a commercial airliner (killing all 290 aboard). In spite of President George H.W. Bush's repeated conciliatory gestures, it was only after America's overwhelming success in the Persian Gulf War (during which the Da'wa prisoners had escaped from Kuwait) that Iran released the final handful of American hostages in Lebanon (concurrent with Israel's release of nearly 100 imprisoned Lebanese Shi'a and Bush's payment to Iran of \$278 million, ostensibly for undelivered military equipment ordered by the shah). When in 2001 Iran offered to cooperate with the United States on Afghanistan, it was after the American military campaign against its enemy, the Taliban, had begun; and when Iran's senior leadership allegedly approved a proposal, relayed to the United States by the Swiss ambassador to Iran, for comprehensive talks with Washington, it was just after America's formidable 2003 invasion, and initially successful occupation, of Iraq.

More importantly, these expressions of relative temperance were short-lived, all of them followed by reassertions of Iranian aggression--acts that were orchestrated by some of the most powerful leaders in contemporary Iran. These men, who were complicit in the hijackings, kidnappings, and embassy bombings of the Islamic Republic's early years, witnessed American timidity first-hand and responded with attacks that continued well into the 1990s. According to the December 2006 Memorandum Opinion of a U.S. Federal Court, the 1996 bombing that killed 19 U.S. airmen and wounded 372 people at the Khobar Towers housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia "was approved by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme leader of Iran at the time."<sup>68</sup>

Louis Freeh, who was nominated to become FBI Director by President Bill

Clinton, was responsible for the Khobar investigation. Freeh wrote in a Wall Street Journal op-ed on the tenth anniversary of the attack "that Mr. Clinton and his national security adviser, Sandy Berger, had no interest in confronting the fact that Iran had blown up the towers." Freeh found that he "was overruled by an 'angry' president and Mr. Berger who said the FBI was interfering with their rapprochement with Iran." More than a decade after the Arrow crash, Clinton and Berger, according to Freeh, were interested only in "Washington 'damage control' meetings held out of the fear that Congress, and ordinary Americans, would find out that Iran murdered our soldiers."<sup>69</sup> Despite stubbornly held American myths of an imminent honeymoon, Iran and the United States, since their disgraceful encounters in the early 1980s, seemed to have changed their policies toward one another not a whit.

Many today serve Reagan and Clinton's wine from new bottles, predicting that the rise of Iranian moderates is nigh. These optimistic seekers of rapprochement rightly stress that although President Ahmadinejad may be sincere in even his most abhorrent proclamations, he is not the arbiter of Iran's foreign policy. Yet he is not without influence, and, unfortunately, the man who is Iran's final decisionmaker, Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i, is something short of a conciliator's cause for hope. "There is only one solution to the Middle East problem," Khamene'i declared in 2000, "namely the annihilation and destruction of the Jewish state."

Hopes of moderation are hardly better placed in Ahmadinejad's possible successor, Expediency Council Chairman Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani is yet again heralded in the West as a pragmatist who ought to be strengthened. Yet he appears no more moderate today than he did when Reagan thanked him after the TWA hijacking. In November 2006, Argentina issued international arrest warrants for Rafsanjani and nine others, including Imad Mugniyah, for their role in the 1994 bombing

that killed 85 people at a Buenos Aires Jewish community center. On Tehran Radio, Rafsanjani declared that "Hitler had only killed 20,000 Jews and not six million."<sup>70</sup> Rafsanjani is the pragmatic Iranian leader who famously stated three months after September 11 that if one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it [Israel's nuclear retaliation] will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality.<sup>71</sup>

Whether it would be irrational to contemplate such an eventuality is precisely what lies at the heart of the Western debate over whether Iran can be deterred from using nuclear weapons. Those who say Iran cannot be deterred need only point to the words of Khamene'i and Ahmadinejad, and to Rafsanjani's proclaimed willingness to absorb nuclear retaliation for the sake of Israel's destruction. These deterrence pessimists point out that in Iran, Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad are no anomalies--it was declared by the revered Ayatollah Khomeini himself that "We are ready to be killed and we have made a covenant with God to follow the path of our leader, the Lord of the Martyrs."<sup>72</sup> In an address to the papal nuncio in Iran, eight days after the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy, Khomeini said: "We have a population of thirty-five million people, many of whom are longing for martyrdom. All thirty-five million of us would go into battle and after we had all become martyrs, they could do what they liked with Iran."<sup>73</sup>

The majority view in the West is that these words are mere rhetoric--that, as was written in *The Economist's* lead editorial in February 2007, "for all its proclaimed religiosity," Iran "has behaved since the revolution like a rational actor." Therefore, the logic goes, "a nuclear Iran could probably be deterred."<sup>74</sup>

Yet deterrence is premised upon two conditions: a credible threat of retaliation and the ability to identify an attacker. America lacks both. It ruined its credibility with Iran long ago. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that anyone in Washington, much less in Tehran, believes that America would retaliate against Iran for a terrorist nuclear attack whose materials could as easily have come from Russia, Pakistan, North Korea, or the United States itself. A rational Iran would have learned from the past quarter century that America's resolve doesn't amount to a damn thing.

As for the second necessary condition of deterrence, the existing technology to determine the country of origin of the materials used in a non-missile nuclear attack is woefully limited. This capability, known in the jargon of the Pentagon's Defense Threat Reduction Agency as "nuclear event attribution," relies heavily on data from atmospheric nuclear tests. Yet the last such test occurred in 1980, which means that the provenance of a new type of bomb, or of a bomb containing material from a new nuclear power, could be undetectable.

With hindsight, some argue that Iran's simultaneous bombings of the French paratrooper and U.S. Marine barracks were rational, because the attacks offered some hope of plausible deniability (even though the United States discovered Iran's responsibility). Yet given the problems of nuclear forensics, a nuclear terrorist attack could be just as plausibly denied. Moreover, the prospect of intercepting the bomb would be, if anything, more hopeless than it was in 1983: A Hiroshima-yield bomb requires roughly 50 kilograms of highly enriched uranium--about the size of a grapefruit--and a simple gun-type nuclear device could easily fit in a truck or car.

Leaving aside all the arguments about messianism, about the rise to power of a new, more conservative generation, and about the first government to have employed the tactic

of suicide bombing, one is still left with the disheartening realization that even the most perfectly rational Iran would have little reason not to attack, cow, and expel the fumbling American giant who surrounds her; for what other inference can be drawn from witnessing decades of U.S. capitulation, gullibility, and incompetence?

So thoroughly has the United States eroded its credibility that today one must wonder whether it would be rational for Iran, in contemplating another large-scale attack, to count on American retaliation. The question for America's leaders is not whether "a nuclear Iran could probably be deterred," but, rather, whether "could probably" is good enough. "I want you to know," Ahmadinejad declared in January 2007, "that the Iranian nation has humiliated you many times, and it will humiliate you in [the] future."<sup>75</sup>

Paraphrasing Khomeini's slogan, Iran's president has predicted: "By God's grace our powerful nation will continue its path and the enemy cannot do a damn thing on the nuclear issue."<sup>76</sup> If history is any guide, it will require nothing less than a reversal of American policy to prove him wrong.

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NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7080>.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Peretz, "Tremors," *The New Republic*, January 19, 2004, <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20040119&s=diarist011904>.

<sup>3</sup> Mehdi Bazargan was the Iranian prime minister, Dr. Ibrahim Yazdi the foreign minister, and Mustafa Ali Chamran the defense minister. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power*

*and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1983), p. 475.

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Gates, *From The Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> The United States broke its official neutrality in the Iran-Iraq War in the Spring of 1982, when Iraq was on the brink of losing the war. Howard Teicher, "Testimony before the United States District Court, Southern District of Florida," January 31, 1995, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB82/iraq61.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Reagan, "President Reagan's and Secretary of State Shultz's Remarks Concerning the Bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, April 18-26, 1983" *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, No. 2075, at 60, (June 1983).

<sup>7</sup> George Pratt Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> Afterward, Congressman Lee Hamilton told White House Chief of Staff James Baker, his future co-chair of the Iraq Study Group, that Shultz, in arguing against withdrawal, had been, if anything, "too gentle." Baker then reported the conversation to Shultz, and added: "But if things go badly and we do pull out, we've written the script for the Democrats." *Ibid*, p. 227.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Halloran, "Special U.S. Force for Persian Gulf is Growing Swiftly," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> *Ettela'at*, September 17, 1983. All of the quotes in this paragraph were originally found in David Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> *Kayhan*, September 24, 1983.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, September 25, 1983. Hakim, one of the most powerful men in post-Saddam Iraq, was killed by a car bomb in 2003 as he exited the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf. His brother, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, has since succeeded him as the head of SCIRI, the largest—and most closely aligned with Iran—of Iraq's political parties.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, October 13, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Iran's Ambassador to Syria, Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Mohtashami-Pur, was influential in creating Hizballah. He went on to become Iran's Interior Minister and Secretary-General of the International Conference to Support the Palestinian Uprising.

<sup>15</sup> There are discrepancies in the reporting of the truck's make and color. *Peterson v. Islamic Republic of Iran* lists the truck as a red Dodge while the Long Commission and most other reports state that the truck was a yellow Mercedes. The more common description is used here.

<sup>16</sup> Judge Royce C. Lamberth, *Memorandum Opinion, Peterson v. Islamic Republic of Iran* (U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, 2003), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1983* (U.S. Department of State, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> "Interview with Hojjat al-Islam Fakhr Rouhani," *Ettela'at*, January, 1984. This quote was originally found in Martin Kramer, "Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance* (The Fundamentalism Project, Vol. 3), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 539-56,

<http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Calculus.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), p. 437.

<sup>21</sup> George P. Shultz, "Secretary of State Shultz's Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, October 24, 1983," *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, No. 2081, at 44 (December 1983).

<sup>22</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: the Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p.395.

<sup>23</sup> Weinberger's counterpart was French Minister of Defense Charles Hernu. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: 7 Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p.112.

<sup>24</sup> Robert C. McFarlane, "Interview with PBS Frontline," September 2001, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/mcfarlane.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Gates's realist credentials were widely lauded in Washington at the time of his nomination. See Scott Shane and David Sanger, "Robert Michael Gates; Cautious Player from a Past Bush Team," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Gates, *From The Shadows*, p. 351.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Budget Deficit, Central America, and Lebanon," February 4, 1984, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/20484a.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, p. 111.

<sup>30</sup> Shultz, "Secretary of State Shultz's Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee."

<sup>31</sup> George W. Bush, "President Discusses War on Terror at National Endowment for Democracy," October 6, 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Usama bin Ladin, "Interview with ABC News," May 1998, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html>

<sup>33</sup> Hassan Nassrallah, "Speech Before a Pro-Syrian Rally in Beirut," March 8, 2005 (Broadcast on al-Manar TV), <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archive&Area=sd&ID=SP87805>.

<sup>34</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Keeps Pressure on Iran But Decreases Saber Rattling," *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2007, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/10/AR200702101275\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/10/AR200702101275_pf.html).

<sup>36</sup> Dana Priest and Douglas Farah, "Iranian Force Has Long Ties to Al Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Caspar Weinberger, "Interview with PBS Frontline," September, 2001, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/weinberger.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 351-52.

<sup>39</sup> Da'wa is one of the largest political parties in Iraq; at the time of the Kuwait bombings, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, then known as Jawad al-Maliki, was a Da'wa leader in Damascus.

<sup>40</sup> One of these, Jamal Ja'far Muhammad Ali Ibrahim, was sentenced in absentia and is a member of Iraq's parliament.

<sup>41</sup> Though Iranian-backed operatives in Lebanon had previously kidnapped David Dodge--the president of the American University of Beirut--and murdered his successor--the Lebanese-American political scientist Malcolm Kerr--it was not until the Da'wa trial neared completion that the abduction of Americans began in full force.

<sup>42</sup> The Da'wa prisoners were such an important and repeated sticking-point of the Iran-Contra negotiations that George Cave, a Farsi-speaking CIA officer who was brought out of retirement to help with the negotiations, testified that at one meeting the two delegations had "an all day argument... An exhausting one. It lasted the whole damn day. It was almost entirely devoted to the Da'wa prisoners." George Cave Deposition, in Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair (United States Congress: 1987), Appendix B-3, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> The embassy's previous Beirut location had been demolished by the Islamic Jihad 17 months earlier.

<sup>44</sup> John Kohan, "Horror Abroad Flight 221," *Time Magazine*, December 17, 1984, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,923819,00.html?promoid=googlep>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 654.

<sup>47</sup> The shooter was Muhammad Ali Hammadi. David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War Against Terrorism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 177. Despite long-standing requests from the United States that he be

handed over for trial, Hamadi was freed by Germany, where he had been imprisoned for 19 years, in 2005. Craig Whitlock, "Hijacker Sought By U.S. Released: Germany Frees Hezbollah Member Who Killed Md. Sailor in '85 Plot," *The Washington Post*, December 21, 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 397.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Oakley, "Interview with PBS Frontline," September 2001, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/oakley.html>.

<sup>50</sup> "The Seven Left Behind," *Time Magazine*, July 15, 1985, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,959666,00.html?promoid=googlep>.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Baer, *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002), p. 96.

<sup>52</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 494.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 498.

<sup>54</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 667.

<sup>55</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan*, p. 538.

<sup>56</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 507.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 507.

<sup>58</sup> According to the report of President Reagan's Special Review Board investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, the Tower Commission: "In October, 1985, the U.S. obtained reliable evidence that William Buckley had died in June."

<sup>59</sup> Michael A. Ledeen, *Perilous Statecraft* (New York: Scribner's, 1988), pp. 161-62.

<sup>60</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 510.

<sup>61</sup> John G. Tower and Edmund S. Muskie, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (New York: Bantam, 1987), p. 193.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 193.

<sup>63</sup> Robert C. McFarlane, *Testimony at Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition* (United States Congress: 1987), pp. 100-03.

<sup>64</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 511.

<sup>65</sup> N. Bobbitt, L. Filotas, D. Mussallem, and R. Stevenson, "Dissenting Opinion," (Arrow Air CASB Minority Report, Report Number 85-H50902, November 14, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Tower and Muskie, *The Tower Commission Report*, p. 38.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Ray Takeyh, "Time for Détente With Iran," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2007), pp. 17-32. The quoted expression can be found on p. 19.

<sup>68</sup> Judge Royce C. Lamberth, *Memorandum Opinion, Heiser et al. v. Islamic Republic of Iran* (U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Louis J. Freeh, "Khobar Towers: The Clinton Administration Left Many Stones Unturned," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2006,

<http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110008563>.

<sup>70</sup> Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, "Sermon on Tehran Radio," [http://www.adl.org/holocaust/Denial\\_ME/western\\_deniers.asp](http://www.adl.org/holocaust/Denial_ME/western_deniers.asp).

<sup>71</sup> Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, "Speech at 'Jerusalem Day' Rally," 2001, <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20070205&s=halevioren020507>.

<sup>72</sup> "Message to the Pilgrims," issued in Tehran on September 12, 1980. Ruh Allah Khumayni, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)* (North Haledon, NJ: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 305.

<sup>73</sup> "Address to Monsignor Bugnini, Papal Nuncio," November 12, 1979; *Ibid*, p. 285.

<sup>74</sup> "Next Stop Iran?," *The Economist*, February 8, 2007.

<sup>75</sup> "Ahmadinejad: Iran Will 'Humiliate' U.S.," Associated Press, January 2, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/01/02/world/main2321311.shtml>.

<sup>76</sup> "Enemies Cannot Stop Our Nuclear Work: Iran," Reuters, November 10, 2006.