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Sabra-Shatila 1982; Iran 2012?

The Same Volatile Dynamics

by BARRY LANDO
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The outburst of anti-Americanism sweeping much of the Arab world was ignited by an off-the-wall film insulting Mohammed, but the underlying outrage is fed by decades of resentment against the U.S. and its ally, Israel.

Nothing fueled that anger more than the massacre of at least 800 Palestinian refugees in Beirut on September 16, 1982 in the camps of Sabra and Shatila,

An Op Ed piece in today's New York Times detailing U.S. complicity with that slaughter is a must-read for anyone trying to fathom the dynamics between Israeli and American leaders. It is, eerily relevant to the current virulent demands of Israeli Premier Nethanyahu that the U.S. support a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Recently declassified Israeli files, analyzed by Seth Anziska, a doctoral candidate at Columbia University, reveal the bare-knuckle discussions between U.S. and Israeli leaders thirty years ago, as American officials were essentially bullied and brow beaten to do nothing to prevent the slaughter of the Palestinians, nearly all of them elderly men women and children, murdered, raped dismembered. The slaughter went on between September 16th and September 18th while Israeli troops surrounded the camps, their flares lighting the cramped ramshackle streets and homes within.

The killings were carried out by fanatical right wing Christian Phalangist militias, allied with the Israelis, who had invaded Lebanon in June, 1982. Israel's goal was to eradicate the PLO which had set up a state within a state in Lebanon, and to ensure the rule of the country by Israel's Lebanese Christian allies.

Ultimately, President Reagan dispatched several hundred U.S. marines to Beirut to help establish a cease fire, and oversee the evacuation of thousands of Palestinian fighters to other Arab countries.

But, after Israel's ally, Bashir Gemayel was assassinated, the Israelis broke the truce and occupied West Beirut where thousands of Palestinian civilians were still living.

Israeli leaders claimed the presence of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) was necessary because there were still thousands of "Palestinian terrorists" in West Beirut. But, U.S. officials had helped coordinate the withdrawal of thousands of Palestinian fighters a month earlier. They knew the Israeli claim was false and they feared a massacre if the Phalange were allowed into the Palestinian camps. Many top Israelis had the same fears.

On September 17, 1982 American Envoy Moris Draper and Ambassador, Samuel Lewis met with General Ariel Sharon and other Israeli officials to attempt to force an Israeli withdrawal from West Beirut.

According to Anziska,

"The transcript of the Sept. 17 meeting reveals that the Americans were browbeaten by Mr. Sharon's false insistence that "terrorists" needed "mopping up." It also shows how Israel's refusal to relinquish areas under its control, and its delays in coordinating with the Lebanese National Army, which the Americans wanted to step in, prolonged the slaughter.

"Mr. Draper opened the meeting by demanding that the I.D.F. pull back right away. Mr. Sharon exploded, "I just don't understand, what are you looking for? Do you want the terrorists to stay? Are you afraid that somebody will think that you were in collusion with us? Deny it. We denied it...."

"Mr. Draper, unmoved, kept pushing for definitive signs of a withdrawal. Mr. Sharon, who knew Phalange forces had already entered the camps, cynically told him, "Nothing will happen. Maybe some more terrorists will be killed. That will be to the benefit of all of us."

"Continuing his plea for some sign of an Israeli withdrawal, Mr. Draper warned that critics would say, "Sure, the I.D.F. is going to stay in West Beirut and they will let the Lebanese go and kill the Palestinians in the camps."

"Mr. Sharon replied: "So, we'll kill them. They will not be left there. You are not going to save them. You are not going to save these groups of the international terrorism...."

“Mr. Sharon exploded again: “When it comes to our security, we have never asked. We will never ask. When it comes to existence and security, it is our own responsibility and we will never give it to anybody to decide for us.”

“By allowing the argument to proceed on Mr. Sharon’s terms, Mr. Draper effectively gave Israel cover to let the Phalange fighters remain in the camps.

Once the extent of the massacre had become known U.S. officials from President Reagan on down expressed their outrage, but writes Anziska,

“the belated expression of shock and dismay belies the Americans’ failed diplomatic effort during the massacre. The transcript of Mr. Draper’s meeting with the Israelis demonstrates how the United States was unwittingly complicit in the tragedy of Sabra and Shatila.

“The Sabra and Shatila massacre severely undercut America’s influence in the Middle East, and its moral authority plummeted. In the aftermath of the massacre, the United States felt compelled by “guilt” to redeploy the Marines, who ended up without a clear mission, in the midst of a brutal civil war.

“On Oct. 23, 1983, the Marine barracks in Beirut were bombed and 241 Marines were killed. The attack led to open warfare with Syrian-backed forces and, soon after, the rapid withdrawal of the Marines to their ships. As Mr. Lewis told me, America left Lebanon “with our tail between our legs.”

“The archival record reveals the magnitude of a deception that undermined American efforts to avoid bloodshed. Working with only partial knowledge of the reality on the ground, the United States feebly yielded to false arguments and stalling tactics that allowed a massacre in progress to proceed.

“The lesson of the Sabra and Shatila tragedy is clear. Sometimes close allies act contrary to American interests and values. Failing to exert American power to uphold those interests and values can have disastrous consequences: for our allies, for our moral standing and most important, for the innocent people who pay the highest price of all.”

What Seth Anziska fails to examine in his Oped piece is the extent to which American officials at the time were not just being confronted by rabid Israeli leaders, but, at the same time, by the powerful pro-Israeli lobby back in Washington. It’s a good bet that AIPAC and its allies, publicly and behind the scenes—were also demanding that Israel be given a free hand.

Those same volatile dynamics are playing out today, thirty years later, as intimidated American officials confront a blustering Israeli Prime Minister demanding that the U.S. join in an attack against Iran.