

Sample chapter from  
*One Brief Miracle: The Diplomat, the Zealot, and the Wild Blundering Siege*  
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*Cursed Is the Peacemaker: The American Diplomat Versus the Israeli General, Beirut 1982*  
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## **Background**

Legendary American diplomat Philip Habib came out of retirement in 1981 to avert war between Israel and Syria and between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin deeply appreciated Habib's success in preventing those wars, neither of which he really wanted.

But his defense minister, Ariel Sharon, did want a war. Sharon had made no secret of his eagerness to drive the Syrians out of Lebanon and to destroy the PLO once and for all. Sharon briefed US Secretary of State Alexander Haig about his intentions May 25, 1982. Haig said nothing to dissuade him.

A week later, Habib was at a conference in England, after which he and his eldest daughter, Phyllis, planned to take a short vacation together. But on June 4, the Israeli ambassador to England, Shlomo Argov, was shot. Israel responded by bombing over 25 sites in Lebanon, including West Beirut, the PLO's stronghold. The PLO responded by shooting rockets into Israel.

With that, Habib's 1981 ceasefire vanished, and Sharon finally had his long-sought *casus belli* to invade Lebanon.

## 3

### Playing on Two Ropes

When all else fails and all appears lost, call in Phil Habib, the master of lost causes.

*Thomas Barron*

As soon as he heard about the Argov shooting, Philip Habib started tapping his foot, anxious to get going. But diplomats do not ordinarily initiate their own missions, and State had not yet called to give him instructions. The call he finally got came not from State, but from National Security Adviser William Clark, telling him to fly to Paris. Reagan and his party were in Versailles, outside Paris, for an annual economic summit of the Group of Seven industrial nations. One of Habib's colleagues, Nathaniel Howell, happened to be at the conference too, so he brought him and Phyllis along.

Apparently the only person surprised to see Habib show up at Versailles was Al Haig. Relations between Haig and the White House had been deteriorating for months, and the stresses of the summit had only made matters worse. So nobody had bothered to tell him Habib was coming. "Bill Clark had ordered *my* subordinate to come over and see the president, and I didn't even know it!" Haig shouted years later, bristling with indignation. This would not be the last snub.

Habib was immediately ushered into a meeting with Reagan. Haig was not invited. Reagan had enough confidence in Habib's judgment that he offered no specific instructions. "My instructions were not really very precise," Habib later said. "They were basically, 'See whether you can put an end to or defuse this crisis. Try to prevent it from going out into major warfare.'" Habib then met separately with Haig. The secretary hadn't even known that the earlier meeting was happening, much less what Reagan had said, so Habib filled him in. Haig



Haig, Habib, Reagan at Versailles  
Source: Ronald Reagan Library

did give him instructions. While they talked, Reagan came in and took Habib away for a photo op. Haig fumed.

The three did eventually all sit down together, at least briefly. But Habib was troubled. He would later say that the differences and the anger between “the Reagan triumvirate” and Haig “were evident to me in the manner in which I was getting my instructions. I was getting different kinds of instructions from different people.” At the moment, though, he didn’t tell Howell much about the problem. “Phil only alluded to it,” Howell says. “He said it was very strange, like having two different mandates. My impression was that the president said, ‘Go over there and get this thing settled,’ and Haig said, ‘Go over there.’ I didn’t get a full read-out, but my impression from what Phil did say was that Haig wanted him to more or less go through some motions.”

Going through motions was not in Philip Habib’s nature. The conflict between what Reagan wanted, what Haig wanted, and what Habib himself believed had to be done would only intensify in the following weeks. But, as a professional, Habib saluted and marched off.

### **43 Kilometers**

Sharon’s long-awaited invasion of Lebanon began at 11 A.M. Sunday, June 6, about the time Habib was arriving in Versailles. Some people welcomed the invasion, dubbed Operation Peace for Galilee. In Lebanon, the Christians and Shi’a Muslims threw rice and rosewater on Israeli soldiers to welcome them as their saviors from the hated PLO. Some members of Haig’s inner circle welcomed the prospect of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) finally destroying the PLO. Others in Washington “were just overjoyed,” not that the IDF had invaded, but that this development gave the US a great opportunity.

Habib didn’t buy that. Having warned Sharon six months earlier that an invasion would be a terrible blunder



Israel's foreign minister Yitzhak Shamir, Ariel Sharon, Menachem Begin, Habib  
Courtesy of Marjorie Habib

and an outrage, Habib was angry that Sharon had gone ahead and launched it anyway. He considered the invasion “a fundamental mistake,” “stupid,” badly conceived, badly realized, unnecessary, and counterproductive.

Habib arrived in Jerusalem on Monday, June 7. At his first meeting with Begin, the prime minister assured him that he had “no tantamount designs on Lebanon.” Begin said he intended only to clean out the PLO up to the Alawi River 43 kilometers (just under 27 miles) north of the Israel/Lebanon border. Since the PLO’s weaponry had a range of 42.8 kilometers, that certainly sounded reasonable. (Begin’s original number 43 quickly got rounded down to 40 in general use.)

But Habib “didn’t believe it, because I remembered Sharon’s original plan as he had shown me with the maps in 1981.” On the third day of the invasion, with Begin’s assurances about 43 kilometers fresh in his ears, Habib reported “I do not feel confident I have a clear picture of ultimate Israeli intentions.” He wrote that he was suspicious “of an Israeli-Phalange decision to link up their forces and redraw the political map of Lebanon once and for all. This is not, repeat, not, the Israeli objective as Begin reaffirmed it again tonight to me. . . . Nonetheless, we need to take into account Sharon’s more grandiose scheme of putting Israeli forces alongside of [Bashir’s Phalange militia] east of Beirut to force Syrian withdrawal from the Beirut area.” Even if Habib succeeded in arranging a ceasefire, it would only buy him a few days of quiet in which to try to get some kind of political underpinning in place to sustain a longer-term cessation of fighting.

The IDF had built its reputation on lightning strikes, and every indication was that Begin genuinely believed this would be another quick operation. He told Habib on June 7 that his major military objectives “could be attained by tomorrow” and told the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, that the war would take forty-eight hours, would be limited to 40 kilometers, and would bring Israel peace for the next forty years. For his part, Sharon told the Cabinet a mere twenty-four hours after the invasion began that “We have achieved almost all our objectives!”

Begin’s and Sharon’s assertions notwithstanding, there was little reason for anyone else to believe that this would be a quick, limited strike. In the first place, there was no element of surprise. Second, the sheer number of planes, tanks, and troops rumbling across the border was far too massive for the limited purposes Begin an-

nounced. Third, the Israelis fought best with jets and tanks, but Lebanon is largely a country of rugged mountains and narrow roads: terrible terrain for tank battles. Fourth, the PLO had no intention of going down without a fight.

“I don’t think Phil had any illusions that this was just going to be a quick in-and-out once it started,” says Lewis. Still, he apparently did not expect the crisis to be prolonged. He had brought Phyllis along with him to Jerusalem and booked her into the King David Hotel. Worried that someone might harm the daughter of Philip Habib, he told her, “I don’t want you going around the streets. It’s not safe. You stay here in the hotel until I come back.”

He never did come back. After two weeks, Phyllis borrowed money from Consul General Brandon Grove for a ticket and flew home.

At the US embassy in Beirut, Ambassador Robert Dillon had no doubt on day one that this was a full-scale invasion with Beirut as the objective. Despite Begin’s assurances, Dillon and his staff could see that Sharon’s forces were already far beyond any 40 kilometers. His report to Washington was couched in polite diplomatic language, but he says his message was that Begin’s claim “was clearly a lie.” Though ambassadors are always slow to order evacuations of their embassies, hoping that the next day will be better, Dillon on day two ordered all non-essential personnel and dependents to leave the country.

## A Race

Regardless of whether Sharon and/or Begin really intended to hit only the PLO, there was no way the operation could be that clean. The Palestinians and the Syrians were often physically intermingled, and some Palestinian fighters were under Syrian command. So it was often impossible to hit one without incidentally hitting the other. Hitting ragtag PLO fighters was one thing. Hitting troops of the Syrian army held far greater potential consequences. Habib’s overriding immediate priority was to avoid a major Israeli-Syrian fight, because that could easily escalate into a massive conflagration whether either side intended it or not. Begin and Assad said they did not want such a fight, so he had reason for optimism.

But Sharon was throwing far more equipment and troops into the effort than he would ever need to deal with just the Palestinians. Indeed, on the second day of the invasion, Sharon was confronting the Syrians more than the PLO. He was “trying to provoke a little fight with the Syrians,” says Morris Draper. But the Syrian troops had not been ordered to mobilize for war so they just played defense. They tried to withdraw, but Sharon threatened to outflank them and cut off their retreat. A day later, Sharon’s forces attacked Syrian positions south of Beirut well within the Syrian zone that Israel had always respected under Kissinger’s 1976 Red Line agreement.

Sharon and Habib were locked in a race. Sharon’s war plan hinged on speed, achieving his objectives before Habib could intervene and force him to stop. But he underestimated his enemies: The Syrians and Palestinians both mounted a surprisingly tenacious defense that slowed Sharon’s forces badly. He also overestimated the capacity of Lebanon’s narrow roads and bridges to carry his swarms of troops and equipment. Instead of sprinting to a brilliant victory, his tanks and trucks were running out of gas while bogged down in skirmishes and traffic jams.

Meanwhile, Habib was furiously trying to bottle the crisis. Specifically, he was trying to get Israel to stop its attacks beyond the 40-kilometer line and pull its troops back to within that zone. Once they did that, he could work out a ceasefire in place and start designing a new security arrangement to keep southern Lebanon free of threats to Israel. The operating assumption was that the ineffectual UN force already in southern Lebanon, called UNIFIL, would be replaced by a bigger and stronger peacekeeping force, perhaps of American troops, perhaps of troops from multiple countries, perhaps a beefed-up and redefined UN force. With a new, strong peacekeeping force in place to keep PLO guns out of southern Lebanon, the Israeli army would go home.

Habib and Howell dashed from one meeting to another; then Habib would go catch a few hours of sleep while Howell wrote the reports for Washington. About the time Howell would finish the cables, Habib would be waking up and ready to head off to the next meeting.

Habib was thriving, but within days the burden of what was really going on began to get to him. “He got feisty,” says Howell, “but not in the good sense that he usually got feisty. He was really worried about the kind

of mandate he was operating under,” that is, the conflict between what Reagan wanted him to do and what Haig wanted. “You see, Phil was really on delicate ice in that the secretary had in fact blessed this [invasion] without telling anybody,” says Howell. “That put Phil in a very strange situation.” It didn’t help that Sharon kept saying, “Well, you all knew all about this.” It was hard for Sharon to disguise his glee.

## The First Ugly Shock

Habib was in for three ugly shocks in the next few days. The first two would destroy his credibility with Assad. All three would shatter his own assumption that the Israelis were playing straight with him.

The first shock came on June 9. Begin had met with the opposition leaders in the Knesset the day before and promised no wider war and no contact with the Syrians. He asked Habib to go to Syria and tell Assad that Israel would not attack Syrian troops, but that Assad must pull both Syrian and PLO units out of southern Lebanon and remove his missiles from the country entirely.

Habib went to Damascus June 9 to deliver Begin’s message. In the car from the Damascus airport, a Syrian official shocked him by quoting Israeli press reports, leaked by the Israeli government, that Habib was “going to get the missiles out and warn Syria.” Habib was furious: “These leaks are seriously undercutting my efforts. [Getting the missiles withdrawn] will become well nigh impossible if the Israelis choose to make a public issue of them, demanding their removal or linking them to my talks in Damascus. I realize in that case the Israelis will probably decide to take them out by force.”

Habib conveyed Begin’s message to Assad’s foreign minister in the morning. Assad himself wouldn’t see him until later. Assad was a night owl who frequently met with visitors in the wee hours of the morning, when he was at his sharpest. If that put the visitor at a disadvantage, so much the better. Even for daytime meetings, Assad “is not at anybody’s disposal,” says Robert Paganelli, the American ambassador to Syria. “You’re at *his* disposal. That was the psychology.” True to form, he kept Habib waiting—and waiting, and waiting.

Assad’s little game backfired on him. While Habib sat in the Damascus embassy waiting to tell Assad personally that Israel had no desire to attack Syria, Israel attacked and destroyed the most prestigious symbol of Syria’s presence in Lebanon: its missiles.

It’s unclear why Sharon decided that this afternoon was the moment when those missiles had to be destroyed. Most of them had been in place in the Bekaa Valley for over a year. Only the day before, Israeli jets had flown within range of the missiles, yet the Syrians did not fire them and the Israelis were “careful not to strike” them. Whatever Sharon’s reasons, Begin clearly did not want to take out the missiles until he heard from Habib. While Assad was keeping Habib waiting, Begin called Lewis over and over, “obviously extremely eager” for word of what had happened in Habib’s meeting with Assad. Eventually, Begin apparently decided he could wait no longer and authorized the attack.

In any case, Syria’s hopelessly outclassed air force bit Sharon’s bait, rising to confront the Israeli jets. The Israelis shot them out of the sky one after another after another, like skeet. The afternoon’s air battles among some two-hundred jets were the biggest of modern warfare.

Meanwhile, Habib, twiddling his thumbs in the Damascus embassy, knew nothing about these events going on 30 miles away. By the time he finally was ushered in to see Assad in the late afternoon, he had spent hours listening to the roar of Syrian jets taking off. But he didn’t know where they were going or why. Assad started off the meeting, as he always did, with extended banter and pleasantries. If he knew about the day’s military action yet, he gave no hint of it or of being upset. Habib presented Begin’s message, as he always did, with the best spin he could muster to make it as palatable to Assad as possible. Messages from the Israelis with conditions were never welcome in Damascus, but Assad took this one no worse than any other.

Only when Habib returned to the US embassy after that meeting did he learn about the missiles and the dog-fights. “He was really very upset” when he heard, says Paganelli. “He felt that he’d been deceived” by the Israelis. Washington too had heard about the fighting by now and wanted Habib to arrange a ceasefire to begin at 6 o’clock the next morning. He hurriedly called the Syrian foreign ministry to explain that he had known nothing about the attacks and arrange to see Assad again to explain that to him personally and to propose the ceasefire. He cabled Washington, “I am astounded and dismayed by what happened today. The prime minister of Israel in

reality sent me off on a wild goose chase.”

Sharon described the day’s events as the turning point of the war. They were, in several ways. Israel’s action crippled Syria’s air defenses and put Syria’s ground forces at the mercy of Israeli aircraft. But beyond that, it convinced Assad that, as Habib put it, “the Israelis are not only out to defeat him, but to humiliate him as well, and destroy his position in Lebanon.” It also cut Habib off at the knees. His protests notwithstanding, the Syrians had every reason to believe that Israel had sent him to lull them into a false sense of security to facilitate this attack. As Assad’s biographer reflects the Syrian view, “Habib’s mission had itself been a feint.” What surer way to discredit a diplomat? “His feet were just taken out from under him,” Draper says. By now “Phil was beginning to recognize that there was more than one game going on at the same time,” says Howell. “As the Arabs say, *Yilaeb ala hableen*: ‘They were playing on two ropes.’”

Assad was not one to show anger, but his 11:35 P.M. follow-up meeting with Habib was noticeably more tense than the earlier one. The atmosphere reflected Habib’s feeling that the Israelis had deceived him, and Assad’s feeling that *Habib* had deceived *him*.

Habib urged Assad to accept the ceasefire proposed to start in six hours, even if he couldn’t get all the details worked out by then. Assad agreed, provided the ceasefire was accompanied by a simultaneous IDF pull-back. Habib must have been amazed: Despite the heavy losses Syria had suffered that day, Assad repeatedly spoke as though he were the victor, insisting that Israel withdraw immediately to the 40-kilometer line they had announced and then, as soon as possible, withdraw entirely from Lebanon. Habib knew the odds were nil that he could persuade the Israelis to do any such thing.

Someone interrupted the meeting by handing Habib two urgent cables from State. He excused himself to go read them. He came back to emphasize to Assad, as the cables directed, that he was speaking on behalf of Reagan, who was very serious about making sure this ceasefire worked. US policy, he said, was “that Israeli forces must be withdrawn from Lebanon.”

Assad of course bore in on that point. He wanted the withdrawal now, but the cables instructed Habib to be vague about what might follow the ceasefire and when. Besides, instructions or no, the best Habib could hope for was a standard ceasefire *in place*, never mind a withdrawal. So he proposed that the Syrians and Israelis both issue orders that the troops not pull their triggers. Beyond that, Habib could only reiterate that the US agreed with Assad that Israel should withdraw entirely from Lebanon. He offered Assad no suggestions that they actually would or when they might. The only assurances Habib gave Assad were that he would “be moving on further measures” toward getting an Israeli withdrawal and that “in any case, [Assad’s] position will not be jeopardized by the ceasefire.”

Habib was determined not to let the fiasco about the missiles divert him from his purpose of defusing the crisis. So, despite their shared anger at the Israelis and despite Habib’s embarrassment, he and Assad had managed to have a productive, professional meeting with tangible progress toward a ceasefire in place. At about the same time, Lewis met with Begin to read him a letter from Reagan calling on Israel to observe the same 6 A.M. ceasefire that Habib had more or less sold to Assad.

## The Meat Grinder

Reagan’s letter set the stage for Habib’s second ugly shock.

The time Reagan had specified for a ceasefire to begin was 6 A.M. June 10, a few hours hence. But Sharon was not yet ready to stop. He still wanted to cut the strategic Beirut-Damascus Highway so “we would be in a very strong position for the coming negotiations” and completely flank the Syrian troops in the Bekaa Valley. So, despite Reagan’s appeal, he fought on past 6 A.M. and throughout the day.

While this was going on, Habib met with Begin. Habib “was pretty pissed all right” about the previous day’s events, Draper says. He made no secret that he felt double-crossed, but he stopped short of directly accusing Begin of that in so many words. They talked about the ceasefire that Reagan had proposed and that Sharon was busy ignoring.

But by the end of the day’s fighting, Begin and Sharon were satisfied with the situation. Sharon told his commanders that they “had achieved the war’s objectives in full.” Begin was now willing to offer a ceasefire.

Habib flew up to Damascus to brief Assad at 11 P.M. To Assad, Habib's news was bleak. Habib reported that Israel was willing to stop shooting, but was not yet willing to withdraw. "Israel was proposing a ceasefire in place," Habib said, but would talk about withdrawal only in conjunction with negotiations about future arrangements in Lebanon—which, Assad knew, would take forever and go nowhere.

Habib asked Assad if he was expecting or prepared for a protracted fight with Israel. Assad said he did not want to fight at all, but that if Israel forced a fight upon him, Syria would rise to the occasion. He "made it very clear," Habib wrote, "that he would continue to fight despite military reverses."

That was Habib's worst fear: a major war between Israel and Syria. He wrote that "Syrian readiness to throw its air force into the meat grinder so far is a good illustration of their capacity to sacrifice." So he started probing Assad on ways to break the impasse. One suggestion was a ceasefire to begin at an appointed time "accompanied by a limited disengagement of forces but without a clear idea of the extent of withdrawal nor of the time frame for further withdrawals. This would begin the process of withdrawal but without any clear idea in advance of how fast and how far although the ultimate objective was clear." Assad said he could agree to that.

Assad asked if the US truly supported the principles of ceasefire and withdrawal. Habib said it did, "but I had to be frank. We had not been able to get Israel's agreement concerning a ceasefire and simultaneous withdrawal. The ideas that I had just raised were an attempt to break this deadlock and to look for flexibility so as to persuade Israel to move from its position of a pure standstill ceasefire to a position where it would deal with the principle of withdrawal in a practical way." Assad said he could be flexible on procedural matters, but that the two "fundamental principles on which Syria would not compromise were a ceasefire and complete Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon."

Improbably, Assad then suggested another idea: that Israel simply leave Lebanon all at once. Habib must surely have squelched his astonishment, saying only that "if I thought I could arrange a sudden and total Israeli departure from Lebanon I would try but that this simply was not a feasible idea." Assad did not press the point.

The two men had not formulated a concrete plan for a ceasefire, nor had they really even reached a firm understanding. But Assad's "preliminary positive attitude" toward a ceasefire in place was enough for Habib to work with. As he bade Assad farewell, the president said he would always be welcome to return.

The events of the next twenty-four hours would chill that welcome and come back to haunt Philip Habib eleven months later.

## The Second Ugly Shock

Habib phoned in a report to Washington and got a couple of hours of sleep. He awoke to a cable informing him that in a few hours Begin would announce a unilateral ceasefire. Habib wasn't sure what to make of that, but he didn't like the sound of it. He cabled back to Washington, "I would have preferred to reach an agreed, negotiated ceasefire, with gradual Israeli withdrawal."

He left Damascus at 8 A.M. June 11 for the short flight to Israel, satisfied that he had Assad's tentative approval for a ceasefire and curious how he might marry that with the ceasefire Begin had in mind. Sure enough, at 10:45 A.M., the Israelis said they would cease fire at noon. Assad responded by announcing his formal acceptance of the ceasefire on the condition that all Israeli forces withdraw.

Assad was operating on the assumption that Habib had sold the Israelis on the tentative understanding that he and Habib had discussed in Damascus the night before. He was wrong. He missed the point that this would be a *unilateral* ceasefire. By declaring a *unilateral* ceasefire, the Israelis were not binding themselves to any conditions that Habib or Assad might have wanted. A unilateral ceasefire could mean whatever the Israelis wanted it to mean.

And "it soon became apparent," Habib said, "that Israel's ceasefire didn't mean a thing." Sharon's forces stopped shooting but kept advancing, flanking the Syrian forces in the Bekaa Valley. The Syrians naturally interpreted that as a prelude to an attack and responded by shooting at them. The Israelis shot back, and in no time "they got into a hell of a fight," Habib said. "The Israelis clobbered the Syrians. Holy Jesus!" This was serious: The Syrians considered these units, stationed as close as 15 to 20 miles from their border, their vital first line of defense of the homeland itself. By having sat still while the IDF improved its position, the Syrians had unwittingly

tingly yielded advantageous turf at no cost to the enemy. That made this both a “horrendous defeat for Syria and a humiliation for Assad,” says one American official. “The Israelis had taken him to the cleaners.”

After all of Habib’s precision with Assad that the Israelis were offering not a withdrawal but “a pure stand-still ceasefire,” the Israelis had advanced on him. Assad interpreted their “ceasefire” as a Trojan horse, and he blamed Habib. First there was the Israeli attack on June 9 while Habib was in Damascus to say Israel would not attack. Now, two days later, this. Assad knew perfectly well who had actually wronged him. But there was no point blaming Sharon, so he took the position that Habib had deceived and betrayed him, breaking a promise to force Israel to withdraw and setting him up for this humiliating defeat. Assad would never forgive that.

## The Confrontation

For his part, Habib was in a towering rage. “Goddammit, I gave my word!” he roared to Washington. Normally he treated Begin with the utmost courtesy, but when he confronted Begin and Sharon about this, “he really shouted at Begin.”

“What the hell is going on?” he demanded. “We had a ceasefire. Why did you move?”

“Well, they fired on us,” Begin said.

“Whaddya mean, they fired on you? You moved!”

“If there’s any shooting at an Israeli soldier,” Begin said, suddenly furious, “the Israeli shoots back! Jews are not going to turn the other cheek!”

Sharon jumped in and said, “When you’ve got a ceasefire, the smart thing to do, of course, is to occupy the high ground.”

“What are you talking about?!” Habib said. “A ceasefire is a ceasefire *in place!* You can’t just keep rolling up the hillsides and mountains in order to get some advantage for the next go-around.”

“We agreed to a ceasefire,” Begin said, “but we didn’t agree to a ceasefire in place.”

“You’re dealing with the United States of America here. Your word has to be good. What the hell are you sending me off to do these kinds of things for if you’re going to play these kinds of games?”

“Show us in the president’s message where it says ‘in place.’”

“Do you mean to tell me that your definition of a ceasefire is that you stop firing and he stops firing, you go where you want to, and if he fires he’s broken the ceasefire?”

“Show us in the president’s message where it says ‘in place.’”

Habib was horrified. The term *ceasefire in place* is standard diplomatic parlance, and he had been using it routinely in his negotiations with both the Israelis and the Syrians. Reagan’s message, however, did not contain the words *in place*, only *ceasefire*. So, in the most literal, legalistic sense, Begin was correct. Habib refrained from asking why he was not equally punctilious about the message’s demand that Israel cease fire thirty hours earlier than they did. Instead, he just shook his head and said, “Well, I think I’ll turn this one over to our military attaché so it can appear in the annals of the Naval War College as a new definition of *ceasefire*.”

Habib had thought that the June 11 ceasefire would bring an end to the crisis. The only end it brought was to his and Assad’s illusions. Habib’s credibility plummeted with Assad, who, Howell says, was now certain “that Phil was carrying water for the Israelis.” Habib too now knew he was being used. “Phil felt he’d been snookered,” and he began to view Begin and Sharon with a new wariness. He saw to it from then on that all communications about ceasefires specified “in place.”

## The Third Ugly Shock

Israel’s rolling ceasefire was only the second of three shocks in five days that showed Habib that, as Howell puts it, the Israelis “were just barreling on ahead while we were chasing moonbeams.” The third came two days later.

After blowing past the forty- or forty-three-kilometer limit that Begin had originally said they would not cross, the Israelis said they would not go past the Beirut-Damascus Highway. But on June 12, Sharon’s forces crossed that highway to take control of the suburbs of Beirut. One suburb was Baabda, the site of the Lebanese

presidential palace and defense ministry and a quarter mile from the American ambassador's residence—all some 60 kilometers from the nearest Israeli soil. There the IDF linked up with their ally Bashir Gemayel's Phalange forces. Together, they now had Beirut surrounded, with thousands of PLO fighters and several thousand elite Syrian soldiers trapped inside.

The next day, June 13, Sharon himself showed up in Baabda. As Sharon tells the story, he was just out looking for one of his generals in the mountains when, much to his surprise, he found himself in Baabda. As another writer tells it, "Sharon, in full battle-dress, rode triumphantly, like a latter day Tamerlane, on top of an armored personnel carrier into Baabda, the hillside seat of the Lebanese presidency".

Sharon's capture of Baabda changed everything. Beirut was now under siege. The focus now shifted from fighting the Syrians to crushing the PLO in Beirut. This was a turning point in the war—not just militarily, but politically and psychologically. Israeli journalists Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari wrote in *Israel's Lebanon War*:

There is no getting around the fact that the Israeli Cabinet never ordered or sanctioned the IDF's entry into Beirut. When Israeli troops and vehicles began to sweep through the streets of the Lebanese capital, they did so in express contradiction not only to what their government wanted but to what their defense minister had promised. The events of Sunday, June 13, were among the most critical of the war in Lebanon, for they proved that Ariel Sharon had led Prime Minister Begin and his Cabinet down the garden path. Most important of all, perhaps, the IDF's arrival in Beirut marked the transformation of Operation Peace for Galilee from a limited military action to protect Israeli citizens into a runaway war to conquer an Arab capital, and eventually a kind of Frankenstein monster . . . .

All of Israel's governments had lived by the axiom that the capture of an Arab capital—any Arab capital—was to be stringently avoided. Yet now, in what was supposed to be a relatively limited ground operation in South Lebanon, the inconceivable seemed to be happening. Only in retrospect did the ministers realize that the penetration of Beirut, the subsequent siege, and all that followed shattered the hallowed consensus on security, raised disturbing moral issues in Israel, offended international public opinion, and altered the attitudes of formerly sympathetic governments.

## The Stakes

The quick, limited border sweep that Begin originally thought he was launching had become a quaint memory. Sharon's surge to the edge of Beirut suddenly raised the stakes dramatically. Unless Philip Habib could stop him, a disaster of epic proportions—a disaster for the Lebanese, for the Palestinians, for the Israelis, for the US, for the entire Middle East—was guaranteed.

Habib faced the very real prospect of Sharon's forces and/or the Phalange wading into West Beirut for unspeakably bloody hand-to-hand combat to dig out and kill every PLO fighter they could find. Sharon's forces were superbly suited to quick air and tank battles. But they were utterly unsuited to hand-to-hand fighting in the PLO's home turf, slogging through the streets and tenements of a city honeycombed with booby-trapped PLO hiding places. "Every bit of evidence I have," Habib wrote, "suggests that the cornered Palestinians will fight unless shown an alternative."

The IDF would surely prevail—eventually—but in the meantime untold thousands of Lebanese civilians, Palestinians, and Israeli soldiers would die. According to two of Habib's US military advisers, the standard estimation tables on which American Marines base their predictions of casualties suggest that the Israelis would have to throw about 40,000 ground troops at West Beirut to achieve the 4-to-1 ratio required to dig out such well-entrenched defenders. Quite apart from the number of Lebanese and Palestinian casualties or the number of Israelis who would be captured, Israel could expect about 2,000 of its attackers to die and 6,000 to be wounded.

Habib knew that Begin did not want that. Begin was extremely pained by each Israeli casualty, and a slow, ugly street fight would cost far more Israeli lives and captives than he was willing to lose. But Habib also felt that Sharon was a loose cannon with his own agenda in Lebanon that he was determined to achieve with or without his government's prior approval. He just might be obsessed enough to do this. He had, after all, pledged

to exterminate the PLO, to wipe them out once and for all. His chance had finally arrived.

How likely was Sharon to plunge in? Habib always considered it an imminent threat. "In my opinion," he said, "Sharon would not have minded going into Beirut. He wanted to get the PLO. He just wanted to get them." George Shultz says, "I don't think there was any question in anybody's mind that if the PLO were not negotiated out, the Israelis—despite their misgivings—would storm into Beirut and try to kill them. They were heavily committed." Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger also considered house-to-house combat "very likely. It was almost certain to happen. You would have had a major bloodletting."

Along with the PLO fighters, several thousand elite Syrian troops were trapped in Beirut. Those Syrians had been ordered to fight to the last man. If they did, that in turn might spark an all-out war between Syria and Israel on the order of the 1967 and 1973 wars. Syria had lost its battles with the Israelis so far, but Assad had so far been trying to avoid a fight. If he decided to really fight wholeheartedly, he would still lose eventually, but only after a nasty, bloody war.

The immediate prospects of a bloodbath and all-out war were obviously Habib's first concern. But his second concern was the broader political and diplomatic consequences that might reverberate for years to come if, for the first time in history, Israel conquered an Arab capital. He was also worried about the implications for American interests in the rest of the Middle East. The Israelis were dropping American-made bombs from American-made aircraft to kill Arabs. The Arabs assumed that the US had given the Israelis the green light to do this and thus blamed the US as much as Israel. An Israeli conquest of Beirut would convince some Arabs that the US had no real influence with the Israelis, so why talk to them? It would convince other Arabs in this conspiracy-minded region that the Americans had planned precisely this with Israel all along.

It would convince all Arabs that Ambassador Philip Habib was at best an impotent, irrelevant Quixote and at worst the Israelis' shill.

Academic experts on the Middle East predicted that the whole Arab world could erupt in a firestorm of anti-American violence. Draper considered it "quite possible that fanatics might attack American embassies and businesses" around the world.

The invasion also raised the prospect of the Soviet Union intervening militarily on behalf of its ally Syria. That in turn might draw in the US militarily on behalf of its ally Israel. Already in this crisis Assad had secretly flown to Moscow with an urgent appeal for protection, and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev had used the hot-line for the first time in the Reagan administration to threaten to intervene if the US couldn't restrain Israel. Brezhnev also put a Soviet airborne regiment in Odessa on alert. "Although the information was still being evaluated," says a National Security Council (NSC) official involved in the crisis, "it certainly appeared that Moscow was signaling that it was . . . prepared to confront the United States and stand by its allies in the face of 'American-backed' Israeli aggression."

Any hope of averting all these disasters rested squarely on the shoulders of Philip Habib. His prospects were grim.

## ENDNOTES

*The hardback edition of the book included 125 pages of endnotes, way too many to include in the abridged eBook edition. So all endnotes and other reference materials are offered online at [wayfind.com/habib](http://wayfind.com/habib). Endnotes are included in this sample chapter for the sake of completeness. Additional reference material is available at [www.wayfind.com/habib](http://www.wayfind.com/habib).*

*Citations of interviews give the last name of the interviewee and date of the interview.*

*Where appropriate, citations of declassified cables and other documents give city of origin, number, and date/time. Most cables cited use military time, with a 24-hour clock, so 21 means 9 p.m. Z stands for "Zulu," shorthand for Greenwich Mean Time. Example: 062147Z Jul 82 means July 6, 1982, at 9:47 p.m. GMT.*

Lost causes: Barron letter to author 5-4-94. Barron was administrative officer in the Beirut embassy.

Relations: Veliotes 4-29-93

My subordinate: Haig 5-11-94

Haig not invited: Howell 9-6-93; Haig, p.337.

Reagan's instructions: Habib interviews with Parker and Tueni. Habib would later describe them as "general guidelines."

Habib meeting with Haig: Haig 5-11-94; Haig, p. 337.

Different instructions: Habib interview with Parker

Motions: Howell 9-6-93. Haig (p. 337) writes that "I asked Habib to go immediately to Begin and urge an immediate end of hostilities before the conflict widened."

Welcomed: Randal, p. 289; Parker, p. 178; Norton, p. 84; Draper 4-13-93; Howell 9-6-93

Inner circle, others overjoyed: Draper 4-25-93. Draper mentions NSC staff member Howard Teicher specifically as one of these. Haig himself wrote to Reagan on the sixth day of the invasion that the US should "seize the initiative quickly" to capitalize on the occasion (Haig memo to The President, "A Forward U.S. Strategy in Wake of Israel's Offensive," 6-12-82).

Having warned: Eagleburger 7-3-93

Considered the invasion: Habib interviews with Parker and Dusclaud

Habib-Begin meeting: Habib cable Jerusalem 01745, 072224Z Jun 82, par. 2. In most of Begin's other statements, he said 40 kilometers. "In his presentation," Habib wrote, "Begin stated Israel's firm commitment not repeat not to remain in Lebanon" (Habib cable Jerusalem 01743, 071925Z June 82, par. 2). A week later Begin was still telling Habib that, once a multinational force took control of a 40-kilometer zone to keep terrorists out, "we will be out of Lebanon completely." The Israelis considered defining the zone as 43 to 48 kilometers, but decided to stick with 40 (Habib cable Jerusalem 01903 of June 13, 1982, repeated in State 163551, 142321Z

Jun 82, par. 6).

Artillery range: Habib cable Jerusalem 01745, 072224Z Jun 82, par. 6

Didn't believe: Habib interview with Parker

More grandiose scheme: Habib cable Jerusalem 01785, 082248Z Jun 82, par. 2 and 3. Habib's suspicion about an Israeli-Phalange linkup was strengthened the next day when he met with Begin and asked him directly whether Israel's current military moves were a prelude to such a linkup. Begin was "somewhat coy" and evaded the question, leaving Habib and Amb. Sam Lewis with the "distinct impression" that they were (Lewis cable Tel Aviv 08563, 091533Z Jun 82, par. 8 and 11). Despite his skepticism that the IDF would stop at any 40- or 43-kilometer limit, he set about trying to get a ceasefire anyway (Hopkins, p. 7 and 63, citing a 3-12-92 interview with Habib). Nathaniel Howell, who accompanied Habib for the first week or so of the war, says that in the early days he and Habib really did think they were dealing with Israeli ambitions for a 40-kilometer security zone (Howell 10-23-96).

Few days of quiet: Crocker 4-25-94

Genuinely believed: Kadishai 6-29-95

By tomorrow: Habib cable Jerusalem 01743, 071925Z Jun 82. Begin and Sharon were "supremely overconfident" of the IDF's ability to root out the PLO within days without triggering a wider conflict with Syria (Lewis in Quandt, p. 242; see also Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 103-6). Sharon told the cabinet the operation should take 12 to 24 hours (Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 105-6).

Sharon told Knesset: Yaacobi 2-14-95. Again on August 4, Begin predicted "a historic period of peace, of 40 years or 50 years" once the PLO left Lebanon ("Israelis push toward guerrilla strongholds," St. Petersburg Times based on New York Times and Washington Post wire reports, 8-5-82). Four days later he said in a speech, "Because the other Arab countries are completely incapable of attacking the State of Israel, there is reason to expect that we are facing a historic period of peace. It is obviously impossible to set a date. It may well be that 'The land shall be still for 40 years.' Perhaps less; perhaps more. But from the facts before us, it is clear that, with the end of the fighting in Lebanon, we have ahead of us many years of establishing peace treaties and peaceful relations with the various Arab countries" (Begin speech "The Wars of No Alternative and Operation Peace for Galilee," delivered at the National Defense College in Israel 8-8-82, in Laqueur and Rubin, p. 655).

Achieved: Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 187

Too massive: Dillon ADST oral history

Terrible terrain: Dillon 5-9-94

Without a fight: Dillon 5-9-94

Any illusions: Lewis 4-10-94

Phyllis: Marjorie Habib 2-27-93; Phyllis Habib 7-7-97; Grove 6-12-94. Despite his instructions, Phyllis did not stay at the hotel the whole time. She spent part of her two weeks at Consul General Grove's residence.

Dillon and embassy, lie: Dillon ADST oral history. Dillon 5-9-94; "The 'Beirut Summer,'" by Dundas McCullough, State, 12-82, p. 6-7

Intermingled: Habib cable Jerusalem 01745, 072224Z Jun 82, par. 6. Israelis viewed PLO artillery as shooting at Israeli villages from “under Syrian umbrella” (Habib cable Jerusalem 01782, 082059Z Jun 82, par. 6).

Overriding priority: Habib cable Jerusalem 01785, 082248Z Jun 82, par. 2

Escalate: Haig memo to The President, “Lebanon: Critical Moment at Hand,” 6-9-82, 8216678, warning that, unless the Israelis pulled back to within their declared 40-kilometer zone, “there is a strong likelihood of a Syrian-Israeli war”; Draper ADST oral history

Not want a fight: Howell 10-11-93; Howell 9-6-93; Seale, p. 378-79; Begin and Sharon told Habib at their first meeting with him after the invasion that they “wanted to avoid any battle with Syria” (Habib cable Jerusalem 01745, 072224Z Jun 82, par. 6). Israeli Labor Party leaders told Habib June 7 that Israel “had sought to inform the Syrians in every possible way that it desired no clash with Syrian forces” (Habib cable Jerusalem 01782, 082059Z Jun 82, par. 5).

Far more equipment: Seale, p. 379-80

Confronting the Syrians: At their first meeting after the invasion began Sharon told Habib his troops were trying to avoid any battle with Syria, but that “there had been a very dangerous development”: Syria was taking advantage of Israeli caution to move new forces and missiles into Lebanon and had shelled Israeli troops, inflicting casualties and “complicat[ing] the IDF’s mission” (Habib cable Jerusalem 01745, 072224Z Jun 82, par. 6 and 8).

Provoke: Draper ADST oral history

Mobilize: Howell 10-11-93

Cut off: Gabriel, p. 64-66. Sharon, in a meeting with Habib June 7, accused the Syrians of attacking the IDF (Habib cable Jerusalem 01745, 072224Z Jun 82, par. 6 and 8).

Red Line: Cobban, p. 39. The Red Line agreement was an informal division of Lebanon brokered by Henry Kissinger in 1976. Under the agreement, Syria tolerated Israel’s presence in certain areas while Israel tolerated Syria’s presence in other areas (Seale, p. 378). Syrian president Assad now concluded that Syria was Sharon’s real target (Seale, p. 380).

Race: Former Lebanese Prime Minister Sa’ab Salaam would later say “Sharon is winning the race against a political settlement” (Habib cable Beirut 05089, 040531Z Aug 82, par. 9).

War plan: A major strategic premise of Israel is a fast war doctrine, to achieve its objectives before the US intervenes to force a halt to the fighting (Gabriel, p. 14; Yaacobi 2-14-95; Draper 4-13-93).

Bogged down: Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 109-160, particularly 137, 159-60

Operating assumption: Haig cable (no number) from Windsor to Habib, 6-9-82; Haig memo to The President, “Lebanon: Critical Moment at Hand,” 6-9-82, 8216678; Lewis cable Tel Aviv 08563, 091533Z Jun 82, par. 4-5; State cable 159059 from NEA to Haig, par. 6; Habib cable Jerusalem 01871, 121152Z Jun 82, par. 3D and E. Other options for a security force in southern Lebanon included involving the Lebanese Armed Forces in it (Haig memo to The President, “A Forward U.S. Strategy in Wake of Israel’s Offensive,” 6-12-82, p. 2). When Habib first pointed out to Begin that the IDF was considerably past 40 kilometers already, Begin said those were

just “‘tactical’ positions. Begin stated strongly that it is not an Israeli objective to press military operations with the goal of doing away with the PLO entirely” (Habib cable Jerusalem 01781, 082022Z Jun 82, par. 10; Habib cable Jerusalem 01785, 082248Z Jun 82, par. 6).

Sleep, feisty, glee: Howell 9-6-93. At Habib and Sharon’s first meeting after the invasion, the first words out of Sharon’s mouth were a pointed reminder that he had just recently emphasized in Washington that he didn’t want the US to be caught by surprise (Habib cable Jerusalem 01745, 072224Z Jun 82, par. 6).

No wider war: Gabriel, p. 67, citing Newsview, July 20, 1983, p. 19.

Asked Habib to go: Haig memo to The President, “Lebanon: Critical Moment at Hand,” 6-9-82, 8216678; Seale, p. 381. In his memo, Haig told Reagan that “the Syrians are very unlikely to agree” to Begin’s terms as long as Israeli troops kept attacking well beyond Begin’s 40-kilometer zone. Seale and Schiff & Ya’ari (p. 168) both describe this message as an ultimatum, but Draper says, “Phil would never deliver an ultimatum on behalf of the Israelis or anybody else.” In Draper’s view, Habib was simply bringing, in good faith, a reiteration of the Israeli position on the missiles that everyone had known for over a year (Draper 4-25-93). Assad apparently did not view it as any more of an ultimatum than he viewed other messages from Begin (Paganelli 11-2-96). Hopkins, p. 6, and Sharon, p. 465, give differing texts of Begin’s message to Assad.

Sharon claimed that Syria introduced six additional SA-6 missile batteries between June 7 and 9 (Lewis cable Tel Aviv 08505, 090841Z Jun 82, par. 3); Assad told Habib that he had added no new missile batteries in the Bekaa, only shifted existing ones around (Habib cable Damascus 04030, 092111Z Jun 82, par. 1).

Leaks: Hill 7-9-94; Habib cable Damascus 04013, 091207Z Jun 82, par. 3 and 4. Lewis conveyed to Begin Habib’s message that Israeli leaks like this virtually guaranteed Habib’s failure. But Lewis said “this will not be the first or the last time that Israeli leaks complicate your missions. I have long since run out of arguments to forestall them” (Lewis cable to Habib, State 158952, 092310Z Jun 82, par. 3-4).

Night owl: Howell 9-6-93

His disposal: Paganelli 11-2-96

Attack while Habib waits: Seale, p. 381-82; Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 167-68; Gabriel, p. 67, 97. Nathaniel Howell, who was the only person traveling with Habib in the first few days of the war, points out that the missiles were positioned “pretty well far up the Bekaa” nowhere close to the Israeli border. Despite Reagan’s uninformed statement that the missiles were pointed at the heart of Israel, they were defensive missiles. “They couldn’t hit Israel and they couldn’t threaten Israel,” says Howell. “What they did threaten was Israel’s ability to fly at will over the Bekaa Valley. So those missiles were a red herring all along. . . . Among the professionals dealing with this there was some understanding of why the Syrians had moved the missiles in and a feeling that the Israelis had really provoked them to do it” (Howell 9-6-93).

Careful not to strike: Gabriel, p. 92. The only explanation Gabriel offers is that “the political situation changed” on the ninth and “Begin finally authorized” Sharon to launch a preemptive strike (p. 97). Sharon’s version is that, as soon as Habib received the message from Begin on June 8, the US embassy in Damascus forwarded it to Assad. Meanwhile, Assad was introducing new missiles into the Bekaa to supplement the ones he already had there. Begin demanded, through US ambassador Lewis, that Assad remove those new missiles by 5 A.M. the next day, June 8. Assad failed to comply. While the Israeli Cabinet pondered what to do, and while Habib coincidentally was waiting to see Assad, Israeli intelligence notified Sharon that more missiles were on their way to Lebanon. The Cabinet thus decided to take them out (Sharon, p. 465-66).

Sharon did tell Begin on the morning of June 9 that the Syrians had moved six additional surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries into Lebanon (Lewis cable Tel Aviv 08505, 090841Z Jun 82, par. 3). But Habib cabled

Washington that “Assad told me last night that he had not [repeat] not sent additional SAM batteries into the Bekaa but had rotated units [that were already] there for tactical reasons.” Begin’s request that Habib discuss with Assad the question of “additional SAMs” was “misleading,” Habib said, because the supposedly new units at issue were not in the Bekaa Valley but “located on the border. It is simply not reasonable,” Habib wrote, “to expect the Syrians not to augment their air defense, particularly within their own territory, and use them in certain circumstances under conditions that approximate war. . . . [The Israelis] really wanted to bomb them out and did not even give me a chance to get Assad to move back to June 5 deployment, despite [the] fact that I had been tasked by them to raise the issue” (Habib cable Damascus 04056, 100943Z Jun 82).

Robert Paganelli, the American ambassador in Damascus at the time, also disputes Sharon’s crucial point about his embassy forwarding Begin’s message to Assad on June 8: “No, that’s wrong. Phil carried that message. We never in any of the time that I worked with Phil, when he had a message to deliver, we would never preempt that message. Never” (Paganelli 11-2-96).

Begin extremely eager: Sichertman 8-4-98. Lewis cabled Habib in Damascus on June 9 that “Begin has telephoned several times during the day today (Wednesday, June 9) to ask whether I had any word about your movements or meetings. He is obviously extremely eager to know whether anything helpful occurred. When I spoke to him about 3 P.M. local this afternoon, we had just gotten the first word of the firing of the SAM-6 missiles, the Israeli attack on those missiles, and the ensuing air battle” (Lewis cable to Habib, State 158952, 092310Z Jun 82, par. 2-3).

Biggest: Seale, p. 381-82; Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 167; Gabriel, p. 67, 97. Israel shot down twenty-nine Syrian MiGs that afternoon. Schiff & Ya’ari point out that Syria’s loss of pilots was even greater than its loss of equipment.

Knew nothing: Habib cable Damascus 04039, 100047Z, par. 3. Howell also confirms that Habib did not know about the missiles having been hit when he walked into the first meeting with Assad (Howell 10-23-96).

Afternoon: Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 169

Listening to the roar: Howell 10-11-93. Paganelli (11-2-96) says the Syrian military bases were far away from town, but Howell distinctly remembers the sounds of the jets.

No hint: Draper 4-25-93; Howell 9-6-93; Sichertman 8-4-98

No worse: Paganelli 11-2-96

Deceived: Paganelli 11-2-96

Ceasefire for 6 A.M.: Eagleburger cable to ambassadors, State 158441, 091807Z Jun 82

Called foreign ministry: Habib cable Damascus 04039, 100047Z Jun 82, par. 3. Howell (10-23-96) and Paganelli (11-2-96) both confirm that Habib did not know about the missiles having been hit when he walked into the first meeting with Assad.

Wild goose chase: Habib cable Damascus 04030, 092111Z Jun 82, par. 1

Turning point: Gabriel, p. 97. Gabriel, who wrote his book with the cooperation of the IDF, says the dogfights were no accident. Rather, “A second part of [Israel’s] strategy was to draw Syrian aircraft into battle and destroy as many as possible in order to establish air superiority over the entire Lebanese battle zone” (p. 97).

Crippled: Gabriel, p. 100. Assad told Habib that he would replace whatever equipment the Israelis destroyed

(Habib cable Damascus 04030, 092111Z Jun 82, par. 2).

Humiliate: Habib cable Damascus 04030, 092111Z Jun 82, par. 5; see also Seale, p. 382

False sense of security: Howell 9-6-93

Feint: Seale, p. 381

Feet taken out: Draper 4-25-93

Two ropes: Howell 9-6-93. A newsletter that got hold of Habib's cables reported that Habib believed he was "set-up" by the Israelis (Middle East Policy Survey, June 18, 1982, No. 58, p. 1, "War in Lebanon"). Habib complained about the leak of his cables, but did not dispute the accuracy of the report (Hill 7-9-94).

More tense: Howell 10-23-96; Habib cable Damascus 04039, 100047Z Jun 82, par. 2

Atmosphere: Paganelli 11-2-96

Habib meeting with Assad: Habib cable Damascus 04039, 100047Z Jun 82, par. 6-12. In fact, Habib had "tried strenuously" that very morning to extract from Begin a promise to pull back to 40 kilometers; Begin not only refused, but confided to him that pulling back would contradict the Israeli strategy of keeping a certain amount of pressure on the Syrians to "persuade them" to move the PLO north. Indeed, Begin had emphasized, forcing Syria to move the PLO north was the "only purpose" behind Israel's operations north of the 40-kilometer line (Lewis cable Tel Aviv 08563, 091533Z Jun 82, par. 2 and 4-7). Begin said the IDF's strategy was to encircle the Syrians and the PLO much as it had encircled the Egyptian Third Army on the east bank of the Suez Canal in the 1973 war. He pointed out that in 1973 the IDF had not fired on that army, but that keeping it encircled facilitated the subsequent negotiations. Likewise, he said he had ordered the IDF not to attack the Syrians (par. 4 and 6).

One of the two cables Habib was handed during this meeting (Eagleburger cable to Habib and Paganelli, State 158653, 092031Z Jun 82, par. 2) contained talking points for Habib to make to Assad and reinforced the US position "that Israeli forces must be withdrawn from Lebanon." The other (Draper cable to Habib, State 158702, 092056Z Jun 82) authorized Habib to make clear to Assad that the US did not view the ceasefire as "the end of the game" and to leave Assad with the "clear implication that other steps will follow the ceasefire" (par. 2). Draper was sending this cable in his capacity as deputy assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs; within days he would take over for Howell travelling with Habib.

Not divert: Habib cable Damascus 04056, 100943Z Jun 82, par. 2, 6

Sharon fights on: Sharon, p. 467-68; see also Gabriel, p. 104. It had been three days since Sharon had told the Israeli Cabinet that the IDF had "achieved almost all our objectives!" within the first twenty-four hours (Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 187). Begin's reply to Reagan's letter was, in Lewis' description, "vintage Begin, an extravagantly polite and legalistic way of rejecting the president's simple proposal and restating Begin's previous conditions" (Lewis cable Jerusalem 01809, 100509Z Jun 82, par. 5).

Pissed, double-crossed: Draper 4-25-93

Achieved objectives: Sharon, p. 467-68; see also Gabriel, p. 104

Worst fear: Habib cable Jerusalem 01785, 082248Z Jun 82, par. 2, 7

Meat grinder: Habib cable Damascus 04082, 101739Z Jun 82, par. 3. Habib had written two days earlier, “I do not believe the Syrians can in any way accept . . . the virtual loss of their dominant position in Lebanese affairs” as a result of Israeli action. “I believe they might just make a major fight now rather than swallow this humiliation, even at the cost of a military defeat” (Habib cable Jerusalem 01785, 082248Z Jun 82, par. 7).

Habib meeting with Assad: Habib cable 6-11-82. Assad typically had visitors meet first with his foreign minister, then repeat their message to him later. Habib knew that Assad had played the same game with Kissinger and Vance. This practice is one reason Habib had to wait to see him on June 9. Having been burned by that experience, Habib took steps to prevent an encore. He sent word via a Syrian intermediary, “This is ridiculous. I don’t want to go and sit for two hours and tell [Foreign Minister] Khaddam everything I have to say and then have to go repeat it to Assad” (Habib interview with Parker).

Attitude: Draper 12-22-94 and 4-13-93; Draper ADST oral history; Howell 9-6-93

Welcome: Habib cable 6-11-82. The American ambassador in Damascus would say on July 16 that the “Syrians would welcome a Habib visit for . . . any . . . purpose” (Paganelli cable Damascus 05050, 160720Z Jul 82).

Begin would announce: Haig cable Bonn, Secto 08064, 110102Z Jun 82, par. 2

Would have preferred: Habib cable Damascus 04097, 110702Z Jun 82, par. 7

Ceasefire at noon: Cable 111738Z June 82, RUEKJCS/1022. The PLO rejected the ceasefire. Assad’s biographer says that, on the strength of Habib’s words the night before, Assad had already agreed to pull back his own troops and to move the PLO fighters northward (Seale, p. 384). Howell, who was in the meeting with Habib and Assad, says flatly, “He did not agree to pull them back” (Howell 9-6-93).

Assumption: Paganelli 11-2-96

Unilateral ceasefire: An incorrect story has it that the Israelis decided on their ceasefire while Habib was flying from Damascus to Israel and that Habib knew nothing about it until he arrived in Jerusalem (Hopkins, p. 9, quoting his interview with Paganelli 1-11-92). The story cannot be correct because Habib’s cable commenting on “the ceasefire which they intend to declare unilaterally” was sent from Damascus at 9 A.M. local time. Another report is that the Israelis learned of Habib and Assad’s understanding during the night of June 10-11, perhaps by monitoring the less-than-secure line Habib used to report back to Washington. The communication facility at the US embassy in Damascus had broken down, and Habib was forced to fall back on a voice line (Seale, p. 384). When Habib heard of Israel’s unilateral ceasefire, he said he didn’t think Assad would agree to it unless it carried some provision for beginning an Israeli withdrawal—which it of course did not (Habib cable Damascus 04097, 110702Z Jun 82, par. 8). See Sharon, p. 469.

Didn’t mean a thing: Quoted in Seale, p. 385, from Seale’s interview with Habib 7-25-87. Sharon’s explanation in his memoirs (Sharon, p. 470-71) is that the PLO south and west of Beirut kept shooting, so Begin ordered the IDF to strike back at them.

Hell of a fight: Habib interview with Tueni

Clobbered: Habib interview with Parker

Line of defense: Howell 10-23-96; Paganelli 11-2-96

Cleaners: Veliotis 4-29-93

Deceived and betrayed him: Seale, p. 407. The American ambassador in Damascus talked with the Syrian deputy foreign minister June 26 about a report that Assad believed Habib had deceived him in their June 9-10 discussions. He argued that Habib had not misled Assad, but that his discussions had been overtaken by developments on the ground (Paganelli cable Damascus 04565, 261130Z Jun 82).

Breaking a promise: Draper ADST oral history; Draper 4-13-93. Why would Assad blame Habib instead of Sharon? Paganelli, the American ambassador to Syria, says this was a case of Assad shooting the messenger (Paganelli 11-2-96).

Rage: Draper 4-25-93

My word: Quoted by a State Department official who asked not to be identified by name.

Really shouted: Draper 4-25-93

Habib exchange with Begin and Sharon: Habib recounted this exchange several times, with some variations each time. So did Draper and Howell, who were both in the meeting with him. This version is based primarily on Habib's account in his interview with Parker, with additional material from Draper's accounts (Draper 12-22-94 and 4-13-93) and Howell's account (Howell 9-6-93). Habib also told the story in interviews with Hopkins 3-12-92 (Hopkins p. 9-10) and Tuani 6-28-87. Habib repeatedly complained about Begin's "mind-boggling definition—foreign to any rational definition of a cease-fire" (Habib cable Beirut 04240, 162045Z Jun 82, par. 2). The letter was of course not written by the president himself, but by an official in the State Department. It got the usual approvals, including a "No objection" stamp from the NSC (State 158645 TOSEC 080359, 092024Z).

Habib reported on a June 13 meeting in which he and Begin argued about whether "in place" is intrinsic to the concept of a ceasefire. This may have been the same meeting described in the text, though it may also have been a later one in which they went at it again. In that meeting, Habib told Begin he "found it hard to believe that Israel would deal this way with the appeal of the president. Clearly, the president had proposed a ceasefire in place. Begin repeated that that would be true if it had been negotiated into an agreement. As it is, it is a unilateral undertaking" [italics added]. Lewis reminded Begin in this meeting that, when he had first presented Reagan's message to Begin, he had "made it clear that the cease-fire was in place" (Habib cable Jerusalem 01903 of 6-13-82, repeated in State 163551, 142321Z Jun 82, par. 15-23; Habib cable Beirut 04240, 162045Z Jun 82, par. 2).

The Israelis had continued moving not only on the Syrians, but also on the PLO in the Beirut area. Their rationale there was that their unilateral ceasefire applied only to Syria, not to the PLO (Habib cable Beirut 04240, 162045Z Jun 82, par. 2). In his memoirs, Sharon goes out of his way to emphasize that this ceasefire had been unilateral, that Israel declared it because the army "had achieved the war's objectives in full," and that, as Begin put it, "Israel wasn't negotiating with anyone" (Sharon, p. 468-69). It is therefore unclear why, in justifying his troop movements during the ceasefire, he and Begin felt the need to cite Reagan's message at all.

Begin apparently had no qualms about his and his army's conduct. The same day, June 11, he told the Cabinet that the operation in Lebanon so far "has been one of the greatest actions, and not only of our nation in its thirty-four years of independence, but throughout the history of our people" (Sharon, p. 474). At about the same time, though, the CIA was calling the invasion "a grave mistake" and saying that Israel had "over estimated the ease with which it could achieve its military objectives." Israeli losses, the CIA reported, had been "considerable," "much higher than Israeli media sources have admitted." There had been "large numbers" of helicopter Medi-Vac flights out of southern Lebanon, and Haifa Hospital was reportedly full (CIA cable 250164, 12 June 82).

Carrying water: Howell 9-6-93

Snookered: A colleague of Habib's who asked not to be identified by name

Wariness: Hopkins, p. 10, citing his interview with Habib 3-12-92

All ceasefires specified: Draper 12-22-94; Habib interview with Tueni

Moonbeams: Howell 9-6-93

Would not go past: Howell 10-11-93. Sharon's forces had blown past that point days ago. The Middle East Journal, Autumn 1982, vol. 36, no. 4, "Chronology April 16, 1982-July 15, 1982," p. 566, cites a New York Times report that an Israeli Army spokesman said on June 10 that all opposing forces had been cleared from a 25-mile-wide zone (approximately 43 kilometers) north of Israel.

Control of suburbs: Kahan Commission report, p. 7

Surrounded: Beirut had plenty of PLO fighters in it when the invasion began, but their numbers swelled as fighters deployed in the south and east fled into the city to escape the Israeli northward advance. There they could hide out and defy the Israelis, confident that the Israelis would not come into the city to get them (Draper ADST oral history; Dillon ADST oral history). Syrian numbers per Paganelli 11-2-96. Quarter mile per Associated Press story "Habib makes peace in his ancestral land," in Clearwater Sun, 8-21-82.

Looking for general: Sharon, p. 472-83

Tamerlane: Gowers, p. 205. See also Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 196.

Now under siege: Dillon 11-5-96. Beirut had previously come under siege by the Crusaders, by Saladin in the twelfth century, and by the Anglo-Turkish fleet in 1840 (Fisk, p. 278).

Focus shifted: Israeli and Syrian forces did continue to skirmish in various places now and then, but these became peripheral to the main event in Beirut.

No getting around the fact: Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 181. The same point is made by Draper ADST oral history and "Ministers: Sharon strung us along," The Jerusalem Post, 6-13-82.

Cornered Palestinians: Habib cable for the President from Beirut 04247, 6-17-82, par. 4

Standard estimation tables: Smith 11-25-96; Smith email to the author 7-12-01; Mead email to the author 7-15-01 confirms Smith's numbers. Smith adds that "Israel's air superiority might have lessened the cost, but such an attack would most likely have drawn Syria, Egypt, and others into the fray, which would certainly have changed the equation." Mead adds that, to the small nation of Israel, 2,000 dead would be the equivalent of 35,000 deaths to America. The casualty tables they refer to are based on military experience stretching all the way back to the Peloponnesian War. The Israelis would no doubt have consulted comparable tables of their own in planning their attack.

Loose cannon: Sharon later said that he had decided in January 1982 that he wanted to avoid entering Beirut because it is the capital. "I solemnly affirm that I never wanted to enter Beirut unless it was absolutely indispensable. And believe me, had I been convinced that we had to enter Beirut, nobody in the world would have stopped me. Democracy or not, I would have entered even if my government didn't like. I mean, I would have persuaded them. . . . Militarily speaking, we could get in any moment. Just in case it would become necessary, all was arranged to get in" ("Sharon: 'I Wanted Them Out of Beirut; I Got What I Wanted,'" The Washington

Post, 8-29-82).

Exterminate: Quoted by a senior Labor party member of the Knesset at the time, who asked not to be quoted by name. That source emphasizes that “exterminate” was Sharon’s word, but notes that Sharon meant to destroy the PLO as an organization, not to kill each person who was a member of the PLO.

Wipe out: According to one of Habib’s colleagues who asked not to be identified

Get the PLO: Habib interview with Parker. Hopkins, p. 12, citing his 3-12-92 interview with Habib, says, “Sharon was hell-bent on getting what he wanted, which was the wholesale destruction of the PLO in Lebanon; he was going to stop at nothing less.” Habib said on June 17, “Sharon knows he has the PLO on the ropes,” Habib said, “but he prefers to have someone else finish them off. I doubt that he would want to risk the Israeli casualties involved in house-to-house fighting. But I cannot rule it out. He may try to use the Phalange for this, but that will be just as bloody” (Habib cable for the President from Beirut 04247, 6-17-82, par. 4). Habib repeatedly insisted that, whatever else might happen, the Israelis must not be allowed to enter West Beirut.

One of Habib’s colleagues, who asked not to be identified by name, says, “Paint the picture we faced at the time: You’re not sure who’s really in control of the Israeli army. Every time you’re told what their position is, they’re actually 10 miles or 20 miles or 50 miles further than you think. You know that the leader of this enterprise, Arik Sharon, has talked about the Palestinians as being like insects and like a disease that has to be cut out. The Israelis seem very, very close to going into Beirut, where you would have massive destruction, massive casualties—on both sides.” Begin had referred to Palestinian terrorists as “animals on two legs” and Gen. Rafal Eitan would later describe West Bank Palestinians as “drugged cockroaches” (The Times, 4-15-83, cited in Fisk, p. 399; Sachar, p. 194)—an ironic choice of words, since Anne Frank had written with disgust in her diary of German plans to “cleanse” Utrecht of Jews “as though Jews were cockroaches” (Fisk, p. 399).

Storm into Beirut: Shultz 9-16-93

Major bloodletting: Weinberger 10-7-93

Fight to the last man: Seale, p. 386

Spark an all-out war: In the judgment of the American ambassador to Syria, Robert Paganelli, 11-2-96. That’s what Habib feared most (Tuani 11-15-95): “Once you get into national wars,” he said, “you get into danger of major conflagration. Then you’re talking big stuff” (Habib interview with the author, The Stanford Magazine, Spring 1984).

Broader consequences: Draper ADST oral history; Dillon 5-9-94

American-made: Draper 4-13-93; also Draper ADST oral history

Green light: Draper ADST oral history. For example, Arafat said that “the U.S. will pay a high price in the near future for its collaboration with Israel.” Eighteen West Bank labor unions and student organizations denounced “American imperialist collaboration with Israeli policies” in Lebanon, and a Palestinian politician reportedly criticized “American-Israeli conspiracy in the massacre being implemented against the Palestinians in Lebanon” (Palestinian newspapers Ashaab and Al Fajr, 6-28-82, summarized and quoted in Grove cable Jerusalem 02057, 281105Z Jun 82, par. 3-4). The pro-Jordanian newspaper Al Quds titled one of its lead editorials “The Futility of Habib’s Mission,” in which it concluded that the United States is unfit to play the role of mediator since “American and Israeli aims are identical” (6-28-82, summarized and quoted in Grove cable Jerusalem 02057, 281105Z Jun 82, par. 4). The Soviets also accused the US of, at least, advance knowledge of the invasion and, at worst, complicity in it (Reagan, p. 422).

Quixote, shill: “Israeli attacks into Beirut will make the U.S. appear to have been acting as an accomplice in a pattern of Israeli deception, i.e., declare a ceasefire and then move ahead to take more territory. This can utterly destroy our credibility in future efforts to help meet Israel’s security objectives” (Assistant Secretary of State memo to the Secretary, 6-15-82, 8216710).

Anti-American violence: Hill 6-15-93. Hill hastens to point out that academics frequently predicted upheavals in the Arab world in response to Israeli actions, but that the Arab states have really never cared enough about the Palestinians to react that way.

Fanatics: Draper ADST oral history. Hill says Draper felt even more strongly about this than Habib: “Draper was just really wild about this. He just believed that if the Israelis went into an Arab capital and the US was seen as allowing this to happen, it would be such an affront to Arab pride that God knows what would happen all over the Arab world. It could be just upheaval and embassies in flames and everything.” Hill was skeptical about that prospect (Hill 7-19-95). A coalition of Syrian parties appealed to Arab masses on June 19 to hit and destroy American interests in the region (Journal of Palestine Studies, Summer/Fall 1982, “Chronology of the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon June-August 1982,” p. 148).

Soviet Union intervening: Draper (2-24-02) says, “We were concerned about a US-Soviet clash. We couldn’t rule out the possibility that the Soviets might come to Syria’s aid.” The Soviets “indicated they might provide air defense help in the event of Israeli attacks on Syrian positions in the Bekaa Valley. The Soviets have suggested that they might become more directly involved in supporting Syrian forces if Israel attacked inside Syria” (Eagleburger cable State 155256, 070141Z Jun 82, p. 3, p. 6).

Draw in the US: Draper ADST oral history. To many, the prospect was very real: The Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 had brought the U.S. and the USSR very close to an all-out confrontation over the Middle East. US ambassador to Syria Paganelli disagreed, considering it unlikely the Soviets would really intervene (Paganelli 11-2-96).

Secretly flown: Seale, p. 383

Brezhnev: Teicher p. 200-202. Teicher says this letter arrived from Brezhnev early in the second week of the war. Haig, p. 339, says it was June 9. As it turned out, Brezhnev’s messages to the US were hollow. In his last months of life, he was too feeble and too distracted by his own crises in Afghanistan and Poland to really want a superpower confrontation (Seale, p. 395). But at the time, his threats had to be taken seriously.

Averting these disasters: As Schiff & Ya’ari (p. 201) put it, the Israelis had “two choices: to let Philip Habib negotiate a withdrawal of the Palestinian forces or to force their way into West Beirut and clean it out themselves.”