

Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive, LLC

The Green Light

Author(s): Zeev Schiff

Source: *Foreign Policy*, No. 50 (Spring, 1983), pp. 73-85

Published by: [Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive, LLC](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/interactive/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1148281>

Accessed: 28/09/2013 10:47

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive, LLC is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Foreign Policy*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE GREEN LIGHT

by Zeev Schiff

There is a popular Israeli folk song about a young suitor and his beloved that accurately describes the Israeli-American relationship leading up to the war in Lebanon late last spring. The suitor, wondering if the nay he heard from his beloved may actually have been a yea, asks in the song's refrain: "What is it you mean when you say nay? You say it with such charm, it sounds rather like yea." Like the young suitor in the folk song, the Israeli government had good reason to believe that even when its representatives heard a nay from Washington prior to the invasion of Lebanon, the word sounded every bit like a yea.

Right from the outset, Washington spoke to Israel's representatives in contradictory terms about the possibility of an Israeli military operation in Lebanon. From extensive discussions with sources in Israel and the United States close to the events that led up to the invasion, the full story can now be told. Although the Americans sounded circumlocutory warnings for public consumption, the American nay was so feeble that the Israelis regarded it merely as a diplomatic maneuver designed to exonerate the United States should the military operation go sour. Based on trustworthy intelligence, Israel was confident that the United States would welcome a military operation in Lebanon if it struck at the base of Moscow's allies—the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Syria—without resorting to dangerous extremes.

According to the factual evidence that has come to light so far, the Israeli-American complicity was not—as some Arabs have charged—a conspiracy to send the Israeli army into Lebanon in order to expel the PLO and the Syrians. It was, instead, an implicit Israeli-American partnership. The Americans—having received advance information about Israeli intentions—chose to look the other way, mak-

ZEEV SCHIFF is defense and military editor at Haaretz, an Israeli daily newspaper.

ing ambiguous comments about Lebanon that the Israeli government could interpret any way it liked.

Washington expressly avoided direct involvement in a conspiracy that could have evolved into a foreign-policy disaster similar to that borne by France and Great Britain during the 1956 Suez affair, when the two West European countries secretly enlisted Israel's participation in their attempt to regain control of the Suez Canal. The lesson gleaned from that affair was that the best-kept top secrets do ultimately get leaked, especially when Middle East issues are involved.

Washington knew what was about to happen. It possessed information in abundance about Israel's intentions and operational plans for Lebanon. Israel's incursion into Lebanon did not come as a surprise. Then Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon did not hand the Pentagon his specific war plans, but there is no doubt that Washington, through its contacts, was well apprised of the plans before they were implemented. Washington knew about the highly visible concentration of forces on the borders of Lebanon and that Israel intended to invade Lebanon with a large army. Thus Washington's vague murmurings and apparent indifference were interpreted by the Israeli government as a green light for Operation Peace for Galilee.

This implicit American approval of Sharon's plans weakened the hand of those elements in Israel—both in the parliamentary opposition and in the general public—who opposed extending the war further into Lebanon and thus helped insure that the offensive would not be limited to the defensive perimeter of the Galilee townships and villages.

Hence in the final analysis—as in the 1973 war when the United States provided Israel with abundant military aid—Washington became more than a mediator between the warring parties in Lebanon, having reaped the benefits of Israel's military victory more than Israel itself. That is the reality as seen in Israel. From the Israeli public's point of view, it makes no difference whether this partnership evolved wittingly and deliberately or whether the United States was maneuvered into it by Israel.

A Military Trap

Israel has a history of understandings and agreements with other countries regarding Israeli military operations. Without prior agreements with the French and British governments in 1956, then Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion would not have agreed to launch an offensive against Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula as proposed by his chief of staff Moshe Dayan. In 1967 Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Ben Gurion's successor, chose to defer an attack against Egyptian troops in the Sinai while he stepped up efforts to gain the backing of President Lyndon Johnson. Similarly, hoping to gain American support by demonstrating Israel had not started the war, Israel in 1973 refrained on Yom Kippur from a pre-emptive air strike after learning that an Egyptian-Syrian assault against Israel would be launched the same day. It was a decision that cost Israel many casualties.

In contrast, Israel did not appear overly concerned about U.S. support prior to the Israeli move into Lebanon in June 1982. Israel behaved as if its offensive posture was safe by virtue of an established partnership. The issue of U.S. reaction to an Israeli strike against the PLO and Syrian forces in Lebanon was mentioned but not discussed by the Israeli cabinet when it voted to go to war. It was clear to many Israeli ministers that based on what Washington was saying behind the scenes—unlike what it was saying in public—Israel was already assured of U.S. support.

A series of developments dating back to April 1981 led the ministers to conclude that U.S. support was guaranteed. In April 1981 the Israelis shot down two Syrian helicopters over Mt. Lebanon after the Maronite Christian Phalangists convinced the Israeli government that a major Syrian attack under way on Mt. Sannin was jeopardizing the entire Christian minority in Lebanon. The Syrians responded by introducing ground-to-air missiles in Lebanon. They had hitherto refrained from such a move because of Israeli warnings that deployment in Lebanon would violate the tacit "red line" understanding reached between Israel and Syria through U.S. mediation in 1976. Al-

though this understanding was never clearly defined in press reports or government statements, former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin disclosed in February 1983 that it included three elements: First, Syrian troops would not venture south of a “red line” extending from Sidon to Kfar Mishki near the Lebanese-Syrian border; second, Syria would not deploy ground-to-air missiles on Lebanese territory; and third, Syria would not conduct aerial attacks against targets in Lebanon.

U.S. Special Envoy Philip Habib was then sent to the Middle East to help prevent a flare-up of fighting and to use the crisis as a catalyst for a broad settlement in Lebanon. While Habib conducted talks in Damascus and Jerusalem, Israel began conducting military exercises on its northern border. These troop movements continued through a series of crises—including the annexation of the Golan Heights—and only ended with the outbreak of war in June 1982.

Throughout this period the United States was not blind to ties developing between Israel and Bashir Gemayel’s Phalangists, nor was it unaware of Phalangist efforts to encourage an Israeli attack against the Palestinians and Syrians in Lebanon. At the same time it was clear to the Israeli government that while Washington publicly voiced concern about Israeli troop concentrations on the border, Habib was expertly taking advantage of these troops to gain leverage with the Syrians.

A certain identity of purpose, therefore, had already begun to emerge between the United States and Israel regarding Lebanon. Both the United States and Israel were interested in removing the Syrians and their missiles from Lebanon and in restraining the PLO. The United States, wanting to prevent a direct Israeli attack against the Syrian missiles, invoked the threat of Israeli troop concentrations. The threat succeeded in getting the PLO out of Beirut in 1982—but the Syrian missiles were not removed from Lebanon the previous year.

In July 1981 Israeli settlements came under heavy bombardment, and the PLO and Israelis engaged in numerous shooting incidents. Habib subsequently secured a cease-fire, but the agreement he negotiated bore the seeds of

the forthcoming war. Although the PLO—through the intermediary of Saudi Arabia—requested the cease-fire, the Israelis did not win the artillery duel. It took the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) several days to concentrate adequate deterrent artillery. During those few days the PLO spread devastation and terror on Israeli settlements in the Galilee with small concentrations of artillery—raising grave questions about the future of the most vulnerable settlements. The PLO attacks demonstrated once again how difficult it was for the Israelis to locate and strike swiftly single pieces of artillery. Thus Israel was faced with two options: either allocate huge sums of money to construct large civilian shelters or push the enemy back by conquering the area where the guns were stationed.

Washington was fully aware of this problem before Habib negotiated the cease-fire agreement, which quite peculiarly did not ban the transfer of additional PLO guns into southern Lebanon. Despite warnings from the army, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin yielded to pressure from Habib and approved the cease-fire agreement. It then became clear, however, that if the PLO resumed shelling Galilee townships and villages, Israel would have no choice but to invade southern Lebanon and remove PLO artillery beyond the range of the settlements. When the PLO moved additional artillery and the latest Russian Katyusha rockets into southern Lebanon following the cease-fire agreement, the Israeli military option became even more imperative.

Washington and the PLO realized that a military trap had been created: The PLO, for the first time in its history, had mounted a real military threat against Israeli settlements; yet any attempt to take advantage of that threat would automatically provoke a large-scale military move against the PLO. The only outstanding variable in the equation was what would trigger the inevitable confrontation.

A Crossroads

Any defense minister from the parliamentary Likud bloc—be it Ezer Weizman or Begin—would have ordered a large-scale military operation in southern Lebanon had the

PLO opened fire once more on the Galilee townships. But the man who finally did order the operation, Sharon, appointed defense minister in August 1981, had military plans—of which Washington was duly informed—that went beyond southern Lebanon. Sharon was interested both in the coming presidential elections in Lebanon and in PLO headquarters in Beirut. He believed that a future government headed by Bashir Gemayel—who was assassinated shortly after his election as president—would cooperate with Israel by expelling the PLO from Beirut and preventing its return. A Gemayel government, according to Sharon, could be safeguarded only if the Syrian army were forced out of Lebanon. Sharon did not intend to delay the implementation of his plan until PLO guns shelled Israeli settlements; a lesser provocation, even one far from the borders of Israel, would suffice.

For Sharon's plan to succeed, however, Israel needed an assurance from the United States that it would not obstruct Israeli moves into Lebanon. In this respect, then Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Jr.—considered a friend of Israel with an understanding of its security problems—was instrumental. Since Washington had acquiesced in 1976 to a Syrian move into Lebanon prior to elections that brought former President Elias Sarkis into office, it seemed logical to Sharon that it would acquiesce to a similar Israeli move six years later. The Israeli move, in fact, appeared more likely to win U.S. favor since it would weaken pro-Soviet forces in the Middle East—the PLO and Syria. Sharon assumed that the memorandum of strategic understanding between Israel and the United States—agreed upon on November 30, 1981, and detailing their cooperation against threats to the Middle East caused by the Soviet Union or Soviet-controlled forces—would provide ideological cover for his moves into Lebanon. But when the memorandum was suspended just three weeks later, after Begin annexed the Golan Heights, Sharon needed to obtain a separate promise from Washington that it would not oppose the plan.

In January 1982 Sharon visited Beirut secretly to find out what contribution the Phalangists would make to an Israeli offensive. He

showed Bashir Gemayel and the Phalangist commanders the significant military areas around Beirut and vital points that Israeli and pro-Israeli forces would need to seize when the war began. Gemayel and his aides became well acquainted with the Israeli objectives—an important fact since information the United States did not gather in Israel was certainly uncovered by U.S. intelligence services in Lebanon.

In February 1982 Major General Yehoshua Saguy, chief of Israeli military intelligence, visited Washington where he met with officials at the Pentagon and with Haig. According to Israeli press reports at the time, Saguy was carrying information about possible Israeli military moves into Lebanon. But he was primarily attempting to reach an understanding on what would constitute an unquestionable breach of the cease-fire. In retrospect, this visit was clearly a first Israeli attempt to engage the United States as a partner in its plans for Lebanon.

The visit pointed to a crossroads in Begin's analysis of the Lebanon situation. Prior to February 1982 war in Lebanon was only a possibility; but from that month onward Begin set out to explain to Washington why Israel had no choice but to react with utmost vigor if the PLO violated the cease-fire. U.S. acceptance of Begin's explanation would provide the necessary foundation for any future green light from Washington.

Saguy certainly did not surprise Haig and other U.S. officials during their meetings in Washington. The Americans were already well informed about events in the Middle East. Some of the details—including specific military plans that seemed far-fetched at the time but that were actually used in the war—were later publicized by the U.S. media. NBC commentator John Chancellor, known for his contacts in Washington, reported on April 8, 1982, that an Israeli military operation in Lebanon would take the form of a major war and would involve 1,200 Israeli tanks. Some Israeli planners, he said, were considering sending four columns into Lebanon—one pushing northward to block the Syrian armor in the Bekaa Valley and another advancing to the Pales-

tinian camps in Tyre and Sidon under aerial and naval cover. Chancellor was so well informed that he reported some Israeli planners envisaged a strike against the city of Beirut. This report amounted to a virtual exposure of the Israeli war plans.

Meanwhile in Israel, Sharon did not conceal his thoughts from American diplomats. It was no accident that he spoke at length to one of them about what would happen in Lebanon if the cease-fire were broken. Earlier, too, he had told Habib that the PLO would be routed in Lebanon and that this would affect PLO standing in the West Bank.

Based on trustworthy intelligence, Israel was confident that the United States would welcome a military operation in Lebanon.

It is clear that these comments were passed on to officials in Washington. Haig was quoted as telling the Israelis during a private conversation in May 1982 that he was losing sleep over what was likely to happen if Israel invaded Lebanon. Yet lost sleep or not, Haig did not attempt to persuade Israel that Washington opposed strongly an invasion of Lebanon.

Two key conversations during May 1982—between Haig and Sharon and Haig and Moshe Arens, then Israeli ambassador to the United States—convinced Israel that the final green light had come from Washington.

Sharon met with Haig for two and one-half hours in Washington in mid-May. Sharon spoke plainly: An Israeli military move against the PLO in Lebanon was likely to start at any moment—perhaps even during their conversation. To ward off an American warning against entanglement in Lebanon, Sharon told Haig that no country had the right to tell another country how best to protect its citizens. Sharon did not give details of his operational plans, but anyone—especially an American general—familiar with the Israeli army could have inferred that it would be a large-scale operation.

Sharon and his delegation took careful note of Haig's presentation of the American position. Haig issued no threat against Israel's

forthcoming military action. He confined his comments to the issue of the cease-fire. He emphasized that it would take an unquestionable breach of the cease-fire by the PLO to warrant an Israeli riposte. Without such a breach, he said, an Israeli attack would be neither understood nor accepted in the international arena. Judging by Haig's comments, it was obvious that he envisioned a limited, lightning-strike operation. Thus the import of Haig's response for Sharon was that the United States did not oppose a limited military operation provided there was sufficient reason for one. From Sharon's point of view the American had provided a green light.

The halfhearted, feeble warnings subsequently voiced by Haig were irrelevant. What counted was Sharon's and his aides' understanding of what they had heard in the two and one-half hour conversation, and what they accordingly reported to Begin and his fellow ministers. Sharon told them that the secretary of state comprehended Israel's action. After Haig's response was reported to Begin, no Israeli minister could offer serious resistance to a limited military operation in Lebanon.

Sharon was not concerned about the possibility that Haig's views did not represent the official position of the Reagan administration. The Israeli government had grown accustomed to hearing contradictory voices from Washington; what Sharon had heard from Haig was good enough for him. Sharon and Begin were encouraged a few days later when they received a letter from Haig stating that the substance of Sharon's remarks had been passed on to President Reagan. What Begin and Sharon did not know was that the Reagan administration had decided prior to Sharon's visit that it would treat the visit as a nonevent. The administration wanted to wait until Begin's scheduled visit in June 1982 to discuss Israeli requests for security assistance. As it happened, Sharon was not seeking arms during his trip.

Immediately following the Haig-Sharon meeting, Haig's aides took pains to explain to the secretary that the Israelis might draw far-reaching conclusions from his comments. They convinced Haig immediately to send Begin a letter that would put a damper on Sharon's

enthusiasm about an American commitment in the event of war. The two-page letter sent on May 28, 1982, included a summary of the conversation with Sharon and an expression of U.S. concern that Israeli military actions in Lebanon were liable to have unforeseeable consequences. Haig emphasized that the U.S. government would appreciate uttermost restraint on the part of Israel, but the letter contained no forthright warning.

The Haig letter was in part an attempt at a cautious retreat from what was said during the Haig-Sharon meeting. But in substance, the letter did not change—perhaps it even strengthened—Sharon's version of that meeting. A later meeting in Washington between Arens and Haig also supported the Sharon version. Arens reported that he had discussed in a positive atmosphere Israel's need to seize a security zone in southern Lebanon.

Today it is known that in May 1982 the State Department was busily examining what the consequences and the reactions would be if war broke out. Many feared a tough response from the Arab countries. But other American experts confidently explained that in the last resort the Israeli government would not approve the proposed invasion of Lebanon. They surely took as their criterion that on past occasions the Israeli cabinet had rejected proposals for military action. Evidently these experts did not take into account Sharon's dogged persistence.

The pretext for going to war came sooner than anyone in Washington imagined. The moment a bullet struck the Israeli ambassador in London on June 3, 1982, events were set rolling as in a Greek tragedy. No one in the Israeli cabinet bothered to check whether the assailants were actually PLO members. And those Israeli ministers who did not wholeheartedly favor war voted to bomb PLO targets in Beirut, even after experts told them such a move would result in strikes against Israeli settlements in Galilee and an escalation to war. Once the Israeli forces crossed into Lebanon, Washington discovered that it had little control over a war it had failed to prevent. This became very clear when Israeli forces surprised the Americans by advancing beyond the security belt of 40 kilometers—that is, beyond the range of PLO

artillery bombarding Israeli settlements. Many Israelis, including cabinet ministers, were also taken by surprise.

The Fruits of War

Despite the broadening of the war—and in distinct contrast to past experience—Washington did not pressure Israel to bring the war to a quick end. The impression in Jerusalem was that Israel was being given adequate time to accomplish the wide-ranging objectives of the campaign. There was a general feeling that Israel and the United States were operating in tandem. Even if Haig and other U.S. officials were surprised by the Israeli move past the 40-kilometer line, the moderate and indifferent U.S. reaction to that move revealed an American tolerance for the extended war. It appears that Haig intended to enjoy the fruits of the Israeli move.

A more resolute American response would have strengthened moderate elements in the cabinet and would have prevented the two-month shelling of Beirut. Israeli cabinet ministers who were against extending the war to Beirut said they could not oppose the plans as long as Washington did not come out against them. "I cannot show myself to be less of a patriot than the Americans," one minister said. Later, when the Israeli government was considering plans to enter West Beirut, the same minister said: "The Americans have got Israel into a mess. They have got us to climb up a high tree and now it's a hell of a job climbing down again."

Habib came to Israel on the second day of the war and, after discussions with Begin, went to Damascus. Habib's willingness to convey to Damascus the Israeli demand that the PLO men in the midst of the Syrian forces immediately quit the 40-kilometer zone enhanced Israel's already firm confidence in American backing. Habib did not complete the mission because while he waited in Damascus for a meeting with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, the Israeli air force destroyed the Syrian missile system in Lebanon beyond the 40-kilometer zone. In so doing Israel exceeded the limited objectives announced at the outset of the war. And it looked as if Washington had stood by

watching with indifference or maybe even satisfaction.

The political opposition in Israel against the extension of the war was also weakened by the feeling that the Israeli government and the American administration were coordinating their moves. Frustration within the Israeli opposition became particularly acute during Begin's visit to Washington when the Israeli prime minister declared on June 21, 1982, after a meeting with Reagan that Israel and the United States shared a number of common interests in Lebanon. For the greater part of the Israeli public this statement was further confirmation of Israeli-American cooperation.

Habib subsequently secured a cease-fire, but the agreement he negotiated bore the seeds of the forthcoming war.

Despite Begin's declaration it was obvious that this match of convenience could not last very long. A temporary, tactical understanding could not permanently substitute for an agreement in principle on a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although Washington did not demand an unconditional Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, a White House spokesman had already declared on June 28, 1982, that the United States attached great importance to progress on the issue of autonomy. While the United States hoped the war would create opportunities for new political initiatives in the region, Sharon was determined to demolish the Palestinian establishment, push it finally into the arms of Syria, and consolidate his rule in the West Bank.

The moment Haig resigned as secretary of state the contradiction between the objectives of Washington and Jerusalem became transparent. After IDF penetration into West Beirut and the September 1982 massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, Washington made its first unilateral move of the war: It decided to send U.S. Marines to Beirut and to force Israel to withdraw rapidly from West Beirut. Ever since this move the United States has been desperately attempting

to persuade the world that there never was an Israeli-American partnership in the Lebanese war.

Both sides must share the blame for the resulting dispute between Israel and the United States. By issuing positive—or at least indecisive—signals, Washington encouraged the Israelis to believe that it supported not only their general objectives but their specific war plans as well. And the conflict became inevitable the moment Israel decided unilaterally and without coordination to extend the objectives of the war and to impose them on Washington, believing that success would allow Jerusalem to dictate its own solution to the West Bank.

Whether wittingly or unwittingly, Washington gave Jerusalem the green light to invade Lebanon, and Israel interpreted the lack of a strong American position as support for all its objectives. Whatever the merits or demerits each country deserves for its actions—or inaction—prior to, during, and after the war, one lesson stands out: The lack of clear, direct communication and coordination damages the relationship between the United States and Israel and undermines the search for peace and stability in the Middle East.

In the wake of the war in Lebanon, with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians still under Israeli control and with the military infrastructure of the PLO in Lebanon destroyed, both sides have approached a moment of truth in the bitter conflict. Much will depend on moderate forces in Israel and among the Palestinians. But the United States can also play a key role—unless it permits events and forces in the region once again to dictate its moves.