

Setting the Record Straight: The 1984 Beirut Barracks Bombing

The White House wants to blame Iran, but they're wrong. I was there.

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Featured image: Chaplains, U.S. Marines and family members observe a moment of silence at memorial services for the 241 Marines killed during the terrorist bombing of the barracks at Beirut International Airport. (Credit: Gunnery Sgt. R.D. Lucas/DefenseImages.mil)

Vice President Mike Pence and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster recently marked the 34th anniversary of the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon. Their remarks may have comforted the families and honored the sacrifice of the 242 American service members—222 of whom were Marines—who were killed. But both officials presented such a distorted version of the events of that horrible day that, if not corrected, they will cause more harm than good to our national security.

According to Pence and McMaster, the attack on the Marine (and French) barracks was an early version of the attacks of 9/11. In their view, terrorist bombers, aided and abetted by Iran, committed mass murder and inspired Osama bin Laden by attacking U.S. and allied military forces that were simply in Lebanon on a peacekeeping mission. Moreover, the attack demonstrates that their boss, President Trump, was right not to certify the nuclear deal with Iran.

However, close examination of the events reveals that while the U.S. and French military forces were initially engaged in a peacekeeping mission, by the time of the attack their nations were waging war against the allies of Iran in the Lebanese civil war.

The multinational force, composed of troops from the U.S., France, and Italy, arrived in Lebanon in August 1982. Their presence was part of a ceasefire agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which followed the American-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon in early 1982. Their mission was to oversee the peaceful withdrawal of Yasser Arafat and the members of the PLO from Beirut. Within a month, the PLO withdrawal was completed and the troops left, in effect, ending their peacekeeping mission.



Rescue and clean-up crews search for casualties following the barracks bombing in Beirut on October 23, 1983. (Department of Defense)

But shortly after the withdrawal, the assassination of the Lebanese president-elect, Bashir Gemayel—the Phalangist leader of the Lebanese Forces, a unified Christian militia—sparked a new wave of violence in which Christian militiamen, who were strong supporters of Gemayel, killed upwards of 800 Palestinians, mostly women, children and elderly, in refugee camps. In the wake of these killings, known as the [Sabra and Shatila massacre](#), U.S. troops returned and became involved in the civil war.

By early 1983, the situation seemed to have stabilized until, in April of that year, a car bomb destroyed the U.S. embassy in Beirut. In July, after Israel began a unilateral withdrawal, fighting between the competing militias intensified and violence against the multilateral force, who were now seen as allies of the Christian militias, escalated. As a result, U.S. Marine positions routinely came under small arms and mortar fire which, by late August, the Marines began returning. These skirmishes led to the death and wounding of several militiamen and some Marines even before the attack on the barracks.

The crucial turning point occurred in early September, when the U.S. began providing naval gunfire support for the U.S.-backed Lebanese Army—something that was opposed, as journalist Nir Rosen has pointed out, by the State Department, the CIA, and even Marine Commander Col. Timothy Geraghty.

In an [article](#) he wrote on the 25th anniversary of the attack on his marines, Geraghty recalled the situation:

The Marine and the French headquarters were targeted primarily because of who we were and what we represented. ... It is noteworthy that the United States provided naval gunfire support—which I strongly opposed for a week—to the Lebanese Army at a mountain village called Suq-al-Garb on 19 September and that the French conducted an airstrike on 23 September in the Bekaa Valley. American support removed any lingering doubts of our neutrality and I said to my staff at the time we were going to pay in blood for this decision.

The Marines' deaths certainly need to be remembered. But the real problem is that when we went back into Lebanon after withdrawing, the U.S. took sides in a civil war that it could not and did not need to win. And while Iran certainly bears some responsibility for the deaths of these brave warriors, this does not mean the Iranians had anything to do with 9/11.

In fact, right after the attack, Iran held a candlelight vigil condemning it, and later provided intelligence to help the U.S. drive the Taliban and al Qaeda from Afghanistan in 2001. And the Iranians persuaded their allies in the Northern Alliance to support the establishment of the Karzai government at the Bonn Conference in December 2001. Moreover, condemning Iran for these attacks in Beirut—as Pence and McMaster did—ignores the fact that we were de facto supporters of Iraq when that country not only invaded Iran in the early 1980s, but used chemical weapons against them. Finally, using the events of 1983 to undermine a nuclear deal with Iran, completed some 32 years after the attack, makes as much sense as our not wanting to conclude a nuclear arms agreement with the Soviet Union in the early-1970s because of the assistance they were providing to the North Vietnamese to kill Americans.

Rather than using this horrible event to push their agenda, Pence and McMaster should have

praised President Reagan for having the foresight not to expand the war after the attack, as many of his hawkish advisors wanted. Instead, Reagan listened to my then-boss, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and strategically redeployed the Marines to their ships; that is, withdrew them from Lebanon in early 1983. Moreover, as a result of this tragedy, the Pentagon developed what became known as the Powell Doctrine, which established stringent criteria Washington should use before becoming involved in wars of choice.

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