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The Reagan Administration and the Origins of the War on Terror: Lebanon and Libya as Case Studies

MATTIA TOALDO*

ABSTRACT *This article uses recently declassified records to analyze the American intervention in Lebanon between 1982 and 1984 and the confrontation with Libya between 1981 and 1986. In both cases, the US responded to a terrorist attack with military force. Especially after the attacks in Lebanon, members of the administration started to elaborate a comprehensive strategy to fight terrorism which focused on pre-emptive strikes against states deemed to be supporters of terrorism. The strike on Libya in April 1986 was the first implementation of this strategy and, furthermore, regime change had been attempted both before and after this strike. The article argues that the policy of the Reagan administration in the fight against terrorism was a combination of two factors: the global Cold War mindset and the first elaboration of concepts that would later become part of the Bush administration's War on Terror. Rather than being the beginning of the War on Terror, however, Reagan's policy should be considered as a source of inspiration for it, albeit one that was deeply influenced by the bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union.*

Introduction

While reading records and speeches from the Reagan administration, one might be surprised to stumble upon some concepts that would become popular only in the following millennium. A good example is the speech delivered by Secretary of State George Shultz at the Park Avenue Synagogue a few days before the 1984 presidential elections:

We must reach a consensus in this country that our responses should go beyond passive defense to consider means of active prevention, pre-emption and retaliation [...] The public must understand before the fact that occasions will come when their government must act before each and every fact is known [...] We will need the flexibility to respond to terrorist attacks in a variety of ways, at times and places of our own choosing. [...] There will be no time for renewed national debate after every terrorist attack. Fighting terrorism will not be a clean and pleasant contest. [...] There is no room for guilt or self-doubt about our right to defend a way of life that offers all nations hope for peace, progress and human dignity.¹

These concepts do sound familiar to those who witnessed the War on Terror of the early 2000s but one should not over-emphasize them: "World War 4" did not start in the Reagan years as Andrew Bacevich provocatively asserted, though that administration can be considered its source of inspiration.²

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¹ 'Excerpts From Shultz's Address on International Terrorism', *The New York Times* (26 October 1984).

² Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 179-204. One of the first to use this definition was Norman Podhoretz in 'How To

The Reagan administration did not start a comprehensive new policy against terrorism. Rather, it experimented with tools and ideas that later were incorporated into Bush's War on Terror, including the following: the analysis of terrorism as a form of warfare which implied a military rather than solely a law enforcement response by the US, the use of pre-emptive strikes against states which were deemed to be supporters of a worldwide network of terrorism, and the need to overthrow the regimes that supported terrorists. These, however, were just experiments and were contentious inside the administration. This "experimental" phase ended shortly after the strike against Libya and the outbreak of the Iran-Contra scandal in the second half of 1986. It seems incorrect to argue that there was continuity in the American government's terrorism policy between the Reagan and the second Bush administration given that the Bush senior and Clinton administrations implemented few of Shultz's ideas. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration's anti-terrorism policy was highly influenced by a second element: a vigorous dedication to rolling back Soviet inroads in the third world and in the Middle East through the fight against Soviet proxies. The members of this administration had risen to policy prominence during the Cold War and their mindsets, along with their understanding of events, were deeply influenced by this. This article, therefore, argues that the policy of the Reagan administration against Middle Eastern terrorism was the combination of the following two elements: the birth of some of the themes and ideas of what would later be called the War on Terror and the influence of Cold War paradigms and concerns. In the context of this argument, it is important to assess how much of what was put forward in the War on Terror of the early 2000s was deeply rooted in the Cold War reality and mindset of the Reagan administration.

The first section of this article describes the context of the policy of the Reagan administration, including its continuity with traditional US policy during the Cold War and its reaction to the regional events of 1979, the most significant of these being the Iranian revolution. In the second section, two case studies are used to analyze Reagan's policy against Middle Eastern terrorism: Lebanon, where US troops suffered two relevant terrorist attacks, and Libya, which was bombed by the US after it was linked to a long string of terrorist attacks against Americans. The third and the fourth sections examine the two main elements of Reagan's policy which have been briefly outlined above.

A note on terminology: it is important to clarify that the words "terrorism" and "terrorist" in this article indicate individuals, groups or governments which were considered as such by the US administration. These words were applied to people and situations which did not always fit into the standard definition of terrorism, which is an act of violence committed against individuals with the explicit goal of spreading terror.³ As will be discussed later, the broad labelling of a number of organizations and governments with very different ideologies, structures and aims as "terrorists" or supporters of "terrorism" by American policy-makers served to further obscure what was already a region which few people in the administration understood. Also, the term "war on terror" is used to describe the Reagan administration's policies pertaining to terrorism whereas War on Terror is used to describe the policies of President George W. Bush.

Win World War 4', *Commentary*, Volume 113, no. 2, (February 2002), p. 28. See also, Eliot Cohen, 'World War IV: Let's Call this Conflict What it Is', *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern edition) (20 November 2001) p. A.18; and Daniel Pipes, 'Who's the Enemy?', *Commentary*, Volume 113, no.1, (January 2002), p. 22.

³ For a discussion of the term "terrorism", see Robert Imre, T. Brian Mooney, Benjamin Clarke, *Responding to Terrorism: Political, Philosophical, and Legal Perspectives*, (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 27-28.

The Context of Reagan Administration Policy against Middle Eastern Terrorism

The policy of the Reagan administration against Middle Eastern terrorism can be considered as predominantly “globalist”, meaning one that relied on the global conceptual frameworks of the Cold War to understand regional events and to take decisions.⁴ The alternative approach, which was overshadowed by the influence of the globalists inside the administration, can be defined as “regionalist”. It assigns a decisive role to local actors and regional history to understand events and define policy. Especially during its first years in office, the Reagan administration tended to ascribe events in the Middle East to the superpower chess-game, rather than emphasize regional dynamics. Moreover, the globalist approach was in line with the traditional US hierarchy of priorities in the Middle East, which prioritized the fight against the Soviets and their regional allies. The Reagan administration followed this tradition while also sharing two other priorities with past administrations: guaranteeing the security of Israel and defending access to oil sources. This hierarchy of priorities, and thus the prevalence of the concern for Soviet inroads into the region, greatly affected the “choice of enemies” by the Reagan administration as it had for past administrations.⁵ Starting from the 1960s, successive US administrations had divided regional actors into two main categories: nationalists and radicals on one side and traditionalists and conservatives on the other. The latter group, usually called “Arab moderates”, would generally become the allies of the US and the “West”.⁶

The problems faced by the Reagan administration pertained to the changes in the regional context. Starting from the 1970s, conditions in the region had moved farther away from the binary logic of the Cold War while political Islam started to play a growing role in international diplomacy. As Fawaz Gerges has argued, few American policy-makers understood the relevance of these changes, even after the 1979 Iranian revolution.⁷ Rashid Khalidi is even more explicit on this point when he writes that the “Cold War logic” led superpowers to neglect the reality on the ground and rely on the Cold War chess game to shape policy and local alliances “whether for the United States in Lebanon in 1983 or for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s”.⁸

The other major factor in Reagan’s policy was the declaration of a particular kind of anti-terrorism strategy which, as Lawrence Freedman has pointed out, “could be interpreted either as a reference to a real war or a rhetorical device to mobilize the nation to address some great problem”.⁹ In this version of the fight against terrorism, there were differences within the administration with the President playing an important role as well. Ronald Reagan, as far as declassified records and memoirs show, was not very involved in the concrete, day-to-day shaping of US strategy in the Middle East which was the result of the convergence (or competition) of the diverse views present inside the administration. George Shultz strove to become the main strategist for the anti-terrorism strategy in the administration, particularly

⁴ For this distinction, see Raymond Tanter, *Who’s At the Helm? Lessons of Lebanon* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

⁵ This point is specifically stressed, among others, by Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: the United States and the Middle East since 1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2008); Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

⁶ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism*, pp. 157-92.

⁷ Fawaz Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸ Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*, p. XV; again on p. 145 he writes that “the much more adversarial relationship between the superpowers” created by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan “considerably facilitated the decisions of the Begin government towards Lebanon”.

⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies*, p. 4.

after 1984. His views on how to implement this fight against terrorism, however, were not shared by other members of the cabinet such as Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. Other, less prominent figures in the NSC and its staff also played a substantial role, making the picture even more complex.¹⁰ This is why it is worth taking into account not just Reagan's words and deeds, but also those of other administration members.¹¹

Shultz's ideas emerged in a series of speeches delivered mainly during 1984, the most important of which was the one delivered at the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York.¹² In this speech, Schultz argued that the fight against terrorism was a struggle to defend a way of life and a civilization, and that the US needed to use pre-emptive strikes to achieve this goal. This implied the need to extend executive powers in order to strike terrorists and their sponsors in a timely and effective way. Weinberger, on the other hand, feared that any strike of this fashion would be merely an empty show of force without bringing concrete, positive effects on the capability of terrorists to strike against the US.

Other themes were more broadly shared within the administration and can be considered the most solid part of its legacy. These included the idea of terrorism as a form of warfare rather than as simply a heinous crime, the existence of sponsor-states which were all linked into a "terror network", and the need to seek opportunities to carry out regime change in these countries. Interestingly, regime change, as James Mann has noted, was not linked to the promotion of democracy until the last years of the Reagan administration.¹³ Moreover, the US foreign policy community focused on terrorism as a tactic rather than on those who practiced it in the 1980s, meaning that the enemy was "terrorism" (i.e. the phenomenon or the technique of warfare) rather than the different terrorist organizations. Importantly, it was this view that allowed the Reaganites to fit it into their view of the Cold War.

These factors were at work at a time when Middle Eastern terrorism was becoming more prominent. This had begun with the hostage crisis in Tehran but became all the more evident with the remarkable succession of events between 1983 and 1986 (such as the bombing of the US Marines in Beirut in 1983 and the shootings in European airports during Christmas vacation in 1985). These events outraged the administration and spread doubts about US credibility at home and abroad. The Reagan administration was therefore forced to think – and to think very fast given the pace of some of these incidents – about policies which could constitute an effective response to terrorism.

Two elements must be singled out as the most relevant in the development of the War on Terror during the Reagan years: the rising number of American victims – which increased the relevance of the issue of terrorism to the American public – and the use of American military power as a reaction to terrorist attacks. In the US interventions in Lebanon and in Libya, both of these elements played a major role. A very significant part of the legacy of the

¹⁰ Some authors stress the role of Weinberger, Casey, McFarlane and North; see for instance Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan* (New York: Harper & Collins, 2008), pp. 209-43 or Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies*, pp. 111-13. Confidential interviews conducted by the author pointed also to the role of Director of Policy Planning Staff Paul Wolfowitz and his deputy Donald Fortier.

¹¹ The best testimony to Reagan's role in the shaping of Middle East policy is given by his daily diary: Douglas Brinkley (ed.), *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). The members of the administration produced a high number of memoirs: Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: the Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Touchstone, 1996); Alexander Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Policy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1984); Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1999); George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph. My Years as a Secretary of State* (New York: MacMillan, 1993); Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace* (New York: Warner Books, 1990).

¹² See his memoirs: George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 648; and also Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies*, pp. 147-48.

¹³ James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), pp. 127-38.

administration in the War on Terror comes from its reaction to events in these countries, both in terms of actual policies and in terms of public and private discussion.

Libya, Lebanon, and Libya Again

The Reagan administration had entered office while the hostage crisis in Tehran was coming to an end. The challenge to American credibility and to the safety of its citizens abroad posed by the events in Iran (and more broadly by terrorism) was merely a harbinger of what would follow during the 1980s. The administration was also concerned with Soviet inroads into the region. To this end, Reagan's first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, tried to build an anti-Soviet "strategic consensus" among Arab allies and Israel¹⁴ while blaming the Soviets for the rise of international terrorism.¹⁵

The Libyan dictator Mu'ammār al-Qadhafi provided the Reagan administration with a golden opportunity to restore US military and political credibility after Vietnam and the failed rescue mission in Iran, and to fight Soviet proxies (or presumed Soviet proxies). Qadhafi, indeed, was accused of supporting international terrorism and having a close relationship with Moscow, thus filling both roles exceedingly well in the minds of administration officials.¹⁶ As a result of this, the administration escalated tensions with Qadhafi, first by the closure of the Libyan embassy in Washington in May of 1981 and then the planning of several "Freedom of Navigation" exercises in the Gulf of Sidra, which Qadhafi claimed as Libyan territorial waters. In August, a Libyan plane was shot down after firing at two American F-14s during one of these drills. The Libyan dictator would again be in the spotlight in the following years although from mid-1982 to 1984 the attention of the administration would shift to Lebanon.¹⁷

On June 6, 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon with the goal of uprooting the infrastructure of the PLO and eliminating the threat to the security of its northern borders. American policy-makers had been somewhat vaguely informed about the Israeli plan to invade Lebanon, though not everyone was aware of Sharon's plan to go as far as Beirut.¹⁸ In an attempt to move Lebanon towards peace, the administration decided to form a multinational force (MNF), together with France and Italy, with the goal of helping the PLO fighters withdraw from Beirut, thus ending Israel's ostensible reason for being there. The evacuation was completed by August 30 and the MNF withdrew on September 10. That month, Lebanon was shaken first by the murder of the newly elected President Bashir Gemayel and then by the massacre in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps. The US, which through Philip

¹⁴ On Strategic consensus and its limits, see Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, pp. 158-61, and William Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), p. 248.

¹⁵ Robert Michael Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 202-206; 'Excerpts From Haig's Remarks at First News Conference as Secretary of State', *The New York Times* (29 January 1981).

¹⁶ See for example: Howard Teicher and Gayle Radley, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm: America's Flawed Vision in the Middle East from Nixon to Bush* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993), p. 134.

¹⁷ On US policy towards Libya during Reagan years see Geoff Simons, *Libya and the West: From Independence to Lockerbie* (Oxford: Centre for Libyan Studies, 2003); Ronald Bruce St. John, *Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Joseph Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan's Undeclared War With Qaddafi* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004); Granville Austin, 'The Libya Raid and the Arab-Israeli Dispute', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 15 no. 4 (Summer 1986), pp. 99-111.

¹⁸ On the discrepancy between Sharon's plans and American and Israeli awareness of them, see Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall* (New York: Norton & Co., 2001); on Sharon's plans to invade Beirut, see John Boykin, *Cursed Is the Peacemaker: The American Diplomat Versus the Israeli General, Beirut 1982* (Belmont CA: Applegate Press, 2002).

Habib had brokered a deal that guaranteed the safety of the Palestinians in Beirut, sent a second multinational force (now also including the United Kingdom) with a broader, virtually undefined, goal of establishing a “presence” while American diplomats could work on an agreement between the Israeli and Lebanese governments. This agreement was intended to bring about the withdrawal of both the IDF and the Syrian forces, which had been deployed in Lebanon since 1976 with the goal of containing the instability generated by the civil war.¹⁹ The irony is that, with the failure of this strategy, both the IDF and the Syrian troops would stay in Lebanon well beyond 1982: the former would not completely withdraw from Lebanon until 2000 and the latter stayed until 2005. In 1983, the US contingent found itself more and more involved in the civil war while coming under attack by Islamist terrorists twice: first on April 18, when the US embassy in Beirut was hit, resulting in the death of 63 people including 17 Americans; second on October 23, when 241 US soldiers were killed by a truck bomb in their barracks at Beirut’s airport. The administration discussed retaliation, specifically against the Sheik Abdullah Barracks in Baalbek where the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had allegedly trained the terrorists that had struck against the Marines.²⁰ Two attempts to strike these targets were made in November by the French and another in early December by the US, all of which were unsuccessful. On 17 February 1984, a memo by Robert McFarlane officially informed both Shultz and Weinberger that the president had decided on the ‘redeployment’ of the Marines.²¹ The pull-out was completed by February 26, 1984. This year was the peak of Shultz’s campaign in favour of a tougher stance against terrorism by the administration. While a National Security Decision Directive was approved to this end (NSDD 138), no real decision was taken on the means and strategy which could be adopted in the fight against terrorism.

1985 would be, for many years to come, the “*annus horribilis*” of the American fight against terror. In June came the hijacking of flight TWA 847 which lasted almost three weeks and led to the death of Navy Petty Officer Robert Stethem. During the summer, the administration discussed various methods of overthrowing Qadhafi but never carried these out. October brought the hijacking of the Italian cruise-ship Achille Lauro with 12 Americans on board, among them Leon Klinghoffer, a disabled Jewish-American who would be killed by the Palestinian terrorists. Last came the shootings in the airports of Vienna and Rome on December 27 which left 19 people dead.²²

1986 began with Reagan administration plans to confront Qadhafi again in the Gulf of Sidra because he had strong ties with the terrorists from Abu Nidal’s Organization (ANO), which had claimed responsibility for the attacks in the airports.²³ On March 24, several Libyans were killed and six Soviet technicians were wounded in an air battle between US and Libyan planes during yet another US military exercise in the Gulf of Sidra referred to as “Freedom of Navigation” operations.²⁴ Qadhafi’s response came only a few days later. On

¹⁹ On the debate inside the administration before the deployment of MNF 2, see the paper presented by Robert Murray (Harvard University), Lebanon intervention 1982-1983, Tower Board files, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA (From now on: RRL).

²⁰ On this discussion, see Memo for the president from Robert McFarlane, NSDD: Lebanon and the Middle East, Lebanon Chronology (1), Box 41, Executive Secretariat NSC, Country files, RRL.

²¹ Memorandum by Robert McFarlane for George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger. “Plan for the redeployment of the USMNF contingent”. February 17, 1984. Folder: Lebanon II (4 of 4), Box 1 of 3, Donald Fortier files, RRL.

²² On terrorism against Americans in this decade, see David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America’s War Against Terrorism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*; David E. Long, *The Anatomy of Terrorism* (New York: Free Press, 1990); David C. Wills, *The First War on Terrorism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

²³ Cable from JCS, “Warning Order for Operation Prairie Fire”, 28 December 1985, Folder: 1-6-86 NSPG Libya, Elaine Morton Files, RRL.

²⁴ George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 680; Joseph Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, pp. 127-43.

the night of April 5, a bomb blew up in La Belle discotheque in West Berlin where many US servicemen spent their free time. Two people were killed and 155 were wounded, a third of them Americans. According to Bernd Schäfer's research in the Stasi archives, the terrorists had acted on instructions from the Libyan embassy in East Berlin with the knowledge of the East German intelligence agency. They later sent a cable to Libyan intelligence headquarters in Tripoli to confirm the "execution of one of the actions" which was intercepted by US intelligence.²⁵

On April 15 at 2 a.m. Tripoli time, US planes started to bomb several locations in Tripoli and Benghazi. This was 7 p.m. Washington time, and the attack was shown live by NBC and CNN. It was, as Roland Bruce St. John has commented, "the first prime-time bombing in the nation's history."²⁶ Efforts on Libya did not stop there, as attempts at overthrowing Qadhafi were carried out in the summer of 1986.²⁷ These actions, as will be discussed below, were the pinnacle of Schultz's influence on anti-terror policy. A major scandal helped to put an end to this influence as some of Schultz's allies in the administration would become embroiled in the Iran-Contra affair and were forced to resign.²⁸ Schultz's attempt at this more robust response to terrorism was not continued by his immediate successors.²⁹

The Influence of the Cold War on Reagan's War on Terror

Through the reaction to events in Lebanon and Libya, new ideas about the fight against terrorism were elaborated. Nevertheless, these reactions were deeply influenced by the Cold War mindset deeply engrained into the members of administration: it conditioned their understanding of reality, their choice of enemies, their day-to-day decision-making and the way they presented issues to Congress or the public. The Cold War "globalist" mindset played a great role in the failed understanding of Middle Eastern regional dynamics. Driven by a "Cold War logic", as Khalidi has labelled it,³⁰ the Reagan administration did not fully understand the consequences of what had happened in the Muslim world in 1979. This year marked the beginning of the 15th century in the Islamic calendar and, indeed, it was a new era that was taking shape in the Muslim world. In 1979, General Zia started what he called the "Islamization" of Pakistan, discarding British common law and instating Islamic law in its place. In Saudi Arabia on November 20 (New Year's Day in the Islamic calendar) a crowd of religious hard-liners opposed to the rule of the Saud family took control of the Great Mosque in Mecca. They surrendered only after a siege that lasted for two weeks. 1979, above all, would see the evolution of Islamic fundamentalism into the main ideology of one of the most important states in the region: Iran. As French scholar Gilles Kepel wrote, "after 1979 no one, in the Muslim world and beyond, ignored the expansion of the Islamic phenomenon".³¹

²⁵ Bernd Schäfer, 'New Evidence on 1986 U.S. Air Raid on Libya: A Confidential Soviet Account from the Stasi Archives', Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive, http://www.libyaforum.org/archive/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=4361.

²⁶ Ronald Bruce St. John, *Libya and the United States*, p. 137.

²⁷ See below, the discussion of the "Flower" plan under the heading "Terrorism, Terrorists and the Way to Fight".

²⁸ The scandal, uncovered in the fall of 1986, was about American arms sales to Iran in exchange for the liberation of US citizens held hostage in Lebanon. Funds earned through this sale were allegedly used to fund the anti-Communist guerrillas in Nicaragua, namely the *Contras*. See Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne (eds.), *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (New York: New Press, 1993).

²⁹ 'Key Sections of Shultz Press Talk on Libya and Other Issues', *The New York Times* (18 April 1986)

³⁰ Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*, p. XV.

³¹ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: Expansion et déclin de l'islamisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 193. Author's translation from French.

Although it is true that the Reagan administration did not ignore this phenomenon, their reading of it led them to see each local player as either associated with the Soviet threat or as aligned against it. They neglected the fact that the 1979 revolution in Iran had created regional cleavages and new threats for the US which did not exactly fit into this bipolar competition.³² This misreading had started with the President himself. Speaking on September 3, 1980, Reagan so described the events of the previous year:

We are approaching a flashpoint in this tragic process, with Soviet power now deployed in a manner which directly threatens Iran, the Persian Gulf and the Arab sea; with Soviet forces and proxy forces building up again in the region; with Soviet fleets and air bases emplaced along the sea lanes on which we and our Allies and the entire free world depend.³³

Regional actors, however, seemed to have different concerns. Many of the more secular Arab governments saw the Islamic revolution as a threat to the stability of their regimes, which prompted them to side with Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its war against Iran (1980-1988). The global Cold War, rather than being a cause of that conflict, would at times be used by both countries to win the support of one of the two superpowers (or both) in a typical case of superpower manipulation.³⁴

The misreading of the new regional cleavages, however, was not a distinctive feature of the Reagan administration but was, as with other aspects of foreign policy, actually in continuity with the last years of the Carter administration. In his famous "arc of crisis" memorandum, for example, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski explained to President Carter how the political vacuum in this area "might well be filled by elements more sympathetic to the Soviet Union."³⁵ What followed was the return of the Carter administration to a typical Cold War mentality which in the Middle East implied a confusion between radical nationalists and Soviet clients. Regional events were seen, by both Carter and Reagan, through the lens of the zero-sum game with the USSR. To be fair, this view was not entirely unjustified. As Kepel bluntly notes, in 1979 the US had lost one of its main allies (the Shah) while the Soviets seemed to have conquered a new stronghold in Afghanistan, gaining a vantage point to the strategic Persian Gulf.³⁶

In the Reagan administration's analysis, Soviet power now directly threatened Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea.³⁷ Moreover Reagan's positions dovetailed nicely with those of the 'Committee on Present Danger', a hawkish group of Washington foreign policy insiders, which argued that the Carter administration had underestimated the worldwide Soviet offensive. According to this Committee, it was now time for a counteroffensive which should overcome the legacy of inhibitions left by the Vietnam War. Fifty members of the Committee had been appointed to posts in the Reagan administration. These officials would advance their agenda supported by aggressive conservative think tanks such as the Heritage

³² See Fred Halliday, 'The Middle East, the Great Powers, and the Cold War', in Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim (eds.), *The Cold War and the Middle East*, p. 20.

³³ "Address by the Honorable Ronald Reagan B'Nai B'Rith Forum", Washington DC, 3 September 1980. Fred Iklé papers, Box 10. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Palo Alto CA.

³⁴ Malcolm E. Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War: A History to 1995* (Longman, 1996), p. 438

³⁵ Brzezinski to Carter, 2 December 1978, box 42, BC, Carter Library, cited in Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), p. 301

³⁶ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad*, pp. 221-24

³⁷ Research in the Soviet archives, however, tells a different story: as Vladislav Zubok has noted, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was not an attempt to threaten the Persian Gulf, but the result of a "disastrous miscalculation" of the situation in the country. The Soviets could barely understand the Islamist ideas of the opponents of their allies in Kabul. Thus, the misunderstanding of the new realities was not confined to the American elite. Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 228-60

Foundation, which had identified eight extra-European countries in which Soviet influence could be rolled back. Among them was Libya.³⁸

While Libya was under scrutiny, at least initially, as part of the confrontation with the USSR, the Lebanese Shiites were neglected because of this Cold War logic. As US Ambassador in Beirut Robert S. Dillon recollected, “the Shiites, although the largest group, were usually ignored [...] [Washington] was more concerned with the possibility of Russian influence in these groups and the alliances with the Syrians”.³⁹ The formation of the “party of God”, or Hezbollah, in the early 1980s was the result of disdain for Lebanon’s old patronage politics mixed with political mobilization of the previously marginalized Shiites by Imam Musa al-Sadr. Despite his mysterious disappearance in Tripoli (Libya) in the summer of 1978, his followers did not dwindle and they came to be fascinated by the example of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Their project was accelerated by the Israeli invasion of the country in 1982 and grew thanks also to Syrian and Iranian support.⁴⁰ Thus Hezbollah was a reaction to the marginalization of the Shiites in the old Lebanese confessional system and, internationally, had more to do with the Iranian Islamic revolution than with the Soviet Union and the Cold War. As recognized by Howard Teicher, who covered several positions in the NSC staff during the Reagan administration, the significance of the birth of this organization in the first half of the 1980s was not apparent to US policy-makers.⁴¹

The Cold War did not just provoke the American misreading of events; it was also a source of manipulation by local actors who wanted more support from one of the superpowers. The Lebanese Christians, for instance, would compete for American support in the name of defending Western values against the threat posed by Soviet proxies and Arab radicals.⁴² By the same token, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin would also raise the issue of Soviet support for Palestinian terrorists in his meeting with Reagan a few days after the invasion of Lebanon:

There is no doubt – Begin said – that far more than simply arming the PLO, the Soviets had made Lebanon the center of Soviet activity in the Middle East [...] Based on documents [the Israelis] had captured, it was clear that a terror network sponsored by the Soviets and involving Hungary, Bulgaria, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, Pakistan, India, the People's Republic of China, East Germany and Austria were all involved in assisting the PLO.⁴³

Begin was either mistaken or was trying to get Reagan’s attention with an overstatement. While the Palestinian National Movement had received some support both from the Soviet Union and from other countries in the Soviet bloc in its early stages, there is no evidence that the PLO in Lebanon in the 1980s was a Soviet proxy. Indeed, there is actually evidence to the contrary: the enemies of the PLO within the Palestinian movement, namely Abu Nidal’s Fatah-Revolutionary Council, had received training in East Germany.⁴⁴ Moreover, the need to

³⁸ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, pp. 153-57.

³⁹ Charles Stuart Kennedy, Interview with Robert S. Dillon, 17 May 1990, Frontline Diplomacy, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁰ For an updated history of Hezbollah, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah. A Short History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Howard Teicher, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm*, p. 203.

⁴² Letter to Vice President Bush from American-Lebanese League, 12 May 1981, Donald Gregg Files, George Bush Presidential Library, College Station, TX (from now on: GBL).

⁴³ Memorandum of Conversation, ‘Summary of the President’s Plenary Meeting with Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel, June 21, 1982, 11:55 a.m.-12:30 p.m.’, Near East and South Asia files, Box 91987, Folder: Begin Meeting with President, June 21, 1982 [1 of 4], RRL.

⁴⁴ A good summary of the evidence from East German archives on Soviet support for Middle Eastern terrorism can be found in Thomas Riegler, *Quid pro Quo: State sponsorship of terrorism in the Cold War*, paper presented at the conference on “Terrorism and International Politics: Past, Present and Future”, Graduate Institute, Geneva, 28-30 September 2011.

fight Soviet influence in the Middle East was not at the top of the Israeli government's agenda because its main concern was destroying the PLO "state-within-a-state", reducing Syrian influence, and creating a friendly Lebanese regime. Nevertheless, Begin and his cabinet had sensed that framing these goals in Cold War terms would help convince the Reagan administration not to oppose Israel's invasion of Lebanon.⁴⁵

The Cold War mindset was crucial for day-to-day decision-making inside the administration. During the summer of 1982 the National Security Council met to discuss what to do with respect to the heavy Israeli bombings of Beirut, which seemed to slow down the negotiations between US Presidential Envoy Philip Habib and the PLO. On the table were several options, ranging from a private letter to Begin asking him to simply stop the invasion, to unilateral military sanctions against Israel. According to the minutes of the meeting,

Ambassador Kirkpatrick then stated that the group should not lose sight of the fact that the PLO is not a bunch of agrarian reformers. They are international terrorists who are working against US interests and committing acts of violence throughout the world supported by the Soviet Union. We want them out and the US should not throw away the possibility of getting rid of the PLO by taking measures against Israel [...] Clearly, once we have removed the PLO from Lebanon we can make fast progress in the peace process.

The President, who seemed not to pay attention to the other aspects of the discussion, intervened to say that he agreed and asked, "How do we inform the PLO of the situation and the need to get out?" The meeting, which had started with a focus on Israeli deeds, ended with President Reagan saying that "any statement should have half of its emphasis on the PLO. We must make it clear that the president cannot tee-off only on Israel."⁴⁶ While sticking to the Cold War mindset, the members of the Reagan administration had to cope with the ever increasing threat of Middle Eastern terrorism. This was now perceived as a form of warfare waged by enemies of Western civilization supported by a network of states hostile to the US.

Starting to Elaborate the War on Terror

In the Reagan years, the perception of terrorism changed also because it became much more lethal for US citizens. Still in 1980 it had killed only ten Americans, less than the number killed by lightning in that calendar year. In a meeting in the White House on January 26, 1981, then Head of the State Department Office for Combating Terrorism, Anthony Quainton, called terrorism a "manageable threat."⁴⁷ This could hardly be said after the attack against the Marines' barracks in Beirut on October 23, 1983. Writing to the President about that attack, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger compared it to "an act of warfare".⁴⁸

The vision of terrorism as warfare was common to many members of the administration but their differences lay in the response to this threat. Weinberger, on the one hand, was not enthusiastic about fighting terrorism with military means. He always argued in favour of a "focused" response and only when there was a clear "smoking gun".⁴⁹ Weinberger, though, was merely reacting to the campaign waged by his fellow cabinet member George Shultz. In

⁴⁵ See also Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*, pp. 145-146; on the goals of Sharon's "grand design" for Lebanon see Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

⁴⁶ Minutes of meeting, 'NSC meeting: Lebanon Situation', 4 August 1982, System II 90613, Folder: NSC 00057 Aug 4 1982 [Lebanon Situation], Box 91284, NSC meeting files, RRL.

⁴⁷ David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans*, p. 46.

⁴⁸ Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense for Reagan, 'Long Commission Report On October 23 Bombing', 23 December 1983, System II 91530, Folder: Lebanon III (4/5), Box 90753, Fortier files, RRL.

⁴⁹ Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, pp. 188-90.

a series of speeches and hearings he gave during 1984, Shultz emphasized the nature of terrorism as a form of asymmetrical war. He also underlined how this new threat fundamentally changed the nature of the challenge before US armed forces and policy-makers.⁵⁰

The ideas that would later partly form George H. W. Bush's War on Terror also had their roots in an exchange between American and Israeli right-wing politicians. In June 1984, Israeli and American right-wing policy-makers met in Washington DC at the Jonathan Institute which had been created by the Netanyahu family to honour the memory of their son who had died in 1976 while rescuing Israeli hostages at Entebbe. The goal of the institute was to mobilize public opinion and policy-makers on the need to fight terrorism and its sponsor states. At this meeting, Shultz argued in favour of "preventive or pre-emptive actions against terrorist groups before they strike",⁵¹ and he would again make his point in the above-mentioned speech at the Park Avenue Synagogue a few days before the 1984 presidential elections. The proceedings of this conference were later published in a book edited by Netanyahu himself entitled *Terrorism: How the West Can Win*.⁵² When it came out in 1986 it became one of Reagan's favourite books.⁵³

The thoughts expressed in this conference are among the most "modern" in Reagan's Middle East legacy. For example, there was a clear definition of the fight against terrorism as a struggle *for* civilization. As Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister Moshe Arens stated, terrorism was "a war against Western society". Jeanne Kirkpatrick stressed the existence of "affinities between terrorism and totalitarianism", stating that "both regard violence as an appropriate means to their political ends. Both use it as the instruments of first resort. Both reject the basic moral principles of Judeo-Christian civilization."⁵⁴ The fight against terrorism was therefore a climatic one for Western civilizations, much like the one against Communist totalitarianism. Having determined the ideological links between terrorists and the Soviet Union, it was only logical (in the Cold War sense) that the USSR was behind a network of states which supported terrorists.

A few weeks before the conference, on April 3, 1984, National Security Decision Directive 138 was approved. In the interpretation of some members of the administration, it partially shifted "policy focus from passive to active defence measures", as National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane wrote.⁵⁵ Inside the administration, Shultz had been the strongest advocate of pre-emptive strikes against terrorists. The strike against Libya in April 1986 can be considered a first implementation of Shultz's new strategy and of McFarlane's interpretation of NSSD 138. In his post-strike address to the nation, Reagan defined the mission both as "fully consistent" with Article 51 of the UN charter which decreed that nations had the right to self-defense and as a "pre-emptive action against terrorist installations".⁵⁶ Though pre-emptive strikes against a terrorist sponsor state had been experimented with for the first time, they would not become the official policy of the Reagan

⁵⁰ See for example: Address by the Honorable Secretary of State Before the Washington Plenary Meeting of the Trilateral Commission, 'Power and Diplomacy in the 1980's', Washington DC, 3 April 1984, Folder: Terrorism, Shultz Material, Box 90754, Fortier files, RRL.

⁵¹ 'Shultz Urges 'Active' Drive on Terrorism', *The New York Times* (25 June 1984).

⁵² Benjamin Netanyahu (ed.), *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1986).

⁵³ See Shultz's letter to Netanyahu, 2 May 1986, Folder: Public Diplomacy (5 of 6), Box 1 of 2, Craig Coy files, RRL.

⁵⁴ Both quotes come from Benjamin Netanyahu, *Terrorism*, pp. 57 and 94.

⁵⁵ Memorandum for Edwin Meese III from Robert McFarlane, 'Background Material On Terrorism', 15 August 1984, Folder: Terrorism [August 1984], Subject files, RRL.

⁵⁶ 'Address to the Nation on the United States Air Strike Against Libya April 14, 1986', The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, RRL.

administration. Rather than a new beginning, the 1986 strike would serve more as a model of how force – especially that of the Air Force – could be used for a specific political goal.⁵⁷

The discussion inside the administration focused on the nature of the threat and on the kind of reaction that the US had to display in the face of this threat. Little attention was devoted to the enemies, apart from the indication of a series of states which sponsored them. During the Reagan years few analysts appreciated the difference between national liberation organizations and terrorist groups, as well as the impact of groups such as the Abu Nidal Organization which, though relying on state support, had political, financial and military autonomy.⁵⁸ Intelligence on transnational terrorism had been elaborated well before the Reagan administration. In 1976, the CIA had warned that “transnational terrorism” represented the “wave of the future” and was “largely independent of – and quite resistant to control by – the state-centered international system”.⁵⁹ The subsequent administrations did not heed or apparently comprehend this warning.

While the CIA was issuing those warnings, the alternative idea of a terror network supported by some national governments also started to gain ground among US policy-makers. In this view terrorism was a new tool used by old enemies, namely the Soviets and their allies which aimed at the destabilization of the West. Thanks to this conceptual framework, some members of the Reagan administration transferred many of the ideas they had developed about the Cold War to Middle Eastern terrorism. One of the occasions for the elaboration of this idea was the first conference convened by the Jonathan Institute in Jerusalem in 1979, during which the participants concluded that the Soviets were behind a vast network composed by the “newly transformed Iran”, Libya, Iraq, Syria, South Yemen, the PLO, the Armenian ASALA, the Baader-Meinhof gang and the Red Brigades.⁶⁰ It is worth pointing out how this analysis, which was elaborated *while* the Iranian revolution was taking place, remained unchanged during the 1980s when the consequences of the establishment of the Islamic Republic were evident to the vast majority of those who observed events in the regions.

Later, the idea of this global network became the basis of a book by journalist Claire Sterling entitled *The Terrorist Network*⁶¹ which served as a source of inspiration for some members of the administration.⁶² The book predicted that the 1980s would become “Fright Decade II” implying that the first of these was the 1970s. According to Sterling, the main feature of this new era was terrorism used as a “continuation of war by other means” to destabilize the West. Similar to the analyses of terrorism mentioned above, she based her analysis on a Cold War logic which bore little resemblance to the Middle East of the 1980s. While she wrote about “left-wing, or red, terrorists”, the regional scene was increasingly dominated by radical groups based on the Palestinian cause or Islamic fundamentalism. Sterling, consequently, equated the kidnapping of Italian statesman Aldo Moro by Italian communists with the hostage crisis in Teheran.⁶³

She was not alone. During the transition from the Carter administration, Constantine Menges, later Special Assistant to the President for Latin America, had identified a “destabilization coalition” composed of the USSR, Libya, Cuba, Yemen and Syria, against

⁵⁷ On the strike against Libya as a “model strike”, see Joseph Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*.

⁵⁸ On ANO, see David Long, *The Anatomy of Terrorism*, pp. 38-40.

⁵⁹ CIA Research Study, ‘International and Transnational Terrorism: Diagnosis and Prognosis’, April 1976, NSArch-CT in Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot*, p. 85.

⁶⁰ ‘Background Paper for the Second Conference On International Terrorism’, The Jonathan Institute, Folder: Combatting Terrorism Task Force, OA/ID 19849, Donald Gregg files, GBL.

⁶¹ Claire Sterling, *The Terror Network* (New York: Berkley Books, 1981).

⁶² ‘Transcript of complete interview given by NSA Richard Allen on March 20, 1981, to ABC news program’, Folder: Libya 1981, Box 90495, Kemp files, RRL.

⁶³ Claire Sterling, *The Terror Network*, p. 3.

which he advocated a tougher US stance.⁶⁴ Those who supported this idea apparently were not deterred by the lack of reliable intelligence on the link between the Soviets and the Middle Eastern states deemed to be supporters of terrorism. The link between the Soviet Union and terrorism was apparent to Secretary of State Alexander Haig who, early in 1981, was ordered to draft a special national estimate that could prove this point. According to Robert Gates, at the time in charge of the Executive Staff of the Director of Central Intelligence, several drafts had to be written in order to reach this goal. Finally, “an old hand in the estimates business” crafted what became SNIE 11/2-81 on “Soviet Support for International Terrorism and Revolutionary Violence.”⁶⁵ The report put everything in the same box: terrorists and counterinsurgencies with violent radical groups, the Palestinians with the Italian Red Brigades. The connection between all of these groups was their use of the terrorist technique, as if the (relevant) cultural and ideological differences among them did not matter. The focus of this analysis was the hypothetical master-mind of the global terror network, not the particularities of each organization. In the end, though, the report did not give Haig what he wanted, namely the evidence of the existence of a worldwide terrorist network supported by (and alive only because of) the Soviet Union. The report explicitly said that “even a complete withdrawal” of Soviet support would not end international terrorism as both “Libya and the extreme Palestinian groups have ample independent resources”. Moreover, the estimate, if read closely, denied the very need for such a powerful supporter as the USSR: “The weapons needed for terrorist activities are relatively cheap and readily available in the world.”⁶⁶ This was the feature which made terrorism all the more convenient for those who carried it out. It was cheap, it was relatively easy, and it produced serious political consequences in the Western world by killing people while they were attending to their daily lives.

But these remarks, along with those written in 1976 by the CIA, were part of an alternative view of terrorism which was not popular in the Reagan years, one that stressed the role of transnational terrorist organizations and that emphasized the ideological differences among them. The idea of state-sponsorship and the fact that those states were all dictatorships could easily induce the reader to conclude that regime change was a logical next step. Nevertheless, the link between the denunciation of state-sponsorship and the efforts towards regime change was not altogether evident in the early years of the Reagan administration. Moreover, whenever regime change was considered as an option in a given situation, it was considered in its traditional form – overthrowing a hostile government and substituting it with a friendlier one – rather than as a tool to promote democracy.

In the summer of 1985 (in the same weeks in which the “arms-for-hostages” deal was starting to take shape, where the US would provide weapons to Iran in exchange for the American hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon), the National Security Council discussed a plan to overthrow Qadhafi. The project, named “Flower”, actually included 2 different plans: “Tulip” focused on cooperation between Egypt and the remains of the NSFL,⁶⁷ while “Rose” would be a “pre-emptive military attack” coordinated with Egypt. In both cases the US would be involved, though its role would be more overt in the “Rose” plan.⁶⁸ Eventually, however, “Flower” was aborted because Mubarak decided against Egyptian participation and because

⁶⁴ Paper by Constantine C. Menges, ‘Proposal for the establishment of a small group to plan and coordinate United States international political action’, 23 December 1980, Folder: terrorism February 1984 (8401576), Box III, Subject files, RRL.

⁶⁵ Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 202-206.

⁶⁶ SNIE 11/2-81, ‘Soviet Support for International Terrorism and Revolutionary Violence’, 27 May 1981, in www.foia.cia.gov (accessed on 11 October 2005).

⁶⁷ The National Salvation Front for Libya was the umbrella organization of the opposition, many of its members were deemed to be close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

⁶⁸ Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York: Pocket Books, 1987), pp. 509-10.

of leaks to the American press. Above all, the plan was unpopular both inside the administration and with US diplomats in the region.

The rationale for acting against Qadhafi was that this would prove US resolve to its Middle Eastern enemies while not endangering ongoing arms reduction negotiations with the Soviets, as explained by the Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Staff Donald Fortier to Robert McFarlane:

Libya has the longest record in support of terrorism [...] it was also judged to be the easiest to attack without running up against a more serious Soviet challenge [...] Our hope, then, was to send a signal to those other countries indirectly [underlined, name of other countries classified] through a truly decisive action in Libya.⁶⁹

Supporters of regime change in Libya would again propose their plans in the aftermath of the April 1986 strike. The plan was to use disinformation to stir up Qadhafi's suspicions about his own officer corps and thus induce him to remove some of its key members. The idea was welcomed at least by two top officials in the administration, because handwritten on this same memo was the note: "Fred [Ikhlè, Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy] and I like this a lot!!" with the signature of John Poindexter (McFarlane's successor as National Security Advisor).⁷⁰

While ideas about regime change started to gain ground inside the administration, the intelligence seemed to deny that the overthrow of Qadhafi would bring any good to the United States. A CIA report in April had examined the issue concluding that there were two possible outcomes, both presenting risks for the US: either a military government which would have to prove its anti-Western stance to "dispel the inevitable suspicions at home and abroad that the US put it in power", or an "extremist-dominated government that could become an even greater threat to US interests than the Qadhafi regime".⁷¹ Such an analysis apparently did little to stop those inside the administration who advocated for regime change for Libya. In late July 1986, Reagan, Casey, Weinberger and Shultz gave their approval to the plan for regime change, which started to be implemented one month later.⁷²

On August 25, the Wall Street Journal wrote that the administration was planning an attack on Libya.⁷³ To increase tension in Libya, military actions had been carefully planned by Weinberger to give the impression of an ongoing build-up.⁷⁴ In fact, no new strike could take place both because of Western European opposition – including the British who had supported the strike in April – and because, as former Acting US Ambassador in Moscow Jack Matlock had warned, the Soviets would consider a new strike as a challenge to their credibility in the third world.⁷⁵ The whole operation backfired on those who had devised it on

⁶⁹ Note for Robert McFarlane from Donald Fortier, 'McFarlane Scene-Setter', 19 July 1985, Folder: Libya (3 of 4), Box 90754, Donald Fortier files, RRL.

⁷⁰ Memorandum from the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs for the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, 'Means by which to weaken Qadhafi's internal security apparatus at a propitious time', 18 April 1986, Folder: US Action in Libya 1986 (3 of 4), Box 91747, James Stark files, RRL.

⁷¹ Directorate of Intelligence, 'What if Qadhafi is ousted?', 30 April 1986, Folder "Post April 14 [1986] Action (2)", Box 91112, Elaine Morton files, RRL.

⁷² For details, see Memorandum of conversation, 'NSPG on Libya', 14 August 1986, System II 90610, Folder: NSPG 0137 14 Aug 1986 [Libya], NSPG meeting files, RRL.

⁷³ John Walcott and Gerald F. Seib, 'Collision course: New Signs that Libya Is Plotting Terrorism Bring Quick Response', *Wall Street Journal* (25 August 1986).

⁷⁴ Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense, 'Memorandum for the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs', 20 August 1986, Folder: Libya (1), Box 91095, James Stark files, RRL.

⁷⁵ Memorandum from Matlock to Poindexter, 'Possible Soviet Responses to US actions in Libya', 25 April 1986, Folder: US Action in Libya 1986 (2 of 4), Box 91747, James Stark files, RRL.

October 2, when Bob Woodward of the Washington Post disclosed the administration's intent.⁷⁶

The ascendance of this ideology in the Reagan administration ended in November 1986, when the first news of the Iran-Contra affair was published in the American press. The scandal would end the careers of some of the prominent "hawks" against terrorism inside the administration, such as North, Poindexter and McFarlane. The re-shuffle inside the administration would bring to the fore people like General Colin Powell as National Security Advisor and Frank Carlucci as Secretary of Defense who both supported a more nuanced, regionalist and diplomatic policy towards the Middle East. The crescendo towards a "war for civilization" would momentarily stop though some of the ideas and concepts created during the Reagan administration would survive its end.

Conclusions

The Cold War was an important factor in the shaping of the Reagan administration's policy against Middle Eastern terrorism. It affected their understanding of reality, their choice of friends and foes and the way they presented global issues to the public and to Congress. The Cold War was also the tool used by regional actors to attract American support. Presenting their local enemies as Soviet clients was, often, a good way to generate sympathy and aid (both financial and military) from US policy-makers. As Malcolm Yapp has stated, "the dominant feature [of the Cold War in the Middle East] was the manipulation of the international powers by regional powers", with the Cold War paradigm acting as one of the main tools of this manipulation. Thus, while the goal of many "globalists" inside the administration was to strengthen America's role in the region, this attitude actually gave more leverage to regional actors who used it to manipulate the superpower.⁷⁷

This was not the only problem created by the use of Cold War paradigms in the Middle East of the 1980s. First of all, the unbalanced mix between the globalist and the regionalist approaches led the US to commit mistakes in Lebanon which, on a smaller scale, resembled those of the Soviets in Afghanistan.⁷⁸ Secondly, although Cold War paradigms had always been important in shaping US policy in the Middle East, this seemed particularly out of place in the 1980s because the events of the late 1970s had created cleavages which had little or nothing to do with this bipolar confrontation. After the Iranian Revolution, the region was increasingly removed from the Cold War, yet American policy-makers still relied on the Cold War paradigm.

Terrorism was perceived by many members of the Reagan administration as a new threat, though they framed it as a new technique employed by old enemies. Understanding the transformations ushered into the politics of the Middle East by the events of 1979 was not an impossible task. In the first days of 1985, Richard Nixon produced a document with advice for the Reagan administration in its second term. His (rather prophetic) analysis was quite different from that of the White House:

The major danger of war in the next ten years is not in Europe but in the Third World. And the most crucial area is the Mideast and the Persian Gulf [...] We must recognize that the major destabilizing and dangerous factor in the Middle East is not the communist revolution but the Moslem/Fundamentalist revolution [...] Even without Soviet assistance, the Khomeinis and the Qadafis will continue to try to export their revolutions [...] Military power will not decide this conflict in the Third World. We could have military superiority across the board and still lose.

⁷⁶ Bob Woodward, 'Qadhafi Target of Secret U.S. Deception Plan', *Washington Post* (2 October 1986).

⁷⁷ Malcolm E. Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War*, p. 438.

⁷⁸ For this parallel see Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*, p. XV.

Nuclear weapons are irrelevant (...)conventional weapons and rapid deployment forces serve a purpose but are not effective when aggression is not over borders, as in Korea, but under borders by Soviet- and radical Moslem-supported revolutionaries.⁷⁹

Reagan's policy, though, was not simply the continuation of Cold War policies in the Middle East. His administration did produce new ideas and new concepts which acquired a new relevance in light of the War on Terror declared by the administration of George W. Bush. The idea of terrorism as warfare against the West would be reinforced by the nature of the attacks on 9/11; the necessity of using pre-emptive strikes as well as regime change against states which sponsor terrorists would likewise gain prominence. Even the list of countries listed as sponsors of terrorism in the Reagan years resembled that of the Bush years.

Nonetheless, these elements of continuity are not enough to say that the Reagan years were already part of World War 4: there was no global War on Terror in the 1980s. Though Middle Eastern terrorism was always high on Reagan's agenda, it never overcame other global priorities as happened after 9/11 for George W. Bush,⁸⁰ and indeed the main point here is how the Cold War logic framed the understanding of Middle Eastern terrorism in the 1980s.

It is more appropriate to view the Reagan administration as a breeding ground for what came after 9/11. Reagan's legacy could be taken or left by those who came after him. While some ideas were elaborated and examples produced, in the end these did not become a comprehensive policy. Overall, the Reagan administration, when faced with the emergence of new and extremely diverse forms of radicalism in the Middle East, failed to produce a comprehensive analysis of the motives, aims, structure, and basis of popular support of these movements. In the end, nothing even close to the depth of analysis enclosed in George Kennan's "long telegram" was drafted by anyone in the administration – or if it was drafted and is still classified, it never gained a similar influence. Context and understanding of diversities were sacrificed in order to have a global framework that could justify a foreign policy whose main task had an important domestic dimension: the restoration of American power and will after the weaknesses exposed by the Vietnam years.

Finally, Reagan's policy in the Middle East neglected non-state actors like the Abu Nidal Organization. It stuck to an idea of terrorism as a synonym of "insurgency" which had developed in the 1960s and 1970s, as Timothy Naftali has noted. This came together with the idea of state-sponsorship: behind every insurgency lay either the USSR or China.⁸¹ A language and a conceptual framework conceived for Latin America or Asia (the locations of insurgencies in the 1960s and 1970s) were then partially used for the Middle East of the 1980s. Despite receiving occasional warnings about the nature of organisations like Abu Nidal's, the administration seemed incapable of conceiving of a world where an independent organisation, using nation-states as mere assets without obeying their agendas, could cause major trouble for the United States. The Abu Nidal Organization created part of the *casus belli* for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon – which in turn prompted an American intervention in the country – and of the US attack against Libya in 1986. The relevance of non-state actors in global terrorism is part of another, more recent, story. The misunderstanding of their nature and danger, though, is part of the same legacy that this article has tried to investigate.

For all these reasons, it is important to understand how the context of the Reagan administration shaped ideas and policies which were fully developed when the Cold War was over and which would have been unthinkable without the unipolar moment. While asking

⁷⁹ 'A New Approach for the Second Term', Folder: Memorandum File Subseries 1984-January 1985, Box 9, James Baker files, RRL.

⁸⁰ On the hierarchy of priorities of US foreign policy before and after 9/11 see Barry Buzan, 'Will the Global War on Terrorism Be the New Cold War?', *International Affairs*, 82:6 (November 2006).

⁸¹ Naftali, *Blind Spot*, p. 26.

ourselves how much of Bush's War on Terror was already there in the Reagan years, we should also use scholarship to understand how much of Reagan's Cold War mentality was still there in the Bush years.