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Abstract

In 1985 the Canadian government closed its embassy in Lebanon and opened a mission in Syria. This realignment occurred amid charges from Lebanon and the Lebanese diaspora in Canada that the government was abandoning Lebanon at the moment of its greatest need and rewarding the malevolent Ba'ath regime in Damascus. The Canadian Department of External Affairs, under the leadership of Secretary of State Joe Clark, risked political fallout from this controversy—such as outrage from Lebanese and Israeli diaspora communities in Canada, injured relations with Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, and partial responsibility for the deteriorating human security situation in Lebanon—in favour of protecting the Canadian embassy staff from escalating violence in Beirut and seizing the opportunity to open a long overdue diplomatic presence in Damascus, Syria, from which the hard-line Ba'ath party dominated much of the region's politics.

Keywords

Canadian Department of External Affairs, Lebanon, Syria, Joe Clark, human security, Israel, Lebanese diaspora, Ba'ath regime

The Harper government's recent decision to close the Canadian embassy in Damascus as the Syrian revolt worsened brought to an end a chapter in Canada–Syria relations that began over a quarter of a century ago, as it ended, in a time of crisis. Indeed, the early history of the Canadian embassy in Damascus

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provides a clear and detailed example of high-stakes foreign policy decision-making and crisis management.

In 1985 the Canadian government closed its mission in Beirut and concurrently opened an embassy in Damascus. The challenges of crisis management can be lost sight of in what might seem in retrospect to have been a matter of brick and mortar rather than a weighing of dire potential consequences, including outrage from Lebanese and Israeli diaspora communities in Canada, injured relations with Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, and partial responsibility for the deteriorating human security situation in Lebanon. These factors are as alive today as they were 27 years ago when the events herein transpired. They are determinants of national action.

In writing this article the authors combined their knowledge of the events of 1985 from personal experience, both at External Affairs headquarters in Ottawa and in the Middle East, with archival research and interviews with key players. When the events transpired, Michael Bell was director of the Middle East Relations Division at the Department of External Affairs headquarters in Ottawa; Mike Molloy was counsellor at the Canadian embassy in Amman, where he oversaw Canadian Immigration's operations in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

In drafting this article we asked ourselves who made the decisions that led to the closing of the embassy in Beirut; who were the relevant actors; and what circumstances and constraints confronted decision-makers. We relied on External Affairs files, which were sometimes incomplete.¹ Overall, in this article we demonstrate the strengths of the Department of External Affairs, including its minister at the time, Joe Clark, and its policy and organizational capabilities in the face of major challenges.

This article illustrates the importance of weighing risk and opportunity. It demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of domestic lobbies and their impact on foreign policy in Canada in the period. It illustrates internal tensions in the Department of External Affairs and shows how these tensions became pivot points in the department's decision-making.

The shape of things

In June 1985, in the midst of the Lebanese civil war, the Canadian embassy in Beirut was closed. Mounting security concerns respecting the safety of the mission's staff forced the matter. The decision was authorized by the Canadian foreign minister of the time, Joe Clark, despite the inevitable accusations from Lebanon and Lebanese-Canadians that Canada was abandoning Lebanon at the moment of its greatest need. Involved Canadian ministers debated a move replete with political overtones—particularly, Canada's reduced support for a legitimate Lebanese state to the benefit of the hardline Ba'ath party regime in Damascus. This move required

1. We accessed the RG series files of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade through Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (LAC).

broad and intensive consultations, in and outside of Canada, against a tight time frame.

By the mid-1980s, the Lebanese government was more fiction than fact; the state had disintegrated through civil war and foreign military intervention. The Syrian regime was a major, if radical, regional player in its confrontations with Israel and self-proclaimed role as defender of secular Arab nationalism. The Syrian autocracy had much in common with the governance models of its Egyptian, Iraqi, and other Arab neighbours, which acted arbitrarily and often brutally, as did the Lebanese militias. The Department of External Affairs, however, did not deem those regimes barriers to on-the-ground conduct of diplomatic relations. Western countries were well represented in Damascus; Canadian non-resident accreditation from Beirut was an anomaly.

The Beirut–Damascus mission realignment, although it might on the surface seem a simple matter, was anything but. The decision to relocate the mission took into account the interests of domestic lobbies, the pursuit of broader Canadian interests abroad, and the need for Canada to ensure visa and consular services in a country in perpetual crisis. These factors were combined with External Affairs' sensitivity to any Israeli reaction and, above all, the department's growing apprehension of imminent danger to embassy personnel through kidnapping or worse. In the lead-up to the embassy's closure, the need for secrecy, for fear of violent intervention or reprisals, was paramount.

The analysis that led to embassy closure in Beirut and opening in Damascus was conducted at the desk and middle management levels in External Affairs, which included the director general for the Middle East and the director of Middle East relations. From there, discussions went to the assistant deputy minister, the deputy minister, the minister's political staff, and then to the minister. The department consulted extensively with other government departments and agencies, particularly Immigration, Defence, and the Privy Council Office. It held consultations with concerned ministers and the prime minister, and in Cabinet. This organizational schema was not always adhered to, as life-threatening situations required flexibility and quick turnaround times across lines of authority. Also critical was the role played by Canadian missions abroad, particularly those of the Canadian ambassador and staff in Beirut and, ultimately, Amman.

Context²

The civil war in Lebanon from 1975–1990 was complex and multidimensional as it mutated throughout its 16-year duration. It was characterized by factionalized ethnic and religious politics and aggravated by clandestine and overt military interventions by external parties with widely conflicting cultures and military goals.

2. For reference on this section, see Tom Najem, *Lebanon: the Politics of a Penetrated Society* (London: Routledge, 2011); Farid El Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon* (London: I.B Tauris, 1999); Helena Cobban, *The Making of Modern Lebanon* (London: Hutchison, 1985); Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

The “National Pact” of 1943 that had provided stability through a complex series of inter-communal understandings and by apportioning major offices of state among the various sects—the president would always be Christian; the prime minister, Sunnite; the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Shiite—began to unravel. Demonization of the other was rampant. The Christian Maronites were reluctant to cede their traditional dominance of the Lebanese polity, despite their ever-diminishing share of the population. The Maronites were under pressure from many Sunni Muslims, despite the Sunni elite’s relatively privileged position. The marginalized Shia underclass, the largest Lebanese demographic, despite its increasing numbers, did not develop a significant voice until the conflict was well underway. The Druze and other minorities sought what they saw as their fair share of the Lebanese pie in a fragmented polity, where loyalties to religion, tribe, and community were deeply embedded.

Longstanding internal tensions had been reshaped by the arrival in 1948 of roughly 150,000 Palestinian (overwhelmingly Sunni) refugees, as a consequence of the fighting that followed the British termination of its Palestine mandate and the creation of the state of Israel. In a society in which group identities were paramount, this influx of Palestinian Sunni refugees upset the delicate Muslim–Christian balance in Lebanon. By the late 1960s Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) elements began building their own power base beyond the refugee camps, using South Lebanon as a base from which to operate against Israel. This development in turn led to the formation of Christian militias aimed at forestalling the perceived threat of a Lebanese Muslim–PLO alliance establishing a Muslim-dominated state. The potential for violence escalated in 1970 with the expulsion of Palestinian fighters from Jordan, following the “Black September” conflict between the Jordanian Hashemite monarchy and the PLO, from which King Hussein emerged victorious. A large contingent of battle-hardened Palestinian guerrillas settled in Lebanon, and the PLO established its headquarters in Beirut. Under the pressure of conflicting loyalties, the Lebanese army split along confessional lines and became ineffectual. As a result, the Lebanese state was too weak to prevent or even control the creation of Palestinian organizations, military and civil, led by Yasser Arafat. The PLO conducted itself as “a state within a state.” As the Palestinians accelerated anti-Israeli activities from Lebanon, Israeli reprisals grew.

In the civil war that ensued, the Lebanese capital was divided into sectarian enclaves. Christian militias controlled East Beirut, while the leftist Muslim–PLO alliance controlled the western side of the city where the Canadian embassy was located. Throughout the fighting, which spread across the country, both sides pursued control of Beirut, which held two-thirds of Lebanon’s population. The ideological focus of Muslim groups became gradually more sectarian, particularly within the Shiite underclass, leading to an agglomeration of contesting movements. After the Likud party of Menachem Begin came to power in Israel in 1977, Israel’s tolerance of PLO activity on its northern border evaporated. In 1978 Israel invaded Lebanon and took hold of a narrow strip of Lebanese territory, which it labelled the “security zone.”

Israel invaded Lebanon again in June 1982. After vicious fighting and in the face of overwhelming Israeli military superiority, the PLO dismantled its institutions and left Lebanon. The PLO leadership, including Yasser Arafat, relocated to Tunisia; the fighters went mainly to Yemen. The Israelis wanted to establish a friendly Christian-dominated central government in Beirut, to be led by the Maronite militia leader Bashir Gemayel. Bashir became president-elect in August but was assassinated in September. He was succeeded by his brother Amin, who signed a peace agreement with Israel in May 1983 but abrogated it within a year, allowing the Syrian regime to reinforce its influence in Lebanon.

Soon after, public order had completely broken down, as mounting violence, terrorism, sectarian revenge killings, kidnappings, and hostage takings became the norm. Westerners were in danger of being viewed as Christian allies, hostile to Muslim interests. In October 1983, suicide-bombers attacked US and French military stations, killing 241 American Marines and 56 French paratroopers. The highest-profile case was the kidnapping of the Church of England envoy, Terry Waite, in 1987.

The Canadian presence

Traditionally, Canadian ties with Maronite Lebanon had been particularly close. Resident diplomatic relations with Lebanon were established in 1954, and until the 1970s Canada's mission in Beirut remained, with Egypt, one of two Canadian embassies in the Arab world. Ottawa's decision to establish a diplomatic mission in Lebanon was driven by its growing sense of Canada as an international actor following the Second World War and by its perception of Beirut as the Arab world's international entrepôt. The most compelling rationale, however, was the sensitivity of Canadian governments to the substantial and active Lebanese diaspora in Canada, whose members were determined to ensure strong Canadian support for their communities and homeland. Best established in Canada were the Maronites and other Christians, mainly Orthodox, who had the ear of Canadian government.³ The Canadian government's words were most often overblown, but those words, along with the government's strong support for an active visa program facilitating immigration to Canada, seemed to satisfy the diaspora's most pressing needs. A positive tone was the norm in Canada–Lebanon relations.

That tone was of immense psychological value to the diaspora, which grew progressively more important as Lebanon's precarious security situation threatened the Canadian government's pursuit of traditional diplomatic policy goals. For Canada, the foreign policy activities most affected by the Lebanese civil war were the immigration and visitor visa and consular protection programs. The government of Canada instituted special measures in 1976 to facilitate the immigration of Lebanese citizens affected by the war and sponsored by relatives in Canada.

3. Estimates of the number of Canadian residents of Lebanese heritage at the time of the embassy's closure in 1985 range from 350,000 to 450,000. The 1991 census shows 54,605 Canadians as having been born in Lebanon, of whom 67 percent self-identified as Christian.

These measures were enhanced in 1982, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The management of the visitor visa program was particularly challenging, as visitors, once in Canada, could seek permanent residence under the special measures. In addition, dual nationals, who had chosen to return to Lebanon to visit or resume residence after acquiring Canadian citizenship, frequently expected succour and demanded an expeditious response. Ottawa devoted considerable resources to these “consular emergencies.”

In February 1976 the embassy was occupied for a day by Lebanese gunmen. Embassy staff were evacuated. The political section of the staff took up temporary residence at the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman. The visa section relocated to Limassol, Cyprus, where it had convenient access to the international airport and continued to process thousands of Lebanese applicants displaced by violence until a period of relative calm permitted the reestablishment of a fully functioning mission in Beirut in July 1977.⁴ That calm was deceptive. In the years following, embassy personnel were routinely confined to their homes and to the chancery for security reasons, and were given little if any diversion to release the stresses that inevitably accumulate in war zones. Nevertheless, for the departments concerned and for the staff that rotated through Beirut during these turbulent years, the situation was accepted as a kind of perverse norm—even with, *inter alia*, an Israeli rocket passing through the then Ambassador Ted Arcand’s apartment during the 1982 Israeli invasion. This commitment to stay was designed to satisfy the Lebanese diaspora.

The embassy at risk

The embassy, protected by an increasingly robust contingent of Canadian military police, kept its door open to those on both sides of the city who could navigate the ragged no man’s land not far from the chancery. Despite the turbulence, the embassy provided a steady stream of political reporting and analysis. The violence, however, became less tolerable once a pattern of assassinations and kidnappings targeting westerners and diplomats emerged in the 1980s. Both External Affairs headquarters and the embassy itself again became preoccupied with the risks to its diplomats and staff situated at the Sabbagh Bank Building on Hamra Street near the Green Line in the explosive heart of mostly Muslim West Beirut.

Reporting to headquarters from the post conveyed a sense of the precariousness of the situation in the city. That reporting prompted thinking in headquarters about how to minimize risk to embassy staff without ceasing operations—the mission was valuable both symbolically and for its visa and consular services. Those of us with first-line responsibility at External Affairs in Ottawa believed that there was as yet insufficient understanding of the gravity of the danger to ask the minister to

4. The Limassol, Cyprus operation dealt with over 7000 Lebanese applicants over the next year: “Annual Report 1976–1977,” Department of Manpower and Immigration, Ottawa, 1977.

risk confrontation with the Canadian-Lebanese diaspora. But we were gradually convinced that closure was the only viable course.

A memorandum from the Middle East Relations Division sent to Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark on 27 March 1984 suggested a number of measures that might enhance security without closing the mission.⁵ On our recent rereading we continue to find the memorandum's evidence and presentation compelling. Segments of it are worth quoting at length, as they provide daily on-the-record accounts of the situation as it developed:

Le caporal B nard, qui est l'un des trois gardes militaires canadiens pr sentement affect s   notre ambassade   Beyrouth, a  t  atteint d'une balle   la main gauche alors qu'il stationnait une voiture de l'ambassade devant la chancellerie vendredi dernier . . . Il a  t  d cid  d'envoyer M. B nard   Chypre . . . D'autre part, on rapporte qu'un diplomate fran ais a  t  abattu hier   Beyrouth.

Ces incidents sont survenus alors qu'on assiste   un regain de l'activit  militaire dans la capitale libanaise depuis la fin, sans r sultats positifs, de la conf rence de Lausanne le 20 mars. C'est ainsi que des accrochages relativement importants se sont d roul s au cours des derniers jours   Beyrouth-Ouest entre miliciens du mouvement sunnite extr miste "Mourabitoun" et miliciens druzes du Parti socialiste progressiste, qui entend apparemment  liminer les "Mourabitoun" comme facteur militaire significatif   Beyrouth-Ouest.

Par ailleurs, le retrait du contingent fran ais, le seul des quatre contingents de la force multinationale demeurant   Beyrouth, a  t  amorc  durant la fin de semaine derni re, suite   l' chec de la conf rence de Lausanne et doit  tre termin  le 31 mars . . .

Nous sommes conscients depuis longtemps du risque g n ral, impliqu  par notre pr sence   Beyrouth.⁶

5. Memorandum to the Secretary of State for External Affairs drafted by Yvon Jobin, External Affairs Lebanese desk officer, 27 March 1984, AGMR-0557, file 22-9 LBAN, LAC.

6. An English translation of the quotation is as follows:

Corporal B nard, one of three military guards attached to the Embassy at present, was wounded by a bullet through his left hand while parking one of the Embassy's cars at the Embassy last Friday. . . it was decided to send B nard to Cyprus. . . It is reported that a French diplomat was killed was killed yesterday in Beirut.

These incidents reflect an increase in military activity in the Lebanese capital since the failure of the Lausanne Conference 20 March. They also reflect the serious clashes that have taken place in recent days in West Beirut between the extremist Sunnite militia, the "Mourabitoun" and the fighters of the Druze Progressive Socialist Party, which is apparently intended to eliminate the "Mourabitoun" as a serious military factor in West Beirut.

In addition, the withdrawal of the French contingent, the last of the four military contingents of the multilateral force remaining in Beirut, began last weekend following the failure of the Lausanne Conference, and its mission must be terminated 31 March.

We have been aware for a considerable time of the risks involved in our presence in Beirut.

The memorandum concluded by recommending, despite the security situation, that the embassy be kept in Beirut for the following reasons: the likely negative impact of an embassy closure on Canada's ability to process Lebanese visitor and immigrant visas; the importance of the embassy's presence to the Canadian community of Christian Lebanese origin; the danger of closure further undercutting the precarious regime of then Maronite president Amin Gemayal; and the loss of source reporting on events, while the Lebanese crisis, in which Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran were heavily involved, dominated the international agenda.

The memorandum therefore recommended that most of the mission's 22 personnel be redeployed to temporary visa offices in Damascus and the Christian Lebanese port of Jounieh, north of Beirut, while a core staff remain in Beirut, so that it would not appear that Canada had become a *de facto* ally of the Christian community or had abandoned Lebanon in favour of Syria. These recommendations were not implemented immediately, in part because of the reluctance of the minister of immigration, Flora MacDonald, to alter the administration of the visa program and because of the importance the Department of National Defence attached to ensuring a full-time intelligence presence. There was an unspoken concern, particularly among Canadian ministers, about the potential reaction of Israel and the Canadian Jewish community to Ottawa setting up resident representation in Damascus, the capital of the major Arab power in confrontation with Israel.⁷ There was also concern that Canada, in broadening its interaction with Syria, would confer legitimacy on what was deemed by its critics an "outlaw" state. Clark, after consulting with his colleagues, decided that the memorandum's recommendations would not be implemented for the present.

The situation in Lebanon, ably reported by our staff in Beirut, continued to deteriorate. Two months later, on 24 May 1984, a second memorandum was sent to Clark proposing that the embassy's staff and functions be relocated to reduce risk, this time presenting different options to this end.⁸ This memorandum argued for leaving a largely symbolic presence in Beirut, while the embassy's visa function would be exercised from Amman, Jordan. The memorandum's proposal, in recommending a Beirut/Amman split, sought to minimize Canadian exposure in Beirut while ensuring Canada's presence there. At the same time the memorandum made an important point regarding these *ad hoc* arrangements, asserting that it was anomalous for a country like Canada to be the only significant western player unrepresented in Damascus, which had become a pivot point in the Middle East. An embassy in Syria had for this reason been a long-sought goal of those in External Affairs responsible for the Middle East, although this was the first time the prospect was formally raised.

7. The bulk of that community was represented by the Canada-Israel Committee—then one of the most effective lobby groups in the country. The committee had easy access to the prime minister and other ministers, who were duly sensitive to its views.

8. Memorandum to the secretary of state for external affairs, 24 May 1984, GMR-0907, file 22-9-LBAN, LAC.

Clark accepted the ad hoc Beirut/Amman split of the embassy on 23 June 1984. The countries affected were so informed and accepted the minister's decisions without demur.⁹ In the succeeding months, the approved changes were implemented and deemed workable, though less than ideal. The Canadian staff remaining in Beirut was reduced from 22 members to 10. Beirut continued to issue visas to visitors in Lebanon, while seven positions and responsibilities for the immigration applications in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria were handed off to Amman.

Over the next year the situation in Lebanon, and particularly Beirut, continued to deteriorate. On 19 March 1985, CTV News carried the following item: "ABC News reports this morning that Britain has closed its embassy in Beirut as fighting and kidnappings continue. Several people have been kidnapped in recent days, including the Associated Press correspondent Terry Anderson and two Britons." The Canadian ambassador to Lebanon, Jacques Noiseux, told CTV News that security for his staff had been increased: "They are driven back and forth to work and are warned not to go out unnecessarily."¹⁰ On 26 March CBC radio carried an item on Lebanese developments: "A French diplomat was killed at gunpoint today and two other French Embassy employees are missing. The Muslim fundamentalist group Islamic Holy War is claiming responsibility for the disappearances. That brings to five the number of kidnappings carried out in nine days by the group and it brings the total number of foreigners seized in the past 14 months to ten."¹¹ Seven weeks later, Aidan Walsh, the Irish deputy director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, was kidnapped. Two weeks after that incident, David Gibson, director of the American University Hospital, was also kidnapped.

Our mission in Beirut reported these events to Ottawa. On 28 March the embassy wrote that "[what] the press is calling the 'War of the Camps' is now in its second week and fighting continued this morning around Sabra, Shatila and Bourj El Brajneeh camps. Shelling of West Beirut lasted for about one hour but reports of what was hit from where are confused. At [the] Embassy which is located not far from [the] American University Hospital and on [the] ambulance access route, we have heard [a] steady stream of armed ambulances suggesting fighting is intense and that there are many casualties."¹²

Noiseux, the former ambassador, recently provided the authors with a more personal take.¹³ When he arrived in Beirut on 28 August 1984 to take over the mission, he was met by an armoured car that had been dispatched by the embassy to protect him from kidnapping. He recalled the restrictions on movement imposed by External Affairs that severely limited embassy activities. On one occasion, en route to see Dany Chamoun, a member of the Christian Maronite Lebanese

9. Aide Memoire delivered to the Lebanese, Syrian and Jordanian governments, 23 June 1984, file 20-1-2 Syria, LAC.

10. Canada AM, CTV, media tapes and transcripts, 19 March 1985 file, 22-9-LBAN-1, LAC.

11. As It Happens, CBC Radio, 22 March 1985, file 22-9-LBAN-1, LAC.

12. Message from the Canadian Embassy in Beirut, 28 May 1985, ZJGR7821, file 20-LBAN-1-4, LAC.

13. Jacques Noiseux, interview with the authors, 11 February 2012, Montréal.

political leadership, Noiseux's car was stopped by an unidentified gang, which decided, after heated internal debate, to let him go.¹⁴ Noiseux described the atmosphere he found in Beirut and Lebanon as one of "blood and fire." The embassy's second officer, Scott Mullin, recounts that militia snipers were operating from the roof of the Mimosa building, where Mullin and a number of UN employees resided, while opponents lobbed mortars from the Summerland hotel, the favoured locale of visiting journalists and others.¹⁵

The crunch

Our concern was to protect the Canadian government's image as it tried to balance the symbolic importance of maintaining a Canadian presence in Beirut with the dangers posed by that presence to the Beirut embassy's staff.¹⁶ By 1985 the messages we were receiving from the embassy had changed in tone: while still confident of the importance of keeping Canadian officials on the ground, the messages reflected the increasingly perilous conditions endured by staff members. Michael Bell in Ottawa received frequent phone calls from embassy staff members fearing for their safety and looking for a sympathetic ear. On one such occasion, an embassy staff member dangled the phone receiver over his balcony to capture the sound of incoming shells. On another, an embassy staff member called from the relative security of a bathtub. Not only were snipers operating from staff member Mullin's apartment's rooftop, but Mullin missed death by a hair's breadth: he arrived at a restaurant for dinner with a journalist, only to find the premises in ruin, a bomb having destroyed it less than an hour earlier, killing or injuring patrons and staff.

The management of the Middle East Bureau at External Affairs decided to approach Clark again on 25 May 1985 to propose that Canada decamp Beirut completely. The minister accepted the recommendation and convinced his colleagues in Cabinet that there was no realistic alternative. It was critically important that the decision remain under wraps until our staff had safely crossed the land border with Syria. We were concerned that premature disclosure would put our people at risk, given that one of many militias might decide to "punish" the Canadians for "abandoning" them. We were also concerned, as were ministers, that the Lebanese-Canadian community would try to reverse the decision. A number of the like-minded western missions still in Beirut, *inter alia* the Irish, Norwegians, and Dutch, viewing their own situations to be equally precarious, felt betrayed—if not by our decision, by our lack of transparency.

14. Dany Chamoun was a prominent Christian Maronite political and militia leader, noteworthy for his opposition to Syrian domination of Lebanon. He himself was assassinated in October 1990. Chamoun's rival for the Maronite leadership, Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces at the time, was subsequently found guilty of Chamoun's murder.

15. Scott Mullin, interview with the authors, 15 February 2012, Toronto. At this point, all of the brand name hosteleries situated on the Corniche had been destroyed.

16. The files we accessed were missing correspondence from 1 May–14 June 1985. That correspondence may have been withheld from the archives by External Affairs.

Our determination to keep the move confidential led Michael Bell, in response to a query from the Ottawa-based media the day the mission ended operation, to deny straightforwardly any change in the embassy's status, suggesting instead there was any number of reasons why the mission might have closed for a few hours and that we at headquarters were unaware that the chancery was not open for business. This denial was an example of the much-maligned dictum that the job of diplomats is sometimes to lie for their country.¹⁷

External Affairs then had to take in hand the mechanics of the move: destruction of classified material, sealing the mission to the degree possible, moving staff to an assembly point, and assembling a convoy to Syria en route to Amman. Given the size of the task and the limited time available to complete it under a shroud of secrecy, we wanted someone from headquarters on the ground to coordinate the closure and withdrawal. We settled on an officer in the External Affairs' security bureau, newly transferred from the Department of National Defence, to do the job. Since commercial flights to Beirut were almost nonexistent, and those available were consistently overbooked, we were unsure of how to get our man into the city; however, he confidently told us that, provided he was given \$5000 in advance, he would find a way into Beirut, get the job done, and stay with the staff members until they had safely left Lebanon. The embassy staff, fondly or not, nicknamed him "John Wayne."

"John" did his job well, giving cohesiveness to the effort and dealing with operational issues with a confident, experienced hand. After briefing the staff on what was required of them, he entered the most secure area of the embassy, axe in hand, to destroy the communications equipment. Files were burned in the Sabbage Bank's incinerator. Transfer of the Canadian military guards' weapons posed a novel challenge. The firing mechanisms were removed and carried by the departing soldiers in a sealed diplomatic bag; the impressive array of neutralized weapons were locked up in a security shell and left in the chancery. Without informing the local staff, Canadian embassy personnel departed Lebanon the morning of 14 June 1985. Both Noiseux and Mullin were—and remain—critical of the convoy idea. They do not dispute External Affairs' decision to close the embassy but believe that they should have been consulted on the plans for departure, given their greater knowledge of the situation on the ground and the possibility that a convoy of North American vehicles could have been targeted by militias along the route.¹⁸ Those at headquarters may have been remiss not to have consulted the embassy.

Nevertheless, Canada-based staff members arrived safely in Damascus later that day. They were met at the Lebanese–Syrian border by David Malone, the senior political officer from Amman, who had explained to the Syrian foreign ministry our intention to pass through Syrian territory en route to Amman.¹⁹ Malone

17. Such secrecy would be unachievable today, given the impact of social media on the flow of information.

18. Jacques Noiseux, interview with the authors, 11 February 2012, Montreal; and Scott Mullin, interview with the authors, 15 February 2012, Toronto.

19. David Malone, interview with the authors, 29 August 2012, Ottawa.

immediately called Ottawa to confirm arrival. Under instructions from over-zealous politicians in Ottawa, the Beirut embassy staff was permitted only to spend one night in Damascus and firmly directed to proceed to Jordan the morning of 15 June. Amman was to be the holding point until a decision was made on what to do next.

Once the word was out of the embassy closure, the Lebanese lobby in Canada conveyed its outrage to the government. The Maronite leadership on the ground, feeling undermined and humiliated, was bitter, as its already fragile legitimacy slipped further. That we had not notified the Lebanese foreign ministry of our imminent departure was a particular source of outrage, but as far as External Affairs was concerned, the need for a safe, secure, undisrupted exit trumped protocol.

Realism in Israel

The decision to move the Beirut staff temporarily to Amman was separate and distinct from the decision to open a full embassy in Damascus. The Syrians were welcoming, but top Canadian ministers and officials anticipated a negative reaction from Israel and its Canadian supporters. The Syrian regime was at the time regarded as the greatest external threat to Israel's security. A permanent move of the Beirut embassy's functions to Amman posed no such problem: King Hussein's regime was perhaps the most benign in the Arab world and enjoyed positive, if discrete, relations with Israel.

Canadian politicians wanted to avoid a contretemps with another Canadian diaspora, the Jewish community, and therefore had to be convinced of the huge practical and operational advantages of Damascus over Amman. At External Affairs in Ottawa we received instruction from Clark's office to ask our ambassador in Tel Aviv to discuss the issue with the senior level of the Israeli foreign ministry to gauge its reaction. We considered whether the minister's office had requested that the Israelis be informed or that their outright blessing be sought. Most involved were convinced that the minister intended to have Israel notified of the Canadian decision. Most also believed that as a sovereign country we should not be beholden to other states as to where we established our overseas representation. Clark's office approved this approach but advised us to carefully word the notification of the decision to Israel's foreign ministry. The assistant deputy minister, meanwhile, expressed his preference that we seek outright permission from Israel before establishing a resident embassy in Damascus.

Bob Elliot, the director general for the Middle East in Ottawa, orally conveyed the necessary nuances to Vern Turner, our ambassador in Tel Aviv, who assured us that he would inform the Israeli foreign ministry of Ottawa's decision to relocate its Beirut embassy to Damascus in a manner faithful to ministerial instruction yet respectful of Canadian dignity—a delicate balance that he successfully struck. David Kimche, the director general of the foreign ministry in Jerusalem, responded to Turner's demarche in positive terms, suggesting it was high time Canada was

represented in such a strategically important capital. Kimche's sole request was that from time to time he be briefed on our impressions of Syria and Syrian intent.

Despite Turner's positive report, the assistant deputy minister (ADM) level at headquarters had another message sent to Turner in Tel Aviv: "please confirm that while departure from Beirut was conveyed to Kimche as decision/decision of the government, (the) prospect of opening (a) mission in Damascus was conveyed as (a) measure which government was considering/considering. Reply requested by Flash tel(egram)"²⁰ Turner therefore contacted Kimche a second time and received an identical response: the Israeli government had no objection. External Affairs' self-made "crisis" faded into obscurity. There were no repercussions with the Israel lobby in Canada.

To Damascus

On the morning of 15 June 1985, the day after the Beirut staff left Lebanon and arrived in Damascus, a small team from the embassy in Amman went to the Jordanian–Syrian border to meet the evacuees. Safely "home" in the embassy in Amman, the Beirut team was conflicted—worried about the local Lebanese staff that had been left behind with no explanation; annoyed that they had not been consulted but simply ordered to depart; unconvinced that their sudden evacuation from Beirut had been necessary, but quietly relieved to be out. Operating month after month under intense pressure in Beirut had required courage, professionalism, dogged determination, and a strong belief in the mission's purpose. With the staff's sudden extraction from Beirut, that pressure was suddenly lifted; and the staff members had a consequent emotional response—a feeling that they had been forced to abandon their responsibilities.

The problem now that the Beirut team had been extricated was how to deliver visitor visas to the Lebanese applicants. The instructions from Ottawa were clear: the visitor visa and immigration programs for Lebanon were to be delivered from Amman. That, however, was impossible: Jordan has no land border with Lebanon, and since the beginning of the civil war it had refused to let Lebanese citizens visit Jordanian territory for fear they would remain.

It was evident to Mike Molloy and Scott Mullin that the only workable option would be to set up a visa operation in Damascus. Canada had worn out its welcome in Cyprus in 1976–1977, Israel was a non-starter, and Turkey was too far away. What Ottawa needed was a dispassionate, technical but implacable message from those in Amman ruling out Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and Cyprus, and demonstrating that visas for the Lebanese could only be delivered from Damascus. Molloy and Mullin worked out the details. They presented their draft to the two ambassadors (Jacques Noiseux and Keith MacLellan, representing Canadian interests in Amman as ambassador and also as non-resident ambassador to Syria) that

20. Message from the Department of External Affairs to the Head of Mission Tel Aviv, 14 June 1985, GMD-0153, file 22-9-LBAN, LAC. At this point in the record, the files available to us again become comprehensive.

afternoon. After a long, sometimes difficult discussion, the men agreed that as it dealt only with immigration operations and not with the issue of a possible embassy in Damascus, the message should be sent by telegram from Molloy, the head of the immigration operation in the area. The next morning, on 17 June 1985, Michal Bell replied from Ottawa indicating that the message from the field had been “singularly helpful.” Immediately afterward another message arrived from headquarters stating that Molloy should proceed to Damascus to set up a temporary visa operation.

Molloy completed the 2-hour drive from Amman to Damascus on the morning of 18 June. Upon arrival he contacted Colonel Don Ethell,²¹ commander of the Canadian contingent serving with United Nations Disengagement Force on the Golan Heights for assistance and advice. The colonel’s logistical team quickly identified a small but suitable hotel, the Al-Jalaa, for use as a temporary chancery. On 21 June the Canadian ambassador to Jordan, Keith MacLellan, was called to the Syrian foreign ministry and informed that President Assad, although on an official visit to Moscow, had approved the Canadian request to open a resident embassy.²² Mike Molloy became chargé d’affaires, pending Syrian acceptance of Noiseux as resident ambassador.

Over the next few days the temporary visa service that would morph into an embassy took shape. The Beirut embassy’s locally engaged staff of approximately 25 persons, many with long years of loyal service in dangerous conditions, were asked to go to Damascus. They were offered three options: to retain their positions at the new location in Damascus, to retire with severance and pension, or to immigrate to Canada.²³ Three chose the last option. Many decided to move to Damascus from Beirut to work at the new embassy, bringing great knowledge of the visa and consular programs with them. The Beirut embassy’s much admired local consular assistant, Salwa Assaly, volunteered to stay in an improvised micro-office in Beirut, which served, as it turned out, as an essential drop off and pick up point for passports and visas. Despite bravely carrying visas across the Green Line for several years to people who could not come to West Beirut, she never came to harm.

The small and shabby Al-Jalaa Hotel in Damascus served its purpose well. A friendly Commonwealth embassy offered secure storage for sensitive equipment and materials.²⁴ The Al-Jalaa afforded easy access, parking, and breakfast and coffee to the thousands of Lebanese who arrived at the door seeking visas at the

21. Today Don Ethell is the lieutenant governor of Alberta.

22. Amman message, 24 June 1985, RAGR0437, file 20-1-2-2-SYRIA, LAC.

23. The example of Vietnam, where the local staff had to be left behind as Saigon fell, influenced the decision to provide the Lebanese local staff with honourable options.

24. At one point, the security shell containing the guard’s weapons was unceremoniously deposited upside down by the moving company on the lawn of the friendly Commonwealth country, to the puzzlement of a long line of Lebanese visa seekers. The new embassy’s administrative officer and the guard’s sergeant managed to open the shell’s door, whereupon the visa seekers saw a cascade of Canadian military hardware tumble onto the lawn. The Commonwealth ambassador, however friendly, was not amused.

crack of dawn throughout that summer and fall. With the arrival in late August of Noiseux as resident ambassador to Syria, the Al-Jalaa became a modest but workable chancery. Ottawa later agreed to move the chancery to the Meridian Hotel, which more or less met international standards. That move was occasioned by the January 1986 Syrian decision to house the Maronite warlord, Elie Hobeika, accused by many of involvement in the Sabra and Shatila massacre, in the Al-Jalaa, when he ended up on the losing side of an internal Christian struggle.

Fallout

Confronted with the deteriorating security situation in Beirut, Clark stood steadfast in support of the embassy's closure. Any hesitancy would have kindled the flames to no-one's benefit. Still, the perceived wound to Lebanese pride festered. Noiseux, still accredited to Lebanon, albeit now a non-resident, was never again received at the ministerial level during his periodic visits to that country. At one point, a prominent member of the Canadian Maronite clergy contacted External Affairs to "warn" that a hostile militia was aware of the next passport/visa run from Damascus to Beirut and was determined to interdict that movement and murder its accompanying officials. Michael Bell believed, despite the risk, we had to call our interlocutor's bluff, as without the Damascus/Beirut land link, embassy services could not be maintained. The trip proceeded without incident as originally planned.

On 4 December 1985 Mike Molloy went to Beirut to re-establish contact with the Lebanese authorities and prominent Christian leaders. Upon his return to Damascus he warned headquarters that "[in] the next few months we should anticipate a concerted and co-ordinated attempt by Lebanese Canadian and Lebanese Christian leaders to secure the establishment of a Canadian diplomatic mission in . . . Beirut."²⁵ The lobby indeed applied pressure on the government well into 1986, but External Affairs had resolved to resist that pressure. On 6 December 1985 headquarters sent a message to the embassy in Damascus, following Mike Molloy's visit to Beirut: "Believe it is important in the light of potential pressures you allude to that [the] post and headquarters continue to be careful not/not to give Lebanese [the] impression of hesitancy or any deviation from our clearly established position on Canadian representation in Lebanon. Consequently we strongly endorse the line you took . . . Nor is it clear to us that Christians have always been entirely sympathetic to our security concerns . . . In fact even [the] most constructive of these leaders have tended to attach little importance to [the] very real dangers to Canadian staff."²⁶ In addition, there was ample evidence that under the new arrangements Canada was able to maintain the passport/visa program for the benefit of Lebanese nationals wanting to visit Canada. During the second month of our presence in Damascus, the embassy reported "that the 757 Lebanese who

25. Message from the Canadian embassy in Damascus, 4 December 1985, ZJGR1156, file 20-1-2-LBAN, LAC.

26. Headquarters message to Damascus, 6 December 1985, GMR-1588, file 20-1-2-LBAN, LAC.

approached our Embassy in . . . August included 143 from (Muslim) West Beirut, 243 from (Christian) East Beirut, 218 from south Lebanon and 150 from North Lebanon. These figures testify to the ability of our Lebanese clients from all regions of the country to reach our Mission in Damascus when they needed Canadian services.”²⁷

Lessons learned

The 1985 closure of the Canadian embassy in Lebanon and subsequent opening of an embassy in Syria provide a useful example of how seemingly simple foreign policy decisions can involve a complex balancing of conflicting interests, political calculations, and operational choices. By 1985 Canadian interest in Lebanon had narrowed to the symbolic and operational. Trade was negligible, tourism (aside from Lebanese-Canadians visiting their relatives) non-existent, and the Lebanese state as a foreign policy actor neutralized. In the preceding 3 years of conflict, western efforts to influence, control, and contain events in Lebanon had been thwarted by Syria and its local allies, and western attention to Lebanon had declined. The Canadian government’s rhetoric emphasized solidarity with the “suffering people of Lebanon” and a moral commitment to Lebanon’s territorial integrity. There was little Canada could in fact do except maintain the visa and consular functions, which was done equally effectively from Damascus, and provide a certain symbolic value to the Lebanese elites, both in that country and, most importantly, in the Lebanese diaspora in Canada, for which an ambassador ensconced in Beirut was a *quid pro quo*.

Domestic interest groups thus played a critical role in External Affairs decision-making. The inclination to allow domestic interests to play an often primary role in determining policy options is likely to increase as Canadian society becomes still more diverse. Governments know the cost in electoral terms of being out of sync with committed communities. Only with the increasing realization that the government would be hard put to explain the kidnapping or murder of embassy staff were Clark and his department able to convince others that political risks outweighed political benefits. Ironically, while the interest of the Lebanese community in Canada was subordinated to concerns about the safety of embassy personnel in Beirut, the need to ensure vital consular and immigration services to the relatives of that community tipped the scales in favour of Damascus.

The desire of External Affairs’ regional ADM to give Israel an effective veto over opening an embassy in Syria is illustrative of the considerable attention some in government were prepared to pay to the Israel lobby. The fussy “belt and braces” process of consulting the Israeli authorities was a direct function of sensitivity to the Israel lobby in Canada, which nevertheless came to see the mission in

27. Memorandum from Robert Elliot, the Department’s Middle East Director General, to Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark, 20 September 1985, GMD-0239, file 20-1-2-SYRIA, LAC. Elliot oversaw the entire Beirut–Damascus operation, as he did others, with imagination, guile, and determination.

Damascus as a capable agency committed to monitoring and finally effecting the departure of Syria's small Jewish community to safer climes, which the embassy ultimately did. Damascus never became an Israel lobby issue because of the solid pragmatism of Israeli decision-makers at the time; but it could have.

What tipped the balance for the Canadian government respecting the embassy in Beirut was the issue of the safety of Canadians serving abroad. With the plethora of internecine conflicts worldwide today—most notable of late, the kidnapping of Robert Fowler and Louis Guay in Niger—this concern is ever present. When Michael Bell was chair of the Donor Committee of the International Reconstruction Fund Facility in Iraq, among the myriad difficulties he faced was the Paul Martin government's reluctance to authorize Canadian public servants to travel outside the American-controlled Green Zone in Baghdad, thereby making those public servants' safety a priority while severely undercutting Canada's goal of playing a meaningful role in rebuilding that country. In contrast, the Harper government's focus on cultivating relations with ethnic communities in Canada suggests that it weighs political risk heavily in balancing the potential consequences of foreign policy decisions such as the ones we have recounted.

Author Biographies

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Michael J. Molloy is a senior fellow at the University of Ottawa's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. He has served as Canada's Ambassador to Jordan, Canada's special coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and senior advisor to the Canadian Delegation to the Multilateral Refugee Working Group on Palestinian refugees. He is Co-chair of the Jerusalem Old City Initiative.