

*Issue Date: May 01, 1981*

## **Israel Intervenes in Syrian-Lebanese Christian Clashes**

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### **Downs 2 Syrian 'Copters**

Israeli jets April 28 intervened for the first time in the fighting between Syrian and Lebanese Christian militia forces in the Beirut-Zahle area of Lebanon, shooting down two Syrian helicopters. Two Syrians were reported killed. The Syrian aircraft were said to have been attacking Christian forces at the time. [See 1981 [Lebanon Fighting: North, South Clashes Intensify](#)]

Damascus said Israeli planes also struck Syrian ground positions, a claim denied by Israel.

An Israeli communique on the attack repeated the government's position that it "cannot acquiesce in the attempt of the Syrians to conquer Lebanon and liquidate the Christians in that country."

Deputy Defense Minister Mordechai Zipori said that in recent days, "the Syrians have introduced a new dimension to the war against the Christians against which the Christians do not have the ability to defend themselves, and these are helicopters, which are really causing them heavy losses."

Zipori stressed Israel's "commitment" to the Christians not to "allow them to be annihilated."

Prime Minister Menachem Begin said of the Israeli attacks, "There are grounds to assume that we will not be content with this action." He said Israel's purpose was not "to get the Syrians out" of Lebanon but to protect the Christians from being destroyed.

Referring to the recent Syrian capture of strategic Christian-controlled mountain peaks, Begin expressed concern that the Syrians could use these positions to shell Junieh, the port through which Israeli arms to the Christians were said to flow.

The first Syrian helicopter shot down had been part of a force striking a mountain ridge west of the Bekaa Valley, which constituted "the backbone of the Christian positions," said Lt. Gen. Rafael Eitan, Israeli chief of staff.

The second Syrian helicopter was shot down several hours later east of Zahle, an Israeli military spokesman said.

A spokesman for the Syrian military command said the Israeli attacks would "not deflect Syria from the course it had chartered in Lebanon." Syria, he said, would continue to pursue its policy of achieving "national reconciliation" among Lebanon's diverse warring factions.

Syria April 29 began to install Soviet-built surface-to-air missiles in the Bekaa Valley in an apparent response to the Israeli attacks. Six SAM-6 batteries were said to have been moved from Syria into Lebanon and positioned near the Lebanese government air base of Rayak, north of Beirut.

Western military sources in Beirut said the dispatch of the missiles was a "breach of an Israeli-Syrian understanding" of Syria's role in Lebanon. Syrian troops had moved into Lebanon in 1976 as part of an Arab League peacekeeping force to bring an end to the civil war in the country. When the Syrians intervened, the Western military sources pointed out, "it was on the understanding that certain weapons wouldn't be allowed to be installed on Lebanese territory." One of these weapons was the SAM-6.

Syria was reported to have moved more anti-aircraft missiles into Lebanon April 30.

Commenting on the deployment of the missiles, an Israeli foreign ministry spokesman April 30 said their entry into an "area where they never were before adds a new dimension to the situation and is an escalation by the Syrians." He warned of possible new Israeli counteraction.

Prime Minister Begin, on the other hand, sought to calm the situation, saying he did not believe the latest developments would result in a war between Israel and Syria. Contrary to accounts of his own military intelligence, Begin said Israel had no authoritative confirmation of reports that Syria had deployed the SAM-6s in Lebanon. U.S. intelligence evidence supported Israeli military reports indicating that Syria had moved SAM-6s into Lebanon, the State Department said April 30.

### **International Reaction**

The clash between Israeli and Syrian forces raised international concern that the fighting in Lebanon might escalate into a wider conflict.

U.S. Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. April 29 called the situation "very worrisome."

A State Department spokesman, seeking to discount speculation that the Reagan administration approved of Israeli air attacks on Lebanon, said the U.S. "hasn't given a green light to Israel to take any military actions" against that country.

The spokesman said the U.S. had appealed to "all governments," including the Soviet Union, which was a strong supporter of Syria, to use their influence to help calm the situation in Lebanon.

(Undersecretary of State Walter J. Stoessel Jr. had discussed the Lebanese crisis April 24 with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin.)

The State Department April 27 had expressed concern about Syrian capture of former Christian positions on Mt. Lebanon, saying it represented a "major change in the status quo."

The U.S. April 30 again expressed deep concern over the turn of events in Lebanon. A State Department spokesman said the administration had taken "diplomatic steps" aimed at obtaining a cease-fire.

Secretary of State Haig discussed the situation in Washington with United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim. Waldheim later held talks with President Reagan.

The British embassy in Beirut April 28 urged the estimated 1,000 Britons in Beirut to leave the country immediately if they had no good reason to stay on.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Butros Ghali April 29 assailed "the Israeli intervention" in Lebanon, calling it a "new obstacle to peace" in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait also threw their support behind Syria.

### **Other Military Action**

Syrian forces April 28 shelled Zahle, killing at least 12 persons and wounding more than 45. The attack prompted two Lebanese cabinet members to resign in protest. They were Defense Minister Joseph Skaf and Public Works Minister Elias Herawi, both Christians from Zahle.

Skaf and Herawi had been involved along with President Elias Sarkis in peace talks between the Syrians and Christians.

In southern Lebanon, an Irish soldier of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was found shot dead and another was said to be missing, it was reported April 28.

In previous military action, Syrian artillery and helicopters April 25 attacked Christian militia forces around Zahle and several other areas in the Bekaa Valley. The fighting around Zahle followed a tentative truce accord reached for that war zone April 24.

A Beirut announcement said Syrian representatives, Christian officials from Zahle and Lebanese government mediators had agreed that Lebanese government police security units would assume responsibility for order in Zahle and would patrol major roads in the area. The pact also called for the removal of "all unauthorized gunmen" from the streets of Zahle.

The tentative accord, which had been reached after three days of talks, failed to take hold since it did not receive the required approval of the Christian Phalangist Party.

In the April 25 fighting, the Syrians expanded their operations in the Bekaa Valley, breaking a three-day truce between them and the Christians.

Israeli jets April 26 bombed bases of the Palestine Liberation Organization near the port of Sidon and Nabatiye. Lebanese authorities said 15 persons had been killed and 30 wounded, most of them civilians.

Israel said all its six planes returned to base, refuting a Damascus claim that Syrian jets had downed two of the Israeli aircraft. The Damascus report conceded that one Syrian plane was hit.

Syrian forces April 26 heavily shelled Christian villages in the Bekaa Valley and around Jebel Sannin, a Mt. Lebanon peak 22 miles (35 kilometers) northeast of Beirut. A spokesman for a Lebanese Moslem leftist group said its forces fighting alongside the Syrians had captured the stronghold. A Phalangist official denied the claim.

Israeli jets April 27 again struck at PLO targets in the south, bombing their positions near the ports of Sidon, Tyre and Damur and Nabatiye. On the return flight to base, the Israeli planes attacked a dozen or more suspected PLO strongholds.

Lebanese officials said the raids, involving 12 Israeli planes, left 50 persons killed or wounded. The officials said the strikes were the heaviest since March 1978, when Israeli troops occupied southern Lebanon.

The Christian and Moslem sectors of Beirut came under heavy shelling April 27 in an exchange of fire between Syrian and Christian forces. Beirut International Airport also was struck and remained closed for the eight straight day. The Christian port of Junieh was shelled by a Lebanese Moslem militia force, prompting a Christian official to warn that unless it stopped it "will mean civil war."

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## Modern Language Association (MLA)

### **Citation:**

"Israel Intervenes in Syrian-Lebanese Christian Clashes; Downs 2 Syrian 'Copters; Other Developments." *Facts On File World News Digest*. n. pag. *World News Digest*. Facts On File News Services, 1 May 1981. Web. 30 June 2011. <<http://www.2facts.com/article/1981012950>>.

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## American Psychological Association (APA)

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The title of the article. (Year, Month Day). *Facts On File World News Digest*. Retrieved Month Day, Year, from World News Digest database.

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