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.

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