

# My Historic Summer Vacation: A Dogfight, the Lebanese Missile Crisis, and a Hope for Peace

[↩ 1](#) [🗨 1](#) [🔖 Save](#)



Cars sit in traffic as they flee the southern villages amid ongoing Israeli airstrikes, in Sidon, Lebanon, on Sept. 23, 2024. AP Photo/Mohammed Zaatari

By Alan Wakim  
10/12/2024 Updated: 10/12/2024

[A](#) [A](#) [🖨](#) Print

*Commentary*

Situated in the hills above Sidon, Lebanon, my family's home offered a spectacular view of the surrounding hills and valleys. It was July 14, 1981, and having been forced to remain indoors earlier that day due to recent events, we were now outside enjoying the warm afternoon—eating grapes and drinking either juice or Pepsi.

My uncle Camille and I were in a deep conversation—the original subject having been long forgotten. As we talked, my uncle's intense gaze shifted over my left shoulder, and his eyes suddenly widened. “LOOK, LOOK, LOOK!” he yelled in Arabic. I quickly turned to see a Syrian MiG-21 fighter jet rapidly approaching at rooftop level. Before I could react, the MiG flew past us, banking at a steep 60-degree angle and barely clearing a neighbor's house. Then came the deafening roar of its engines, followed by the rattle of anti-aircraft gunfire.

We couldn't hear the women's screams urging us to run inside over the roar of the jet, but we knew exactly what they were saying. Then, at that very moment, something else in the sky caught our attention—something that made us freeze in place and stare.

## **Rewind: the Start of the 1981 Lebanese Missile Crisis**

In April 1981, Lebanon's Christian militia clashed with the Syrian Army and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), led by Yasser Arafat, for control of the strategic Mount Sannin ridge. This ridge overlooked the Bekaa Valley and much of the Christian strongholds in central and coastal Lebanon. During the campaign, the Christian city of Zahlé, nestled at the base of the mountains, was besieged by Syrian forces.

Israel intervened, sending combat aircraft into the area to assist their Christian allies and help lift the siege. On April 28, Israeli F-16 Fighting Falcons shot down two Syrian Mi-8 helicopters. In response, Syria deployed Soviet-made SA-6 Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) in the Bekaa Valley, a move that significantly heightened tensions. Israel had previously suffered heavy losses to SAMs in Egypt and Syria during

the Yom Kippur War eight years earlier, so this deployment was seen as a major provocation. Observers feared that the situation could spiral into a broader war involving both the United States and the Soviet Union.

Egypt's President Anwar Sadat urged all involved parties to withdraw from Lebanon. U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig ordered the evacuation of American embassy dependents from Lebanon and advised U.S. citizens to leave the country as well. Within two days, fighting erupted in Beirut between the Syrian Army, the PLO, and various Christian and Muslim militias.

At the same time, U.S. President Ronald Reagan, still recovering from an assassination attempt in March, dispatched envoy Philip Habib to negotiate with leaders from Israel, Syria, and Saudi Arabia in a bid to defuse the escalating conflict.

## Operation Opera

As if the Lebanese Missile Crisis wasn't volatile enough, on June 7, eight Israeli Air Force F-16s embarked on a long-range bombing mission to Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility near Baghdad, successfully destroying its reactor. Among the pilots on that difficult mission was a fighter ace named Lt. Col. Amir Nachumi.

The operation dealt a significant blow to Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons program. Surprisingly, the anticipated Iraqi retaliation never materialized.

## 1981: Summer Vacation

Although tensions remained high, the region began to quiet down by early July. Our family believed the lull in violence would last for several months, and decided a two-week visit was worth the risk. After landing at Beirut International Airport, our relatives picked us

up and drove us 28 miles south along the Mediterranean coast to the ancient port city of Sidon.

It became immediately clear that Lebanon was an occupied war zone. Propaganda posters covered buildings scarred by years of conflict. Armed PLO militia and Syrian soldiers roamed the streets, mingling at restaurants and cafes, loitering near shops, and patrolling in “technicals” (trucks mounted with weapons). They also manned armored personnel carriers and vehicles equipped with anti-aircraft guns, most notably the ZU-23-2 and ZPU-4.

Military checkpoints located every few blocks were particularly intimidating. Drivers were required to stop, roll down their windows, and remove their sunglasses before being allowed to proceed. If the Syrian soldiers or PLO militiamen ordered you to exit your vehicle—which never ended well—you had no choice but to comply. We all breathed a sigh of relief once we arrived at our family’s home.

The first day was relatively uneventful. Families walked throughout the neighborhood or sat outside, smoking hookahs, sipping coffee, and chatting with neighbors. Everyone seemed content, but that peace was often broken by an eerie silence as people turned their eyes to the sky. That’s when I first noticed the distant rumble of jets. Confused by their reaction, I asked, “What’s the big deal?” My family explained: Those weren’t commercial planes—they were Israeli warplanes.

That night, Israeli jets flew overhead, dropping parachute flares that floated slowly to the ground, illuminating the entire area. Within seconds, tracer rounds fired from anti-aircraft guns lit up the sky to destroy the flares.

Soon after, we saw flashes on the horizon, followed by the sounds of Katyusha rockets and artillery as the PLO shelled northern Israel. Israel and its ally, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), responded with artillery of their own. The SLA controlled southern Lebanon, a region along the Israeli border known as “The Good Fence.” The sights and sounds of these artillery exchanges were like violent thunderstorms.

With each day, the sound of jets grew louder and more frequent, followed by bursts of anti-aircraft fire that shook windows and rattled nerves across the city. People caught outside scrambled for cover, while PLO militiamen recklessly fired into the air in a futile attempt to hit the Israeli planes.

Despite the danger, I often ran outside, scanning the skies for a glimpse of the jets. I'd spot contrails, puffs of flak, and the glowing arcs of tracer fire. Then, suddenly, I'd see them darting across the sky, dropping flares to evade heat-seeking missiles. "There they are!" The roar of their engines was deafening, leaving my ears ringing long after they disappeared.

## July 14

The shelling and aerial bombardment of southern Lebanon and northern Israel intensified as civilians huddled in their homes or shelters, and dark smoke from the explosions filled the skies. I was on the floor, pressed up against the wall near the dressers, alongside my aunt. What a wild story I'd get to share with my friends back home in Texas. Fireworks on Independence Day paled in comparison to what I'd been witnessing.

Around 3 p.m., the air raids suddenly stopped, following a pattern that had become all too familiar. Slowly, people emerged from their homes and resumed their daily routines. We thought it was safe to get out and relax for the remaining afternoon, sitting on the balcony enjoying snacks and drinks. We were about to be proven wrong.

## It's Not Over ...

Over the Mediterranean, four Israeli Air Force F-16s provided cover for the A-4 Skyhawks striking the PLO and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine bases in Sidon. Among the F-16 pilots was Lt. Col. Amir Nachumi, who had participated in the bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility the previous month.

Several miles to the east, a formation of Syrian MiG-21s approached Sidon, flying low between the mountains to evade radar and ambush the A-4s. However, Israeli radar operators detected the MiGs and alerted the F-16 pilots, who immediately turned east toward the Lebanese coast to intercept this new threat.

Flying low over Sidon, Lt. Col. Nachumi spotted one of the MiGs. He maneuvered his F-16 behind the enemy jet, locked onto the target, and fired an AIM-9L Sidewinder missile.

## Front-Row Seats

We were about a hundred yards away, frozen in place as we watched the dramatic scene unfold. High above in the clear, blue sky, bursts of flak appeared near two unidentified jets, sunlight glinting off them as they flew toward our left. Then, to our right and much closer to us, a Syrian MiG-21 appeared just above the horizon moving fast to our left, followed by Lt. Col. Nachumi's F-16 in pursuit. We saw the Sidewinder missile streak toward the MiG, striking it directly and engulfing the plane in a massive fireball. The stricken jet, with its doomed pilot, continued along the same trajectory before slowly losing altitude and disappearing behind a mountain.

## Witnessing History

We stood there stunned and nearly deafened from the noise of the jets and anti-aircraft fire. So loud was all the action that anyone screaming would have gone unheard. It would be years before learning that we had just witnessed the world's first air-to-air kill of an enemy jet by an F-16. But at that moment, we were less concerned with witnessing history than with escaping Lebanon.

The artillery duels, air raids, and naval bombardments from the Israeli Navy continued around Beirut and southern Lebanon for another three days before Philip Habib brokered a ceasefire. News of the truce spread quickly, and our families urged us to pack and leave

immediately. An invasion of Lebanon by Israel was imminent, and once it began, evacuation would be impossible.

It seemed every foreigner in Lebanon had the same idea. To make matters worse, the coastal roads, highways, and bridges had been heavily damaged from the bombings, turning the drive to Beirut into a painfully slow crawl. Eventually, we reached the chaotic, overcrowded airport, boarded a packed Middle East Airlines flight to London, and escaped the excitement and danger. We were fortunate because those left behind faced an uncertain future.

The long-anticipated invasion of Lebanon occurred the following summer, in 1982. We watched it unfold from the safety of our home in Texas, hoping that at the war's conclusion, Lebanon and its people might finally enjoy peace.

## **2024: Fall Vacation**

In July, I considered flying to Lebanon in early October for a two-week trip—not having seen my family in years. But just as in 1982, recent events in the region have altered those plans.

Just as in 1982, I'm watching bombs and missiles rain down upon the people of the Middle East from the safety of my home in Texas.

Just as in 1982, I am concerned for my family.

But, just as in 1982, I remain optimistic that cooler heads and future generations will grow weary of war, choose peace, set aside the differences that have long divided us, reject those who impose their will on others, and love their children more than they hate their enemies.

*Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.*

**Sign up for the News Alerts newsletter.** You'll get the biggest developing stories so you can stay ahead of the game. [Sign up with 1-click >>](#)



**Alan Wakim**

Author

Alan Wakim co-founded The Sons of History. He and his co-host write articles, create videos, and interview history writers and the extraordinary individuals involved in historical events. Mr. Wakim also travels globally to visit historical sites for The Sons of History YouTube Channel.

### Author's Selected Articles

#### **250 Years Ago: Planning the 1st Continental Congress and the Road to the Revolutionary War**

Sep 02, 2024



#### **250 Years Ago: The Summer of Coercion and the Road to the Revolutionary War**

Jun 27, 2024



#### **250 Years Ago: The Road to the Revolutionary War**

Mar 28, 2024



#### **From Friend to Foe: What Led Up to the Boston Tea Party**

Dec 10, 2023





