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KEY HISTORICAL EVENTS

The Sabra and Shatila Massacre (16-18 September 1982)

For 40 hours in September 1982, members of the Israeli-allied Lebanese Phalangist militia raped, killed, and injured a large number of unarmed civilians, mostly children, women and elderly people inside the encircled and sealed Sabra and Shatila camps. The estimate of victims varies between 700 (the official Israeli figure) to 3,500.



On 6 June 1982, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon in retaliation for the attempted assassination of Israeli Ambassador Shlomo Argov in London on 4 June. The Israeli secret services had that same day attributed the attempted assassination to a dissident Palestinian organization backed by the government of Iraq, which was at the time eager to deflect world attention from its recent setbacks in the Iran-Iraq war.[1] The Israeli operation, planned well in advance, was called "Operation Peace for Galilee."

Initially, the Israeli government had announced that its intention was to penetrate just 40km into Lebanese territory. The military command, however, under the orders of Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, decided to execute a more ambitious project that Sharon had prepared several months earlier. Having occupied the south of the country and destroyed any Palestinian and Lebanese resistance there, simultaneously committing a series of violations against the civilian population,[2] Israeli troops proceeded to penetrate as far as Beirut. By 18 June 1982 they had surrounded the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) armed forces in the western part of the Lebanese capital.


According to Lebanese statistics, the Israeli offensive, particularly the intensive shelling of Beirut, caused 18,000 deaths and 30,000 injuries, mostly among civilians.

After two months of fighting, a cease-fire was negotiated through the mediation of United States Envoy Philip Habib. Under the terms of these negotiations, the PLO was to evacuate Beirut under the supervision of a multinational force deployed in the evacuated part of the town. The Habib Accords envisaged that West Beirut would subsequently be under the control of the Lebanese army, and the Palestinian leadership was given guarantees by the Americans regarding the security of civilians in the camps after their departure.

The evacuation of the PLO ended on 1 September 1982.

On 10 September 1982, the multinational forces left Beirut. The next day, Sharon announced that "2,000 terrorists" had remained inside the

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Palestinian refugee camps around Beirut. On Wednesday 15 September, the day after the assassination of President-elect Bashir Gemayel, the Israeli army occupied West Beirut, "encircling and sealing" the camps of Sabra and Shatila, which were inhabited by Lebanese and Palestinian civilians, the entirety of armed resisters (more than 14,000 people) having evacuated Beirut and its suburbs.[3]

Historians and journalists agree that it was probably during a meeting between Ariel Sharon and Bashir Gemayel in Bikfaya on 12 September that an agreement was made authorizing the "Lebanese forces" to "mop up" these Palestinian camps.[4] Sharon had already announced, on 9 July 1982, his intention to send the Phalangist forces into West Beirut,[5] and in his autobiography he confirms having negotiated the operation during his meeting with Gemayel in Bikfaya.[6]

According to statements made by Ariel Sharon on 22 September 1982 in the Knesset (Israeli parliament), the decision that the Phalangists should enter the refugee camps was made on Wednesday, 15 September 1982 at 15.30.[7] Also according to General Sharon, the Israeli Command had received the following instruction: "[t]he Tsahal [8] forces are forbidden to enter the refugee camps. The 'mopping-up' of the camps will be carried out by the Phalanges or the Lebanese army."[9]

By dawn on 15 September 1982, Israeli fighter-bombers were flying low over West Beirut and Israeli troops had secured their entry. From 9 am, General Sharon was present to personally direct the Israeli penetration, installing himself in the general army area at the Kuwait embassy junction situated at the edge of Shatila camp. From the roof of this six-story building, it was possible to observe the town and the camps of Sabra and Shatila clearly.

By midday, the camps of Sabra and Shatila -- in reality a single zone of refugee camps in the south of West Beirut -- were surrounded by Israeli tanks and soldiers, who had installed checkpoints all around the camps in order to monitor the entry or exit of any person. During the late afternoon and evening, the camps were shelled.

By Thursday 16 September 1982, the Israeli army controlled West Beirut. In a press release, the Israeli military spokesperson declared, "Tsahal controls all strategic points in Beirut. The refugee camps, inside which there is a concentration of terrorists, are surrounded and sealed." On the morning of 16 September, the following order was issued by the army high command: "[t]he searching and mopping up of the camps will be done by the Phalangists/Lebanese army."[10]

During the course of the morning, shells were being fired down at the camps from higher elevations and Israeli snipers were shooting at people in the streets. By approximately midday, the Israeli military command gave the Phalangist militia the green light to enter the refugee camps. Shortly after 5pm, a unit of approximately 150 Phalangists entered Shatila camp from the south and south-west.

At this point, General Amir Drori telephoned Ariel Sharon and announced, "Our friends are advancing into the camps. We have co-ordinated their entry." To which Sharon replied, "Congratulations! Our friends' operation is approved."[11]

For the next 40 hours the Phalangist militia raped, killed, and injured a large number of unarmed civilians, mostly children, women and elderly people inside the "encircled and sealed" camps. These actions, accompanied or followed by systematic roundups, backed or reinforced by the Israeli army, resulted in dozens of disappearances.

The Israeli army had full knowledge of what was going on in the camps right up until the morning of Saturday 18 September 1982, and its leaders were in continuous contact with the militia leaders who perpetrated the massacre.

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Yet they never intervened. Instead, they prevented civilians from escaping the camps and arranged for the camps to be illuminated throughout the night by flares launched into the sky from helicopters and mortars.

The count of victims varies between 700 (the official Israeli figure) and 3,500 (in the inquiry launched by the Israeli journalist Amnon Kapeliouk). The exact figure can never be determined because, in addition to the approximately 1,000 people who were buried in communal graves by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or in the cemeteries of Beirut by members of their families, a large number of corpses were buried beneath bulldozed buildings by the militia members themselves. Also, particularly on 17 and 18 September, hundreds of people were carried away alive in trucks towards unknown destinations, never to return.

The victims and survivors of the massacres have never been deemed entitled to a formal investigation of the tragedy, whether in Lebanon, Israel, or elsewhere. After 400,000 Israelis took to the streets in protest once news of the massacre was broadcast by the international media, the Israeli parliament (Knesset) named a commission of inquiry, to be presided over by Yitzhak Kahan, in September 1982. In spite of the limitations of the Commission's mandate (limited because it was a political rather than a judicial mandate and because the voices and demands of the victims were completely ignored), the Commission concluded that the Minister of Defense was personally responsible for the massacres.[12]

Upon the insistence of the Commission, and the demonstrations that followed its report, Sharon resigned from his post of Minister of Defense but remained in the government as Minister without Portfolio. It is worth noting that during the Peace Now demonstration immediately prior to Sharon's "resignation," demonstrators were attacked with grenades, resulting in the death of a young demonstrator.[13]

Several non-official inquiries and reports, including those of Sean MacBride and of the Nordic Commission, based mainly on the testimony of western eyewitnesses, as well as other pieces of journalistic and historical research, have assembled vital pieces of information.[14]

Despite evidence of what the UN Security Council described as a "criminal massacre," and the ranking of the Sabra and Shatila massacres in humankind's collective memory as among the most heinous crimes of the 20th century, the man found "personally responsible" for this crime, as well as his associates and the people who carried out the massacres, have never been pursued or punished. In 1984, Israeli journalists Schiff and Ya'ari concluded their chapter on the massacre with this sobering reflection: "If there is a moral to the painful episode of Sabra and Shatila, it has yet to be acknowledged." [15] The reality of this impunity remains true to this day.

The United Nations Security Council condemned the massacre with Resolution 521 (19 September 1982). This condemnation was followed by a 16 December 1982 General Assembly resolution qualifying the massacre as an "act of genocide."

Endnotes

[1] The "Revolutionary Council," better known as the "Abu Nidal Group," cf. Z Schiff and E Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, 97-100, on page 99: "The three detainees [arrested by Scotland Yard] also disclosed that an envoy from Baghdad emissary had brought them orders to carry out the assassination, and that they had received their weapons from the military attache's office of the Iraqi embassy in London." The name of the Iraqi responsible is mentioned by Dilip Hiro, *Iran under the Ayatollahs*, London, Routledge, 1985, 211: "Israel's attack was triggered off by an attempt to assassinate Shlomo Argov, the Israeli ambassador to Britain, on the night of 3 June. The London operation was masterminded by Nawal Al Rosan, an Iraqi 'carpet dealer' who was later found to be a colonel in the

Iraqi intelligence." (Footnotes omitted). It is worth noting that Ambassador Argov later denounced Ariel Sharon's war on Lebanon.

[2] For a detailed catalogue of the violations of the Geneva Conventions with regard to the civilian population, see the report of the MacBride Commission (Nobel Peace Prize 1974), "Israel in Lebanon, The Report of the International Commission to enquire into reported violations of International Law by Israel during its invasion of the Lebanon, 28 August 1982 - 29 November 1982," London, Ithaca, 1983, 187-192 (Conclusions) - hereafter referred to as the MacBride Commission.

[3] According to Kapeliouk, *Sabra et Shatila: Enquete sur un massacre*, Paris, Seuil 1982, citing *Haaretz* of 15 September 1982, General Eitan declared the previous day before the Knesset's Commission for Foreign Affairs that "[n]othing remains in Beirut but some terrorists and a small PLO office." Kapeliouk, p 30.

[4] Benny Morris, *The Righteous Victims*, New York, A. Knopf, 1999, p. 540.

[5] Schiff and Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1984, p. 251.

[6] Ariel Sharon, *Warrior: An Autobiography*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989, p. 498.

[7] Sharon at the Knesset, Annex to the Kahan Commission report, *The Beirut Massacre, The Complete Kahan Commission Report*, Princeton, Karz Cohl, 1983, p. 124 (Hereafter, the Kahan Commission Report).

[8] Israeli Defense Forces [actual literal translation from Hebrew; *tsahal* is an acronym of this phrase.]

[9] *Kahan Commission Report*, p. 125.

[10] *Kahan Commission Report*, p. 14.

[11] Kapeliouk, p. 37

[12] *Kahan Commission Report*, p. 104: "We have found ... that the Minister of Defense bears personal responsibility." We shall return to this edifying conclusion.

[13] Emil Grunzweig. Avraham Burg, the current Speaker of the Knesset, was hurt during this demonstration.

[14] The most well known works are the reports of the Kahan Commission, the MacBride Commission and the Nordic Commission, and the books of Robert Fisk, Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, Amnon Kapeliouk, Thomas Friedman, Jonathan Randall and others. An enquiry by the Lebanese military prosecutor, which concluded that no responsibility lay with the executors of the massacre, has never been published. Tabitha Petran, *The Struggle Over Lebanon*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1987, p. 289.

[15] Schiff and Ya'ari, p. 285.

The above text is an extract from the Complaint lodged in Belgium against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Amos Yaron and other Israelis and Lebanese responsible for the massacre.





Shatila camp, Beirut, 20 September 1982 (Photo: UNRWA/Beirut)

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