

Sabra and Shatilla Massacre

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After the 1970 civil war in Jordan, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) moved its operations to Lebanon, recruiting fighters from Palestinian refugee camps. Its presence altered the balance of power among Lebanon's sects, and in 1975 the PLO was drawn into a civil war with its Lebanese allies against the Maronite community whose military strength was centered in the Phalangist militia. PLO advances against the Phalangists led to Syrian intervention in 1976 to restore the status quo.

Diplomatic gains by the PLO during 1979-81 caused concern within Israel's Likud government headed by Menachem Begin. With his Defense Minister Ariel Sharon he planned to crush the PLO militarily and draw Lebanon into a peace treaty with Israel. On June 6, 1982 the IDF invaded Lebanon, bombarding refugee camps in southern Lebanon with heavy artillery before moving against PLO forces in West Beirut. It besieged that half of the city for two-months before the US intervened with a plan to evacuate PLO fighters from Lebanon. This occurred under the auspices of a multinational force on August 21 sent to oversee the evacuation and protect Palestinian refugees who had been left behind. But the multinational force left by early September claiming its mission was accomplished.

Lebanon's new president, Bashir Gemayel, was reluctant to rush into a peace treaty with Israel, but on September 12, he agreed to Israel's request that Phalangist forces eliminate the 2000 "terrorists" which Israelis claimed were still in the refugee camps. On September 14, Gemayel was killed in a powerful explosion at the Phalangist headquarters in East Beirut, it being uncertain who was responsible. A day later, the IDF moved into West Beirut in violation of the evacuation agreement. Sharon authorized entry of what were presumed to be members of Gemayel's Lebanese Forces (a Phalangist militia) and Saad Haddad's South Lebanon Army into the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps, home to 30,000 Palestinians and some Lebanese. The camps were completely sealed off by Israeli tanks. When the militiamen entered on Thursday evening, September 16, the only resistance they encountered was from a few lightly-armed young boys.

For the next 38 hours, aided by Israeli flares at night, the militiamen raped, tortured, mutilated and massacred civilians. IDF personnel, including General Amos Yaron, IDF Commander in Beirut, were stationed on the rooftop of a seven-story building 200 meters from Shatilla, with a clear view of the camps below. Also there were members of the Phalangist intelligence who had radio communication with militiamen on the ground. By Friday morning, evidence that a massacre was taking place was communicated to Israeli Chief of Staff, Raphael Eitan, but he approved a request that the Phalangists remain in the camps until 5:00 am Saturday. The militiamen finally left the camps at 8:00 am.

The exact number of those who were killed is not certain. On September 22, the International Red Cross gave a figure of 2400, but the militiamen had buried some bodies before evacuating, and sources among both Phalangists and Palestinians claimed that at least 3000 people were killed or unaccounted for. Among the dead, none could be identified as members of any PLO military unit.

The massacre was a wild suspension of law and morality, and the interesting normative questions concern the scope and degree of responsibility. The killers entered the camps at the behest of Israeli officials who were certainly aware of Phalangist hostility towards Palestinians -- Phalangists had previously massacred Palestinians when the Tel Az-Zater refugee camp was taken in 1976, and Bashir Gemayel had repeatedly described the Palestinians as "a people too many" in Lebanon. An Israeli commission of inquiry ridiculed the claim that a massacre was not foreseen by Israeli officials, especially after Gemayel's assassination, and concluded that "indirect responsibility" rested on the shoulders of Sharon, Eitan, IDF commanders, Foreign Minister Yitsak Shamir, and Prime Minister Begin. Presumably, the qualifier "indirect" was based on the assumption that Israeli soldiers did not actually do the killing. Yet, allowing the revenge-seeking Lebanese Forces into the camps under the fiction that they would clean out "terrorists" suggests complicity if not outright instigation. In other circumstances, those responsible - - directly or indirectly -- would have been convicted of war crimes.

But Israel was the victor in the Lebanon war, and memories are often short. Within a few years Shamir was Israel's Prime Minister, Eitan a Knesset member, General Yaron was appointed military attache to the Israeli Embassy in Washington, and Israel's Agricultural Minister, Ariel Sharon, carried *chutzpah* to remarkable heights in a 1986 *New York Times* op-ed piece entitled "It's Past Time to Crush the Terrorist Monster."

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