

# Slaughter Illuminated: Israeli Strategy and the Sabra and Shatila Massacre

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## Slaughter Illuminated: Israeli Strategy and the Sabra and Shatila Massacre

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ADAM MOSCOE, FEB 15 2014

On September 15, 1982, one day after the assassination of Lebanese president Bachir Gemayel, the Israeli defence minister, Ariel Sharon, ordered an invasion of West Beirut. Just before Gemayel's death, he and the Israeli military agreed that 200 Phalangist forces would enter the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian camps in order to "mop up" the 2,000 Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) fighters suspected of having been left behind after the exile of the PLO to Tunis, in concordance with the agreement negotiated by US ambassador Philip Habib.[i] On September 16 at 6:00pm Phalangist forces entered the camps and immediately began a campaign of brutal torture and murder that would last until 8:00am on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Israeli military officials – on the eve of the Jewish New Year – provided flares to light up the night sky, while Israel Defence Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff, Rafael Eitan, sat atop a deserted six-story building overlooking Shatila. Within Israel, reaction to the massacres was furious – 400,000 people protested in Tel Aviv alone[ii] – leading to the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut. The Kahan Commission, as it was known, ascribed "direct responsibility" to the Phalange while finding Sharon to bear personal, yet indirect responsibility; it recommended he, along with Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan, be dismissed.[iii]

Viewing the Sabra and Shatila massacre as the climax of the First Lebanon War – as the event that left the most enduring impact on relations between Israel, the United States, and Lebanon – it is useful to examine how the entry of Phalangist forces into the camps affected progress towards Israel's objectives for the 1982 struggle against the PLO. Rather than wade through the conflicting narratives surrounding the morbid details of the massacre, this paper addresses both Sharon's stated (yet incompatible) objectives for the operation – to purge southern Lebanon of 2,000 armed PLO "terrorists" while protecting Palestinians from the "likely vengeance" of the Phalangists[iv] – and his more covert aim – to assert Israeli influence in shaping the "new order" in post-Gemayel Lebanon.[v] An analysis of the aftermath of the massacre shows the operation in the camps failed to achieve both Israel's stated and covert objectives.[vi]

### Israel's Stated Objectives

#### 1. Demobilize and Destroy Remaining PLO Fighters

Before Chairman Yasser Arafat executed the PLO's evacuation from Lebanon, Israeli and American intelligence were led to believe that 1,500-2,000 guerrilla fighters would be left behind. Their mission was to "blend in with civilians with a view to reorganizing at the first opportunity." [vii] Hout argues the residents of Sabra and Shatila were not "terrorists," but rather "zealous young men wishing to defend their families and their dignity." [viii] These included PLO members tasked with providing assistance to struggling Palestinian families, facilitating the transfer of arms from to the Lebanese Army, and maintaining civility and order in the camps.[ix] The lack of evidence for the presence of PLO fighters in the camps – coupled with findings that the victims of the massacre included not just Palestinians, but also Lebanese, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis[x] – led the UN's MacBride Report to characterize Sharon's claim as a "disingenuous excuse to justify the invasion which he had already planned." [xi] Some critics point out that the number of Maronite forces sent into the camps – about 200 – would have been far too few to combat the supposed PLO fighters, suggesting the Israelis knew there would not be "serious resistance." [xii] Obviously, Israel was unable

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to achieve its stated goal of wiping out supposedly remaining PLO fighters, since they were not found to exist.[xiii] However, the threat of their existence allowed Sharon to explain to US Envoy Morris Draper that the IDF needed to enter West Beirut in order to liquidate the region from “terrorists” – at a time when the fear of international terrorism was gaining increasing currency in the US.[xiv]

## 2. Protect Lebanese Muslims from the Phalangist Christians

Israel’s second public rationalization for the invasion of West Beirut was the need to protect Lebanese Muslims from the “likely vengeance” of Phalangist Christians following Gemayel’s assassination.[xv] While the Mossad was enhancing strategic cooperation between Israeli authorities and the Phalange, Sharon told Draper, “there could be pogroms” if the IDF failed to intervene. The tragic irony is that Sharon was at this time preparing to “send into Sabra and Shatila the very people...most expected to carry out such pogroms.”[xvi] The Kahan Commission notes that before and after entering the camps, the Phalangists asked the IDF for artillery fire and tanks, “but this request was rejected by the Chief of Staff in order to prevent injuries to civilians.”[xvii] If civilian casualties were already a concern to the IDF, why were the Phalangists allowed anywhere near the residents? The ensuing massacre in the camps is sufficient evidence for the failure of Israel to meet its stated objective of protecting Muslims from Christians.

## Israel’s Strategic Objectives[xviii]

### 1. Assert Israeli Influence in Shaping the “New Order” in Post-Gemayel Lebanon, while furthering Progress Towards an Israeli-Lebanese Peace Agreement, including an End to Rocket Fire on Israeli Homes

To quote Abba Eban: war

“can prevent an enemy from destroying your life and home...but it cannot construct new textures of relationship or create the harmonies and mutual interests necessary for the establishment of a new and better international order.”[xix]

The Sabra and Shatila massacre did not help, but rather hindered Israel’s – and America’s – position in Lebanon. One may argue that the assassination of Gemayel assured this change in geostrategic positioning, but the massacre sealed the deal. The massacre prompted an unlikely alliance between the Shiite group, Amal, as well as Druze and Sunni leaders committed to toppling Amin Gemayel’s repressive administration in Lebanon.[xx] This coalition’s anti-Maronite fervour was matched only by its anti-Israel attitude.[xxi] Rather than expand its influence, Israel – through its association with the Phalange – “widened and deepened the circle of hatred and hostility.”[xxii]

Prior to the massacre, Israelis were not abhorred in Lebanon, including by Palestinian refugees. Friedman interviewed Zaki F., a 30-year-old resident of the Sabra camp, who said: “We were not afraid of the Israelis...We know most of them are not bad people...We figured we would wait to turn over our arms and that would be it.”[xxiii] Another testimony from a survivor – Khalil Ahmad – reveals he had positive feelings about the Israelis before walking through the Sabra camp after the massacre:

“...my nephew gave me the news: ‘Uncle, the Israelis are here – they’re outside!’ I got up hurriedly to...explain that we were civilians and that we were unarmed...after all this was a regular army which had no reason to harm civilians.”[xxiv]

Indeed, some camp residents – mainly Shiites, who opposed the PLO[xxv] – were relieved even after the massacre when Israeli troops entered the Sabra camp to “put [the population] at ease.”[xxvi] When combining these testimonies with the general perspective of the Christian population, one can argue that the will among the Lebanese for peace with Israel was far greater before the massacre than afterwards.[xxvii] A peace agreement between the two states hastily arranged in May 1983 was thus never ratified by Beirut.

Moreover, the growing influence of Syria and the rise of Iran-backed Hezbollah – accelerated by “Shiite demagoguery, Maronite arrogance, Israeli clumsiness, and steady encouragement from Tehran”[xxviii] – further

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dimmed the prospect of a lasting peace.[xxix] Despite “Operation Peace for Galilee,” Israelis endured suicide attacks and rocket fire, and the latter continues to this day.[xxx] Both the immediate aftermath of the massacre – the Muslim revolt – and today’s reality – the prominence of Hezbollah – point to a failure by Israel to stabilize relations with Lebanon.

## *2. Further Progress Towards a Peace Agreement Between Israelis and the Palestinians Residents in the West Bank and Gaza*

Israel hoped that with the exile of the PLO leadership to Tunis, the opportunity to negotiate directly with Palestinians in the Territories – who were presumed to be more pragmatic and therefore open to a peace deal that would allow for increased prosperity – would present itself. As discussed, the massacre failed to both capture a significant number of PLO “terrorists” and to render PLO an insignificant actor. Indeed, the PLO remained a powerful actor, bolstering international support for the PLO while frustrating the 1982 Reagan Plan, which sought to exclude it.[xxxi] The PLO began to embrace a two-state solution but did not explicitly recognize Israel’s “right to exist.”[xxxii] Palestinians, meanwhile, did not soon forget the massacre and it likely fed the anger that inspired the First Intifada.[xxxiii] Since the evolution of the PLO is beyond the scope of this paper, it will merely be stated that prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians grew dimmer after 1982.[xxxiv]

## *3. Strengthen the US-Israel Alliance*

The loss of legitimacy suffered by Israel following the massacre was felt most painfully in her relationship with the American people, including diaspora Jews. Whereas the 1967 war marked “the supremely just and well-nigh miraculous triumph of a historically persecuted race,” the First Lebanon War saw Israel enter into a “moral crisis.”[xxxv] The Kahan Commission emerged not only to quell domestic fury, but also to “secure...maximum possible exoneration from the US public.”[xxxvi] While the report was highly praised in the US as an example of “Jerusalem ethic,”[xxxvii] the massacre itself damaged the trust bonds behind the US-Israel partnership.[xxxviii] By invading West Beirut and the camps, Israel violated the explicit terms of the Habib agreement and thereby ruptured US relations with Lebanon and the PLO. The PLO felt betrayed by the US after having signed the Habib agreement, which involved the PLO’s departure from Lebanon in exchange for guarantees that Palestinian refugees would be protected – guarantees “which were flimsy, and ultimately proved worthless.”[xxxix] The PLO held Washington responsible “for not having restrained Israel,” and the US, in turn, admonished Israel.[xl]

As previously mentioned, the Israeli government’s labeling of PLO “terrorists” resonated with Washington, which was beginning to see beyond the superpower rivalries of the Cold War to a more unpredictable landscape of threat. Thus, when Sharon told Draper on September 17, “...what are you looking for? Do you want the terrorists to stay?” the latter was left speechless and effectively gave Israel cover to let the Phalange fighters remain in the camps.[xli] However, when the massacre came to light, Draper was furious: “You should be ashamed. The situation is absolutely appalling. They’re killing children!”[xlii] Meanwhile, it would be inaccurate to characterize the US as entirely innocent. The Kahan Commission noted that the Americans failed to heed repeated requests by the Israelis that the US appeal to the Lebanese Army to maintain “public peace and order in West Beirut.”[xliii]

Playing an honest broker in Lebanon, the US hastily mediated the signing of a short-lived security agreement between Israel and Lebanon on May 17, 1983. Aside from this, the US fought to no avail to support Maronite primacy in Lebanon while resisting the increasing influence of Soviet-backed Syria.[xliv] The subsequent decline of Maronite rule coupled with US inaction during the massacre “severely undercut America’s influence in the Middle East, and its moral authority plummeted.” Worst of all, in October, 241 US Marines were killed in a suicide attack in Beirut.

Even with such casualties, and even while Israel’s image as an oppressor at worst and guilty bystander at best strained relations with the US and dimmed the prospects for regional peace, Israel remained too strategic an ally in the Cold War matrix to be discarded by the US following the massacre. Washington’s apparent need to move past the massacre and focus on combating the Soviet front as well as the growing threat of Islamic extremism partly explains the general adulation cast upon the Kahan Commission. It was declared by Henry Kissinger to be “a great tribute to Israeli democracy,”[xlv] even as the perpetrators of the massacre suffered only mild consequences for

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actions that directly contradicted promises made to Habib not to enter West Beirut. While the US-Israel alliance did not collapse following the massacre, the event significantly (if temporarily) strained in the relationship. What was decidedly not temporary, meanwhile, was the decline of US influence in Lebanon.

## Conclusion

As details and documents emerge concerning the Sabra and Shatila massacre – civilian casualty estimates range from 762 to 3,500[xlvi] – the international community continues to express shock at how such a sordid episode could unfold and how, despite knowledge of the Phalangists' desire to “cleanse”[xlvi] Lebanon of Palestinians. Israel's army, intelligence agency (Mossad) and defence minister would – in a costly example of “groupthink”[xlviii] – nurture a lethal alliance with the Phalange, order them to enter the camps, and fail to stop the atrocities as soon as grotesque reports surfaced describing the murder of innocent civilians.[xlix] As Timmerman put it, Israelis “are victims who have created our own victims in acts of cruelty.”[i] This paper has demonstrated how the massacre hindered the attainment of Israel's overt and strategic objectives for the invasion of West Beirut. The massacre and its aftermath did not eliminate the PLO as an influential actor and it certainly did not protect Lebanese Muslims from the Phalangist Christians. The slaughter led to a radical shift in Lebanese politics, closing off any possibility for Israel to shape the country's “new order,” while dimming the prospects for peace with Lebanon and the Palestinians. Finally, the massacre strained Israel's relationship with the US, which found itself losing influence in the Middle East during a critical point in the Cold War.

## Notes

[i] Seth Anzika, “A Preventable Massacre,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2012, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/opinion/a-preventable-massacre.html?pagewanted=all>

[ii] Schiff, Z. 1984. *Israel's Lebanon War*, edited by I. Friedman, E. Yaari. New York: Simon and Schuster: 281. Israelis reacted differently to the massacre than to other operations in the Lebanon war. This is explained by Hamilton as an example of “the moral economy of violence which infers that state warfare, aerial bombings and massacres are understood and accepted differently, depending on historically contingent cultural prisms.” Karine Hamilton, “The moral economy of violence: Israel's first Lebanon War, 1982,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4 (2011): 127.

[iii] *The Beirut Massacre : The Complete Kahan Commission Report* 1983. Princeton: Karz-Cohl. In addition to the Kahan report, an unpublished report by the Lebanese army's chief prosecutor absolved the Phalange of all responsibility, while a UN-commissioned report put the onus on Israel for the “criminal massacre.” The report was followed by a resolution in the General Assembly that – for the first time in the body's history – characterized an event as a “genocide” – a term chosen to “embarrass Israel rather than out of any concern with legal precision.” William Schabas. 2000. *Genocide in International Law. The Crimes of Crimes*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press: 455.

[iv] Hirst, D. 2010. *Beware of Small States : Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* . New York: Nation Books: 152.

[v] Ibid 152.

[vi] Abba Eban presents an expanded list of Israel's objectives for the Lebanon war, and we will consider here only those that were affected by the Sabra and Shatila massacre. These include: the destruction of the PLO as an “influential actor”; progress towards a peace deal between Israelis and the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza; the rise of a “stable, strong” Lebanese government; progress towards an Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty “by the end of 1982”; a strengthened US-Israel relationship following the “defeat of the pro-Soviet PLO and Syria”; an Israeli presence in patrolling southern Lebanon to ensure an end to rocket fire on Israeli homes.*The Beirut Massacre: The Complete Kahan Commission Report* 1983. Princeton: Karz-Cohl: IX.

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[vii] Hout, B. N. 2004. *Sabra and Shatila : September 1982*. Ann Arbor, MI; London: Pluto Press: 302.

[viii] Ibid 305.

[ix] Friedman, T. "Sabra and Shatila Massacre: The Four Days," New York Times, September 26, 1982, accessed March 23, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/09/26/world/the-beirut-massacre-the-four-days.html?pagewanted=all>

[x] Hout 245.

[xi] MacBride, S, A. K. Asmal, B. Bercusson, R. A. Falk, G. de la Pradelle, S. Wild. 1983. *Israel in Lebanon: The Report of International Commission to enquire into reported violations of International Law by Israel during its invasion of the Lebanon*. London: Ithaca Press: 191–2.

Meanwhile, Hout – in one of several emotionally driven moves that cheapen her otherwise invaluable scholarly contribution – concludes without supporting evidence that “the fatuous claim” that Israel was in a battle against enemy saboteurs “springs...from the heart of a colonial and settlement ideology that negates the very premise of [the Palestinian] people in the first place.” Hout 274.

[xii] Khalidi, R. 1986. *Under siege : P.L.O. decisionmaking during the 1982 war*. New York: Columbia University Press: 179. Also see Smith, C.D. 2013. *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict. 8<sup>th</sup> edition*. New York: Bedford/ and Smith: 373.

[xiii] Abba Eban’s reference to the covert Israeli goal of destroying the PLO as an influential actor – beyond simply removing the 2,000 suspected terrorists remaining in Lebanon – requires a more detailed analysis than can be offered in this paper. Such analysis must take into account the terms and implementation (or lack thereof) of the Habib agreement, as well the changing relationship between Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza with the PLO leadership, which was exiled from Jordan, to Lebanon, to Tunis.

[xiv] Hout 304.

[xv] Hirst 152.

[xvi] Ibid 155.

[xvii] *The Beirut Massacre: The Complete Kahan Commission Report* 1983. Princeton: Karz-Cohl: 46.

[xviii] It is important to clarify that these highly interrelated objectives were at first overshadowed by the need to deal with the massive domestic and international outcry following the massacre. The Israeli Cabinet rushed to dismiss accusations of involvement and ordered the establishment of the Kahan Commission. Although protests in Israel were loud and populous, a look at opinion polls (Hirst 168) tell a different story. While critics like Thomas Friedman denounced the Kahan Commission as a sham for handing out meagre “punishments” – Sharon resigned but remained in cabinet, for example – Israelis were satisfied with the report. Only 2.17% of Israelis found the Commission to have been “too lenient.”

[xix] *The Beirut Massacre: The Complete Kahan Commission Report* 1983. Princeton: Karz-Cohl: VII.

[xx] Hirst 170. See also Smith 377.

Many Maronites fled to Syria, where President Assad offered to forgive them so long as they renounced any allegiances with Israel.

[xxi] Meanwhile, by holding onto its relationship with the Phalange, Israel – and by extension, the US – “perpetuated the myth that a Christian–Zionist front could substitute for reconciliation with the Muslim–Arab majority.” Eisenberg, L. “History Revisited or Revamped? The Maronite Factor in Israel’s 1982 Invasion of Lebanon,” *Israel Affairs* 15

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(2009): 372.

[xxii] Hirst 169.

[xxiii] Friedman (1982).

[xxiv] Barrada, L.S. and Seidel, G. "Sabra and Shatila: testimonies of the survivors," *Journal: Race and Class*. (1983): 453.

[xxv] Israelis had demonized the Sabra and Shatila areas as bastions of PLO terrorism, and were blinded to the reality that as much as one quarter of the population was Shiite – poor and vulnerable to be smitten by Hezbollah's promises of a better life.

[xxvi] Friedman (1982).

[xxvii] Israeli attempts to hide any traces of involvement in the camps were ultimately futile. Journalists were able to find an abundance of Israeli fingerprints. For example, Friedman notes: "reporters found boxes that had contained M-16 bullets. The boxes were printed in Hebrew. Elsewhere, there were wrappings from Israeli chocolate wafers on the ground, as well as remnants of United States Army C-rations. Witnesses say the detritus may be evidence that some of the militiamen had been provided with both food and ammunition by the Israelis." Friedman (1982).

[xxviii] Norton, A.R. "Changing Actors and Leadership among the Shiites of Lebanon," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 482 (1985): 109.

[xxix] Dowty, A. 2012. *Israel/Palestine: Third Edition*. Cambridge: Polity: 140.  
See also Smith 378 and Hirst 173.

[xxx] Byman asserts that Israel played a crucial role in the rise of Hezbollah: "It is difficult to imagine Hizballah's development without recognizing the key role Israel played. In 1982, largely to get rid of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, Israel invaded, driving well past the border area and encircling Beirut. The Lebanese Shi'as in southern Lebanon, for years mistreated by Palestinian militias, initially welcomed the IDF soldiers "with rice and with flowers." Although most Shi'as were glad to see the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) routed and removed from their villages, inevitably the Israeli occupation of Lebanon first grated on, and over time enraged, local Shi'i communities." Byman, D. "The Lebanese Hizballah and Israeli Counterterrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 34 (2011): 917.

[xxxi] Dowty 141.

[xxxii] Ibid.

[xxxiii] Khalili charts a mnemonic shift following the massacre – a "shift from the battle to the massacre as the central motif of Palestinian existence." This shift is accompanied by a call for "agential action...to an international community whose moral judgment is required to ameliorate unending suffering."

Khalili, L. "Commemorating Battles and Massacres in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon," *American Behavioral Scientist* 51 (2008): 1571-1572.

[xxxiv] Friedman, T. 1989. *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. New York: Anchor: 163.

The will for peace was not strengthened on the Israeli side, either. Israelis – through their military service and through the media – tend to associate "Palestinian" and "terrorist," and "in the Israeli psyche you don't come to the rescue of "terrorists."

[xxxv] Timmerman, J. 1982. *The Longest War: Israel in Lebanon*. New York: Knopf: 158. See also Hirst 160, 168.

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a) For Thomas Friedman, this moral crisis was personal. In an exclusive interview with Major General Amir Drori, Friedman shouted, “How could you do this?...but what I was really saying, in a very selfish way, was “How could you do this to *me*, you bastards? I always thought you were different. I always thought *we* were different.” Friedman (1989) 166.

b) Some scholars have taken this notion of a moral crisis too far, arguing the massacre permanently damaged “Jewish self-identity” and revealed the essential illegitimacy of the Zionist movement. Davidson, L. “Lebanon and the Jewish Conscience,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 12 (1983): 54-60.

[xxxvi] Hirst 163.

[xxxvii] Ibid.

[xxxviii] Falk, R. “The Kahan Commission Report on the Beirut Massacre,” *Dialectical Anthropology*, 8 (1984): 319.

[xxxix] Khalidi 180.

[xl] Ibid. 3.

[xli] Anzika (2013).

[xlii] Ibid.

[xliii] *The Beirut Massacre: The Complete Kahan Commission Report* 1983. Princeton: Karz-Cohl: 49. The Commission also criticized the US, albeit indirectly, for “the hasty evacuation of the multi-national force.”

[xliv] Inbar, E. “Great Power Mediation: The USA and the May 1983 Israeli—Lebanese Agreement,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 28 (1991): 71.

[xlv] Dowty 141.

[xlvi] Furthermore, Hout finds that the victims also included Syrians, Egyptians, Jordanians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Iranians and Algerians – all of whom had come to seek refuge in the Sabra district. Hout 274.

[xlvii] Timmerman 157.

[xlviii] Schulze, K.E. “Israeli Crisis Decision-Making in the Lebanon War: Group Madness or Individual Ambition?” *Israel Studies*, 3 (1998): 215.

[xlix] Not only was there a documented failure to bring reports of atrocities to the attention of senior army officials, but journalists like Thomas Friedman armed themselves with embarrassing and incriminating portrayals of Israeli troops stationed around the Sabra and Shatila camps: “Not far away there were these Israeli soldiers sitting on a tank. Even though there was gunfire in the camp, they were just lounging around, reading magazines and listening to Simon and Garfunkel on a ghetto blaster [no pun intended by Friedman, one would hope]” Friedman (1989) 161.

[l] Timmerman 157

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