

# Israeli Crimes Against Humanity: Remembering the Sabra and Shatila Massacre

By [Institute for Middle East Understanding](#)

Global Research, August 09, 2020

[Institute for Middle East Understanding and Global Research](#) 17 September 2012

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [History](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

First published on September 17, 2012

The Gaza massacre is part of longstanding process of Israeli crimes against humanity. This article describes one of the worst atrocities in modern Middle Eastern history committed against the people of Palestine. This article was first posted on Global Research in 2016.

\*\*\*

*On September 16, 1982, Christian Lebanese militiamen allied to Israel entered the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila and the adjacent neighborhood of Sabra in Beirut under the watch of the Israeli army and began a slaughter that caused outrage around the world. Over the next day and a half, up to 3500 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians, mostly women, children, and the elderly, were murdered in one of the worst atrocities in modern Middle Eastern history. The New York Times recently published [an op-ed](#) containing new details of discussions held between Israeli and American officials before and during the massacre. They reveal how Israeli officials, led by then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, misled and bullied American diplomats, rebuffing their concerns about the safety of the inhabitants of Sabra and Shatila.*

## Lead Up

- On June 6, 1982, Israel launched a massive invasion of Lebanon. It had been long planned by Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, who wanted to destroy or severely diminish the Palestine Liberation Organization, which was based in Lebanon at the time. Sharon also planned to install a puppet government headed by Israel's right-wing Lebanese Christian Maronite allies, the Phalangist Party.
- Israeli forces advanced all the way to the capital of Beirut, besieging and bombarding the western part of city, where the PLO was headquartered and the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila and the adjacent neighborhood of Sabra are located.
- Israel's bloody weeklong assault on West Beirut in August prompted harsh international criticism, including from the administration of [US President Ronald Reagan](#), who many accused of giving a "green light" to Israel to launch the invasion. Under a US-brokered ceasefire agreement, PLO leaders and more than 14,000 fighters were to be evacuated from the country, with the US providing written assurances for the safety of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian

civilians left behind. US Marines were deployed as part of a multinational force to oversee and provide security for the evacuation.

- On August 30, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat [left Beirut](#) along with the remainder of the Palestinian fighters based in the city.
- On September 10, the Marines left Beirut. Four days later, on September 14, the leader of Israel's Phalangist allies, Bashir Gemayel, was assassinated. Gemayel had just been elected president of Lebanon by the Lebanese parliament, under the supervision of the occupying Israeli army. His death was a severe blow to Israel's designs for the country. The following day, Israeli forces violated the ceasefire agreement, moving into and occupying West Beirut.

## The Massacre

- On Wednesday, September 15, the Israeli army surrounded the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila and the adjacent neighborhood of Sabra in West Beirut. The next day, September 16, Israeli soldiers allowed about 150 Phalangist militiamen into Sabra and Shatila.
- The Phalange, known for their brutality and a history of atrocities against Palestinian civilians, were bitter enemies of the PLO and its leftist and Muslim Lebanese allies during the preceding years of Lebanon's civil war. The enraged Phalangist militiamen believed, erroneously, that Phalange leader Gemayel had been assassinated by Palestinians. He was actually killed by a Syrian agent.
- Over the next day and a half, the Phalangists committed unspeakable atrocities, raping, mutilating, and murdering as many as 3500 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians, most of them women, children, and the elderly. Sharon would later claim that he could have had no way of knowing that the Phalange would harm civilians, however when US diplomats demanded to know why Israel had broken the ceasefire and entered West Beirut, Israeli army Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan [justified the move saying](#) it was "to prevent a Phalangist frenzy of revenge." On September 15, the day before the massacre began, Israeli Prime Minister [Menachem Begin told](#) US envoy Morris Draper that the Israelis had to occupy West Beirut, "Otherwise, there could be pogroms."
- Almost immediately after the killing started, Israeli soldiers surrounding Sabra and Shatila became aware that civilians were being murdered, but did nothing to stop it. Instead, Israeli forces fired flares into the night sky to illuminate the darkness for the Phalangists, allowed reinforcements to enter the area on the second day of the massacre, and provided bulldozers that were used to dispose of the bodies of many of the victims.
- On the second day, Friday, September 17, an Israeli journalist in Lebanon called Defense Minister Sharon to inform him of reports that a massacre was taking place in Sabra and Shatila. The journalist, Ron Ben-Yishai, later [recalled](#):

'I found [Sharon] at home sleeping. He woke up and I told him "Listen, there are stories about killings and massacres in the camps. A lot of our officers know about it and tell me about it, and if they know it, the whole world will know about it. You can still stop it." I didn't know that the massacre actually started 24 hours earlier. I thought it started only then and I said to him "Look, we still have time to stop it. Do something about it." He didn't react.'"

- On Friday afternoon, almost 24 hours after the killing began, Eitan met with Phalangist representatives. [According to notes](#) taken by an Israeli intelligence

officer present: “[Eitan] expressed his positive impression received from the statement by the Phalangist forces and their behavior in the field,” telling them to continue “mopping up the empty camps south of Fakahani until tomorrow at 5:00 a.m., at which time they must stop their action due to American pressure.”

- On Saturday, American Envoy Morris Draper, sent a furious message to Sharon [stating](#):

‘You must stop the massacres. They are obscene. I have an officer in the camp counting the bodies. You ought to be ashamed. The situation is rotten and terrible. They are killing children. You are in absolute control of the area, and therefore responsible for the area.’

- The Phalangists finally left the area at around 8 o’clock Saturday morning, taking many of the surviving men with them for interrogation at a soccer stadium. The interrogations were carried out with Israeli intelligence agents, who [handed many of the captives back](#) to the Phalange. Some of the men returned to the Phalange were later found executed.
- About an hour after the Phalangists departed Sabra and Shatila, the first journalists arrived on the scene and the first reports of what transpired began to reach the outside world.

## Casualty Figures

- Thirty years later, there is still no accurate total for the number of people killed in the massacre. Many of the victims were buried in mass graves by the Phalange and there has been no political will on the part of Lebanese authorities to investigate.
- An official Israeli investigation, the [Kahan Commission](#), concluded that between 700 and 800 people were killed, based on the assessment of Israeli military intelligence.
- An investigation by Beirut-based British journalist Robert Fisk, who was one of the first people on the scene after the massacre ended, concluded that [The Palestinian Red Crescent put the number](#) of dead at more than 2000.
- In his book, [Sabra & Shatila: Inquiry into a Massacre](#), Israeli journalist Amnon Kapeliouk reached a maximum figure of 3000 to 3500.

## Aftermath

### Israel

- Following international outrage, the Israeli government established a committee of inquiry, the Kahan Commission. Its [investigation found](#) that Defense Minister Sharon bore “personal responsibility” for the massacre, and recommended that he be removed from office. Although Prime Minister Begin removed him from his post as defense minister, Sharon remained in cabinet as a minister without portfolio. He would go on to hold numerous other cabinet positions in subsequent Israeli governments, including foreign minister during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s first term in office. Nearly 20 years later, in March 2001, Sharon was elected prime minister of Israel.
- In June 2001, lawyers for 23 survivors of the massacre initiated legal proceedings

against Sharon in a Belgian court, under a law allowing people to be prosecuted for war crimes committed anywhere in the world.

- In January 2002, Phalangist leader and chief liaison to Israel during the 1982 invasion, Elie Hobeika, was [killed by a car bomb](#) in Beirut. Hobeika led the Phalangist militiamen responsible for the massacre, and had announced that he was prepared to testify against Sharon, who was then prime minister of Israel, at a possible war crimes trial in Belgium. Hobeika's killers were never found.
- In June 2002, a panel of Belgian [judges dismissed](#) war crimes charges against Sharon because he wasn't present in the country to stand trial.
- In January 2006, Sharon suffered a massive stroke. He remains in a coma on life support.

## **The United States**

- For the United States, which had guaranteed the safety of civilians left behind after the PLO departed, the massacre was a deep embarrassment, causing immense damage to its reputation in the region. The fact that US Secretary of State Alexander Haig was believed by many to have given Israel a "green light" to invade Lebanon compounded the damage.
- In the wake of the massacre, President Reagan sent the Marines back to Lebanon. Just over a year later, 241 American servicemen would be killed when two massive truck bombs destroyed their barracks in Beirut, leading Reagan to withdraw US forces for good.

## **The Palestinians**

- For Palestinians, the Sabra and Shatila massacre was and remains a traumatic event, commemorated annually. Many survivors continue to live in Sabra and Shatila, struggling to eke out a living and haunted by their memories of the slaughter. To this day, no one has faced justice for the crimes that took place.
- For Palestinians, the Sabra and Shatila massacre serves as a powerful and tragic reminder of the vulnerable situation of millions of stateless Palestinians, and the dangers that they continue to face across the region, and around the world.

The original source of this article is [Institute for Middle East Understanding and Global Research](#)

Copyright © [Institute for Middle East Understanding](#), [Institute for Middle East Understanding and Global Research](#), 2020

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Institute for Middle East Understanding](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)