

Sabra and Shatila: The Secret Papers. Carefully Planned Israeli Atrocities Led by Ariel Sharon

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[Sabra and Shatila, September 1982](#), stands as one of the worst single atrocities in modern history. Up to 3500 Palestinians were massacred when Israel's Falangist proxies surged through the two Beirut camps in September 1982. Israel sought to dump the blame on to the Falangists. "Goyim kill goyim and they come to blame the Jews," Israel's Prime Minister, Menahim Begin, complained. In fact, Israel commanded and controlled the entire operation. The punishment meted out by the Kahan commission of inquiry was derisory. Ariel Sharon, the Israeli 'defence minister' was demoted but remained in government, after Begin refused to sack him. Despite his own complicity, Begin was not punished and neither were any of the politicians who had agreed that the camps had to be 'cleaned out.' World opinion was outraged, but not even this fearful event was sufficient for Israel to be held to account. Unrestrained, Israel remained free to kill at will.

The secret annex to the Kahan commission has recently made its way into the mainstream. (See Rashid Khalidi, 'The Sabra and Shatila Massacres: New Evidence,' Palestine Square, Institute of Palestine Studies, September 25, 2018). The basic facts are well established, so the interest lies in what these documents tell us about the interplay between the Israelis and the Falangists, and why, ultimately, Sabra and Shatila had to be invaded.

Even before 1948 Israel was setting out to turn Lebanon into a satellite state by playing on the fears of the country's Maronite Christian community. In 1958 Lebanon endured its second civil war (second to the Druze-Maronite conflict of 1860). This war was part of a regional drama involving anti-Nasserism, anti-communism, the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq and a planned coup attempt in Jordan. No event in Lebanon is ever simply internal, but while the collective 'west' and Israel had a big stake in what happened in 1958, the war developed largely as cause and effect between internal factions. By the time the US intervened, sending the Sixth Fleet and landing marines on Beirut's beaches, these factions had for the moment resolved their differences.

In 1968, against a background of Palestinian resistance from southern Lebanon, Israel destroyed 13 commercial aircraft sitting on the tarmac at Beirut international airport. Lebanon was being warned to control the Palestinians, or else. Of course, given its highly factionalized nature, Lebanon could not control the Palestinians.

In April 1973, the Israelis infiltrated West Beirut from the sea and killed four leading Palestinian political and cultural (Kamal Nasser, a poet) figures and by 1975 the country was right on the edge. A drive-by shooting at a Maronite church in East Beirut on April 13 pushed it off. The dead included members of the Kata'ib, the Lebanese Falange, a party founded on

the Spanish model in the 1930s. Falangist gunmen struck back, shooting up a bus full of Palestinians and the war was on.

As Israel was already involved with the Falangists, as it wanted chaos in Lebanon ending in the defeat of the Palestinians and the destruction of their institutions, the church shooting was very likely a deliberate Israeli provocation. The secret annex to the Kahan commission reveals that by 1975 Israel was holding secret meetings with Falangist leaders, aimed at political and military coordination, towards which end Israel gave the Falangists \$118.5 million in military aid (the figure given in the Kahan annex, the true figure possibly being much higher) and trained hundreds of Falangist fighters, in preparation for the war which Israel wanted the Falangists to launch.

Israel maintained its relationship with the Falangists through the civil war. By 1982 there was an “alliance in principle,” as described by papers in the Kahan annex. Trained in Israel up to Israeli military standards, however this is understood, Israel was confident that the Falangist tough Bashir Gemayel, the dominant figure in the Christian umbrella group, the Lebanese Forces (LF), had evolved “from the emotional leader of a gang, full of hatred, into a relatively prudent and cautious political leader.” No doubt this was how Bashir presented himself at meetings with the Israelis, but his actions in the past, and in the future, indicate that he was merely concealing the brutality that still lay within.

In January 1976, the LF attacked the slum Karantina port district of Beirut, killing or massacring at least 1000 Palestinian fighters and civilians. In June, the Falangists, along with other LF factions, including the Lebanese Tigers of the Chamoun family and the Guardians of the Cedars, besieged the Tal al Za’atar Palestinian camp. Their military equipment included US tanks and armored cars. The camp held out for 35 days before being overrun. Up to 3000 Palestinian civilians were slaughtered.



The Kahan papers include an interesting exchange between Ariel Sharon and Shimon Peres, Minister of Defence in 1976, who asked Sharon whether an IDF officer had warned him against sending the Falangists into Sabra and Shatila. Sharon responded that “you” (the Rabin government of 1976 of which Peres was part) had established the relationship with the Falangists and maintained it even after the massacre at Tal al Zaatar:

“You [Peres] spoke of the moral image of the government. After Tal al Zaatar, Mr Peres, you have no monopoly on morality. We did not accuse you, you have accused us. The same moral principle which was raised by the Tal al Za’atar incident [sic.] still exists. The Falangists murdered in Shatila and the Falangists murdered in Tal Za’atar. The link is a moral one: should we get involved with the Falangists or not? You supported them and continued to do so after Tal Za’atar. Mr Rabin and Mr Peres, there were no IDF officers in Shatila, the same way they were absent from Tal Za’atar.” What is left unsaid is that Israel had a ‘liaison office’ at Tal al Za’atar even if IDF officers were not inside the camp.

‘High stature’

The refrain constantly repeated by Israeli intelligence and military personnel in 1982 was that no-one expected the Falangists to behave so badly. They were people of high caliber, people of quality, “men of much higher personal stature than is common among Arabs,”

according to the statements made to the Kahan commission.

“I interrogated the Lebanese commanders [all Lebanese ‘commanders’ operated under direct Israeli command],” said Sharon. “I asked them, why have you done it? They looked into my eyes, as I am looking at you and their eyes did not twitch. They said ‘we did not do this, it was not us.’ I am not talking about bums, we are talking about people who are engineers and lawyers, the entire young elite, an intelligentsia, and they are looking into my eyes and saying ‘we did not do it.’”

In fact, not just during the long civil war but throughout its invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Israel had abundant evidence of the Falangist capacity for brutality, not just in the massacre of Muslims caught at checkpoints or the Druze in the mountains but in the statements of Falangist leaders. On September 12, two days before he was assassinated, Bashir Gemayel told Sharon that conditions “should be created” which would result in the Palestinians leaving Lebanon.

At the same meeting, it transpired that the Israelis had evidence that “as a consequence of Elie Hobeika’s activities” 1200 people had “disappeared.” Hobeika, a senior and extremely brutal Falangist figure, implicated in the CIA attempt in 1985 to assassinate the Shia spiritual leader, Shaikh Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah, was assassinated in 2002 shortly after he announced he was ready to give evidence in a Belgian court about Sharon’s role in the Sabra-Shatila massacres. His car was blown up, his head landing on the balcony of a nearby apartment.

On July 8 Bashir spoke of wanting to bulldoze the Palestinian camps in southern Lebanon. At a later meeting, asked by Sharon “What would you do about the refugee camps?,” he replied, “We are planning a real zoo.”

An IDF colonel gave evidence to the Kahan commission that it was “possible to surmise from contacts with Phalange leaders” what their intentions were. If Sabra would become a zoo, Shatila’s destiny was to be a parking lot.

The IDF colonel spoke of massacres of Druze villagers by Elie Hobeika and his men. A document dated June 23 refers to “some 500 people” detained by Christians in Beirut being “terminated.” Nahum Admoni, the Mossad head, who said he knew Bashir well, having met frequently with him in 1974/5, said that “When he talked in terms of demographic change it was always in terms of killing and elimination. This was his instinctive style.” The “demographic change” refers to Bashir’s concern at the size of Lebanon’s Shia population, and its high natural birth rate compared to the Christians. To resolve this problem, Bashar said, “several Deir Yassin will be necessary.”

While referring to Bashir’s brutal talk, Admoni said that “at the same time he was a political human being and as such he had an extremely cautious thinking process and thus he avoided taking part in various warlike activities.” The evidence does not bear out the last part of this statement, as Bashar had a long record even before 1982 of engaging in extremely brutal “warlike activities.”

The violence during the Israeli onslaught on Lebanon ran from the Falangists at one end of the spectrum to the extreme violence of Ariel Sharon, including massacres of civilians in Gaza and the West Bank, at the other end. The two extremes met in the middle at Sabra

and Shatila and the outcome was predictably catastrophic.

‘Totally subservient’

What must be reaffirmed is that the “cleaning” or “combing” out of Sabra and Shatila was planned, coordinated and commanded by the Israeli military. It was not a Falangist operation with Israel playing some loose supervisory role. It was an Israel operation, involving the intelligence agencies and approved by the Israeli government. The Falangists were trained and armed by Israel and the LF commanders were “totally subservient” to the commander of the Israeli force sent to the camps, the 96th division. The Falangists were told when to enter the camps and when to leave. The Israelis lit up the camps at night with flares so the Falangists could see what they were doing (or who they were killing) and they stood ready to provide medical assistance to wounded men and intervene if they got into trouble.

Any notion that Menahim Begin, the Prime Minister, had no idea what was going on until a later stage has to be discarded. As Sharon remarked at a Cabinet meeting on August 12, “to say that I speak with the PM five times a day would be an understatement.”

Israel had agreed in negotiations with the Americans not to enter West Beirut. The assassination of Bashir Gemayel on September 14 precipitated the invasion of West Beirut the following day, the seizure of key positions and the encirclement of Sabra and Shatila according to a well-prepared plan. The Falangists entered the camps in the early evening of September 16, on Israeli orders, and did not withdraw until September 18, again on Israeli orders.

There were no “terrorists” in the camps, let alone the 2500 Sharon claimed had been left behind after the PLO withdrawal from Beirut in August. There were only civilians and there was no armed resistance from them. The Falangists did their work silently, mostly with knives so that the next victim would not be aware of the fate of the one before him (or her – many of the dead were women and children and even the camp animals were butchered) until it was too late.

The Falangist liaison office was established in the headquarters of the 96th Israeli division, where eavesdropping yielded unspecified “important evidence,” according to the Kahan commission annex. Professional electronic tapping of the Falangist communications network inside the camps was maintained in addition to “improvised” tapping of the conversations inside the HQ of the 96th division. According to the Kahan commission’s annex, the Falangist liaison officer reported “abnormal occurrences” in the camps to several officers only a few hours after the Falangists entered them.

Clearly, statements by intelligence and military personnel that they did not know what was going, or that they did not know until it was too late cannot be taken at face value. There was no gunfire from the camps and no resistance as would have been expected from armed “terrorists.” In this deathly silence, with no bursts of gunfire, and not the slightest sign or sound of armed combat, did the Israelis really think the Falangists were only killing armed men? Furthermore, Sharon had made it clear that he wanted to break up all the Palestinian camps and disperse their inhabitants. A cruel and brutal figure, he was perfectly capable of doing it. What could be better calculated to drive Palestinian civilians everywhere into panicked flight than an even more monstrous Deir Yassin? There may be a lot more evidence about this, textual and graphics, that has not made its way even into the secret

annex.

Sharon freely insulted and demeaned the two chief US representatives in Beirut, Ambassador Morris Draper, whom he accused of impudence in demanding that Israel withdraw from West Beirut, and President Reagan's special envoy, Philip Habib. "Did I make myself clear?," "Don't complain all the time" and "I'm sick of this" are samples of his aggression when in their company but as he said of the Americans on another occasion, "I hate them."

Ghost towns

This remorseless liar claimed that there were no civilians in the camps. "I want you to know that Burj al Barajneh and its vicinity and the area of Shatila and similar places are ghost towns" he insisted, according to the Kahan annex. In August, as the aerial and land bombardment of Beirut approached its peak, he told the Cabinet that "we are not striking at the area where the Sunni Lebanese population resides." On August 18 he lied again:

"Today there is no-one living in the refugee camps. Only terrorists remain in the refugee camps. That is where their positions remain, in the refugee camps. That is where their positions, bunkers, and HQs were located, and all the civilians had fled."

In fact, the camps were packed with civilians who had nowhere else to go, while in West Beirut, thousands of Sunni Muslims, Christians, and anyone who was living there, were being killed in air strikes.

At the same time, Sharon had the extraordinary gall to present himself as some kind of savior of the civilian population. After entering West Beirut he remarked that "in reality, we are not looking for anybody's praise but if praise is due, then it's ours as we saved Beirut from total anarchy. On September 21, a few days after the Sabra and Shatila massacres, he told the Cabinet that "We prevented a bloodbath." In fact, the invasion had been a bloodbath from the beginning. By the end of the year, about 19,000 people had been killed, almost all of them Palestinian or Lebanese civilians.

Two issues take up numerous pages in the Kahan report annex. One is the speed with which the Israeli army moved into West Beirut after the assassination of Bashir Gemayel. The reason was that the assassination "threatened to bring down the entire political structure and undermine the military plan years in preparation over long months." Having promised full support, Bashar had ultimately refused to send the Falangists into West Beirut and with this commanding figure dead, the Israelis feared that their invasion was going to fail at the critical moment. With no-one to stop them, Sharon's imaginary "terrorists" would be free to rebuild their infrastructure.

'Supreme value'

The other issue is why Israel did not send its own troops into the camps. As expressed in the Kahan papers, "the expected nature of the fighting in the camps did not arouse much enthusiasm for the deployment of the IDF." There would be difficult fighting "which could result in a lot of bloodshed in a densely populated area, where terrorists who have to be located are disguised as civilians in a hostile environment." Such an action would involve a large number of casualties and the IDF had no wish to involve itself "in such an unpleasant

but necessary military move.”

The deployment of the Falangists instead caused “great relief” to the military: the “supreme value” governing the decision was the desire not to cause IDF casualties. So, Israel’s proxies were sent in to do the dirty work instead.

After being elected president, as he was in a dodgy way in August, Bashir Gemayel had shown he realized he would have to act as one, which meant putting the Lebanese consensus before the alliance with Israel. He would have to work with the Sunnis and Shia and repair the fractured relations with other Maronite factions. He would have to take the interests of Arab states into account. He could not simultaneously be Lebanon’s president and Israel’s president. As a senior Falangist figure, Antun Fattal remarked to Morris Draper on December 13, 1982: “Our economy is dependent on the Arab world and we cannot sacrifice it because of a peace treaty [as demanded by Israel].”

On December 14, Bashir’s successor, and milder brother, Amin, asked Israel to stop all contact with Lebanon, saying that he intended to announce at the UN that Lebanon was occupied by Israel. Like Bashir, he knew he had to respect the Lebanese consensus. By the end of 1982 what Israel had comprehensively demonstrated was that it simply did not understand Lebanon. All it had was brute force. The invasion certainly succeeded in changing the geopolitical strategic situation, but not to Israel’s advantage. Yes, the PLO went, but only for Hizbullah to take its place. By 2000 Hizbullah had driven Israel out of the occupied south, in 2006 it frustrated Israel again and by 2018 it had missiles that will cause unprecedented damage if Israel goes to war again. The country Israel regarded as the weakest link in the Arab chain had turned out to be one of the toughest.

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