Tal al-Zaatar massacre

The Tel al-Zaatar Camp Massacre

The Tel al-Zaatar Palestinian refugee camp, located in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, fell on 12 August 1976 after a long siege during the Lebanese Civil War. As the camp fell, and as its residents were leaving it, they were subjected to mass killings that rank among the worst massacres of that war.

The Camp and Its Residents

The camp was established around 1949 to shelter Palestinian refugees who had been driven from their villages during the Nakba of 1948, and its services were run

by UNRWA. Most of its residents came from villages in northern Palestine, particularly al-Khalisa, al-Lazzaza and Salha. In 1965, a number of Palestinian Bedouins who had been living in the al-Maslakh area of eastern Beirut were moved to the camp.

On the eve of the war, the population of the camp and its surroundings was estimated at between 50,000 and 60,000. Poor Lebanese families and workers of other nationalities also lived in and around the camp, owing to its proximity to the industrial zone of Dekwaneh.

Historical Background

Tens of thousands of Palestinians took refuge in Lebanon after the Nakba of 1948. The armed Palestinian presence there grew after the 1967 war, and again after the guerrilla organizations left Jordan following the clashes of September 1970 with the Jordanian army, making Lebanon the main base of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The 1969 Cairo Agreement granted the Palestinian factions wide freedom of action in Lebanon, which deepened Lebanon's internal divisions. Christian parties, especially Maronite ones, saw it as a threat to Lebanese sovereignty and to the balance of the existing sectarian system, while other parties saw it as an Arab cause worthy of support, in addition to their own demands for reform of the power-sharing system. The rival sides received support from various regional powers, including Israel, which later backed some of the Christian militias.

The civil war broke out in April 1975 after the Ain el-Remmaneh incident. The country split between the predominantly Christian Lebanese Front on one side, and the Lebanese National Movement led by Kamal Jumblatt, allied with the Palestinian factions, on the other. Early 1976 saw a series of massacres, including the Karantina and al-Maslakh massacre carried out by Lebanese Front militias, and the Damour massacre.

When the balance tipped in favor of the National Movement and its allies, the

Syrian army intervened in June 1976 to prevent the collapse of the Lebanese Front, and imposed a siege on the positions of the National Movement and the Palestinian factions.

The Siege

- The camp had been partially besieged since early 1976. The assault and full siege began on 22 June 1976 and lasted around 52 days.
- Water, electricity, food and medical supplies were cut off, relief organizations were barred from entering for most of the siege, and residents were forced to fetch water from exposed wells under sniper fire.
- Palestinian sources state that the camp was subjected to more than 70 assaults and tens of thousands of shells. It is reported that hunger became so severe that some residents sought a religious ruling (fatwa) permitting them to eat the meat of animals normally forbidden as food.
- On 11 August 1976, Arab mediation produced an agreement for the evacuation of civilians from the camp under the supervision of the International Committee of the Red Cross.
- On 12 August 1976, the camp fell. Many of its residents were killed inside the camp, at checkpoints and during the evacuation. The abuses included summary executions and violence against women, children and the elderly.

Those Responsible

The storming of the camp and the killings were carried out by Lebanese Front militias, most notably:

- The Kataeb Regulatory Forces of the Kataeb (Phalange) Party, then led by Pierre Gemayel.
- The Tigers militia of the National Liberal Party, led by Camille Chamoun.

- The Zgharta Liberation Army (Marada), led by Tony Frangieh.
- The Guardians of the Cedars militia.

Syrian forces deployed in Lebanon provided political and military cover for the siege, and historians differ in their assessment of the extent of their direct involvement in the final assault.

Victims and Aftermath

- There is no definitive count of the victims, and estimates vary widely, from around 1,500 to more than 4,000 killed according to Palestinian sources. Some died during the siege and others when the camp fell and during the evacuation. Most were civilians, and thousands more were wounded, while hundreds went missing and their fate remains unknown to this day.
- After the camp fell, its buildings were bulldozed, and the survivors were dispersed to other Palestinian camps and communities in Lebanon.
- The civil war ended with the Taif Agreement in 1989, followed by the 1991 general amnesty law, which covered most war crimes. No one was held accountable for the massacre, the camp was never rebuilt, and its residents were not allowed to return.

Testimonies from the Massacre

> They stormed the camp while I was there with my son Khaled, who was 14. They lined up the men, took the girls away, and searched the women in a shameful way. When my turn came, they asked me where I had got a boy like this, because he was blond with green eyes and I am dark-skinned. They said: "It's a shame for the Palestinians to have one like him." I answered them in a voice full of defiance: "This is a Palestinian. He is my son, a son of Palestine." I had barely finished speaking when they shot him. I did not flinch; I stood

> frozen in place. They ordered me to trample on him and I refused. I told them: "I know this ending. This is our fate, and we will never kneel. We still have a baby at the breast."

> A Kataeb fighter asked a Palestinian nurse his name. He answered: "Elias."
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> The fighter said: "A Palestinian, and Elias too!"
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> And he shot him dead.

Source: *Hisar Tal al-Zaatar: Shahadat wa Tahlil* (The Siege of Tel al-Zaatar: Testimonies and Analysis), Ali Hussein Khalaf, 1976.