Life under the 1982 Siege of Beirut: Hunger, Thirst and Zionist Massacres

In the summer of 1982 death in West Beirut did not come from the aircraft alone. It came from a tap that ran dry, a bakery whose fire went out, a hospital that ran out of oxygen, a pile of rubbish where the rats multiplied. For weeks the Israeli occupation army besieged some two hundred thousand Lebanese and Palestinians, cutting off their water, electricity, food, fuel and medicine, while its aircraft, gunboats and artillery pounded their neighbourhoods and camps from dawn to dusk. [1][2][3][4]

This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut. It tells the human side of those days: how people lived, what they ate and drank, how they treated their wounded and buried their dead, and it documents the Zionist massacres that accompanied the aggression, from the south to Sabra and Shatila.

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The siege in numbers

Item	Figure
Besieged in West Beirut	About 200,000 Lebanese and Palestinians (5 July)
Homeless in Lebanon	About 600,000 in the first week, per the Red Cross
Water	4 hours every two days (24 June), then cut off completely in early July
Electricity	Out across most of West Beirut from the second day
Flour	Enough for only about 10 days (6 July)
Oxygen at the American University Hospital	Enough for only two days (5 July)
Vegetable prices	Up 300–400%
Petrol	About $30 for 20 litres
Ratio of dead to wounded	About 1 to 1, instead of the usual 1 to 5
Police toll in Beirut to 7 July	2,633 dead and 3,612 wounded

Sources: [1][4][5][2][6][7][8]

A day in besieged Beirut

The bombardment usually began at about half past four in the morning and went on until evening, and sometimes it continued for 24 hours straight. The phone lines were down, contact with the outside world became rare, and people lived on rumours and whatever the radio broadcast. [4][3]

Occupation aircraft dropped leaflets ordering residents to stay indoors and hang

white cloth on their houses, and in early July more leaflets urging them to leave the city. Mothers spent their days in shelters with their children, never knowing where the shelling would come from next, and women's ululations in the shelters and at the barricades became a way of steeling the fighters' resolve. [9][10][11]

After a week of bombardment an American academic in the city described what had happened to her and those around her: loss of appetite, nausea, insomnia and "the inability to read or write a coherent paragraph." [3]


A scene of daily life in Beirut during the 1982 war. Source: Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, Palestine Red Crescent Society Collection.

The loaf of bread

For many the first task each morning was to look for bread, and often they came home with nothing. Abu Tareq, a Hamra resident, recalls that vegetables and meat disappeared altogether. In the first week of the siege breadlines began to form, hotel stores ran out of basics and canned food vanished from the shops. [3][4][12]

On 5 July the occupation army turned back a convoy of 14 food lorries and four Red Cross cars from West Beirut, and people rushed to the shops in a panic to buy what was left. By 6 July there was flour for only about ten days, and the political and military forces organised its distribution to small bakeries. [1][2]

In one Beirut neighbourhood the 19-year-old Ghassan Jeninati and his friends turned a bakery into a place where people could cook whatever provisions they had left. [13]

The problem was not always the absence of food but its price. Some vegetable prices rose by 300 to 400%, and part of the supply came in through middlemen who bribed the checkpoints of the occupation's allied militias, so the poor, the jobless and the refugees could not afford to buy. In August relief agencies, UNICEF among them, were still waiting for the occupation's permission to bring in 20 tons of food; the great obstacle was "access," not money. [6][14]

Thirst

Drinking water was precarious from the start, and by the end of the first week there was something close to “hysteria” over its availability. On 24 June the occupation cut West Beirut’s water to four hours every two days, then cut it off entirely. On 5 July Prime Minister Shafiq al-Wazzan announced that water and electricity had been cut completely and every road closed, and the occupation army reportedly ordered three engineers to remove key pumping machinery from the waterworks supplying the city. [4][5][1]

People carried pails to five distribution points set up by the United Nations, and the petrol shortage threatened the water tankers themselves. Children queued for water, and many drank sugary soft drinks or polluted well water, spreading stomach illnesses. In the south an occupation air strike destroyed a pumping station serving 120 villages in the Tyre area. [8][13][3]

The occupation turned the water back on only on 31 July, while keeping the blockade on all other goods; still without electricity, people depended on street mains that the shelling kept damaging. [7][14]

Darkness and fuel

Electricity was lost across most of West Beirut from the second day, after a major power station was bombed; it was then cut to four hours a day before being shut off entirely. The occupation army at first denied cutting water and electricity, then had to admit it when journalists found its soldiers inside the switching station. [4][5][2]

Petrol stations ran dry, rooftop diesel tanks were drained, gunfights broke out at petrol stations, and 20 litres of fuel cost about $30. Generator fuel became a matter of life and death for the hospitals. [12][1][7][14]

Hospitals under fire

Hospitals in the south were damaged in the first days, sending the wounded flooding into Beirut, where medical facilities were strained “beyond imagination.” On 5 July the American University Hospital had oxygen for only two days; anaesthetics ran out, and doctors sometimes had no time to anaesthetise the wounded. [4][1][12][3]

Doctors noted that the ratio of dead to wounded had reached about one to one, instead of the usual one to five, so intense was the bombardment. Within ten days the PLO opened 12 new medical facilities with two thousand beds, and 75 doctors and technicians arrived to support the Lebanese Red Cross and the Palestine Red Crescent Society. [8][15]

But the hospitals themselves were not spared. Berbir Hospital was hit again and again until it had lost 75% of its staff, the Palestine Red Crescent’s Gaza Hospital was shelled twice in a single day, and a phosphorus shell landed on the roof of the International Committee of the Red Cross offices, even though the ICRC had handed the occupation army maps of every medical facility. [16][7][17]

The Palestinian doctor Fayez Rashid, who worked at Gaza Hospital and at the Haik Zian school, turned into a field hospital, recorded the testimonies of the children, women, elderly people and fighters he treated in his book The Wounds Bear Witness: Memoirs of a Doctor under Siege. [18]

Rubbish and disease

Rubbish collection stopped in the first week; the waste piled up in the streets, the heaps caught fire and rat bites spread. In July the danger of cholera and typhoid grew, both diseases struck children in the city, and cases of polio, measles and scabies were reported in the region. The political and military forces took on rubbish collection and set up small clinics. [4][13][3][2][6]

Flight and displacement

According to the Red Cross, the first week of the aggression left some 600,000 Lebanese and Palestinians homeless, and the displaced moved into empty apartment blocks. Some 70,000 were displaced within Beirut alone, while thousands fled to the Bekaa, where the refugee centre in Baalbek ran out of food after about a hundred thousand arrived. [4][5][6]

In the south some 41,000 people from Tyre were left on the beaches for two days without food or shelter; the occupation barred UN convoys from the city until 8 June, and Palestinian refugees stayed on Sidon's beaches because they had nowhere left to go. The UN refugee agency said 175,000 of 237,000 registered refugees were in urgent need of aid and that the aggression had set its work in Lebanon back 32 years. [9][19][8]

Dead without graves

So heavy was the shelling that families could not reach the cemeteries and consigned their dead to the sea, and the American University Hospital's crematorium could no longer cope with the number of dead. In Sidon an occupation army administrator announced that the army intended to "bury bodies in pits where they lay." [20][15]

The Zionist massacres that accompanied the aggression

The massacres were not isolated incidents: they accompanied the aggression from its first day until after the fighters had left, striking shelters, hospitals, apartment blocks and camps. Among the most prominent:

4 June: the camp raids and the children's hospital

Two days before the invasion F-16s struck four Palestinian camps in Beirut home to

125,000 refugees; the Nazareth Children's Hospital near Sabra camp took a direct hit, and Lebanese government figures put the toll at 60 dead and 200 wounded, while other sources counted more than a hundred dead. During the first week, children wounded when aircraft struck two school buses were brought to Gaza Hospital. [21][4]

7 June: the shelters of Burj al-Shemali

Between five and eight in the evening occupation aircraft struck the shelters of Burj al-Shemali camp near Tyre with incendiary and phosphorus bombs, killing 125 civilians, 94 of whom burned to death in the Nadi al-Hawla shelter. Fayez Hassan Younes lost his wife and eight children, and Umm al-Ezz lost all five of hers. [22][23]

Tyre and white phosphorus

The UN command protested the occupation's use of white phosphorus incendiary shells in its bombardment of Tyre; Rashidieh camp was "virtually destroyed," and two-thirds of Tyre lay in ruins. Over the course of the war 2,994 people suffered severe white phosphorus burns. [9][19][10]

Sidon: bodies under the rubble

In Sidon 80 bodies were found on 16 June under a single building the occupation had shelled; on 20 June the Lebanese government announced that 1,100 of the city's people had been killed and a quarter of it totally destroyed, with bodies still buried under the rubble. The occupation made men file past informants and marked suspects on their clothes before taking them to detention camps. [15][19]

July–August: buildings brought down on their residents

On 27 July a direct hit struck a building housing 17 families and dozens remained buried under collapsed buildings; police put that day's toll at 120 dead and 232 wounded, most of them civilians. On 28 July 82 bodies were pulled from a single apartment block, and the day's toll reached 203 dead and 297 wounded. A vacuum bomb brought down an eight-storey building in the Sanayeh district, killing

everyone inside. [24][17][20]

On 1 August 200 were killed and 400 wounded in 14 hours of bombardment, and on 12 August, “Black Thursday,” 128 were killed and more than 400 wounded in 11 hours of air raids. [25][26]

16–18 September: Sabra and Shatila

After the fighters left and Bashir Gemayel was assassinated, the occupation army surrounded the Sabra and Shatila camps; at nightfall on 16 September 1982 it sent in allied Lebanese militias and lit up the night sky over the camps with flares to help the killers do their work. The massacre went on for three days and nights. [27][10]

The killers used machine guns, pistols, knives and axes; nurses and doctors were taken from Akka Hospital and executed, and hundreds were abducted and never seen again. Estimates range from 700 to five thousand dead; after comparing 17 lists of victims’ names, the Palestinian researcher Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout concluded that there were at least 1,300. [27]

Israel’s own Kahan Commission found Sharon indirectly responsible, forcing him out of the defence ministry though he stayed on as a minister, while an international commission headed by Seán MacBride concluded that the occupation bore the greatest legal responsibility. Human Rights Watch classed the massacre as a war crime and a crime against humanity, and none of its perpetrators has ever been tried. [27]

A woman displaced from Shatila camp and the Sabra quarter after the massacre, Beirut, September 1982. Source: Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, Palestine Red Crescent Society Collection.

The detainees

The massacres went hand in hand with mass arrests. In Sidon men aged 17 to 55 were rounded up and some 90 busloads of Palestinians taken away for

interrogation; in August the occupation claimed to have captured 7,400 people, while the Red Cross had been able to visit only 490 of them at the Ansar camp. The International Commission of Jurists called for some four thousand Palestinian detainees to be granted prisoner-of-war status. [28][16][2]

Read also: Massacres archive.

Voices and pens from the siege

Writers, poets and journalists stayed in besieged Beirut and set down its days. The Jordanian poet Amjad Nasser kept a diary, Beirut Small as the Palm of a Hand, in which he described the shelling as something that “exceeds revenge” and aims at annihilation. Mahmoud Darwish wrote Memory for Forgetfulness about a single day of the siege, and he is said to have stepped onto the balcony of his flat in the Dabbouss building and shouted at the attacking jets. The Lebanese thinker Fawwaz Traboulsi kept a siege diary published as On a Hope with No Cure. [11][29][3][30]

For all that, those who lived through the siege remember an atmosphere of “hope” and of “resilience and solidarity.” People shared water and bread, opened their shelters to their neighbours, and organised themselves to clear the rubbish and tend the wounded. [3][2]

Differences between the accounts

Casualty figures vary from source to source depending on who counted and over what period, and the occupation’s figures routinely understate civilian losses: on 7 July a government spokesman claimed only 331 Lebanese civilians had been killed, when Beirut police had counted 2,633 dead in the city alone. Estimates for the Burj al-Shemali shelters range from 125 to 150 dead, and for Sabra and Shatila from 700 to five thousand. [8][22][23][27]

Timeline

Date	Event
4 June 1982	Raids on Beirut’s camps and the children’s hospital [21]
7 June	The Burj al-Shemali shelter massacre [22]
8 June	The occupation finally lets UN convoys into Tyre [9]
16 June	80 bodies under a single building in Sidon [15]
20 June	Lebanese government: 1,100 killed in Sidon [19]
24 June	Water and electricity rationed in West Beirut [5]
5 July	Water and electricity cut off; food convoy turned back [1]
6 July	Flour for ten days; cholera threat [2]
17 July	Vegetable prices up 300–400% [6]
27–28 July	Buildings collapse on residents: 82 bodies from one block [17]
31 July	Water restored but goods still blockaded; Gaza Hospital shelled [7]
1 August	200 killed in 14 hours of bombardment [25]
12 August	Black Thursday: 128 killed [26]
16–18 September	The Sabra and Shatila massacre [27]

Frequently asked questions about life and massacres in the siege of Beirut

How did people live in besieged Beirut?

Mostly without water or electricity, searching for bread every morning and spending their days in shelters under bombardment that began at dawn and lasted until evening. [3][4]

Did the occupation cut off Beirut’s water?

Yes: it cut it to four hours every two days, then off entirely in early July, restoring it only on 31 July. [5][1][7]

Was there famine in Beirut in 1982?

Canned food, meat and vegetables vanished at times, flour was down to ten days’ supply, prices rose by 300–400%, and the occupation blocked food convoys. [12][2][6][1]

What were the main massacres of the aggression?

The 4 June raids on the camps, the Burj al-Shemali shelters on 7 June, the Sidon massacres, the collapsing buildings of July, Black Thursday, and the Sabra and Shatila massacre. [21][22][19][17][26][27]

Were hospitals shelled?

Yes: Berbir Hospital was hit repeatedly, Gaza Hospital was shelled, and a phosphorus shell landed on the Red Cross offices. [16][7]

How many were killed at Sabra and Shatila?

Estimates range from 700 to five thousand; Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout concluded there were at least 1,300. [27]

Read also on Palestinuna

- The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon
- Battles archive
- Massacres archive

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