Battle of Beirut Airport and Ouzai 1982: 14 Hours of Bombing That Failed to Break the Camps

On 1 August 1982, after seven weeks of siege, the Israeli occupation army launched its fiercest assault on West Beirut since the invasion began. It bombarded the city for 14 hours without pause in some 150 air raids that dropped about 260 tons of bombs, and drove its tanks up the southern front towards Beirut International Airport, Burj al-Barajneh camp and Ouzai. It took the airport, but against the fighters' positions in the camps and along the coastal road it made only slight gains, and its attempt to land troops on the beach was beaten back. [1]

The fighting on this front went on in the following days, up to the fierce battles at the airport on 8–10 August. This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 siege of Beirut. [2]

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The battle at a glance

Item	Details
Key days	1 August 1982, then 2 August and 8–10 August
Place	Beirut International Airport, Burj al-Barajneh camp, Ouzai, Hay al-Sollom, Lailaki and Mreijeh, south of Beirut
Defenders	The forces of the Palestinian revolution in the camps and southern suburbs, with the Lebanese national forces
Bombardment on 1 August	14 hours, some 150 air raids, about 260 tons of bombs
Occupation losses according to the PLO	30 tanks and personnel carriers destroyed and 80 wounded (1 August)
Toll of the bombardment	200 dead and 400 wounded on 1 August; 238 dead and about 480 wounded on 2 August
Outcome	The airport taken; only slight gains against the camps; the naval landing repelled

Sources: [1][3]

The southern front

West Beirut's southern front ran from Beirut International Airport to Burj al-Barajneh camp and the districts of Hay al-Sollom, Lailaki and Mreijeh, down to Ouzai and the coastal road. On this front the revolution's fighters dug in among the camps and working-class districts, and Yasser Arafat toured its front lines in the southern suburbs. [3][1][4]

The airport was a target from day one: occupation aircraft struck it on 4 June, and on 10 June their raids destroyed six Middle East Airlines planes. On 24 June occupation forces advanced in the airport area; on 6 July its tanks and artillery hit an ammunition store in Burj al-Barajneh camp; and on 30 July it shelled the camp along with Sabra, Shatila and Ras al-Nabaa. [5][6][7][8][2]

1 August: the fiercest day since the invasion

At dawn on Sunday 1 August 1982 the occupation began an air, land and sea bombardment of West Beirut that lasted 14 hours, described in the Palestine Chronology as the “fiercest fighting since the invasion began.” Its aircraft flew some 150 sorties and dropped about 260 tons of bombs. [1]

Under this bombardment occupation forces took Beirut International Airport and drew near the edge of Burj al-Barajneh camp. But they made only slight gains against the fighters’ positions in the camps south of the airport and on the coastal road from Ouzai, and when they tried to land troops on the coast the fighters drove them back. [1]

The PLO announced that 30 tanks and personnel carriers had been destroyed and said 80 occupation soldiers had been wounded, while the occupation army admitted only nine wounded. The fighters’ own losses were small, but the destruction wrought on the Palestinian neighbourhoods was enormous. Lebanese police put the bombardment’s toll at 200 dead and 400 wounded, and a ninth ceasefire took effect at five in the afternoon. [1]

2 August: fifty yards on the coastal road

The next day occupation artillery traded fire with the fighters’ units in Burj al-Barajneh, Lailaki and Hay al-Sollom, and occupation forces took Mreijeh and parts of Hay al-Sollom, until on the coastal road south of the city the two sides were only about 50 yards apart. The occupation commander, Amir Drori, warned West Beirut’s residents to leave “before it is too late,” while massing his tanks near the Museum, Galerie Semaan and port crossings. [3]

Lebanese police put that day’s toll at 238 dead and about 480 wounded, bringing the count since 4 June to 3,541 dead in Beirut and 11,050 in Lebanon. Berbir Hospital was hit again and had lost 75% of its staff. [3]

8–10 August: the airport battles

Fierce fighting broke out again around the airport between 8 and 10 August; the fighters hit an occupation personnel carrier, killing three soldiers and wounding nine, and there were reports that the occupation used internationally banned weapons in these battles. On 9 August the occupation launched an air, sea and land attack on West Beirut and its gunboats kept shelling the shore, even as the logistical details of the fighters' departure were being completed at the Lebanese Defence Ministry. [2][9]

Three days later came "Black Thursday," 12 August, when the occupation bombarded West Beirut for 11 hours without pause. [10]

Results

The occupation took the airport and some of the surrounding districts, but it could not storm Burj al-Barajneh camp or break the fighters' lines on the coastal road, and the battle of 1 August, for all the savagery of the bombardment, became fresh proof that West Beirut would not fall to a ground assault. Days later its last great assault, on the Museum crossing, also failed, and it was forced to wait for the evacuation agreement. [1][3][11][12]

Differences between the accounts

The two sides' figures diverge sharply: on 1 August the PLO announced 80 occupation soldiers wounded while the occupation admitted only nine, and it announced 30 vehicles destroyed, a figure no independent source confirmed. On 2 August Lebanese police put the toll at 238 dead, while the PLO said only 20 to 30 of its fighters had been killed, confirming that most of the victims were civilians. Detailed Arab sources on these battles are few, and this article draws mainly on the Institute for Palestine Studies' Palestine Chronology. [1][3]

Timeline

Date	Event
4 June 1982	Air raids on Beirut airport and the camps [5]
10 June	Six Middle East Airlines planes destroyed at the airport [6]
24 June	The occupation advances in the airport area [7]
6 July	An ammunition store in Burj al-Barajneh shelled [8]
30 July	Burj al-Barajneh, Sabra, Shatila and Ras al-Nabaa shelled [2]
1 August	14 hours of bombardment; the airport taken; the landing repelled [1]
2 August	Mreijeh and parts of Hay al-Sollom taken; Drori's ultimatum [3]
8–10 August	Battles at the airport; an occupation personnel carrier hit [2]
12 August	Black Thursday [10]

Frequently asked questions about the battle of the airport, Ouzai and Burj al-Barajneh

When was the battle of the airport and Ouzai?

Its fiercest day was 1 August 1982, with renewed fighting on 2 August and between 8 and 10 August. [1][2]

How long did the bombardment last on 1 August?

Fourteen hours without pause, in some 150 air raids that dropped about 260 tons of bombs. [1]

Did the occupation take Beirut airport?

Yes, on 1 August 1982, but it made only slight gains against the camps and Ouzai. [1]

What happened to Burj al-Barajneh camp?

It was shelled again and again, and the occupation drew near its edge on 1 August, but could not storm it. [1][8]

How many were killed on 1 August?

200 dead and 400 wounded, according to Lebanese police. [1]

Read also on Palestinuna

- Burj al-Barajneh camp
- The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon
- Battles archive

Sources and references

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