Battle of the Museum 1982: The "Final Battle" That Stopped the Storming of West Beirut

Fighters in one of the battles of Beirut during the war years (1982–1985). Source: Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, Palestine Red Crescent Society Collection.

At dawn on Wednesday 4 August 1982, in the ninth week of the siege of Beirut, the Israeli occupation army launched its last great ground assault to storm West Beirut. It was preceded by a bombardment from land, sea and air that ran from shortly before midnight into the evening, with high explosives, white phosphorus and cluster bombs. Then it drove its tanks along several axes, the most dangerous being the Museum and the Hippodrome racecourse, aiming to cut the capital in two and reach its heart. [1][2][3]

At the Museum crossing the assault was met by fighters of the Palestine Liberation Army's Hittin forces, Fatah, the other factions and the Lebanese national forces. They destroyed dozens of tanks and vehicles and ambushed an armoured column inside the racecourse. The day ended without the occupation reaching its goal, and Palestinian sources called the battle "the pride of Palestinian arms" and "the final battle," the one that convinced the besiegers Beirut would not fall to assault. This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 siege of Beirut. [4][2][5]

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The battle at a glance

Item	Details
Date	Dawn of Wednesday 4 August 1982 until evening (one Palestinian account dates it to 5 August)
Place	The Museum crossing and the Hippodrome racecourse, plus the port, Ouzai, Hay al-Sollom, Lailaki and Galerie Semaan axes, Beirut
Defenders	Battalion 412 of the PLA’s Hittin forces, fighters of Fatah and the other factions, and the Lebanese national forces
Main commanders	Saad Sayel (Abu al-Walid), Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), and Battalion 412 commander Atiyeh Awad
Attackers	Armoured brigades, elite units and the Golani Brigade, with air, artillery and naval cover
Occupation losses according to Palestinian sources	More than 36 vehicles destroyed; 19 soldiers admitted killed
Outcome	The assault failed and West Beirut’s lines held

Sources: [3][4][6][2][1]

The Museum crossing: the gate to Beirut’s heart

The Museum crossing was the best-known passage on the line dividing the two halves of Beirut. From it the road runs towards Barbir Hospital, the Corniche al-

Mazraa and Fakhani, where the revolution's headquarters stood. Beside it stretches the Hippodrome racecourse, known as al-Marmah, next to the French embassy and the ambassador's residence. During the siege the crossings were cut to a handful, and the Museum crossing was kept for journalists, diplomats and officials. [3][5][4]

That made the axis the ideal target for anyone wanting to split West Beirut: breaking through meant reaching the Ras al-Nabaa highway and the Corniche al-Mazraa, commanding the besieged city's heart by fire, and cutting the southern camps off from its northern districts. A Palestinian account says the occupation's plan rested on three main axes, among them an armoured brigade against the fighters' positions at the port and a tank brigade to storm the Museum and racecourse area and split the capital. [3][2]

The eve of the battle

The assault came days after some of the siege's worst. On 1 August the occupation bombarded Beirut for 14 hours and took the airport; on 2 August it massed its tanks near the Museum, Galerie Semaan and port crossings, and its commander, Amir Drori, warned West Beirut's residents to leave "before it is too late." On 3 August the PLO told the Security Council that occupation forces had advanced in Hay al-Sollom and attacked on the Ouzai axis, where they were repelled, and that they were massing on the Museum, airport, Tayouneh and Ouzai axes. [7][8][9]

On the other side, Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) received word from more than one source that the occupation meant to storm the city. He met Yasser Arafat and Saad Sayel to weigh it, and Arafat judged that the negotiations would now be conducted by fire and that the besiegers were staking everything on this battle. Abu Jihad toured the front, concluded that the attack would come on the Museum axis, and posted officers near the lines of contact with night-vision equipment and radios. The commanders called the coming fight "the final battle." [2]

The axis commanders met, tasks were assigned and a fire plan drawn up for the likely targets. Artillery, rocket launchers and ammunition were brought up, the

threatened axes were reinforced with fighters, and the roads were sown with mines and roadside charges. It was agreed that fire would be opened centrally, on the personal order of Saad Sayel (Abu al-Walid). [2]

The defenders of the axis

The defence of the Museum, racecourse and French embassy sector fell to the commando Battalion 412 of the PLA's Hittin forces, whose sectors stretched to Tayouneh, Ras al-Nabaa and the Phoenicia Hotel. The battalion was attached to the Syrian 85th Brigade stationed in Beirut and worked in coordination with the command of the Palestinian revolution, alongside the Qadisiyya forces, the Hittin tank regiment and the Ajnadin forces. [6][4]

The battalion was commanded by Atiyeh Shehadeh Awad, born in 1940 in Hittin in the Tiberias district. His family was driven out in the Nakba to Khan al-Sheikh camp near Damascus; he studied in UNRWA schools, graduated from the military academy in Homs, joined the Palestine Liberation Army, and was wounded in both the 1967 and 1973 wars. Over the radio during the battle he is quoted as saying: "They will pass only over our bodies." [6][2]

Alongside the PLA fought Fatah's fighters under Saad Sayel, the fighters of the revolution's factions and the Lebanese national forces. One of the battle's commanders recalls a B-10 anti-tank gun of the Lebanese Communist Party, a T-54 tank of the Nasserite Murabitun, a 107 mm Coral rocket launcher, RPG-7s, mortars, medium machine guns and anti-tank mines. [5][3]

Dawn of 4 August: fire on all of Beirut

Shortly before midnight on Tuesday 3 August the bombardment began, and it went on until nightfall on Wednesday, the heaviest assault since the siege began. Artillery, tanks, gunboats and aircraft all took part, firing high explosives, white phosphorus and cluster bombs. Correspondents described a saturation barrage over several square miles that left almost nothing untouched; nearly every district of West Beirut was badly damaged, and the camps were described as devastated.

[1]

Under this cover the occupation moved along six axes: Ouzai, Hay al-Sollom, Galerie Semaan, the Museum, the port and Lailaki. A Palestinian account says the air force alone flew dozens of sorties, and that one occupation officer later said he was sure every aircraft in the air force had taken part in the war. [10][2]



Destruction left by the occupation's bombardment of a Beirut district in summer 1982 (the photograph is dated 5 July 1982). Source: Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, described by WAFA photojournalist Yousef al-Qutob.

At the Museum crossing

After a heavy howitzer barrage, the occupation's tanks advanced suddenly from the Museum area towards the Henri Chehab bridge, led by mine-clearing vehicles and followed by elite units and the Golani Brigade. Palestinian accounts say the fighters let the column draw near until it entered range of the forward ambushes, and that the tension along the lines lasted until reconnaissance reported that the enemy's build-up was complete. [4][5][2]

Then Saad Sayel gave the signal to open fire with the password: "The scents of paradise have blown." Fire rained on the column from every direction, from artillery, rocket launchers, mortars and launchers, and the attackers were stunned by its weight, for Sharon had believed the besieged fighters' ammunition would not stretch to such a battle. [2]

From among the buildings Battalion 412's fighters fired a Malyutka missile at the first tank, blowing its turret up to the eighth floor of a nearby building, and then hunted the vehicles through the streets with B-7 anti-armour launchers. The Palestinian account says more than 36 vehicles were destroyed with their crews within minutes, that the occupation admitted 19 soldiers killed, and that its forces "could not advance a single centimetre" through the crossing. [4]

The occupation's soldiers came under fire from every side and advanced and fell

back beneath it. Palestinian sources say Abu al-Walid halted the barrage for a time to let the enemy gather its dead, then opened fire again. In the fighting the battalion commander, Atiyeh Awad, was wounded in his right shoulder, and the battalion gave a number of martyrs and wounded. [2][6]

The ambush in the Hippodrome

The occupation's tanks avoided the main road from the Museum to Barbir, which was sown with mines and ambushes. Under cover of artillery and air bombardment they burst instead through a breach they opened in the eastern wall of the racecourse. Their aim was to reach the Ras al-Nabaa highway, command it with direct fire, and then take the Ras al-Nabaa district itself. [3]

But Brigadier Saad Sayel had uncovered the plan before dawn. He sent dozens of Fatah fighters armed with B-7 launchers to lie in wait along the southern side of the racecourse, and watched the battle from an upper floor of a building opposite the French ambassador's residence. When the head of the column reached the far end of the ground, the rockets struck the entire column, from the last tank to the first. [3]

This fight was decided in about a quarter of an hour. F-16s tried to cover the withdrawal of the vehicles and protect the troops but could not, because the combatants were too closely entangled, while the occupation's war minister, Ariel Sharon, watching from the Alexander Hotel near the General Security directorate, "went mad with rage." The fighting around the racecourse went on for hours and ended at sunset, and Fatah's fighters recovered from the ground the bodies of his soldiers that Sharon had been unable to retrieve. [3][1]

The port and the coast

On the port axis the occupation's advance reached the Fattal building, but some 40 tanks pulled back to the eastern side of the port before midday. On the southern coastal axis, where the occupation made its biggest gain, its forces reached a Lebanese army barracks near the Palestinian refugee camps, a little

over a mile short of the Corniche al-Mazraa, and took the Ouzai area; its aircraft then bombed the fighters' positions around the barracks for about ninety minutes before nightfall. [1]

On the Museum axis itself, an occupation officer claimed his forces held a strip 60 yards wide and 600 yards long near the crossing, while a Palestinian fighter said the tanks advanced only a few hundred yards before turning into the racecourse. Arafat mocked the occupation's "gains," saying it had advanced "a metre and a half." [1][5]

Results

The occupation failed to storm West Beirut through the Museum gate, making this its last major attempt to take the city by land and the last important battle of the siege. One of the battle's commanders says the occupation pulled back and asked for a new ceasefire, and Palestinian sources say it was unable for days to evacuate some of its wounded and dead. In a press interview an occupation officer said the Museum battles were the fiercest his forces fought in Beirut, that he was trying to forget them, and that he had not been the same since. [3][4][5][11][2]

That same day, 4 August, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 517, declaring itself "deeply shocked and alarmed" by the consequences of the occupation's invasion of Beirut on 3 August. It censured Israel for failing to comply with its earlier resolutions, demanded the prompt return of its forces that had advanced after 1 August, and authorised the Secretary-General to increase the number of UN observers in and around Beirut. [12]

The occupation did not stop at defeat: the next day it took revenge with a savage bombardment of West Beirut, counted among the heaviest of the war, and then returned to the airport and Museum axes on 8–10 August, culminating in the heaviest air bombardment of all on 12 August. But the great ground assault was never repeated, and the outcome moved to the negotiating table until the evacuation agreement. [11][13][14][3]

Differences between the accounts

Most sources date the battle to the dawn of 4 August 1982, among them Farouk Itani’s memoir, the testimonies of Mazen Izz al-Din and Jihad Jayyousi, and the international press of the following day; Ali Badwan dates it to the morning of 5 August. The accounts also differ on the unit: Badwan and Orabi Kalloub speak of Battalion 412 under Col. Atiyeh Awad, while Jayyousi names the 13th Battalion of the Hittin forces under Maj. Atiyeh Awad, with the neighbouring 15th Battalion. [3][2][5][4][6][1]

The figures for the occupation’s losses vary widely. Badwan’s account gives more than 36 vehicles and an admission of 19 soldiers killed; the international press quoted WAFA as reporting 21 tanks and 14 personnel carriers destroyed and more than 100 casualties inflicted, and a military spokesman in Damascus as claiming 40 tanks and an APC lost and at least 150 killed and wounded; another source confirms only that at least four tanks were destroyed. None of these figures was confirmed by independent sources, while the occupation routinely understated its losses. [4][1][11]

Timeline

Date	Event
1 August 1982	14 hours of bombardment; the airport taken [7]
2 August	Tanks massed near the Museum, Galerie Semaan and port crossings; Drori’s ultimatum [8]
3 August	Attacks on Hay al-Sollom and Ouzai; the PLO alerts the Security Council to the build-up [9]
Night of 3–4 August	The all-out bombardment begins shortly before midnight [1]
Dawn, 4 August	Tanks advance on the Museum axis; the password “The scents of paradise have blown” [2]
Morning, 4 August	The Hippodrome ambush is decided in a quarter of an hour [3]

Date	Event
Late morning, 4 August	Some 40 tanks pull back from the port axis [1]
4 August	The Security Council adopts Resolution 517 [12]
Sunset, 4 August	The battle ends and the assault has failed [3]
5 August	A savage revenge bombardment of West Beirut [11]
12 August	11 hours of air bombardment on West Beirut [14]

Frequently asked questions about the 1982 Battle of the Museum

When was the Battle of the Museum?

From dawn to sunset on Wednesday 4 August 1982, according to most sources; one Palestinian account dates it to 5 August. [3][1][4]

Where is the Museum crossing?

On the line dividing the two halves of Beirut, by the National Museum and the Hippodrome racecourse, on the road to Barbir and the Corniche al-Mazraa. [3][5]

Who defended the Museum axis?

Battalion 412 of the PLA’s Hittin forces under Atiyeh Awad, Fatah’s fighters under Saad Sayel, and the factions and Lebanese national forces. [6][3][5]

What was the Hippodrome ambush?

An ambush laid by Fatah fighters with B-7 launchers for a tank column that broke through the racecourse’s eastern wall; they struck it from its rear to its head and the fight was decided in about a quarter of an hour. [3]

What were the occupation’s losses?

A Palestinian account speaks of more than 36 vehicles and an admission of 19 soldiers killed, and WAFA announced 21 tanks and 14 personnel carriers destroyed; no independent source confirmed these figures. [4][1]

What did the Security Council decide on the day of the battle?

Resolution 517 of 4 August 1982, which censured the occupation for non-compliance and demanded the return of its forces that had advanced after 1 August. [12]

Why is it called “the final battle”?

Because it was the last major attempt to storm West Beirut by land; after it failed, the outcome moved to the negotiations until the fighters’ departure. [2][3]

Read also on Palestinuna

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

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