The Departure of the Fighters and Yasser Arafat from Beirut, 1982: "To Palestine" aboard the Atlantis



Yasser Arafat aboard the Greek ship Atlantis after leaving Beirut on 30 August 1982. Photograph by the Lebanese photographer Fouad Elkoury. Source: Middle East Eye.

At dawn on Saturday 21 August 1982, after more than seventy days of siege, the fighters of the Palestinian revolution began to leave Beirut. They left in groups over twelve days, by sea from the port and by land along the Damascus road, in uniform and with their personal weapons, raising victory signs and portraits of Yasser Arafat, while their comrades fired into the air in salute. [1][2][3][4]

On 30 August, after the last agreed groups had gone, Arafat himself left aboard the Greek ship Atlantis, and when a journalist asked where he was going, he answered: “To Palestine.” By 1 September about 14,700 people had left Beirut, according to the United Nations. This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 siege of Beirut. [5][4][2]

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The departure at a glance

Item	Details
Duration	21 August – 1 September 1982
Arafat's departure	Monday 30 August 1982, aboard the Greek ship Atlantis
Routes	By sea from Beirut port, and by land along the Beirut–Damascus road
Number leaving according to the UN	About 14,700, including some 3,600 of the Arab Deterrent Force and 167 wounded
Destinations	Jordan, Iraq, Tunisia, Democratic Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Algeria, the Yemen Arab Republic, and Greece
Supervision	A multinational force from France, the United States and Italy (2,285 troops)
Toll of the invasion as announced by Arafat	About 5,000 killed, 48,000 wounded and 9,000 detained

Sources: [2][6][5]

On the eve: "for all to see"

The departure agreement provided that the fighters would keep their pistols, rifles, machine guns and ammunition and hand their heavy weapons to the Lebanese army "as a gift," with maps of the minefields; that the road convoys to Syria would travel only by day and not stop before the border; and that the departure would take no more than 14 days. The multinational force was to stay in Beirut until 26 September. [3]

Habib had first proposed that the fighters leave overland for Syria in Red Cross

uniforms, but Arafat refused: the departure had to be public, “for all to see.” He ordered the fighters to leave in their uniforms with their light weapons, to preserve the dignity of the revolution that had held out in Beirut. He informed his Lebanese allies, among them Walid Jumblatt, Saeb Salam and Shafik al-Wazzan, of the details and coordinated them with them. [4]

21–22 August: the first groups

At dawn on 21 August the advance units of the French force landed at Beirut port, and at five in the morning the first group, most of them wounded and sick, sailed for Cyprus and on to Jordan and Iraq: 265 men of the Palestine Liberation Army to Jordan and 132 to Iraq. Their comrades fired into the air in salute under the eyes of the French troops, while the Lebanese army was delayed in taking over the port from the occupation army. [7][1][2]

On 22 August occupation warships tried to stop the sailing, claiming that shipping the fighters’ jeeps violated the agreement; then a group of 984 fighters from Fatah, the Popular Front and the Democratic Front sailed for Tunisia, taking 21 jeeps with them. On the military trucks heading for the port the fighters raised victory signs and portraits of Arafat, garlands of white flowers hung around their necks, and the port saw moving scenes of farewell. That same day electricity returned to West Beirut for the first time in weeks. [8][2][3][4]

23–29 August: to Yemen, Sudan and Syria

On 23 and 24 August 1,095 fighters sailed for Democratic Yemen, where they were warmly received; on 25 August 488 fighters of Fatah and the PLA sailed for Sudan, and the sea departures to Syria began. On 26 August 167 wounded Palestinians were taken by sea to Cyprus and Greece, where Athens welcomed the German hospital ship Flora carrying wounded fighters, and Fathi Arafat, head of the Palestine Red Crescent Society, was there to receive them. [2][9][6]

On 27 August the first overland convoy set out on the Beirut–Damascus road carrying more than 1,300 men of the PLA, while 760 fighters sailed for Tartus; US

Marines patrolled the port, and the fighters handed part of their weaponry to the Lebanese National Movement. By 29 August some 8,500 fighters had left Beirut. [10][2][9]

30 August: Abu Ammar's last day in Beirut

On the morning of Monday 30 August Arafat held a press conference at Walid Jumblatt's home, announcing that the invasion had left about 5,000 dead and 48,000 wounded and that the occupation had detained 9,000 people, 106 of them fighters, including wounded men dragged from the hospitals of Sidon and Tyre. Then he bade farewell to the Lebanese Muslim and national leaders one by one. [6]

He called at Saeb Salam's home, a marshal's baton under his arm, and insisted on kissing Salam's wife's hand, saying: "I kiss this hand on behalf of all the heroic women of Beirut who held out with us"; he left most of his belongings at the house. He told journalists he was leaving in Beirut "a part of my heart, a part of my conscience," that "this is a long march," and that Beirut was "a station, and I am going to another station." [11][12][13]

Wazzan and Salam accompanied him to the port, and the farewell was attended by the Mufti of the Republic, Sheikh Hassan Khaled, President Salim al-Hoss and Walid Jumblatt representing the National Movement, and Arafat shook hands with Nabih Berri. Arafat presented Wazzan with the "Steadfastness of Beirut" medal in the name of the PLO. All along the route through the shattered streets his supporters fired into the air in farewell, and a child handed him an olive branch. When an aide told him the people of Beirut had come to see him off, he replied: "No, where are the people of Beirut going?" [11][4][6]

Arafat boarded the Greek ship Atlantis under the protection of soldiers of the 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment of the French Foreign Legion; the Americans guarded the road to the port, the French navy protected the ship and US warships shadowed it at sea. When a journalist asked where he was heading, he said: "To Palestine." His companions recall that he shed a tear as the ship pulled away, and one of them said he "weeps only for the martyrs." [5][11][4]

Aboard the Atlantis

About 80 people were aboard the Atlantis, among them its crew and Arafat's senior aides and their families, including Sakher Habash, Ahmad Abdel Rahman, Force 17 commander Faisal Abu Sharkh and Salah Qallab. With them went the Lebanese photographer Fouad Elkoury, who with his companions wore fighters' uniforms so he could leave with them, and who took rare pictures of Arafat on deck and in the dining room, studying a map with his comrades or leaning on the rail in his keffiyeh, one of them a rare photograph of him bareheaded. [5]

The Lebanese filmmaker Jocelyne Saab was the only journalist allowed aboard with a camera, and she shot her documentary The Ship of Exile (1982), in which Arafat speaks of his fate and the future of the revolution. [14]

On 2 September the ship docked at Piraeus, where large crowds greeted Arafat and he answered them with the victory sign; Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou received him with a red carpet. At a brief press conference Arafat rejected all talk of defeat: "The people cannot be defeated." The next day he sailed for Tunis, where the PLO set up its headquarters, and he remained in exile until he returned to the soil of Palestine on 1 July 1994. [5]

30 August – 1 September: the last groups

On the day Arafat left, 588 fighters sailed for Algeria; on 31 August 841 sailed for the Yemen Arab Republic; and on 1 September the last group of 681 fighters sailed for Syria. On 30 and 31 August the Arab Deterrent Force, 3,613 troops, left West Beirut overland for Damascus and took up new positions in the Bekaa. [2][6]

Date	Number	Destination
21 August	397	Jordan and Iraq
22 August	984	Tunisia
23–24 August	1,095	Democratic Yemen
25 August	488	Sudan

Date	Number	Destination
25–29 August	5,822	Syria (by sea and land)
26 August	167 wounded	Cyprus and Greece
30 August	60	Arafat and companions to Greece
30 August	588	Algeria
30–31 August	3,613	Arab Deterrent Force to Damascus
31 August	841	Yemen Arab Republic
1 September	681	Syria

Source: [2]

After the departure

The multinational force was to stay in Beirut until 26 September, but it left on 10 September. On 14 September Bashir Gemayel was assassinated; the occupation army stormed West Beirut and sealed off the camps of Sabra and Shatila, and the massacre took place between 16 and 18 September. So fell the US guarantee for the safety of the Palestinian civilians left in the camps after the fighters' departure. [3][15][16]

The fighters left Beirut, but they left as Arafat had wanted: openly, with their weapons, raising victory signs, after a siege in which the occupation army had been unable to storm the city. Saeb Salam said they "left with their weapons, honoured, raising the victory sign." [4][12]

Differences between the accounts

Documents published by Al Majalla say Arafat left on 29 August, while the UN Secretary-General's report, the Palestine Chronology and Saeb Salam's memoirs record his departure on 30 August, the date adopted here; on 29 August the PLO denied that Arafat had left Beirut. Estimates of the number who left range from "about 15,000 fighters" in some sources to about 14,700 in the UN table, which

includes the Arab Deterrent Force and the wounded, while the Palestine Chronology put those who had left by 29 August at about 8,500. [17][2][6][11][9][5]

Timeline

Date	Event
21 August 1982	The first group sails from Beirut port at 5 a.m. [1]
22 August	Occupation warships obstruct the sailing; the Tunisia group leaves; electricity returns [8]
23–24 August	Sailings to Democratic Yemen [2]
25 August	Sailings to Sudan; departures to Syria begin [2]
26 August	167 wounded taken to Cyprus and Greece [2]
27 August	The first overland convoy to Damascus [10]
29 August	About 8,500 have left so far [9]
30 August	Arafat’s press conference, farewells and sailing on the Atlantis [6]
30–31 August	The Arab Deterrent Force leaves overland for Damascus [2]
1 September	The last group sails for Syria [2]
2 September	Arafat arrives at Piraeus and is received by Papandreou [5]
10 September	The multinational force leaves ahead of schedule [3]
16–18 September	The Sabra and Shatila massacre [16]

Frequently asked questions about the departure of the fighters and Yasser Arafat from Beirut

When did the Palestinian fighters leave Beirut?

Between 21 August and 1 September 1982, in groups by sea and by land. [2]

When did Yasser Arafat leave Beirut?

On Monday 30 August 1982, aboard the Greek ship Atlantis to Greece, and from there to Tunis. [6][5]

What did Arafat say when asked where he was going?

He said: “To Palestine.” [4]

How many left Beirut?

About 14,700 according to the UN report, including some 3,600 of the Arab Deterrent Force and 167 wounded. [2]

Did the fighters leave with their weapons?

Yes, with their personal weapons; they handed the heavy weapons to the Lebanese army. [3][11]

Who filmed and photographed the Atlantis voyage?

The filmmaker Jocelyne Saab in her film The Ship of Exile, and the photographer Fouad Elkoury. [14][5]

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