Nadi al-Hawla Shelter Massacre 1982: The Battle of Burj al-Shemali

On 6 and 7 June 1982, the first two days of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Palestinian revolution's fighters in Burj al-Shemali camp near Tyre fought one of the fiercest battles of the south, destroying some 14 occupation tanks and armoured vehicles and capturing four of its soldiers. The occupation took its revenge on civilians: between five and eight in the evening of 7 June its aircraft struck the camp's shelters and caves with incendiary and phosphorus bombs, killing 125 of its people within a few hours, 94 of whom burned to death in a single shelter, the Nadi al-Hawla shelter. [1]

Ever since, Burj al-Shemali has been known as "the camp of the martyrs." This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 siege of Beirut, and draws mainly on the testimonies of survivors and fighters gathered by the researcher Jaber Suleiman and published in Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya. [2][1]

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At a glance

Item	Details
Place	Burj al-Shemali camp, east of Tyre, south Lebanon
Battle	6–7 June 1982
Massacre	Evening of 7 June 1982, between five and eight
Defenders	Revolution fighters who stayed in the south, in groups of 2–3 armed with RPG launchers
Occupation losses	About 14 tanks and vehicles destroyed, 4 soldiers captured, the armoured unit’s commander killed
Massacre victims	125 civilians, 94 of them in the Nadi al-Hawla shelter
Weapons used	Incendiary and phosphorus bombs
Occupation enters the camp	17 June 1982, after the fighters withdrew

Sources: [1][2]

Burj al-Shemali camp

Burj al-Shemali camp stands on a hill about 80 metres above sea level, a few kilometres east of Tyre and some 80 kilometres from Beirut. It was set up in 1955 under UNRWA supervision, when refugees were moved there from the Anjar area in the Bekaa; refugees from the villages of al-Dishum and al-Husseiniyya had arrived before them. Many of its people had been driven out in 1948 from the villages of the Hula plain in Upper Galilee, taking refuge in Bint Jbeil, Marjayoun and Khiam, then in Tyre, before settling in Burj al-Shemali. [2]

Hence the name of the Nadi al-Hawla shelter, the “Hula Club,” taken from the Hula

plain, the land whose memory the camp's people carried with them into exile. [2]

4–5 June: the beginning

On 4 and 5 June 1982 occupation aircraft and artillery pounded south Lebanon, Tyre and its camps among them, while its warships shelled the coast. The occupation's leaders had planned a "lightning war" of no more than 72 hours, and to keep their own losses down they adopted the method of bombing civilian shelters before storming the camps, a pattern repeated in Rashidieh and Ain al-Hilweh. [1]

The resistance in the camp was organised by the professional fighters who had stayed in the south; the central sector commander, "Brother Bilal," played a leading role, alongside the Tyre regional commander, Abu Ali Masoud. [1]

6 June: tanks under Lebanese flags

Around noon on Sunday 6 June occupation armour reached the edge of the camp flying Lebanese flags as camouflage, and residents at first took it for units of the "Lebanese Arab Army." Once the fighters confirmed it was the occupation, they split into small groups of two or three, armed with RPG launchers and light weapons, and took up positions at every entrance to the camp. [1]

Position	What happened
Southern main entrance	Four tanks destroyed at the first entrance and three at the second; four soldiers captured, two of them wounded
North-eastern entrance (towards al-Ramla)	Attempts to advance stopped
Eastern entrance (towards the Palestine School), about 3 p.m.	A bulldozer and a tank destroyed; the force forced to withdraw
Near the Sarafand school, about 8 p.m.	Three tanks that had driven onto the roof of a civilian shelter destroyed
Near the Abu Khalil orchard, about 3 a.m.	An attack from the south repelled and a tank destroyed

Source: [1]

The fighter Abu Khaldoun was killed in the fighting. At six in the evening the commanders met and redeployed the fighters towards the eastern and southern entrances, where the pressure was heaviest. At eight, when occupation tanks drove onto the roof of a shelter where civilians were hiding near the Sarafand school, one group held its fire to protect those inside, while another attacked the tanks and destroyed three of them; some soldiers fled, and the fighters took apart the machine guns they had left behind. [1]

7 June: ultimatums, then bombardment

At dawn on Monday 7 June the occupation repeated over loudspeakers its call for the fighters to lay down their arms and leave the camp. From eight in the morning until one in the afternoon its aircraft and artillery pounded every entrance, then the tanks advanced on all of them, and once again the fighters drove them back. In the early afternoon some fighters checked on the shelters and brought food to the residents. [1]

The shelter massacre: 5–8 p.m., 7 June

Between five and eight in the evening of 7 June, after its tanks had failed to storm the camp, occupation aircraft struck deep inside the camp and its surroundings, deliberately hitting the shelters and caves where civilians had taken refuge. On the Nadi al-Hawla shelter, where about a hundred civilians were sheltering, they dropped incendiary phosphorus bombs. [1][2]

Shelter	Killed
Nadi al-Hawla shelter	94
Ali al-Rumayd (Abu Khanjar) cave	21
Rawdat al-Najda al-Ijtima’iyya shelter	7
Maghariba quarter cave	3

Shelter	Killed
Total	**125**

Source: [1]

Most of the dead were women, children and the elderly, all of them people of the camp. Many houses were destroyed, and bodies lay in the streets. In the midst of this devastation a woman named Asya Kamel Fayyad gave birth to her son in the street, and named him Naji, “the survivor.” [1][2]

Inside the Nadi al-Hawla shelter

The fighters entered the shelter in the dark through a breach in its wall and found the bodies burned and charred. They heard moaning and pulled out a child named Mazen Fayez, but he died in the clinic. A woman tried to stand up and fell dead. Only three women came out of the shelter alive, among them Umm al-Ezz and Lam’a, and the shelter became a mass grave. [1]

Kamal Jum’a Mushayrafa (Abu al-Ezz), head of the Hawla Club, had gone back to the shelter after the raid. He went in through the breach and found the bodies torn and burned. He tried to pull out a child, whose arm came away in his hand, and the child died; then he heard one of his daughters crying “Dad, help me” and rescued her, and learned that his wife was in the clinic with severe burns. [1]

Families wiped out

The survivors’ testimonies gathered by Jaber Suleiman fifteen years later carry the names of those who were lost: [1]

- **Fayez Hassan Younes (Abu Khaled)**, a taxi driver on the Tyre route, lost his wife and eight children: Khaled (12), Awsaf (13), Walid (8), Muna (6), Dalal (5), Suhail (4), Mazen (3) and Tareq (2).
- **The mukhtar Kamal Hassan al-Dhib**, from the village of al-Sumayriyya, lost some 37 relatives, among them his wife, eight children

and mother, his brother, sister-in-law and their eight children, and his sister and her seven children. He had stepped out to fetch water for a thirsty neighbour when the shelter was hit.

- **Umm al-Ezz** survived the shelter with severe burns that temporarily took her sight and hearing, and lost all five of her children: Fida (8), Fadi (6), Fatin (4) and the twins Firas and Ihab (6 months). She was taken for treatment through the Red Cross, and it was there that she learned her children had been killed.
- **Muhammad Mustafa Abdullah**, a lorry driver, lost his wife and four children: Nidal (6), Yumna (4), Susan (2) and Nisreen (one month).
- **Ni’ma Mustafa Abdullah** lost his wife Maryam, who was due to give birth that very day, and his children Rami (6) and Rania (4). He had left the Rawdat al-Najda shelter five minutes before it was hit.

The survivors buried their dead in mass graves or in orchards near their homes, and carried some to the Jabal Amel institution. [1]

The withdrawal: an eight-day march

Between ten at night and two in the morning on 7–8 June the commanders met in the operations room under Brother Bilal and decided to withdraw in fighting formations. A group under Issa al-Nabi booby-trapped the wrecked tanks, and some 75 fighters gathered in the Safafra quarter with the prisoners. [1]

The fighters marched from Hamadiyeh to Hulousiyeh on the banks of the Litani, where some 600 of them gathered and the villagers of Hulousiyeh and Zarariyeh brought them food on donkeys. Then they marched by night and hid by day, through Wadi Jahannam below Zarariyeh to Babliyeh near the Zahrani, and on to an orchard behind Ghazieh, an eight-day march with almost no food or water in which they made it a priority to keep their prisoner alive. They decided to press on to Ain al-Hilweh camp, which was still resisting. [1]

In an orchard near Ghazieh occupation tanks surrounded them at about half past one in the afternoon and called on them by loudspeaker to surrender, and they

fought. Some 35 fighters were killed, among them eight young men from Burj al-Shemali and 16 volunteers from Bangladesh; the camp's martyrs included Muhammad al-Jammal, Mamdouh and the officer Ali Basal. Twenty-nine fighters were captured, seven of them wounded, and taken into occupied Palestine. [1]

17 June and after: detention

The occupation army entered the camp only on 17 June 1982, once it was sure no fighters were left, and some of the booby-trapped tanks exploded as they were towed away. It then arrested many of the men and took them to the Atlit prison in occupied Palestine and on to the Ansar detention camp in the south, where some spent around a year and four months, among them men who had lost their families in the shelter, such as Fayez Younes and Muhammad and Ni'ma Abdullah. [1]

On 9 June the UN command protested the occupation's use of white phosphorus incendiary shells in bombarding Tyre, while thousands of refugees from the Tyre camps remained on the beaches without shelter. [3]

"The camp of the martyrs"

The camp's people raised two memorials, one of them bearing the names of the martyrs, and Burj al-Shemali came to be known as "the camp of the martyrs." Some of those who had lost their families married again; Ni'ma Abdullah named one of his new sons after his martyred son and a daughter after his martyred wife, and Muhammad Abdullah's children know the brothers and sisters they lost from their photographs. [2][1]

Jaber Suleiman rejects the Israeli claim of "purity of arms" and stresses that, whatever label others may use, the camp's people see what happened as nothing less than a massacre. [1]

Differences between the accounts

Drawing on survivors' testimonies, Jaber Suleiman counts 125 dead in the shelters and breaks the figure down shelter by shelter, while the Encyclopedia of Palestinian Camps puts the massacre's victims at about 150. Suleiman estimates the occupation's losses at about 14 tanks and vehicles over two days, according to most accounts; its number of dead is not known. [1][2]

Timeline

Date	Event
1955	Burj al-Shemali camp founded under UNRWA supervision [2]
4–5 June 1982	Air, artillery and naval bombardment of Tyre and its camps [1]
Noon, 6 June	Occupation armour reaches the camp under Lebanese flags [1]
6 June	Seven tanks destroyed at the southern entrance; four soldiers captured [1]
Dawn, 7 June	Surrender ultimatums over loudspeakers [1]
5–8 p.m., 7 June	The shelter massacre: 125 killed [1]
Night of 7–8 June	Decision to withdraw in fighting formations [1]
9 June	The UN protests white phosphorus in Tyre [3]
Mid-June	The Ghazieh clash; some 35 fighters killed [1]
17 June	The occupation enters the camp and begins arrests [1]

Frequently asked questions about the Battle of Burj al-Shemali and the Hawla shelter massacre

When was the Nadi al-Hawla shelter massacre?

On the evening of 7 June 1982, between five and eight. [1]

How many were killed in the Burj al-Shemali shelters?

125 according to survivors' testimonies, 94 of them in the Nadi al-Hawla shelter; other sources put the figure at about 150. [1][2]

What weapons were used?

Incendiary and phosphorus bombs dropped by occupation aircraft on the shelters. [1][2]

What was the outcome of the battle?

The fighters destroyed some 14 tanks and vehicles and captured four soldiers, then withdrew on the night of 7–8 June; the occupation entered the camp only on 17 June. [1]

Why was it called the Hawla Club shelter?

After the Hula plain in Upper Galilee, from which many of the camp's people were driven out in 1948. [2]

Why is Burj al-Shemali called the camp of the martyrs?

Because of its battles and the massacre in its shelters in June 1982; its people raised two memorials, one bearing the martyrs' names. [2]

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Sources and references

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2. Encyclopedia of Palestinian Camps, “Burj al-Shemali Camp: Camp of the Martyrs” (in Arabic).
3. Institute for Palestine Studies, Palestine Chronology, “Wednesday, June 9, 1982”.