The Philip Habib Negotiations 1982: The PLO's Departure from Beirut and the Broken Guarantee

Evacuation of wounded in Beirut, 1982. Photograph by Luc Chessex. Source: ICRC Audiovisual Archives, ref. V-P-LB-D-00036-15.

For more than two months of the 1982 siege of Beirut, a second battle was fought alongside the fighting, at the negotiating table, led by the US envoy Philip Habib. Habib never once sat down with the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization, because Washington refused to recognise it, so messages passed between him and Yasser Arafat through Lebanese Prime Minister Shafik al-Wazzan and Saeb Salam, while the Israeli occupation army used bombardment and starvation to pressure both the besieged and the negotiators. [1][2][3]

The negotiations ended in an agreement under which the fighters left Beirut between 21 August and 1 September 1982 with their personal weapons, under the supervision of a multinational force, in return for written US guarantees for the safety of the Palestinian civilians who stayed behind in the camps. But the multinational force left Beirut on 10 September, and less than a week later the occupation stormed West Beirut and the Sabra and Shatila massacre took place. This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 siege of Beirut. [4][5][6]

Contents

1. The negotiations at a glance
2. Negotiations without a meeting
3. June: “We will not die like this”
4. July: the sticking points

5. August: agreement under fire
6. The terms of the agreement
7. The departure in numbers
8. The broken guarantee
9. Differences between the accounts
10. Timeline
11. Frequently asked questions about the Philip Habib negotiations and the departure agreement

The negotiations at a glance

Item	Details
Duration	From June until 19 August 1982
US mediator	Philip Habib, President Ronald Reagan’s special envoy
Channel	Wazzan and Saeb Salam between Habib and the PLO leadership, with no direct meeting
Multinational force	France, the United States and Italy; 2,285 troops by 26 August
Departure	21 August – 1 September 1982, by sea and land
Number leaving according to the UN	About 14,700, including some 3,600 of the Arab Deterrent Force
Destinations	Jordan, Iraq, Tunisia, Democratic Yemen, Syria, Sudan, Algeria, the Yemen Arab Republic
Key guarantee	A US pledge for the safety of Palestinian civilians in the camps

Sources: [1][2][4][5]

Negotiations without a meeting

Washington refused any direct contact with the PLO, and Habib feared that deploying an international force before the fighters left would be read as implicit recognition of it. So he shuttled between the US ambassador’s residence and the

Baabda presidential palace, where he met President Elias Sarkis, Wazzan and Foreign Minister Fouad Boutros, while Wazzan and Saeb Salam carried messages to Arafat and the leaders of the revolution and returned with the replies. [1][7][2]

The occupation army, for its part, matched every round of negotiation with a round of bombardment. Its foreign minister, Yitzhak Shamir, told members of the US Congress that “only army pressure” would ensure the fighters’ departure, while Habib sent blistering messages to Reagan warning that the occupation’s undermining of the ceasefire could wreck the talks. [1]

June: “We will not die like this”

On the night of 22 June “the gates of hell” opened on Beirut, as Saeb Salam put it, as he took call after call from Habib. Habib told him that Sharon had agreed, with Washington’s confirmation, not to enter the airport, and asked for a ceasefire on the Palestinian side. On 23 June the Reagan administration rejected a proposal from Arafat, and a French initiative put forward by President François Mitterrand was blocked. [2][3]

On 24 June Salam met Arafat, Saad Sayel (Abu al-Walid) and Hani al-Hassan, and the idea emerged of a minute signed by the faction leaders declaring their readiness to leave Lebanon, for Wazzan to rely on in the negotiations. The leaders of the revolution signed it in late June, and Salam sent its text to Saudi Arabia. In those days Arafat told Salam: “We will not die like this, we will not die.” [2]

On 30 June Habib presented his first initiative: the departure of the leadership and fighters with their personal weapons, the withdrawal of the Arab forces from Beirut, and the deployment of the Lebanese army in West Beirut. [3]

July: the sticking points

Throughout July the negotiations turned on several sticking points. The PLO at first refused to leave by sea, insisted on keeping a political presence in Lebanon, demanded US recognition as a condition for leaving and direct talks with Habib,

and proposed an interim withdrawal to Tripoli and the Bekaa while final destinations were settled. Arafat also demanded that the occupation army pull back beyond seven kilometres, and that an international force be deployed at the same time as the departure. [1][2]

Habib, for his part, rejected a two-stage withdrawal and proposed that the occupation army pull back one kilometre as the departure began, that the fighters leave by sea under French, Canadian, Belgian or Greek naval escort, and set 1 August as the start date. The occupation rejected a multinational force acting as a "buffer," and Sharon insisted that all Palestinian fighters and Syrian forces leave before any withdrawal of his army; he favoured "a military solution." [1]

In late July Habib worked to break the deadlock and told Sarkis he had secured agreements meeting the PLO's conditions, and Arafat set out the departure plan to Wazzan. On 31 July Wazzan proposed bringing in fuel, water and food by sea under the protection of the US Sixth Fleet, after the occupation had cut the city's water and electricity. [1]

August: agreement under fire

The occupation accompanied the last days of the negotiations with its fiercest attacks: 14 hours of bombardment on 1 August, a failed attempt to storm the city at the Museum on 4 August, then the airport battles of 8–10 August. On 3 August Lebanese Muslim leaders joined the PLO in pressing Habib to consider the fighters' departure in step with the deployment of an international peacekeeping force, and on 7 August Syria and Egypt offered to receive the fighters. [8][1]

On 10 August the occupation government accepted the Habib plan "in principle" but set out counter-demands: the names and destinations of everyone leaving, no UN observers, and the return of a pilot held by the fighters. Its chief of staff, Rafael Eitan, said his army would remove the fighters by force if they did not leave. That same day Syria and Tunisia confirmed their readiness to receive the fighters, and Iraq and both Yemens offered to take them. [9]

The draft provided for a multinational force of about two thousand troops, 800 French, 800 American and 400 Italian, for peacekeeping rather than combat; a 15-day departure timetable; and Lebanese army battalions to accompany the French contingent to reassure the people of West Beirut against reprisals after the departure. [10]

On 12 August, with the agreement almost complete, the occupation poured 11 hours of air raids on West Beirut; Lebanon suspended the negotiations in protest, and Saeb Salam told Habib to “go home.” The bombing stopped only after King Fahd called Reagan and Reagan called Begin. [11]

On 15 August the occupation government approved the plan after Begin had met Habib twice, on condition that the captured pilot and the bodies of nine of its soldiers be returned. On 19 August it gave final approval; the Lebanese government formally asked the United States, France and Italy to send troops, and the White House called the agreement “a remarkable diplomatic achievement.” [12][13][14]

The terms of the agreement

- The Palestinian fighters and their leadership leave Beirut with their personal weapons and hand the heavy weapons to the Lebanese army.
- The non-Lebanese Arab forces leave Beirut.
- The Lebanese army enters West Beirut with seven to eight battalions, moving only by day.
- A multinational force from France, the United States and Italy oversees the departure at the Lebanese government’s request.
- Prisoners held by the fighters are handed to the occupation through the ICRC, with information on those who died.
- Habib pledges, on behalf of the US administration, to guarantee the safety of Palestinian civilians in the camps after the fighters leave.

Habib had assured Salam that Washington “would not allow the Palestinians to be struck” once the Lebanese army entered Beirut, nor allow them to be humiliated or

slaughtered, and Salam relayed these assurances to the leadership of the revolution. [3][5][2]

The departure in numbers

The departure began at dawn on 21 August 1982 from Beirut port. The multinational force's contingents arrived between 21 and 26 August: the Americans deployed in the port area, the French from the port to the Museum, Tayouneh and Shatila along the Green Line, and the Italians in the Galerie Semaan area escorting convoys, 2,285 troops in all. This is the table of departures according to the report of the UN Secretary-General: [15][4]

Date	Number	Destination
21 August	265	Jordan (by sea)
21 August	132	Iraq (by sea)
22 August	984	Tunisia (by sea)
23–24 August	1,095	Democratic Yemen (by sea)
25 August	488	Sudan (by sea)
25–29 August	5,822	Syria (by sea and land)
26 August	167 wounded	Cyprus and Greece (by sea)
30 August	60	Arafat and companions to Greece (by sea)
30 August	588	Algeria (by sea)
30–31 August	3,613	Arab Deterrent Force to Damascus (by land)
31 August	841	Yemen Arab Republic (by sea)
1 September	681	Syria (by sea)

In all, the report puts the number who left at about 14,700, including some 3,600 of the Arab Deterrent Force, and 378 non-combatants, women and children under fifteen, went with them. On 30 August Arafat left Beirut port after being seen off by the prime minister and Lebanese leaders, saying as he bade farewell to Saeb Salam's wife: "I kiss this hand on behalf of all the heroic women of Beirut who held

out with us.” [4][2][16]

The broken guarantee

The fighters’ departure ended on 1 September 1982, and the multinational force left Beirut on 10 September. On 14 September President-elect Bashir Gemayel was assassinated; the occupation army stormed West Beirut, sealed off the camps of Sabra and Shatila and lit them with flares, while Lebanese militias allied with it carried out the massacre between 16 and 18 September. [5][6][7]

So fell the guarantee Habib had given on behalf of the United States for the safety of Palestinian civilians in the camps, less than three weeks after the fighters who had protected them left. The agreement that took the revolution out of Beirut became proof that international guarantees did not protect defenceless Palestinians once the guns had left the camps. [5][6]

Differences between the accounts

Sources differ on the date of Arafat’s departure, 29 or 30 August: documents published by Al Majalla give 29 August, while the UN report, the Palestine Chronology and Saeb Salam’s memoirs record 30 August. Overall figures range from “about 14,000 fighters” in some Arab sources and “up to 15,000” in the draft to about 14,700 in the UN table, which includes the Arab Deterrent Force. Some sources give 4 September as the end of the departure, while the Secretary-General’s report records the last group on 1 September. [7][4][16][2][3][10]

Timeline

Date	Event
22 June 1982	“The gates of hell” open on Beirut; Habib and Salam in contact [2]
23 June	US rejects Arafat’s proposal; the French initiative is blocked [3]

Date	Event
Late June	The revolution’s leaders sign a minute of readiness to leave [2]
30 June	Habib’s first initiative [3]
9–13 July	Sticking points: recognition, the international force, interim withdrawal [1]
3 August	Habib warns Reagan that the occupation’s bombardment could wreck the talks [1]
10 August	The occupation accepts the plan “in principle” with counter-demands [9]
12 August	11 hours of air raids; negotiations suspended [11]
19 August	Final approval of the plan; the multinational force requested [13]
21 August	The departure begins from Beirut port [15]
30 August	Yasser Arafat leaves [16]
1 September	The last group leaves [4]
10 September	The multinational force leaves Beirut [5]
16–18 September	The Sabra and Shatila massacre [6]

Frequently asked questions about the Philip Habib negotiations and the departure agreement

Who was Philip Habib?

President Ronald Reagan’s special envoy, who led the negotiations over the fighters’ departure from Beirut in 1982. [1]

Did Habib negotiate directly with the PLO?

No: Washington refused to recognise the PLO, so Wazzan and Saeb Salam carried messages between Habib and Arafat. [1][2]

What were the main terms of the departure agreement?

The fighters leave with their personal weapons, the Lebanese army enters West Beirut, a multinational force supervises, and the US guarantees the safety of civilians in the camps. [3][5]

How many left Beirut?

About 14,700 according to the UN report, including some 3,600 of the Arab Deterrent Force, between 21 August and 1 September 1982. [4]

Where did the fighters go?

To Jordan, Iraq, Tunisia, Democratic Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Algeria and the Yemen Arab Republic; Arafat went to Greece and on to Tunisia. [4][7]

Was the US guarantee for civilians honoured?

No: the multinational force left on 10 September, the occupation stormed West Beirut, and the Sabra and Shatila massacre took place on 16–18 September 1982. [5][6]

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