

Editorial

How the Camp War Ended...

The war launched against the Palestinian camps of Beirut on May 19th, by the Amal movement and Lebanese Army 6th Brigade, ended after an agreement between the Amal movement, the Palestine National Salvation Front and the Lebanese National Democratic Front, signed in Damascus on July 17th, in the presence of Syria's Vice-President Khaddam. (See text in following pages.)

An entire book could be written about the war on the camps - about the motives of those who launched it, the suffering inflicted on the Palestinian masses, their steadfastness and the heroism and unity in struggle of the Palestinian fighters defending the camps. We cannot cover all the details of the camp war in these pages. Instead we will highlight some facts that explain why the war ended as it did, why the Damascus agreement was signed and with what conditions.

The survivors of the merciless Israeli siege of West Beirut, and the ensuing Sabra-Shatila massacre of September 1982, were again subject to siege, and consequently diminishing food, water and medical supplies. The month-long siege of 1985 was especially cruel because of the small area upon which it was imposed: the refugee camps of Shatila, Sabra and Bourj al Barajneh where facilities anyway are limited. Those wounded by the incessant bombardment could not be properly treated; disease began to spread, in addition to the fact that Amal forces entered the Gaza Hospital, massacring and arresting patients and medical personnel. Many of the wounded, whose lives might otherwise have been saved, died under these conditions, and people had to find ways to bury them. The necessity of mass burials was one indication of how quickly conditions became intolerable. One of these occurred two weeks after the siege began. Families gathered in Shatila's cemetery to identify their dead, despite continued sniping into the cemetery by the attackers. Eighty-three persons were buried that day alone, in two mass graves. At the time the war ended, over two hundred injured were trapped at

Shatila and Bourj al Barajneh, the attackers having totally prevented ambulances from entering Shatila. Only very limited evacuation of wounded had been allowed from Bourj al Barajneh. Seventy per cent of the houses were destroyed in Shatila and Sabra where the attacking forces had brought in bulldozers to finish where their shelling left off. There was considerable damage in Bourj al Barajneh as well.

Palestinian unity in struggle

Despite all this, the people of the camps had remained steadfast, encouraged by fighters' bravery and unity in defending the camps. This was the key to thwarting the ultimate aims of the attacking forces. The Amal movement and their supporters had expected a limited operation and quick victory. They wagered that the prevailing division in the ranks of the PLO would give credibility to their false claim that Arafat had provoked the battle, and that they were only attacking «right-wing deviators». The people of the camps knew this claim to be false. Moreover, they rejected in principle such a pretext for armed assault on the camps. The fighters of all organizations present in the camps joined in the defense. Their position was reinforced by the PNSF leadership which made clear that Amal and the Lebanese Army's 6th Brigade were attacking the camps as a whole, to eliminate them and end the Palestinians' militant national role in Lebanon. The PNSF moreover pledged to fight to the utmost to defend the camps and preserve Palestinian rights to bear arms for continuing the liberation struggle. On the basis of a clear political stand and unity, Palestinian fighters fought valiantly. Young men and women volunteered for special operations of certain suicidal consequences, to relieve the siege. Aided by «unknown soldiers» from Lebanese nationalist ranks, special operations were mounted to hit the attackers from the rear.

Problems in the attackers' ranks

The result was setbacks and demoralization in Amal's ranks. This was revealed in many incidents, including the movement's execution of a number of its own military cadres - perhaps they had expressed doubts about this campaign; perhaps they were held responsible for failure to overrun the camps in a few days. Amal also had to bring reinforcements from the South. This turned out to be a unit of «retrained» deserters from Lahad's renegade South Lebanese Army.

Moreover, the attack on the camps created friction between Amal and other Lebanese nationalist forces. People who were in West Beirut at the time report that there was widespread criticism of Amal's actions among the Lebanese population at large, including portions of the Shiite community. The prolonged defense of the camps had its effect on the Arab level. Those who had backed Amal's assault on the pretext of fighting Arafat, were left without cover, because the PNSF, known for opposition to the right-wing policy, took a clear position on the real aims of the camp war. Arab regimes, as well as international allies of the Palestinian and Arab people, urged the end of the war, creating added pressure. The attackers were forced to realize that their goals could not be achieved by such means.

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