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Shatila: Remembering the Massacre

By Richard Hardigan
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“There is one scene I will always remember. There was one child. The mother died, but he was trying to take milk from his mother. He was still alive.”

Jamili's face betrays little emotion as she recalls the scene from thirty-three years ago. She has told the story many times, and perhaps it has lost some of its power in its retelling. Jamili works for Beit Atfal Assamoud, an NGO that provides medical, social and educational services to the residents of the Shatila refugee camp on the southern outskirts of Beirut, and she is talking about her experiences during the massacre of 1982.

"The best way to forget about the horrible things that have happened in the past is to work, to help," she tells me.

There are currently fifty-nine Palestinian refugee camps scattered throughout the Middle East. When Zionist forces instituted a policy of ethnic cleansing aimed to dispossess the Palestinians of their land in 1947-1948, close to 750,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes. The camps were built to house the refugees in the short term, but as the problem persisted, so did the camps. It is estimated that there are currently 2.5 million Palestinian refugees living in the camps, which are located in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza.

Shatila is probably the most well-known of all the Palestinian refugee camps. In September of 1982, a local Christian militia, known as the Phalange, aided by its Israeli allies, entered Shatila and bordering Sabra, engaging in an orgy of torturing and killing that lasted several days. It is estimated that 3000 people died in this massacre, which has become one of the enduring symbols not only of the Lebanese civil war, but also of the continuing disregard in which Israel holds the Palestinian people.

Jamili was born in 1958, during Lebanon's first civil war, and she moved with her family from Baalbek, site of the spectacular Roman ruins, to Shatila at the age of one. Although she was not alive during the Nakba – the Catastrophe – and the original establishment of the camp that followed it, she has heard countless stories from her relatives about this time. In the fifty-seven years since her move, she has witnessed all of the tragedies that have befallen Shatila. She can associate each event in the history of the camp with an episode in her life. Her history has become intertwined with that of Shatila.

"My house was destroyed seven times," she tells me, "and we rebuilt it seven times."

I have now been in Shatila almost four weeks, and as of yet, I haven't had the opportunity to talk to anybody about their personal experiences during the massacre. When I first arrived, I was expecting that the tragic events of 1982 would somehow cast an enormous shadow over the camp, that it was something everybody was still dealing with on some level. And so I was hesitant to discuss this topic with anybody for fear that I might bring up some memories that might be best left undisturbed. But when I was introduced to Jamili a few days ago as part of a visit to Beit Atfal Assamoud, she began talking about the massacre immediately. When I asked her if we could discuss the matter in greater detail, she agreed to give me an interview.

We are sitting in comfortable black chairs in her office. A fan whirs in a corner of the room, making the heat a little less oppressive. There is an enormous sleek, black desk behind her, at which I have yet to see her sit. Jamili's work involves connecting with the residents of the camp

who come to seek her help, and I suspect she feels a big desk between them would make them feel uncomfortable.

Israel invaded Lebanon on June 6, 1982 in order to rid the country of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which had fled Jordan during Black September in 1970 and had since established a presence in the refugee camps of Beirut. Israel killed roughly 20,000 people, mostly civilians, during the invasion, and it managed to drive out the PLO.

“During the invasion, 90% of the camp was destroyed. We left Shatila and stayed in Hamra (a Beirut neighborhood a few miles north of Shatila). The people lived in schools and cinemas. My house had five rooms, but when we returned to the camp, we found that only one room was left standing.”

In August of that year, Israel pressured the Lebanese parliament to choose Bashir Gemayal, leader of the Israel-allied Maronites, as president. However, Gemayal was assassinated on September 14, and the Maronite Christian community, especially the Phalange, a brutal Maronite militia, blamed the Palestinians for his death. By this time the PLO had already left the camps, and only women, children and old men remained.

“The PLO had left. All of our youths were in prison,” says Jamili.

The international force that had overseen the evacuation of the PLO had by now departed, and the residents of Shatila were completely exposed.

Yassir Arafat had foreseen this possibility. In the negotiations for his departure from Beirut, he had expressed concern for the safety of the civilians he would be leaving behind in the camps. The US and the government of Lebanon had given their word that Israel would not be allowed to enter West Beirut and had ensured the safety of the Palestinians remaining in the camps. But these promises proved to be empty.

On the day following Gemayal’s murder, Wednesday, September 15, the Israelis seized West Beirut, entrusting to the Phalange, whose hatred for the Palestinians had been inflamed by the assassination of their leader, the task of cleaning up the refugee camps.

On the evening of the following day, Thursday, the Phalange finally entered Sabra and Shatila, and the carnage began almost immediately. David Hirst provides a chilling description in his book *Beware of Small States*:

“They broke into houses and killed their occupants. Sometimes they tortured before they killed, gouging out eyes, skinning alive, disemboweling. Women and small girls were raped, sometimes half a dozen times, before, breasts severed, they were finished off with axes. Babies were torn limb from limb and their heads smashed against walls.”[1]

Unaware of the massacre, Jamili and her family sought shelter in a mosque in the center of the camp from the Phalange bombs that were falling on West Beirut.

“The houses, after the Israeli invasion, were not strong. The mosque was strong and standing. All of our neighbors left their houses, because they were weak. And we sat in the mosque. People came from outside and said there will be a massacre. Some people didn’t believe them. Where would we go? At the beginning we didn’t believe. But when many people came covered with blood and told terrible stories, then we were afraid.”

A group of old men decided to try to find a high-ranking Israeli officer and convince him to stop the bloodshed. Jamili’s father was among them, but at the last minute he opted to stay behind, a decision that most likely saved his life.

“And these men, until now we don’t know where they are. They went to tell they Israelis there are only children in the camp. They went to protect the camp. But they killed them. They were all friends of my father. Until now nobody really knows what happened.”

As darkness fell in the evening, the violence continued. The Israelis fired flares over the camp to aid the militia with its grizzly work.

“They lit the streets of the camp. The hopeless thing is that the children saw the lights, and it made them feel happy. But we explained to them that it was the Israelis throwing bombs. Many houses burned. One bomb hit a neighbor’s house, and my father went to help put the fire out.”

Jamili spent that terrifying night in the mosque with her family.

“In the morning, at six o’clock, a group of women, children and old men came and entered the camp and passed by the mosque. They were crying and shouting, and then we believed that a massacre was going to happen.”

On Friday many of the residents of Sabra and Shatila escaped and made their way to two nearby hospitals – the Gaza and Akka hospitals.

“We carried our children and didn’t take anything. We went to the Gaza hospital.”

But even in the hospitals the terrified residents of the camp were not safe from the murderous intentions of the Phalange. In fact, on that day the militia entered the Akka hospital and murdered some of the wounded as they lay in their beds.

“The doctors and the nurses said ‘Don’t stay here. They will come to get you. Please leave this area.’”

“So we left. At that time I was with my family and all of my relatives. There were hundreds of people in the streets, carrying their children.”

Jamili’s destination was Hamra, the Beirut neighborhood where she and her family had spent the bulk of the Israeli invasion. They had lived in a friend’s apartment, and they still had the key. That night they spent in an unfinished building on the way to Hamra.

“It had no doors or windows, but at least we had a place. In the morning hundreds of people from the camp came and shouted, and we felt that it was dangerous and that we must leave.”

On Saturday morning they were stopped by Israeli soldiers.

“They allowed the women and children to pass, but the young men had to stay. My brothers and uncles had to return back while the women and children continued to Hamra. Our men were not with us, and we were afraid. What would happen to them? We were running away from danger, and they were going to danger.”

By now journalists had entered Shatila, and news of the massacre had spread. When Jamili and her family reached Hamra they went to a supermarket to meet its owner, a man they knew. He was astonished to see them.

“‘You are still alive?’ he asked us.”

By ten o’clock on Saturday morning the last of the Phalange had left Sabra and Shatila. The killing was over.

“I am lucky. I didn’t see anybody killed in front of me. But I saw the bodies. The mosque was filled with bodies. You can see the houses that were destroyed and the legs of the children appear from these houses. I saw all this.”

When Jamili saw the pictures in a newspaper, she was horrified. She imagined that all the bodies she saw belonged to her relatives, whom she had been forced to abandon outside of Hamra.

“All youths wear sport shoes and jeans and t-shirts. Their bodies were facing down. We felt that all our men had been killed. We decided to return back to the camp. On Monday morning we entered Sabra, and we were afraid to enter the camp. We saw the bodies in the street. I couldn’t stand. We couldn’t continue. We knew that all our relatives had died. I went to my house. I walked a few meters and then returned back. Because I was afraid to find out what happened.”

But it turned out that her male relatives had found shelter in a school outside the camp.

“When I saw them I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I felt foolish. When I found out that my whole family was safe, it was a perfect day.”

Jamili sighs. Her brown eyes glisten. Telling the story has brought back memories and emotions.

The massacre was over, but the problems for the residents remained, as the camp was almost entirely destroyed and had to be rebuilt.

“We had a group of about twenty girls. We could stand against the enemy. We were not afraid. What choice did we have? To die? To live or die, it was the same.”

And so Jamili and her friends threw themselves into the task of rebuilding the camp, because, among other things, it helped them forget what had happened. But one cannot forget such an event.

Jamili leans closer, her face showing the confusion, the inability to accept what had happened so many years ago. How could one group of human beings do this to another?

“Why did Israel make the massacre? For the children? For the old men? Nobody could imagine that a massacre would happen. Why? For whom? We didn’t have any men. Some of them left, and some of them died. Some of them went to prison.”

Today, thirty-three years later, Shatila faces a multitude of problems. The camp, originally built for 4000 residents, is contained in an area that is in the shape of a square of side length less than one kilometer. With the recent influx of refugees from the war in Syria, the current population is estimated to be close to 25,000. This high concentration of people makes itself felt in the ubiquitous crowds that fill the narrow alleyways, in the piles of garbage that accumulate too quickly for the trash removal workers to keep up with, in the many buildings that extend skyward to accommodate the residents, and in the lack of open spaces in the camp. Living conditions are horrifying. Electricity is cut for at least twelve hours a day, and the tap water is so salty that it corrodes the faucets. Guns are present throughout the camp, and tensions, already high because of the extreme overcrowdedness, often explode to the point of physical conflict. (One week after my arrival in the camp two people were murdered during a dispute over a motorcycle parking spot.)

Most of the people in the camp dream of going back to their village in Palestine. And so it is with Jamili.

“Our problems will stop when we return. Why cannot we return to our homeland? My village is empty. It has been destroyed. Until now nobody lives there. Why must we live in this bad situation?”

As Israel moves further and further to the right, it appears as unlikely as ever that Jamili or any of the other millions of Palestinian refugees will ever be able to return to their homes. As their wait continues into its seventh decade, the international community appears to be losing interest even in providing material support for them. Until a few weeks ago, a UNRWA budget shortfall threatened to close all schools in the refugee camps, an action that would have been a disaster for the residents. Saudi Arabia and a few other nations came up with the funding at the last minute, but the message that the world doesn’t care about the refugees was delivered, regardless. These are dangerous times for the Palestinian refugees, and it is crucial that the international community, especially the West, who bears responsibility for their displacement in the first place, doesn’t forget about their plight.

Notes.

[1] David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East*