

Mass Movement to Return the Disappeared

Hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinian women shut down Beirut in a general strike on July 9 to protest government inaction on returning over 3,000 kidnap victims to their families. What has mushroomed into one of the most important mass movements ever in Beirut, had its origins in the spontaneous demonstrations mounted by women in the wake of the 1982 Sabra-Shatila massacre.

An estimated 3,000 Lebanese and Palestinians were slaughtered by Israeli-backed Phalangist militiamen during the three-day massacre ending on September 18, 1982. While the massacre was in progress, the Israeli army rounded up thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian men from both Sabra-Shatila and surrounding Beirut neighborhoods. Some of those abducted later turned up in the Ansar concentration camp near Nabatiyeh, but hundreds of others were handed over to the Phalange and have since disappeared.

Within days of the massacre, rumors spread through West Beirut that the Phalangist butchers were returning in force to the camps. Hundreds of women clutching their babies in their arms, gathered at an office of the International Red Cross to register their names in case they too disappeared. Others gathered at the residence of former Prime Minister Saeb Salam demanding protection from continued Phalangist outrages. Their protestations went unheeded, the kidnappings continued on a massive scale and the movement for the disappeared took on a militant momentum.

Forty days after the massacre, 2,000 Lebanese and Palestinian women mounted a demonstration in Shatila camp in defiance of the Lebanese Army. The women carried Palestinian and Lebanese flags as well as enlarged photographs draped in black of family members who had been massacred. The women moved en masse out of Shatila, hurdling the rubble and stagnant pools of water left by two months of Israeli aerial bombardment of the camp

during the summer. They marched to the Gaza Palestinian Red Crescent Hospital where over 1,000 of the massacre victims had been herded off to their deaths by the right-wing Lebanese death squads. The women's screams broke the silence in the streets: «We will redeem you with our blood and souls;» «Sabra and Shatila could only be destroyed after the revolutionaries left.» The demonstration ended at one of the mass graves of the massacre victims with the laying of a single wreath. The wreath read: «We salute the blood of the martyred men, women and children of Sabra and Shatila. Your blood has not been spent in vain.» Since that day the mothers, wives and sisters of the disappeared have carried out weekly demonstrations explicitly modelled after the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina.

How many disappeared?

In addition to the hundreds of persons who disappeared during the massacre, thousands of other Lebanese and Palestinians disappeared in the following two months when the rightist-controlled Lebanese Army entered West Beirut after the departure of the Israeli army. The first act of the newly installed government of Phalangist President Amin Gemayel and Prime Minister Shafiq Wazzan was to launch a massive «security sweep» of West Beirut and the southern suburbs. While the Israeli army orchestrated the Sabra-Shatila massacre, this time thousands disappeared while US Marines and the rest of the multinational force were allegedly protecting the refugee camps and Lebanese civilians.

The Lebanese Army arrest campaign began on September 26, 1982, less than one week after the massacre. The Amin Gemayel government was said at the time to have a secret plan to expel 50,000 Palestinians from the zone under its control. Even Western press accounts of the «security sweep» list the number of the disappeared in the thousands. Richard Ben Cramer wrote in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on September 30, 1982:

Since Monday, Lebanese soldiers and secret policemen have stormed and searched thousands of homes, offices and shops in the camps of Sabra, Shatila, Bourj el-Barajneh. The soldiers and plainclothesmen took away the young men. Anyone could be seized and held in this great roundup. More than 1,500 prisoners, mostly Palestinian men, are being held in an East Beirut prison, where - according to a man who said he had been there - they are packed too closely to lie down, denied food, forced to live amid their own excrement and beaten during «interrogation».

The *New York Times* reported on October 3, 1982 that «some officials said that up to 2,000 civilians had been picked up during this week for identity checks». David Ottaway in the *Washington Post* on the same day reported that «the Lebanese Army has been rounding up hundreds of Palestinians, spreading new terror in the camps where the massacres took place last month, in what appears to be a government effort to reduce the number of Palestinians here by about 90 percent...The roundup of Palestinians is also taking place in camps around Sidon. There it is the Israelis rather than the Lebanese Army making most of the arrests.» Finally, the *New York Times* reported on October 7, 1982, that «soldiers of the Lebanese Army today made their first intensive search of downtown West Beirut...Some unofficial estimates put the number of people detained at more than 400...The searches paralleled others in the last 10 days, with unofficial estimates that up to 3,000,