Black Saturday

Exploring different perspectives on pivotal events early in the Lebanese Civil War.

Background

Since 1948, there had been a significant presence of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. They resided in camps like Tal Al-Zaatar, Jisr El-Basha, Karantina, and others that were spread around the country. Many Palestinians were involved from Lebanon in an armed struggle against Israel to regain their former lands. Not all Lebanese were comfortable with this Palestinian presence, however, and this pitted the Palestinians primarily against Christian groups. On the other hand, many leftist and Muslim groups naturally supported the Palestinian cause in their allegiance to a broader Arab nationalist ideal.

April 1975 is often identified as the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War, associated with the infamous incident of the Ain Al-Rummaneh bus. Over the subsequent months, the conflict developed to involve a confrontation between mainly right-wing Christian groups of the Lebanese Front and its allies,[1] and leftist and Muslim groups of the National Movement and its allies.[2] Black Saturday proved to be a major escalation and sectarianization of this conflict.

Killings on the Fanar Road

The National Movement Narrative	**The Lebanese Front Narrative**
On the evening of December 5, 1975, five Palestinian militia members[3] were patrolling the area around the Tal Al-Zaatar camp, armed with Kalashnikovs and handguns. They were near the road running down from Ain Saadeh to Fanar, which was used during the night by Palestinian armed groups to transport food and weapons to the camp. It was therefore paramount to keep it secured. When crossing this road at 11:30PM, the five men saw a car	Late afternoon on Friday December 5th, 1975, Eddy Awkar, a member of the Kataeb militia, passed by the party's headquarters in Beirut. He invited his brother David and three friends, all members of the Kataeb,[7] to watch a movie at the Printania Cinema in Broumana in the Metn mountains. Later that night, after the movie ended at 11:00PM, the five men returned to Beirut on the road leading down to Fanar through

[1] The Lebanese Front included the Kataeb Party, the National Liberal Party, the Guardians of the Cedars, Tanzim, and was allied with a Christian group that splintered from the Lebanese Army under the name of the Free Lebanon Army.

[2] The Lebanese National Movement included the Progressive Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Communist Action Organization, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Ba'ath Party, the Independent Nasserite Movement (Al-Mourabitoun), the Popular Nasserist Organization, and was allied with the Palestine Liberation Organization, and a splinter group of the Lebanese Army known as the Lebanese Arab Army.

[3] Idris, Muhammad Khali, Abu Ziad, Muhammad Abdo and Ibrahim Nabulsi.

[7] These were Eddy Awkar, David Awkar, George Absi, Elie Pano, and Roland Saadeh. Primary source T., Freiha and Mechaalani, however, say that Elie Pano was not with the Kataeb, but with Sakhra, the personal security of the Kataeb's head, Pierre Gemayel. And Mechaalani specifies that the two Awkars and Absi were part of the BGin, the division created by Sami Khoueiry and named after Pierre Gemayel (PG or BG in Arabic) to protect the Kataeb headquarters.

approaching; startled, three of the men remained standing in the middle of the road, while the other two were still behind in the woods.[4] When the car stopped, the leader of the Palestinian group inquired in a Lebanese accent about the passengers' identity.[5] The passengers responded they were with the Kataeb, assuming the others were as well. When the Palestinian continued asking questions, however, one of the passengers started cursing angrily. This made the Palestinians pull the men out of the car and make them lay on the ground. One of the Kataeb men then shouted "if you are Kataeb as we are, why are you treating us in this way?" The Palestinian leader responded: "We are not Kataeb, and the Kataeb need a beating." One of the other Palestinians then urged the leader to stop wasting time and urged him: "tokho!" meaning "kill him" in Palestinian Arabic. They shot the Kataeb men, although one was able to run away, and then continued on their way to the Tal Al-Zaatar camp, which was three kilometers away. Nothing of the encounter had been noticed in the camp, as no gunshots had been heard.[6]	Ain Saadeh, which was generally considered safe as it lay deep within Christian lands.[8] There, they were ambushed by Palestinians based on some intel provided by one of the men's female friends. The Palestinians were aware that the Kataeb were seeking to strengthen their position by improving relations with Syria, and that Pierre Gemayel, leader of the Kataeb, was set to visit Syrian president Hafez al-Assad the next day. Hence, the Palestinians sought to push back by ambushing Kataeb men. In the ambush, the five men's car was stopped by 15-20 Palestinians, who asked them about their identity in Lebanese Arabic. When the men said they were with the Kataeb, the Palestinians ordered them to step out of the car. The Kataeb men became nervous, however, when they heard the Palestinians pronounce "Kataeb" in their distinct dialect, and when David Awkar was twice hit on his head with an axe, the Kataeb men responded by struggling severely against their captors, who then butchered the remaining four men with axes and riddled them with bullets.[9] David Awkar survived, however, as the extreme cold stopped his bleeding.[10] He was found by Emil Aoun, known as "Zapata," on his newspaper delivery round, and later brought to St. Joseph hospital in Beirut.

[4] Primary sources A. and H. say it was an accidental encounter, although leftist weekly Hawadeth says it was an ambush based on intel. Furthermore, A. explicitly states that it has nothing to do with Pierre Gemayel's visit to Syria, although H. does connect the events, and Hawadeth too.

[5] This is the way primary source A. tells the story; Hawadeth, however, says there was immediate shooting.

[6] The couple of shots fired at close range and horizontally to execute the Kataeb men would not have made as much noise as an exchange of fire in an ambush would have.

[8] Primary sources T., S. and J. refer to the road in this way. Mechaalani, however, says he warned the men that this road was secluded and dangerous because mainly used by Palestinians from the nearby Tal Al-Zaatar camp.

[9] This is how primary sources T. and M. tell the story; however, Mechaalani, newspapers Al Aamal and Anwar, as well as the "Lebanese War Documents" published by Dar El Sayyad publishing house, relate that there was first an exchange of gunfire.

[10] Primary sources T. and M. say that the axe wounds are visible on his head until today.

Members of the Kataeb Attack Muslims in Beirut

The National Movement Narrative	The Lebanese Front Narrative
The next morning, Bashir Gemayel, son of the Kataeb's leader Pierre Gemayel, ordered his men to kidnap, torture and kill Muslims in revenge for the death of the four militia members killed on the Fanar road the night before.[11] Around 6:45AM, gun shots were heard near the port of Beirut, and by 7:00AM, Kataeb militia were inside the freight building, separating Christians from Muslims working there, killing those who showed resistance.[12] Then, in coordination with two other Christian militias, the Ahrar and Hurras al-Arz (the Guardians of the Cedars),[13] they forced groups of Lebanese, Syrian and Kurdish Muslims to stand facing a wall and executed them. After shooting one group and throwing the dead aside, the next group of Muslims was forced to walk over the dead bodies and was executed in the same way. Many of these bodies were subsequently thrown into the sea. Bashir Gemayel then further escalated the situation as he commanded his men to descend	At 7AM the next morning, Joseph Saadeh, father of one of the five, discovered that his son had not come home. After calling Pano's father to make sure his son didn't stay the night at his friends', he assumed the boys had been kidnapped and went immediately down to the Kataeb headquarters. There he ran straight to Pierre Gemayel, who was preparing to leave for Syria. Having already lost one son a few months before in the Bekaa, Saadeh shouted: "Sheikh Pierre, if my second son Roland is not back, I will commit a massacre, do you hear? A massacre." As a busy Pierre dismissed him and no one else appeared to care much, Saadeh went to the nearby headquarters of the BGin, a division of the Kataeb named after Pierre Gemayel[16] and entrusted with protection of the Kataeb headquarters. There, Saadeh was more likely to receive a hearing. He announced that the five men had been kidnapped on the Fanar road by militia from the Tal Al-Zaatar camp.[17] The mention of Tal Al-Zaatar roused the sleeping militia members and an enraged Saadeh led them to an intersection on the Damascus road to install a checkpoint with the purpose of kidnapping people to bargain for the five guys. A bus full of Shia from Baalbeck was stopped at the checkpoint, and all passengers were kidnapped and taken to a basement in the BGin headquarters, along with every other Muslim who happened to pass by. The number of kidnapped Muslims totaled 150.[18] When, at 8:00AM, the news arrived that four

[11] Primary source H. and Muharrer (Sunday 7th) say this, although A., who was not present in Beirut at the time, states that Bashir Gemayel was not directly involved.

[12] Primary source H., who was present at the port at the time. However, primary source A. and Muharrer state that the killings started 9:00-9:30.

[13] As-Safir, Sunday 7th.

[16] PG in Arabic makes BG. BGin is pronounced like Beijing.

[17] He says this was the most likely explanation at the time, as Shia from the camp used to kidnap Christians to bargain with Palestinians.

[18] Meshaalani, 73 and Saadeh. However, primary source S. says BGin were forbidden to kidnap; they could only kill on the spot.

on Beirut, shooting and setting up many checkpoints, the first one in front of the Kataeb headquarters. At these checkpoints, his men checked ID-cards and kidnapped or straightaway shot any Muslims. In all, more than 150 Muslims died in these events.[14] [15] In response, members of Lebanese Muslim and Palestinian factions set up checkpoints in West Beirut to kill Christians, and raided Christian homes, although these reactions were not formally ordered by the groups' leadership.	of the five guys were dead, and at 9:20 that Saadeh's son was among them, the man left the headquarters dizzy from the news. He lifted the bloodstained shirt of his son over his head, performed a primitive death dance, then took his weapon and descended into the BGin basement. There, together with other militia members, he started massacring the prisoners. After this, the BGin, joined by other militias, stormed the neighborhood of the Kataeb headquarters by the Beirut port, setting up checkpoints, stopping cars, and killing all with Muslim identity papers.[19] It did not take long for the majority Muslim West Beirut to respond in kind by capturing and killing Christians in the same way. Meanwhile, the Kataeb leadership and Bashir Gemayel attempted to stop the massacre, and were able to save many Muslims.[20] In total, the killings resulted in the death of about 60 Muslims.[21]

Questions for Reflection

1. Is there a narrative you identify more with? If so, which one, and why? If not, why not?
2. If you identify more with one narrative, how does the other make you feel?
3. If you could have advised Joseph Saadeh on the morning of Black Saturday when he discovered his son had been murdered (see Lebanese Front narrative), what would you have said to him?
4. What sort of feelings is Black Saturday manifesting, and which of these still need to be addressed today?
5. During Black Saturday, some Christian militia members are known to have saved Muslims from being massacred, and vice-versa. How does that make you change your opinion about these events?

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[14] This is the median of the following reports: 70 (Al-Safir), 63-100 (Muharrer), 100 (primary source A.), more than 100 (Massoud Khawand), more than 200 (Hawadeth), 275 (Fawaz Trabolsi), more than a thousand (primary source H.), 1200 (Emad Younes).

[15] The Lebanese Front narrative insists only about 60 Muslims were killed.

[19] Primary sources T. and S. say that "everyone who wanted revenge" joined the killing, Saadeh and Al-Nahar specified that BGin did the killings, Freiha, Hayek and Saadeh himself specifically point to Joseph Saadeh, and Al-Nahar adds the Guardians of the Cedars and Al-Tanzim. Various sources also mention various locations for the massacre: Saifi, Charles Helou, the electricity company, the port and market, and "15 other locations."

[20] According to various sources, Bashir Gemayel was not involved, or he arrived on time to save Muslims and stop the massacre (al-Nahar December 8, and Freiha), or he had ordered the initial killings which then ran significantly out of hand (George Hayek, quoting Karim Bakradouni), and only arrived at 10PM in the evening (George Hayek).

[21] This number is the median of the following reports: 10's (George Freiha), 29 (Al Aamal), 56 (Al-Nahar), 60 (primary source S.), 80 (Al-Anwar), more than 200 (George Hayek), 300-370 (Sayyad document).