4 Assassination and Invasion: 1977–78

According to some accounts the Third Lebanese Civil War, in which 20,000 or more were killed, ended with the Riyadh Peace Agreement, the ceasefire of 21 October 1976 and the cessation of fighting in November, but in reality it continued with severe complications as reaction set in. On 1 January 1977 press censorship was introduced. It took effect on the 3rd, was extended to foreign correspondents on the 5th and modified on the 25th. Several Lebanese periodicals were suspended as the restrictions were defied or evaded. Attempts were made to resurrect the economy, and on the 17th Lebanese banks began to reopen, some having been closed for up to ten months.

One of the conditions of the agreement was that the various factions in Lebanon should hand over their heavy weapons – including tanks, armoured vehicles, anti-aircraft guns and heavy artillery – for storage in depots under the surveillance of the ADF. The deadline was set for 5 December 1976, after which they would be collected by force. However little happened as various objections were raised. The militias of the Christian Lebanese Front insisted that the ruling must first apply to the Palestinian and NDM units, but they refused to hand over their heavy weapons until the Christian militias had done so, on the ground that they needed them to defend their camps against possible Israeli aggression, especially in the southern border areas.

The Higher Defence Committee, chaired by President Sarkis, met on 7 January and decided to extend the deadline to the 12th, and that regular Palestinian units should leave Lebanon by that date. A few heavy weapons were surrendered on the 13th, but collection was a slow operation.

Meanwhile there was rising confrontational friction between Christians and Muslims in Beirut and other major cities. For example on 3 January a huge car-bomb explosion
had occurred in the Christian Ashrafiyeh district of East Beirut, close to the HQ of the Falangist security service, which probably killed over 40 people and injured another 50 or so, after which Beirut was paralysed by a strike that caused all traffic between West and East Beirut to come to a halt while reprisals were extracted. Censorship blanketed out much of this and similar incidents. One foreign source (Le Monde) reported that more than 100 Muslims were killed on the streets of East Beirut on the 4th, and more casualties were caused by retaliatory explosions and shootings. There was also a spate of hostage taking, about which little was heard in detail.

THE ASSASSINATION OF KAMAL JUMBLATT

On 16 March 1977 Kamal Jumblatt, the Druse leader of the National Democratic Movement, was ambushed and killed in his car near the village of Baklin in the Chouf mountains by unidentified gunmen. A bodyguard and the driver also died. Since the Riyadh agreement, Jumblatt had opposed the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, and had largely withdrawn to Muktara, his home town in the Chouf where he was working to establish an autonomous administration. In January he had been reelected chairman of the Progressive Socialist Party and confirmed as leader of the NDM. Earlier (4 December 1976) he had escaped assassination, when a bomb in a car parked near his home exploded, killing several people and injuring others. Jumblatt blamed Saiqa for that incident. The Druse extracted retribution on their traditional enemies, the Christians, who lived in intermixed villages. Despite the hasty dispatch of a large body of ADF Syrian troops to keep the peace in the Chouf, over 100 Christians were killed in reprisal actions.

Jumblatt's son, Walid, succeeded him as Druse leader, and on 1 May was elected leader of the PSP. Later (12 September), Walid Jumblatt, with the agreement of the Lebanese Baath Party, reorganised the National Democratic Movement and opened it up to all who accepted its objectives, which were to abolish the confessional state, safeguard the unity of Lebanon, create a Lebanese army capable