9 The Syrians Return: 1985–87

On 20 May 1985 the Amal militia, aided by the Lebanese (Muslim) 6th Brigade, attacked PLO militias in the Sabra Shatila and Bourj al-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut, with the declared intention of eliminating the PLO presence from Lebanon. For a fortnight there was violent fighting, some of it at close quarters. The PLO remained divided into the pro-Arafat faction and the opposing Palestinian National Salvation Front (PNSF), the latter being supported by Syria and based in Damascus. Most of the PLO members in the camps were loyal to Arafat, and as the fighting developed, whenever possible members of the PNSF militias joined them in defiance of Amal, so the division became blurred. During this conflict the Druse watched carefully, but did not join in the fray.

Although Amal and the 6th Brigade had more powerful weapons than the PLO, including artillery and tanks, their advance was countered by fierce Palestinian resistance, the defenders being able to take advantages of the network of tunnels and underground bunkers that had been constructed in the camps. Many of the estimated 120,000 inhabitants of the three camps fled into Druse-controlled territory.

The battle area was closed off to the media, and Red Cross vehicles were prevented from entering the camps to take the wounded to hospital. Soon reports of atrocities and massacres began to filter out, committed by both sides, although Amal, which suffered the greatest proportion of casualties, seemed to get most of the blame. Horror stories emerged of grenades being thrown into makeshift medical centres and wounded being dragged from operating tables. Later evidence substantiated many of these rumours.

Amal’s attack was condemned by all PLO factions, and the PNSF appealed to Syria for military help to halt Amal’s extermination policy, but President Assad chose to sit back
and watch – in the past he had given considerable help to Amal. Arafat accused Amal of a secret alliance with Israel. On 31 May 1985 a UN Security Council resolution condemned this violence against a civilian population and called for a ceasefire. A few days later the Arab League too called for a ceasefire.

By the 31st Amal and the 6th Brigade were in possession of the Sabra and Shatila camps, although spasmodic resistance continued as PLO fighters were able to reemerge from their tunnels in areas previously cleared by Amal, which continued to pound the camp areas with artillery and tank fire, razing buildings to the ground. The major part of the Bourj al-Barajneh camp remained in the hands of the PLO. Despite several attempts by Syria to persuade Amal to stop fighting, these efforts foundered on the Palestinians’ demand to be allowed to retain their weapons until all the other militia groups had been disarmed.

**AMAL–PLO CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT**

Eventually, on 18 June Abdul Halim Khaddam, the prominent Syrian negotiator, persuaded Amal and the PNSF to sign an agreement to end the hostilities. Under the terms of the agreement the Palestinians could retain their light weapons on condition they surrendered their medium and heavy ones when other militias began to surrender theirs. The agreement recognised the PNSF as the sole representative of all Palestinians in Lebanon, the Syrians successfully pushing Arafat aside. Security within the three camps was to be the responsibility of the Lebanese gendarmerie. However, while the differences between the two PLO factions had been blurred somewhat, PLO infighting rumbled on, with the majority of Palestinians in and around Beirut remaining pro-Arafat and those in the Bekaa Valley being pro-PNSF.

The siege of the camps was lifted on 22 June 1985, after which it was estimated that the casualty list amounted to 640 dead and over 500 wounded. The destruction of Sabra and Shatila were almost complete, and tens of thousands more Palestinians were homeless. At the same time,