

Issue Date: July 07, 1978

Middle East: Syrians Attack Lebanese Christians; Other Developments

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Syrian troops of the Arab League peacekeeping force in Lebanon engaged in fierce fighting with outnumbered Christian militiamen in and around Beirut July 1-6. At least 200 persons were killed and more than 500 others were wounded, mostly civilians in Christian sections. Property damage in the capital was extensive. The combat, the worst since the 1975-76 civil war, prompted Israel to warn Syria July 6 to halt attacks against its Christian allies.

The violence erupted after Syria declared June 30 that it would not tolerate a breakdown of order in the country, and would "punish the criminals." The Syrian warning referred to a massacre of Christian civilians June 28, the second such incident in a month. [See 1978 [Middle East: Lebanese Christian Factions Clash](#)] Unidentified gunmen raided Baalbek and three adjacent villages in northeastern Lebanon, killing 36 persons. The attack was believed to be in retaliation for the reputed Phalangist Party slaying of about 45 Christians in the same region June 13. Suleiman Franjeh, leader of one of the Christian factions, had vowed at the time to take revenge for the slaying of his son, Tony Franjeh, and others in that raid.

Camille Chamoun, leader of the Christian National Liberal Party, said the latest murders were committed by "non-Lebanese and noncivilian elements." Other Christian sources said the victims were members of the Phalangist and National Liberal parties. The Phalangists blamed the Syrians for the killings.

The massacre of Franjeh's followers was said to have enraged the Syrians; Tony Franjeh was considered Syria's principal Christian ally in Lebanon.

The Syrian crackdown against the Christian militia also was said to have been motivated by Damascus' impatience with President Elias Sarkis' failure to reorganize his shattered army, his failure to dismiss Christian officers who collaborated with Israel and his inability to curb the activities of the Christian forces. The direct cause of the violence was said to have been the killing of a Syrian soldier by a grenade blast in the Christian sector of Beirut. A Phalangist spokesman, however, dismissed the report and said the Syrian attack was unprovoked.

In the fighting in Beirut, Syrian forces used tanks, artillery, rockets and machine guns to pound the Christian sector of Ashrafiyeh, in the eastern part of the city, and the Christian suburb of Ain al-Rummaneh to the south. The headquarters of the Phalangist and National Liberal parties were the principal targets of the Syrian attack. At least four cease-fires agreed to by both sides failed to end the combat.

Syria said July 2 that it was determined to use an "iron fist" against those attempting to partition Lebanon. The ruling Baath Party's newspaper said Damascus would not permit its forces in Lebanon to be trapped by the "hirelings of foreign powers."

Camille Chamoun appealed July 2 to the U.S., the Soviet Union, Britain, France and the Vatican to bring a halt to what he termed "the genocide by the Syrians" against Lebanese Christians. Chamoun's plea also was directed to "all states that cherish human values," an allusion to Israel, with which Chamoun's National Liberal Party had close ties.

Speaking in a radio interview July 4, Chamoun denounced the Arab League peacekeeping force in Lebanon as "protectors turned aggressors." He said "the latest events have accelerated the need for evacuation of all these forces from Lebanon." Chamoun had insisted that the task of maintaining law and order in Lebanon be turned over to the principal political parties of the country.

President Elias Sarkis threatened to resign July 6 unless Syria dropped its demands for ending the violence. Sarkis withdrew his decision following pleas from Lebanese Christian and Moslem leaders and the ambassadors of the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Britain.

The Syrians were said to have demanded the reinforcement of the Arab League peacekeeping soldiers in all districts of Lebanon, dismissal of Lebanese army soldiers who had collaborated with Israelis in the south,

reorganization of the Lebanese army to replace Christian dominance with equal representation for Moslems, and cutting of the Christian militia force "down to size."

Sarkis in turn was said to have urged Syria to establish "a durable cease-fire" and to withdraw its political demands, particularly those relating to the Lebanese army.

The Christians for their part had urged a larger role for the Lebanese army with authority over the main Maronite Christian areas of eastern Beirut and the mountain district north of the capital, a reduction in the Arab League force and a probe of current clashes and compensation for damages.

Israeli Planes Fly Over Beirut

Israeli jet fighters swooped low over the largely Moslem sector of western Beirut July 6 to underscore the Israeli government's warning to Syria that day to halt its drive against Christian militiamen in the city. The planes produced sonic booms, shattering windows and causing fear.

The warnings were issued by Defense Minister Ezer Weizman, Major General Shlomo Gazit, chief of military intelligence, and Eliahu Ben-Elissar, director general of Premier Menahem Begin's office. While expressing great concern about the situation, none of the officials would specify what measures Israel contemplated to assist its beleaguered Christian allies.

Ben-Elissar charged that the Syrians were "performing a massacre on the civilian population of Beirut. We have promised and committed ourselves not to let the Christian population be annihilated in Lebanon." General Gazit said a total Syrian takeover of Lebanon "might change the balance of forces in the inter-Arab scene," influencing current peace efforts. Syrian success in Lebanon, he added, would turn the country "into a confrontation state" against Israel and would probably force Israel to reconsider its negotiating position.

Contending that Syria had reinforced its military presence in Lebanon with heavy armor, Gazit said the purpose of its drive against the Christians was "to impose a Pax Damascus on Lebanon."

Gazit placed the death toll in Beirut at 400, more than double the figure generally accepted in the capital.

U.S. Urges End to Fighting

President Carter July 6 called on "all parties with influence over the situation" to help end the fighting in Beirut. The President's plea and a similar one issued by the State Department were directed at Syrian and Christian forces and at Israel, U.S. officials said.

Administration officials said the appeal was made in part out of concern that the current fighting might endanger negotiations scheduled later in the month in London between the Egyptian and Israeli foreign ministers. [See 1978 [Middle East: Egypt Details Peace Plan; Other Developments](#)]

The State Department implied strong criticism of Syria's military activity and the Israeli jet warning flight over Beirut. The U.S. was urging "maximum restraint by all the parties," the department said, adding that "anything that would have the potential of expanding the conflict is something we think would not be useful."

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