

Sabra and Shatila 1982: Resisting the Massacre

Zakaria al-Shaikh

Since September 1982, Shatila and Sabra refugee camps have carried an ominous meaning throughout the world. That month, hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent people were slaughtered in a massacre that lasted several days. Their only "crime" was that they were Palestinians or, in the case of many poor Lebanese Shiite refugees from South Lebanon, thought to be Palestinians.

Before the massacres, the two camps on the southwestern fringes of Beirut were home for some thirty thousand refugees from northern Palestine. Most had lived there since 1948 when the camps were established by the UNRWA on land leased from two large Beirut families, the Shatilas and the Sabras.

The author, a Palestinian from the Haifa region, was born and brought up in Shatila camp. The following account of the massacre of September 1982 was originally written in Arabic, soon after the event. It constitutes the author's attempt to make sense of what happened, and to bring to life again, if only fleetingly, some of those people he had known all his life and who perished during those black days.

The events, places and persons described in this account are real. Only in the case of people still living have names been changed for their personal safety. However, the full story remains buried in the graves of those who perished in Sabra and Shatila.

When they* closed in on Sabra and Shatila camps in the dawn of Wednes-

*Throughout the events, neither the author, nor most of the inhabitants had a clear idea of who it was attacking the camps. The distinctions that have since become known between the role of the Israeli, Phalangist and Haddad forces are not taken into account here. The term "they" is thus a reference to one or another of those parties to the massacre.

day, September 15, people were asleep in their homes, or what remained of them after the long terrible war. The camps were being shelled when Abu Ahmed Said marched toward their positions at the edge of the camp. He was going to tell them: "Those who are left in the camps are old men, women, children and unarmed young men. . . . Why are you shelling like this?"

But Abu Ahmed Said did not come back. They killed him before he reached them with his white flag

It had been seventeen days since the last of the Palestinian fighters had left Beirut. West Beirut was a hive of activity: bulldozers were removing barricades, the piles of dirt and rubble; troops of the Multinational Force were defusing mines; Lebanese Army troops were emptying weapon depots; Lebanese police were establishing checkpoints on every corner.

But in the camps of Sabra, Shatila and Bourj al-Barajneh, no bulldozers were at work. The electricians of the national power company had received no orders to repair the damage that had left the camps without light and power. The Popular Committees in Sabra and Shatila were discussing such issues as removing the rubble, repairing or rebuilding houses, and arranging for shelters or temporary buildings for those whose homes had been completely destroyed.

The Committees estimated that in Shatila alone, 70 percent of the houses were damaged and 20 percent wholly destroyed. They discussed the problems of electricity and water, even though they knew they could do nothing about them. They did not have the money necessary for repairs and they had no access to financial support. They did not know who would have to pay for repairs. The camp people? But they had spent their life's savings during the Israeli siege of Beirut to stay alive and to buy canned food, the prices of which had skyrocketed during the war.

The summer had been as hot as hell, yet now preparing for winter occupied everyone's mind. Lines and lines of young men, women and children were roving the camps with their wheelbarrows; shovels, pickaxes and brooms spread through every street and alley. The Popular Committees had just enough money to rent trucks to move the rubble away. A few water pipes had been repaired so there were sufficient public taps for almost all residents to have drinking water. Piles of rubbish were burned and repair work started in some of the houses which had been hit during the war. Several young men started shaving their beards which had grown long, changed their dirty khakis and work clothes, and polished their shoes. They, too, were cleaning themselves of the effects of the long war.

People in the camps were also following the news in the papers and on

radios. One of the first announcements of Bashir Gemayel, the newly-elected President, was that “the Palestinians will have to pay their electricity and water bills of the past fourteen years.” The hardship and uncertainty were reflected in people’s faces after months of war, but these could not disguise the special fear that such pronouncements gave rise to. The Palestinians of Sabra and Shatila were hoping that those “bills” were the only ones they would have to pay. But they knew that the “bills” to which Bashir Gemayel referred were going to be for more than electricity and water.

Bashir was elected President, and it was a few days before his inauguration. The Multinational Force had come to supervise the withdrawal of the PLO, and to “protect Palestinian civilians.” However, that latter assignment was quietly forgotten and dropped, and the Multinationals began their gradual withdrawal; the US contingent left first, of course. They were followed by the Italians and finally the French, who withdrew on Sunday morning, September 12, 1982.

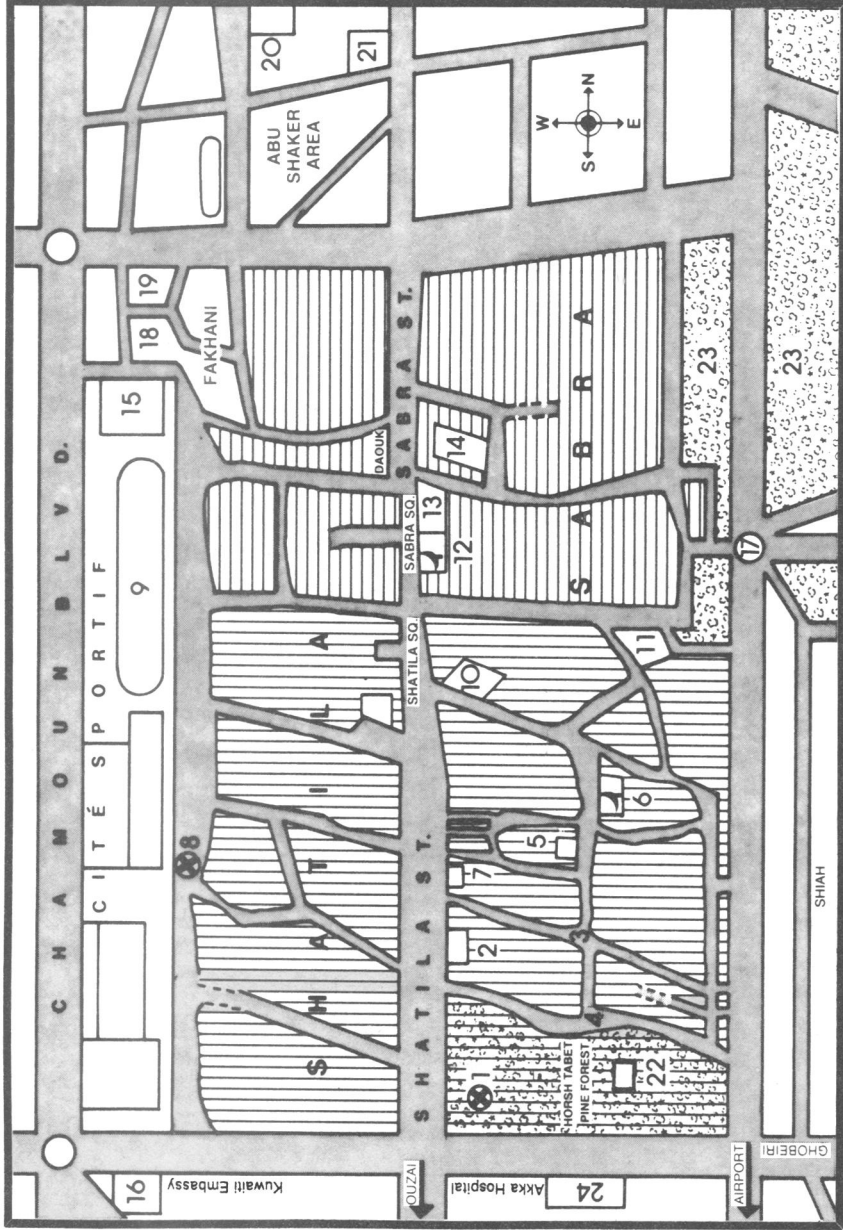
With these quick withdrawals dwindled the faint hope for a relatively secure life under international protection. To the people living in the camps, the future had become one enormous open question. Their main worry was the new president. There were massacres on his record: Karantina, Maslakh and Tel al-Zaatar (during the 1975–76 Civil War) to mention only a few. What shall we do in this second phase of nightmare? What shall we do now that we are unarmed and unprotected? The state was going to have a president whose militia had welcomed the Israeli invaders with rice and flowers. Would he leave us alone?

There would be no answer to these questions. On Tuesday, September 14, at 4:10 PM, Bashir met his fate in a huge explosion that tore down the building in which he was holding a meeting with the commanders of his Lebanese Forces. Until late that evening, people believed the Phalangist “Voice of Lebanon” radio report that Bashir’s life had been spared by a miracle. But in the dangerous game he had been playing, Bashir was the big loser and his death was announced late that night to a stunned country.

Wednesday, September 15

I had not slept well the previous night, but I finally fell into a deep sleep. In the first hours of dawn, my friend Rabie woke me up. It was five o’clock in the morning, but seeing the expression of dismay and consternation on his face, I quickly dressed, my mind fixed on one idea: if the Lebanese Forces had decided to blame the Palestinians for the assassination of their leader,

Sabra and Shatila Camps, Beirut 1982



List of map locations mentioned in the text.

1. Mass grave
2. Abu Walid Harb's shop
3. Jamal shot here
4. Murdered child's mother met here
5. Al-Carmel Center
6. Shatila Mosque
7. Doukhi's shop
8. Mass grave of Abu Faisal's family
9. Sports Stadium
10. Mukhalalati building
11. TV Studio
12. Dana mosque
13. Sabra vegetable market
14. Gaza Hospital
15. Wrestling ring
16. Kuwaiti Embassy
17. Shatila roundabout
18. Arab University Engineering Faculty
19. Arab University Campus
20. Murabitoun radio station
21. Maqassed Hospital
22. Fahd's house
23. Martyrs' cemeteries
24. Akka Hospital

 Shatila Camp
  Sabra Camp

shells would already have rained down on the camps.

Nevertheless, this September morning carried a greater danger. Walking from my home in Shatila, through the main street going north toward Sabra and Fakhani, we heard people talking about how the Israeli forces had already crossed the lines specified by the “Habib agreement” and advanced into West Beirut. Most people were already out of their homes and in the streets. The bad news had awakened everybody that early morning. Some people were just standing in despondent silence, others were whispering to each other in small circles. We crossed the vegetable market and went on up to Sabra Square which was as crowded with people as it used to be every morning when workers gathered there waiting for the cars to take them to their work. This morning was slightly different: there were no cars—and the expressions on people’s faces

We continued our way to the Fakhani residential area. In a street close to the Beirut Arab University Engineering School, everyone was looking toward one corner of the building, where seven fully-armed soldiers stood. I tried to convince myself that they were from the Lebanese Army. Only yesterday I had seen such soldiers standing near the same spot while I was passing through the area. But before I had fully taken in what was going on, I heard a voice from the crowd saying in the distinctive Beirut accent, “These are our cousins.”* This remark had the effect of breaking the long silence as another voice added, “They spent the night in the Engineering School.” “But how can we allow them to stay here?” someone else asked. “Whoever marries my mother becomes my stepfather,”** came the answer from another.

A further series of comments and statements followed. An Israeli officer tried to prevent some children coming closer. The soldiers were standing right next to each other as if afraid of an unknown aggressor. They were clearly on edge, afraid to advance; otherwise, the children would not have dared approach them. I moved a few steps forward to where I could see the remains of the Cité Sportif, and near the wrestling-ring building I noticed two armored vehicles and a military jeep with a wireless, flying a red flag.

We felt an urge to find how far the Israeli forces had penetrated into Beirut, so we continued our trip northwards into the heart of West Beirut. We noticed people standing attentively in the building entrances or on their balconies in their pyjamas: the impending danger concerned every inhabitant of West Beirut. We could hear the sounds of explosions coming from the Verdun Street

*A popular description of the Israelis.

**An Arabic proverb meaning, “We go along with the prevailing power.”

area. We moved west toward Saqiet al-Janzir, and there people spoke of Israeli war machinery roving Beirut's west coast. Going up toward the Snoubra area in Ras Beirut and then down toward Hamra Street, we could hear explosions and shooting. There were radio reports of clashes taking place at Beirut's northeastern entrance near the port. Beirut was surrounded on all sides.

Rabie and I discussed what we should do. He insisted that we not go back to the camps, the "danger areas" as he called them. We did not know then that every street of West Beirut was haunted by images of death. The sonic booms made by Israeli jets from the early morning brought back memories of the "match-box" buildings which had been reduced to piles of rubble by Israel's vacuum bombs during the war.

We entered a small popular restaurant in Verdun Street to make a phone call. I got through to an old friend, Jihad, and we agreed to meet an hour later at the main entrance to the American University of Beirut (AUB). There was time to spare and, with the smell of freshly roasting lamb surrounding me, I realized I needed to eat. I had long ago learnt that in wartime a chance to have a meal was something not to be passed over. You never knew when you might have another chance to eat.

As I waited for my plate of food, I began to wonder what we and Jihad could do; perhaps we could organize something with the few resources left in West Beirut? Meanwhile, Rabie sat opposite, biting his nails, robbed of his appetite by the tension.

At 4:30 PM, we found ourselves standing outside the AUB; the streets were completely empty of cars and pedestrians. Jihad arrived with a Lebanese friend. I began telling them all we had witnessed since the morning. Rabie remained silent, refusing to speak. We drove to a house where we could talk more freely and meet some friends who might be in a position to help. On the way, we stopped momentarily at the top of a hill. There we saw smoke and heard the sound of explosions coming from the south.

We soon arrived at an apartment where we met Muhsin, his wife and another friend, Basil. "No coffee or tea, I am afraid," said Muhsin's wife. They had arrived only two hours earlier at this safe house and a layer of dust covered the furniture. Muhsin quizzed me about all that had happened in the camp area. Once again I recounted what we had seen, and I asked Muhsin directly if there was any way he could help us prepare for the impending danger. He shook his head silently, as if to say, "There is nothing any of us can do now . . . we are all on our own." I looked toward Jihad. His face reflected the bitter disappointment and frustration which welled up in me. Rabie and I decided it was time to move, to get back to the camp before darkness fell.

Basil offered us a ride in his car and we exchanged brief goodbyes.

In the car on the way back to Shatila, I bluntly asked Basil if there were any light weapons or RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades) available anywhere in West Beirut. He remained silent, implicitly acknowledging his and everybody's total unpreparedness for the events which were developing around us.

Without RPGs there was no hope of stopping the Israeli armored vehicles, which always precede their infantry. There were desperately few, if any, of these left in the camps and, anyway, all the fortifications and barricades around the camps had either been destroyed during the war or removed in the previous two weeks. With the Israeli war machine only meters away, there was no time to erect new fortifications. We thanked Basil and he dropped us off before Sabra Square.

We walked back, retracing the route we had taken in the morning. It was imperative to contact some of our friends. They would undoubtedly be facing the same dilemma as we . . . what could be done? I went to Abu Jahl's house, but he was not there. I met a few friends standing in Sabra Street, carrying the few Kalashnikov sub-machine guns that remained in the camp. I could say little to comfort or encourage them. My excursion to West Beirut had been futile. I suggested that they should try to approach the western perimeters of the camp, from where they might be able to observe developments. But I knew this was not a very convincing response to their queries. Nonetheless, Hussein and two others went off to gather information, and we agreed to meet later.

We went to see if al-Shaikh could offer some guidance. Throughout the siege of Beirut this 60-year-old fisherman from Jaffa could be found in his position on the west coast of the city, gun in hand, facing the Israelis with the enthusiasm and determination of a young man. That evening we found him tense and tired, his usual strength gone. He was chain-smoking and silent, trying to respond encouragingly to my questions but clearly despondent. When Hussein and his friends returned, we took leave of al-Shaikh and went outside to listen to what they had to say.

More Israeli tanks had arrived at the Cité Sportif complex. A few hundred meters further south, near the Kuwaiti Embassy, tanks had begun to shell the two camps and sniper fire was being directed down main roads. The sky over the south of the camp was lit with flares, but as yet there was no indication of any move into the camps.

At this point, Rabie spoke for the first time in hours. He had decided that he was going to return to the relative safety of Hamra, to stay at a friend's house. There was no way he could be persuaded to stay; the operation was

turning out to be worse than all expectations. I warmly hugged him farewell and walked in the direction of my house in Shatila to check on my family.

As I made my way southwards, the occasional explosion and sniper bullets nearby kept me on my guard. The flares now lit the whole area and I moved into the smaller safer alleyways outside of the range of the sniping. As I walked, the strange orange glare filled my mind with the images of ordinary times: the streets filled with people, the bustle of the vegetable market, traders hawking their wares, people, cars and carts causing impossible traffic jams in the narrow unpaved roads. In the past few days Sabra and Shatila had begun to regain their activity and life. Now, all around seemed black and empty; the fear of what had yet to come hung heavily around me. The feelings of impotence and desperation began to well up in me again and I tried to dismiss them. I couldn't afford to lose hope.

I arrived at my house. Only my father, two uncles and my grandmother were there. The rest of the family had moved to a nearby shelter. My father was turning the dial of the radio to all kinds of news stations, hoping to hear about anything that might stop the Israelis from entering the camps. The radio offered no such reassurance; there was not a mention of what was going on around the camps.

After having a small meal of cheese and tea, I got up to check on the rest of the family in the shelter. My head was aching with a throbbing pain and I carefully made my way to the shelter, avoiding exposed places. I found my mother and sisters with my uncles' families and a dozen others, or rather part of them, for they were distributed between the shelter itself and the nearby "Carmel Youth Center." I remained there some time, discussing with the Center officials the simple civil defense arrangements that might be made in case the situation worsened. By two o'clock, we all needed some sleep. I returned home and fell on a bed and into a deep but troubled sleep.

Thursday, September 16

Morning

I awoke four hours later. The level of shelling had intensified. People were fleeing from homes to shelters. The shelling was concentrated on the southern Horsch Tabet area and the northern approach to the camps. Old men, women and children filled the few shelters, while the younger men stood in small groups outside and in front of the Center, taking whatever cover there was.

I spent the early morning in Shatila where I had located a Kalashnikov machine gun and sixty rounds of bullets. I had decided not to continue moving

around the camp without some form of protection. At nine o'clock, I went to look for a very close friend, Abu Faris, who lived in the southwestern corner of the camp, near the Kuwaiti Embassy. He had left his own house which had become too dangerous, and I eventually found him at his parents' house. We spent two hours there together, discussing the possibilities of finding additional weapons in the camp, to no avail. I returned to the Center and remained there until the early afternoon. We tried to keep informed of developments, not feeling able to organize any concerted resistance.

At three in the afternoon I accompanied a friend, Sameh, to his home nearby. There, sitting in his newly-furnished living room which had escaped the ravages of the war, we sipped bitter black coffee. The radio was on and we heard reports of how the Israelis had crossed Philip Habib's ceasefire lines. I climbed a ladder which led to the roof of Sameh's house. From there I could see the shells exploding in the Horsch area as well as the northern entrance to the camp. The source of the shells was Israeli tanks positioned behind the sand dunes near the Kuwaiti Embassy.

We had just started to eat when Sameh's youngest brother Wisam burst into the room with the latest news. Abu Ahmed Said, Abu Ahmed Suwaid, Abu Kamal Saad, Abu Mohammed Saad, and Abu Mohammed Hishmeh, all respected camp elders, had met in Said's house at around two o'clock that afternoon. They had decided to go to the Israelis to tell them that the civilians in the camps wanted no more killing or destruction, and that those left in the camps were mostly old men, women and children; there were no armed men.

I could not understand why these people had taken this decision. Something was not normal. Were they surrendering to the Israelis? How else could the decision be explained? I wanted to brush off the idea that the camp elders had decided to surrender. I did not want to believe for one second that Abu Ahmed Said, Abu Ahmed Suwaid, Abu Kamal Saad or Abu Mohammed Saad, all of whom I knew well, had decided to surrender.

Abu Ahmed Said was very well known among the people in the camp, both young and old. Many times, friendly people from foreign countries who visited the camps had been served Arabic coffee in his special cups decorated with the Palestinian flag. Abu Ahmed Said, that human encyclopedia of the historic events that had taken place in Palestine, his homeland, and then in Lebanon over his eighty years, Abu Ahmed Said, surrender? The man who always told the younger generations about the Balfour Declaration, about King Abdullah and King Farouk, about Glubb Pasha, about Hitler, stories about the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid, about the heroism of the Palestinian

fighters Izzedin al-Qassem and Abdel Qader Husseini?

And Abu Ahmed Suwaid, whose son had been brought up steeped in Palestinian tradition and taught future generations the lessons of our history; Abu Ahmed Suwaid, surrender? Abu Mohammed Saad's eldest son was a prominent doctor who had worked in the camp hospital for years, serving his people as his father had done. Abu Kamal Saad, too, had always been proud of his son who had died fighting during the Lebanese civil war. Could these men have taken such a step?

I was still engulfed in memories of them when our friend, al-Omari, arrived and told us that Abu Kamal Saad had returned from the direction of the Israeli positions with a pale face and morbid look. People had tried to ask him what had happened but he did not utter a word. He was moving quickly to the safety of the north.

We tuned in to the radio station run by the Beirut Nasserist movement, the Murabitoun. The Israelis were advancing from the port to Ain al-Mreisseh and were facing fierce resistance. They were destroying every corner before gaining control over it.

I left Sameh's house and returned to the Center. The shelter there was now crammed with people; children were crying and fretting. I was sure the only other shelter in the neighborhood was as full and that nothing could be done to reduce the crush. The people in the other shelter were in an even worse position. The building over their shelter was under continuous shelling from the Israeli positions near the Kuwaiti Embassy and the Cité Sportif. There was no way of escape.

I went into a room in the Center where the older men had gathered. I wanted to know what had happened to the five elders who had decided to talk to the Israelis. The only response I got was, "Abu Kamal passed in front of us, pale and shivering; when we called him, he did not stop but continued his march toward the north."

I wanted to know what these old men thought of the decision of Abu Ahmed Said and the others. "They were right," one old man said. "It is clear they want to enter the camps, and there is little we can do about that." "Have you forgotten what they did to us during the war," another man responded. "How can we fight this modern army? With stones?" a third asked.

I tried to understand the reasoning of some of those old men, but in my own mind I refused to give in to the circumstances. I believed that we should form groups of young, able-bodied men and prepare actively to defend the camps. But I also knew that the positions of the older men were realistic. Ours was an impossible situation. I walked back outside in front of the Center.

By this time, the shelling had become terrifying. Sonic booms from jets flying right above our heads increased the terror. Young men who had gone out looking for a few RPGs had returned empty-handed. The Israeli tanks were so close to us, while in the heart of West Beirut, fierce battles were going on between the few still resisting and Israel's tanks.

My reflections were shattered with the sound of a mortar shell exploding a few meters away and the screams of women and crying children. The fragments of the shell scattered throughout the area, and with a familiar sound, pierced the fragile zinc roofs and walls of houses nearby. The battle was getting nearer.

I decided to go toward Shatila Square at the camp's northern entrance to see if any attempt had been made to close the main safe exit out of the camp. On the way, I passed the mosque in the center of the camp and saw Abu Ziad, a good friend and member of the camp Popular Committee. He was walking briskly toward his house. I shouted to him to stop and exchange greetings and news but he did not even acknowledge me, so intent was he on reaching his family. I continued in the direction of the square.

I found a safe position there and observed that the area was subject to heavy shelling and machine gun fire. The five-story Mukhalalati building was on fire and the strange glow of flares in the early evening skies added to the light created by the fire. The road from Shatila Square to Sabra Square was closed by tank fire and sniping from 23 mm heavy machine gun fire. This axis had become dangerous. There was only a 200-meter stretch of open road between Shatila Square and the tanks' positions near the Sports Stadium. My thoughts were concentrated on the task of locating the few armed defenders and positioning them near Shatila Square, in case the enemy advanced from that direction.

Evening

On my way back, I passed the mosque and saw waves of people rushing toward it in the belief that it was a safe shelter. Overwhelmed by the accelerating events, they thought that the attackers would not commit their crimes in a holy place. It was as if the images of the recent war had disappeared from their memories, as if Beirut's mosques and churches had not been destroyed and its houses and apartment buildings were still standing.

It was around five-thirty in the early evening when, suddenly, a young woman carrying her child emerged from one of the alleys. It seemed that I was the first person she had met on the way because once she saw me she

started talking to me with apparent terror in her face. "They came near my house near the Sports Stadium," she said, "an Israeli officer and another military person wearing dark fatigues like the *fedayeen*. He was carrying a Kalashnikov with a cartridge pouch on his side. He drove some neighbors out of the shelter and started shooting them. The Israeli officer ordered me to go away and I ran with my son. My husband went with the fighters to Syria."

The woman continued her story to the old men and women who had gathered around her. I was withdrawing from the crowd when I saw an old woman approaching from a side alley. She was bleeding from the mouth. I took her hand. I did not talk to her and she did not utter a word. Suddenly, I saw a group of women and children screaming in terror and running toward us. I saw one woman trying to support her body against the shoulder of another woman. Her hand pressed against her stomach and blood gushed between her fingers. Another woman screamed as she saw us, "They are butchering us, they are butchering us." The old woman fainted near the entrance to the mosque; children were crying, "Take us to the hospital."

I ran in the direction of Gaza Hospital, the only safe and nearby medical center operating at the time. I had to find a car to carry the wounded woman to the hospital before her situation worsened. On my way, I noticed a dark colored car near Shatila Square which reflected the light of the flares. A small group of young men were crouching nearby. I called to them and found the owner of the car and urged him to come with me to help remove the wounded.

He drove nervously at high speed without headlights until he ploughed into a pile of rubble that blocked the road to the mosque. We left the car and ran toward the wounded woman, passing on the way three children huddled in a corner and crying for their mother. We carried the wounded woman to the car and were followed by a group of children and mothers who crammed into the car with us. We drove quickly to Gaza Hospital.

I was surprised by the huge number of people gathered in front of the hospital and in its entrances. I went into one of the hospital buildings where I found Abu Antar, an ambulance driver. I told him briefly what was happening near the mosque. We rushed to one of the ambulances and sped back toward the mosque. We stopped near the same pile of rubble. We carried the other wounded woman on a stretcher and rushed her to the ambulance where a dozen more wounded and frightened women and children were waiting to be taken to the relative safety of the hospital.

It was seven-thirty when I began to make my way back to the center of Shatila. Dozens of families were running in the direction of the hospital. An old man was being carried on the shoulders of his son. Parents were car-

rying infants, their older children running barefoot behind them. On the roadside, young men were shouting at the fleeing people, telling them to keep to the right of the street to avoid snipers' bullets. I heard several people saying, "They have reached Doukhi's shop" (only several hundred meters from the Carmel Center).

I started running toward the Center as the thought that had been building up for the past few hours exploded in my mind. This was no ordinary military operation; this was not an attempt simply to surround the camp and shell it into surrender, a repeat of the three-month siege of Beirut. Those attacking us were actually penetrating into the deepest reaches of the camp under the cover of heavy artillery and tank fire, confronting any resistance on their way. But that was only secondary to their main aim which had now become clear: to slaughter every living thing within their reach, men, women, children and animals. I could not be sure for how long this had been going on, but its proportions were becoming horrific.

At a corner near the Center, I stood with Mohammed. From there we saw another friend, Jamal, the son of the well-known baker, with his Kalashnikov at the ready. A few meters to his left stood my cousin Imad with an RPG launcher on his shoulder. They had taken up their position from where they hoped they could confront the enemy advance; they knew, though, that every bullet would be answered with a dozen grenades.

Suddenly, we heard the voice of a girl coming from somewhere near where Jamal was standing. "They are here," she cried, "they have reached here." Right after that we heard several shots and the girl fell to the ground bleeding. Jamal ran toward the girl to pull her away. But he, too, was shot and fell to the ground. Imad fired one of the last five RPGs he had, followed by a few shots by Mohammed, who was advancing toward where the girl and Jamal lay, and I provided further covering fire. Our fire forced the attackers back.

Mohammed pulled Jamal and the girl behind a building. Jamal was bleeding from a wound in his chest, and blood was gushing from a deep cut in the girl's forehead. With some other young men, I ran to the wounded. We carried them toward the mosque where we were lucky to find Abu Antar still evacuating wounded in the ambulance. I looked at the face of the girl lying on the stretcher in the ambulance. The blood had covered her eyes. She was motionless, and I thought she was dead.

Back at the hospital, I saw that the number of wounded had almost doubled in the past two hours. The entrances, the hallways and the rooms in the basement, including the emergency area, were all packed with the dead and wounded. I went down to the operating room in the basement to see what

the situation was there. I saw people almost piled one on top of the other. A woman was screaming, "The cowards, they only dared to come when our fighters had left."

Hysterical screams started coming from the ground floor above. I rushed up the stairs to see a group of men and women trying to hold back a young man, one of Jamal's best friends. He was trying to hit his head against the wall and crying, "Jamal has gone! Oh my God, Jamal has gone!"

Jamal, that kind-hearted boy whose small, green eyes were always full of life and energy; Jamal, the good student whose moments of ultimate happiness were when he used to tell his friends about his plans to go to university and study engineering, was now dead.

As I stood there with a mixture of feelings of confusion and pain, I suddenly noticed a stretcher wheeled by with the body of a young girl on it, tubes extending from her nose and mouth. It was the girl we had brought in with Jamal. I followed the nurses tending to her and asked about her condition. I was told that she would probably pull through. So Jamal's death had meant life for another, a small but needed consolation in those terrible moments.

Unable to stay there, I went out of the hospital into the front yard. I saw Mohammed arguing with his mother. When she saw me coming toward them, she said, "Zakaria, come and talk to Mohammed. He wants to go back into the camp." Her words were like an electric shock; my family had stayed in the middle of the camp. Without replying to her, I ran back toward my house, haunted by images of blood and death.

The distance between the vegetable market and the house was filled with the threat of death from sniping or shelling. It was nearly nine o'clock and I reached the mosque safely; the attackers hadn't yet reached there. The flares lit up those same alleys I remembered so well from the calm winter nights of past years when the only sound to be heard was the whispering of night guards and the crackling of wood fires. Night was a good friend and I walked carefully and quietly. The possibility of the attackers reaching this area at any moment was great; the concentrated lighting of the center of the camp meant that I could expect them around any corner, and I held my machine gun at the ready.

I entered my silent house and listened for familiar voices, but found it empty. Nearby, I heard my father's whispers and found him, my two uncles and my grandmother sitting in a hidden alcove under the water reservoir. I tried to restrain myself from screaming in their faces, "What are you doing here? Don't you know what's going on in the camp?" I said, "Hurry up! We

have to leave now.” When I saw my father heading to gather some papers and lock the main door, I cried out, “What do you want to do? There is no time for you to do anything. Let’s go now.”

Outside the house I thought of the other members of the family. My father told me they were still in the shelter. We needed to collect them, to take them north toward Sabra camp where it was safer. But the way to the shelter was no longer safe, especially if we were to come across the attackers. They had been killing without discrimination and my remaining ammunition wouldn’t be able to save us. Yet I quickly decided to send my grandmother to bring the rest from the shelter to the mosque where we would meet them.

We waited at the mosque for her arrival. I wondered why I had chosen her. Perhaps because I thought that a harmless old woman stood a better chance of getting through than grown men; perhaps the killers had some human feelings? Perhaps if, God forbid, she did not make it, her loss would be less than that of men in the prime of life. Or was it simply a fear for my own life? God, how my morale and logic had changed in these past few hours! Finally, my poor old grandmother returned with the rest of the family and the heavy thoughts that had been preoccupying me vanished. We had to wait several more minutes while my aunt went back to her house to collect a feeding bottle for her child. When she arrived, we began our careful trek northward, each step taking us closer to safety.

I saw Mohammed and a few other defenders on the corner of the road leading to the abandoned Lebanese TV studio on the eastern fringes of Sabra. On the other side of the street stood Imad with his RPG launcher. I told them I would soon be back and followed my family. When we reached the corner of Sabra vegetable market, we still had a few meters left to cross. Snipers’ bullets were hitting the doors of shops across the street. We crossed the road one by one and gathered at the entrance of a building near Gaza Hospital. There, I had a chance to learn from my aunt what had happened when she had returned to the house.

While filling the feeding bottle in the kitchen, she had heard noises outside the house and then a voice crying out, “I am Mohammed Nabulsi, the brother of the two famous Nabulsi wrestlers,” hoping that this would appease the attackers. Another voice answered, “You son of a bitch, you shot your gun in joy when Shaikh Bashir [Gemayel] died, didn’t you?” She then heard shooting and hysterical laughter, followed by complete silence.

I was haunted with the death of Mohammed Nabulsi. I could not understand why he had not run away. What had made him think that they would spare him? What was he doing in that neighborhood anyway, far away from

his house? For a moment, I had the urge to be alone, away from this crowd of people. Exhausted, I chose an isolated place in the vegetable market and rested my body against one of the wooden stalls. But this did not help. My mind spun with confusion. I thought I would burst.

“The best thing is to move and do something,” I decided. I quietly took a back road behind the shops to avoid snipers’ bullets. I climbed a wall that separated the Dana mosque from the vegetable market and walked back to join Mohammed and the others.

I liked Mohammed’s suggestion that we go into the camp to see what was happening there. It was a way to escape the crazy thoughts that had engulfed me. I walked with him and Imad through the narrow back alleys toward Shatila. The neighborhoods were quiet now and the only sounds we heard were those of the explosions of flares and sniper fire. At one corner inside the camp we heard engine noises and tracked vehicles. “Israeli armored vehicles advancing,” I whispered to Mohammed. We hid, each in a corner, each on the alert.

I decided to advance a few meters to see what was going on. I asked Imad to cover me as I followed Mohammed in the direction of the nearby pine forest. I wanted to remind Mohammed that the aim was reconnaissance and not to engage in combat; there was nothing we could do with two guns and an RPG. I had started to move quietly toward Mohammed when we suddenly heard the sound of a wailing woman coming from the dark forest area. We waited for her to come out from among the trees, afraid that she might be followed by the attackers.

When she emerged from the forest, she was crying hysterically, “They’ve killed him, my beloved son. They’ve killed him in front of my own eyes.” She kept repeating the same sentence over and over again. I dashed toward her, took her quickly by the arm and guided her into the alley. I tried to persuade her to stop screaming by calling up the phrases appropriate to the circumstance. When we reached the mosque, the woman had become somewhat calmer, and I asked her what had happened.

She told us through her tears and sobs that she lived near the house of Abu Walid Harb, who had a popular bicycle and motorcycle shop in the middle of Shatila Street. Late that afternoon, when the killings and destruction were going on in the nearby neighborhood and people did not have time to escape, she had convinced her husband and older son to go and hide in the house of a relative near the Arab University. “I thought that they would only kill the men,” she said. But as the attackers approached her house in the evening, she became afraid for her child. It was too late to do anything

but hold him tightly in her arms.

They broke into her house. She tried to escape through the kitchen door, but it was too late. There were three of them, standing in front of her. One of them fired over her head telling her to stop. As he came closer to her, she hugged her son more tightly as if trying to hide him under her ribs. One gunman gripped her neck with his hands while another snatched the baby from her arms. She choked, "Please do not kill him, for God's sake, don't!" She struggled to free her neck. They were laughing hysterically and calling her all kinds of names. They put the baby in one corner and took aim. With a fierce jolt of resistance, she freed her neck only to receive a severe kick in her chest which knocked her to the ground. The child was screaming. He started to crawl, trying to reach his mother, while she looked at him helplessly. One of them grabbed the baby by his feet like a chicken and threw him back into the corner. Again they took aim. The mother cried out, "Please, kill me instead; for God's sake, spare him!"

"No, it is him we want to kill. In a few years he'd become a *feda'i*. We will not kill you because you will soon die of sorrow for him."

The child was screaming for his mother, "Ya mama, ya mama," as dozens of bullets ripped through his small and fragile body.

The woman was now sobbing helplessly after recounting her painful story. When her tears seemed to have dried up, Imad offered to accompany her to Gaza Hospital. I was leaning against the wall of the mosque, trying hard not to dwell upon the brutal images that had just been related to me, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Looking up, I saw a friend, Khalil, standing there with a strange smile on his pale face. He told me that he had been surrounded at the western edge of the camp. He had hidden in a huge pile of rubble. From there, he had seen four gunmen break into the nearby houses and shoot everybody in them. He had seen them shoot two horses which used to pull the kerosene carts. They had brutally kicked an old man and hit him with their rifle butts as he tried to explain that he was not a *feda'i* and not even a Palestinian.

Khalil had become obsessed with the idea that they would soon find him and that they would certainly kill him. He had pulled the pin out of a hand grenade he was carrying, and crept toward the edge of the pile of rubble from where he could see the four gunmen clearly. They had gathered in a circle around the old man and one of them had started shooting close to the man's feet. It seemed a bullet had hit him because he started screaming, "Oh my foot, my foot!" When they started to shower the man with a hail of bullets to finish him off, Khalil threw the grenade at them and fell to the ground,

his head between his arms. A few seconds later, he fled east where we met him.

Khalil could hardly believe he was still alive. We decided to go back to the Gaza Hospital area where he could have rest. I returned to my family, only to learn that Abu Ali, one of my closest friends, had been killed earlier that day. I rushed to his house to find his mother, Umm Ahmed.

The minute I stepped into the house I saw her, in her usual black dress, sitting with three other women, weeping. When she saw me come in, her weeping intensified. She cried out to me, "Oh Zakaria, your beloved friend has been killed." I broke down in tears and took her hand saying, "We are all your children . . . God rest his soul."

Abu Ali. Those who do not know Abu Ali do not know Sabra and its main square. At seventeen, he was larger than life. He was a hero among men. You felt his presence in a crowd, you felt his loud laughter. And the story of his love for the girl two years his senior was well known throughout the camp. Abu Ali had been killed by a sniper's bullet in the head while going to fetch food and supplies for his family.

I picked my way through the wounded and dead bodies laid out over the ground floor of the hospital. I felt that I needed to be far from the surface of this planet. However, I decided to visit Fadi, a friend and one of the hospital lab technicians. I found him scrutinizing a blood analysis machine. He needed three units of O-blood for the same girl whom Jamal had saved; there was no more than that amount in the hospital But they had to be used if the girl was to live. There was little hope at this point of getting any blood donations. Fadi also told me of the desperate fuel situation which threatened the electricity generators. The hospital staff were worried about the presence of such large numbers of civilians in and around the hospital; the whole area was unsafe now and one well-placed shell could cause havoc. But there was little that could be done: "hospital" was a word of comfort and safety to people.

I bade Fadi farewell and went out into the street only to meet Umm Nassar, whose son I had known well. Nassar was a brave fighter who was killed near the Beirut racecourse while taking part in repulsing the final Israeli attempt to enter West Beirut on August 12. His mother was still dressed in the black clothes of mourning. She begged me to help her find some bread for her and her handicapped son. I couldn't believe my ears: were people even unable to feed themselves at this time? The situation was becoming impossible.

It was after midnight when I went to check on my family and find Mohammed. He had gone off with the RPG launcher but nobody knew where. I had an idea where he might be. I made my way back past the vegetable market to that corner near the TV studio where, indeed, I did find him and

a few other young men from the camp. They were arguing about whether to advance any further toward the enemy's positions and they looked to me for a decision of some sort. I knew we had one RPG and only a little ammunition left. I thought to myself, "There is nothing we can do now, but it is wrong to tell them that; they might explode in my face or look at me with disillusion. And I cannot destroy what remains of their morale." I preferred to remain silent, and they took this as a sign of approval of their suggestions to probe the enemy positions.

I moved forward next to Mohammed and al-Omari. We walked silently through ever-narrowing alleyways. The dark and emptiness were almost total. We eventually reached a point just east of the mosque and took up positions there as we believed that to be the approximate "dividing line" between us and the attackers. Before advancing any further, we saw the vague images of a group of gunmen moving forward slowly in our direction, whispering to each other. We all tensed, and for many moments we remained silent until al-Omari gave away our presence by a slight movement. The gunmen stopped and then a hail of bullets sped in our direction. Our positions were well-concealed and none of us was hit. There was a loud explosion as Mohammed shot off his last RPG. A brief exchange of gunfire ensued between us and them; an anti-personnel grenade exploded near us. With so little ammunition left and without knowing how many more gunmen might be in the area, we decided to retreat. As we moved back, we noticed the distinctive south Lebanese accent of the gunmen and their names as they called each other, "Tony . . . Abu Michel."

We returned to the same corner from where we had set off, all relieved to have returned safely. Were it not for our precise knowledge of each square meter of the camp, we might not have been so lucky. I sat back briefly, exhausted, and inhaled deeply on a cigarette, contemplating the situation. It was now clear that the attackers were in firm control of large parts of the camp and there was no way to stop their further advance northward. It was only a matter of hours before the complete occupation of the camps. The handful of defenders would be unable to prevent it. And after that, what?

By the early hours of dawn, only the sound of intermittent sniper fire broke the silence. We were standing on a corner of Sabra Street, near the vegetable market, when an old woman in black emerged from the other side. She started to cross the street toward us, completely oblivious to a large sign placed on an empty vegetable box in the middle of the street with a danger warning. Probably she couldn't read, and anyway, even if she could, her eyesight might not have been good enough to notice the sign. We shouted to her to stay

where she was and not to cross because of sniper fire. She did not hear us and continued on her way.

She was right in the middle of the street when a bullet hit her in the leg. She continued walking as if nothing was wrong until she finally made it across the street. When she reached a safe spot near us, we rushed to her and one of us held her around the shoulders. She looked at us in a strange way, as if not sure what was going on. Luckily, Gaza Hospital had an unfinished back entrance on Sabra Street, away from the snipers' bullets. Two of us led her into the hospital through that entrance as she stared at us in bewilderment. I returned to my family and curled up exhausted in a corner, almost totally drained of my resources.

Friday, September 17

The sound of loudspeakers woke me from a brief sleep. I looked around and saw my mother slumped on the staircase. I saw the tired and pale faces of my brothers, sisters, cousins and grandmother. They were scattered around the entrance to the building in which we were sheltering. The night that had passed was not that different from those many summer nights of the past war. Except that now, the fatigue, hunger and terror that hung around us were greater.

"Get off the streets. We will shoot anyone in the streets. We are looking for the terrorists," the loudspeakers announced. I looked down at my wrist to see what time it was and discovered that my watch was gone. It must have fallen off somewhere the night before. I was told it was seven-fifteen. My mother's voice was filled with sadness and fear for me. Her tears stirred an emotion in me that had disappeared the last two days. She was begging me to leave the area immediately. The sound of loudspeakers grew nearer as her own imploring voice grew more urgent. I had finally thrown away my gun earlier that morning. The last clash had finished my ammunition and there was little use for it anymore.

I knew that I must go, but where to? The Lebanese Shiite suburb of Shiah, east of the camp, was the closest area and I had many friends there. I looked back at my mother, father, brothers and sisters and began to cry. Would I see them again?

I chose the narrower alleys and streets that took me past the TV studio area, and then entered a narrow winding road that was blocked at the end by a burning pile of rubble. Walking along the road that led to Shatila roundabout, I was astonished to see people walking casually toward the camp from

the east. Further away, on the crossroads, I could see cars speeding in all directions. I stopped a man coming from the direction of Shiah and asked him about the situation there. His answer was that there was no fighting going on and that the Israelis had not entered that area. I reached the roundabout. To my right and left were the martyrs' cemeteries. I moved further out into the road and could see to my right the airport roundabout bridge. The road was empty except for the fallen branches of pine trees.

I crossed Shatila roundabout into As'ad al-As'ad Street and walked on. Abu Hussein, a Lebanese friend from many years back, was standing on the second-floor balcony of his home. He invited me in and I went up right away.

I told Abu Hussein and his wife about the events of the past two days in the camps, including the reported death of more than 80 members of a Shiite family, the Miqdads, during the massacres. Abu Hussein mentioned the idea of gathering a group of fighters to return with me to Shatila and attempt to mount some resistance. That was the answer to a question I had not dared to raise since arriving in Shiah. We decided to go and try to find some other friends.

On the way to the Tayyouneh area, Abu Hussein told me of the events of Thursday in the Shiah area: of the Lebanese Army soldier who single-handedly destroyed an Israeli tank with an RPG when the Israelis attempted to advance past his position; of a group of Amal fighters who clashed with the advancing Israeli forces in Ghobeiri and knocked out three tanks; of that other small group of fighters who had taken up defensive positions throughout the past night after the Tayyouneh area had been shelled. But I was surprised to hear that the inhabitants of the area had asked the local fighters to leave the area. I did not want to believe that people had reached the point where they no longer felt there was anything to be achieved from resistance.

We found Umar near his house. He was a trusted Lebanese friend from the area. After I related all the past events to him, he told me that the whole Shiah area was filled with Saad Haddad's soldiers, "at every corner," as he put it. He said that I must immediately leave. He was nervous as he told me, "Go back to the camp, but if you cannot stay there, come back here." The glimmers of optimism that had begun to grow in me were quickly shattered by these words. I decided to go back.

Back in As'ad al-As'ad Street, walking without knowing what I might encounter, I came across a shopkeeper from Sabra whom I knew, searching for food. He told me the situation in the camp was quiet, or at least had been an hour ago when he was there. He offered to drive me back in his car. We

eventually arrived at Dana mosque where I got out of the car. It was quiet—no explosions and no loudspeakers.

I went straight to the building where I had left my family in the morning. There was nobody there. The hundreds of people who had been gathering in that area had all disappeared. I had an idea where my family might be. On the way, I passed by the home of Umm Ahmed and found her and her six children gathered, waiting, not knowing what to do. I urged them to leave the area immediately, to go to her relatives' house in a safer area.

We walked briskly northward; the stillness in the air was different now, more terrifying. I was tense, unarmed and prepared for any shock. I urged the family to move faster. Just north of Sabra, I parted with them and insisted that they stay out of the camp area until the situation was safer. I continued in the direction of the Abu Shaker area just north of the Arab University where I believed I might find my family. They had split up between the small apartment where my aunt lived and the entrance to the same building. My mother later told me that they had left the building near the Gaza Hospital because the doctors there had warned them that the hospital was no longer safe.

Late in the afternoon I went into the street with an urge to talk to somebody or to find out exactly what was going on. I saw the Murabitoun militiamen out in the neighborhood and caught sight of my friend Usamah standing with a group of men. They were discussing what the Murabitoun could do. One of them said, "It seems the Murabitoun are decided on resisting the Israelis. But there is not much they can do since the Israeli tanks are already deployed all along the Corniche Mazraa. They have practically sealed off the whole area after advancing in the early morning from the Museum crossing [from East Beirut]. They are implementing the same plan they failed to carry out during the war: to separate the areas of Fakhani and the camps from the rest of West Beirut." Another person surmised that they might sweep the whole area that night.

I felt great relief that I had met Usamah there. In addition to a long friendship between us, I felt that at that particular moment we were closer than ever. He shared the same "crime" with me: we were both Palestinians. I accompanied Usamah to his home in the Abu Shaker area. It was packed with relatives and friends from the camps. They were all talking about the best ways to hide or seek protection. The initial sense of comfort upon meeting Usamah suddenly dissipated and once again I felt the urge to leave. It was eight o'clock when I left Usamah and headed back to my family.

It was relatively quiet in Abu Shaker square. There were three Murabitoun

tanks there, and on both sides of the street leading to Mazraa, gunmen were spread out at building entrances. I could see them under the continuous light of the Israeli flares. Further down the street near the building where my family was staying, I met a group of young people gathering around a portable television set positioned on the roof of a parked car. I could hear the voice reading news about the Lebanese government's "discontent with Israel's breach of the agreement" and expressions of fear at what was taking place in the camps.

I went into the building. Dozens of people were packed in the hallway and the staircase. Inside my aunt's apartment, I managed to find a place on an armchair in the living room, next to my father. I spent hours fiddling with the radio turning the dial from one station to another. Nothing much was being said about the events of the past two days. My father, noticing how frustrated and nervous I was, tried to distract me by asking my opinion on this and that subject, referring every now and then to our identity cards which we had left back in the camp.

By two o'clock in the morning, my father was dozing in his armchair, and the rest of the family members were scattered here and there in the rooms, mostly on floors. I went out to the balcony and lay down on the cold floor.

It must have been the cold night breeze that made me think of my brother and his family who used to live in the mountain town of Aley. I tried not to. I had enough problems with the present. I had not seen them since my visit a few months ago, days before the war began. The only thing I had heard about them since then was what some people who had fled from Aley told me: my brother's house had been occupied during the war, the furniture and all the family's belongings were piled out in the street and set on fire. Eventually I slept.

Saturday, September 18

I woke up the next morning to the voices of my mother and sister. I thought I heard something being said about my father going back to the camp. I jumped from the floor in horror. I tried to control myself, but my questions about my father came out like screaming anyway. My mother told me that he had gone back to get the identity cards. I nearly lost my mind. I started hitting the wall with my fist and screaming madly. I did not stop until I became aware of the presence of a woman who had come from upstairs to see what was going on. I left the house thinking I would never see my father again.

I went straight to Usamah's house. It was seven o'clock in the morning and Usamah was still asleep. His wife showed me into the living room. My

thoughts were in turmoil as I tried to think of a justification for my father's action. The identity cards were important: without them the whole family was threatened, the women with jail and the men with death if the attackers were to enter the area. But why hadn't he waited until the situation in the camps became clearer? That was exactly what I had been trying to tell him the night before.

I exploded once again while telling the story to Usamah. He tried to cool me down with reassuring words. I sat there crying silently. A few minutes later I went back to my aunt's apartment to see if my father had returned. I kept shuttling back and forth between Usamah's house and my family's. At Usamah's I met a Lebanese friend who had arrived in the area from the other side of Corniche Mazraa. He told us that Saad Haddad's forces in jeeps were roving his area and kidnapping people and breaking into some houses.

On the way back from my fourth trip, I met my relative, Umm Wisam. "Praise God for your safety," I greeted her. "Where are you staying?"

"We are in the next block, at my brother's house," she said. "We managed to get out of the camp only yesterday noon."

"My family is staying there," I pointed in the direction of the building, "in my aunt's house. Come on in."

We walked toward the building. I saw my mother and sister on the balcony, waiting. Umm Wisam noticed the anxiety in their eyes. I told her about my father's trip to the camp. She hesitated, not wanting to continue the story she had started to tell me about the experience of her family. I urged her to go on.

They were one of the families who had been taken off guard by events. They could not leave immediately because their only exit from the camp was being continuously and heavily shelled. They hid in their kitchen, the safest spot in the house. The kitchen wall was the only wall separating them from the house of their neighbor, Abu Diab. With her were her daughter, her son-in-law and her grandchild. On Thursday evening they heard an unusual noise coming from Abu Diab's house. Abu Diab was alone with his daughter Aida. His wife had died a few years before and his son Diab was married and had his own house.

A few minutes later they heard a loud bang like the sound of a heavy kick against the door of their neighbor's house. Then they heard the wooden door crashing down, followed by a shower of bullets, a few of which made holes in their own kitchen wall. Pebbles and dust scattered all over the kitchen floor at their feet. They could hear Aida screaming and the gunmen laughing. They thought they were hearing the noise of something like a battle going

on, yet they could not imagine seventy-year-old Abu Diab being able to resist. It sounded as if they were beating him with their rifle butts, cursing him, shouting and laughing loudly.

Suddenly, they heard a dreadful scream of agony. It was the kind of scream that made Umm Wisam think they were raping the seventeen-year-old Aida. She became almost certain of this when Aida's screams changed into choking moans. Her father's voice was more like frustrated sobbing, repeating only one phrase, "God damn you."

A final terrified scream was heard with a shower of bullets. A few seconds of utter silence followed, then the sound of footsteps receding.

Throughout the night they could hear the sound of firearms, sometimes close to them, sometimes further away. Toward dawn, they heard the roaring of engines. They felt the earth shaking under them. They expected the house to be broken into at any moment. But nothing happened.

Umm Wisam did not know when she gave way to sleep, but on waking up next morning she felt the pinch of hunger in her stomach. She could hear some women talking to each other outside her house and the noises of children. She woke her daughter and her son-in-law. They decided to leave now that the voices outside reassured them.

Outside in the alley, they saw Abu Diab's body near the entrance of his house. His legs and arms were tied and there was a deep hole in his left shoulder, right next to his neck. It was the wound of an axe, they thought. Through the shattered door of the house, they could see the half-naked body of Aida, lying there on the floor. Umm Wisam went into the house in spite of her son-in-law's attempt to stop her. She could see scratches over the girl's chest and neck, deep bruises on the left side of her chest and two bullet holes in her left breast. But the worst shock to Umm Wisam came when she saw the end of a bayonet emerging from Aida's groin.

I was still stunned by Umm Wisam's account when, looking aimlessly toward the open apartment door, I saw my father standing there. His face had the strangest expression I had ever seen. He was pale and looked extremely tired. He fell into an armchair in the living room, seemingly unaware of our presence as we rushed to him with the relief of seeing him safe. We soon realized that something horrible must have happened during his ten-hour absence. We stood there, in complete silence, staring at him anxiously. It was an hour before he started to tell us what had happened to him during his venture into the camp.

The streets leading to the camps were quiet and empty except for several older men and women. This had encouraged him to continue toward the

northern end of Shatila camp. Then, passing through side alleys, he reached our house. The identity cards were stuffed in a plastic bag in the closet. He grabbed the bag and headed right back toward the door. Then, thinking of returning with some food for the family, he went back to the kitchen, took an empty plastic bag and filled it with eggs, tomatoes and other vegetables. Hurrying back through one of the alleys, he suddenly found himself standing face to face with a gunman.

The man pointed the weapon at him and ordered him to throw the two bags on the ground. My father tried to explain that the identity cards of the whole family were in one of the bags, but the gunman insisted, "Put them down or I will shoot you." He dropped the bags and the gunman then forced him to walk toward the camp main street.

There, in the middle of the street, near Doukhi's shop, hundreds of people were standing in several lines, surrounded by a few armed men. My father was pushed by the rifle butt to join one of the lines. The armed men were shouting, cursing, and shooting in the air or between people's feet. With time, the number of armed men increased, as did the number of those they dragged into the lines.

Some time later, the hostages were ordered to move forward in the direction of the southern entrance of the camp. In front of the small café on the street, my father saw a pile of bodies, one on top of the other. A short distance away, lying near the pavement, he saw the body of Shaikh Nouri with his walking stick next to him. He was the head of the gypsy community which lived on the southern outskirts of Shatila. A bullet had penetrated his forehead. A few steps further, dozens more bodies lay half buried in piles of rubble. Two bulldozers were hard at work tearing the wrecked houses down over the bodies of the victims.

Before leaving the southern entrance of the camp, the gunmen ordered the procession to a halt. They started separating the men from the women and children. "They are going to kill us," my father thought. They ordered the men to lie on their backs on the ground with their hands crossed behind their necks. The women and children were led by a number of armed men straight toward the south, out of the camp. Other armed men started inspecting the men's faces. They chose four young men and ordered them to go and lie down on a nearby sand dune so that everybody could see them. Three gunmen approached the young men and showered them with bullets. My father closed his eyes while the screams of the dying men pierced his ears. He kept his eyes closed, reciting verses of the Qur'an over and over again to himself until an armed man ordered them to get up.

They were ordered to move up the hill to the Kuwaiti Embassy. Leading one of the lines was a tall slender man carrying his little daughter. My father wondered why the armed men had allowed them to keep her with him. Suddenly, the man stepped on a cluster bomb that must have lain there since the war. It exploded and the man fell to the ground with his daughter. His leg was almost severed from his body and he was screaming in agony.

Miraculously, his daughter was unhurt. Another man rushed forward and picked up the little girl. The shock of the explosion created chaos in the lines and the gunmen started shooting in the air to restore order. Then, an Israeli military jeep emerged from behind the Embassy. An Israeli officer stepped out of the jeep and said something to one of the gunmen who, in turn, ordered his subordinates to stop shooting. A few minutes later, an Israeli tank and an armored personnel carrier arrived on the scene. A few dozen soldiers came out of the carrier and quickly surrounded the hostages.

In heavily accented Arabic, the officer ordered them to gather in the Sports Stadium, a couple of hundred yards away. Before entering the Stadium, my father was astonished to see a short line of men in white coats crossing the street toward a building on the other side of the Stadium. They looked familiar to him: they were the foreign doctors who worked at Gaza Hospital.

After they had been standing inside the Stadium for a few hours, an Israeli officer came in their midst and started to explain, in clear Arabic, why the Israelis had to come in "to prevent any massacre." He assured the men that he would soon release them and let them return to their homes. My father was boiling with anger. "After they massacred our women, children and men, they tell us they came in to protect us?" he thought. When the Israeli officer had had his say, he told them they could go back to their homes.

The relief at seeing my father safe restored my energy. I went into the darkened bathroom and washed my face for the first time since Wednesday. I looked in the mirror and saw a dim reflection of my face. My beard had grown wild since the beginning of the war. I thought I should soon shave it because it would be a distinctive feature that would attract the attention of anyone on the lookout for fighters.

I left the apartment to go to Usamah's house. Just outside his building, I saw him standing with a group of young men. Usamah looked at me silently with a question on his face. I responded with a smile that was immediately reflected in his face. He knew my father was safe. He then turned back and resumed his conversation with the others.

It was not until then that I noticed the face of his brother-in-law, Zuhair. "The bodies . . . my God!" Zuhair said. "I saw people gathering near the

southern entrance of the camp. I joined them. There I met a journalist acquaintance of mine who pointed toward a weeping man and said, ‘This is the French ambassador.’ I moved closer and saw Lebanese soldiers pushing people away. Scores of women were crying. They were mourning their sons or husbands who were either dead or had been taken to the unknown. The smell was horrible. I have never experienced such a smell in my life.”

Another young man came with the news that the Lebanese Army was preparing to enter the camps, and possibly the Abu Shaker area. The young men, except for Usamah and me, received the news with some relief. We were the only Palestinians in that group and we were worried. Noticing what I was thinking, Usamah took me aside and said, “With the situation as it is now, any party that enters the camps would be much better than the Israelis and their surrogates.”

I walked away quietly with Usamah into a deserted narrow alley. We entered a house that had been destroyed during the war and started searching for a possible hiding place. We thought that nobody would search a destroyed and abandoned house. Through a big hole in one of the walls, we entered what seemed to have been a bedroom. There, we found a cupboard amidst the rubble. We cleared the debris until we could open the cupboard. It was still full of clothes. We decided to make that cupboard our hiding place if and when the need arose. Relieved at our discovery, we left the place and continued on down the alley.

I went back with Usamah to my aunt’s apartment. My mother prepared some food for us and we stayed on the balcony, tuning in the radio for the latest news. The Murabitoun radio station was silent. The Phalangist radio station was still trying to cover for the Israeli actions. Other stations—Radio Damascus, the BBC, the official Beirut radio—were talking about the Lebanese Army entering the camps, and how the USA was calling for an immediate withdrawal of the Israeli army from Beirut!

It was eleven at night when Usamah announced that he was going back to his house. I spent my second night on the same balcony, as confused and exhausted as the night before.

Sunday, September 19

I woke the next morning to the sound of loudspeakers calling on all males between the ages of fourteen and sixty to gather in the Sports Stadium. The deadline was twelve noon. The announcement spread through the area like

a shock wave. Young and old men were roaming the street in a frenzy, exchanging one question, "Are you going?" The answers were evenly divided between "yes" and "no."

A few minutes before the deadline, the loudspeakers were heard again, this time announcing an extension of the deadline until three o'clock. Some of those who had reported to the Stadium before the first deadline came back relieved. They had had their ID cards stamped. They talked about the disguised spy who was picking out "suspects." Some said it was the shoe-shiner who used to sit near Shatila's northern entrance. This piece of news helped many people decide against going to the Stadium. My decision was clear: I would seek the hiding place I had found with Usamah.

By two o'clock in the afternoon, the news was spreading in the area that the Murabitoun were going to destroy their tanks. It was not known if this was in agreement with the Lebanese Army or in order to prevent their capture. To some people, including myself, this decision meant that the Murabitoun were certain the Israelis would storm the Abu Shaker area. The news was especially worrying to Abu Salem, Usamah's cousin, who was uncertain whether to go to the Stadium or not. Abu Salem was so afraid the Israelis might come in that he decided to report to the Stadium before the three o'clock deadline.

The deadline passed and there was still no indication that the Israelis were about to move in. Their tanks remained positioned at different points on Corniche Mazraa with the soldiers alert sitting on top. I remained in the area, waiting to see what would happen.

A few minutes after six, three huge explosions, only seconds apart, sent pieces of the three Murabitoun tanks flying all over the surrounding area. In the quiet that ensued, I remembered that Abu Salem had not yet returned from the Stadium. I felt partly guilty because I was responsible for his decision to accept my interpretation of the Murabitoun's intention to destroy their tanks. At eight-thirty in the evening, Abu Salem came back. Pale, with a look of horror in his eyes, he seemed worried and distracted. He had spent more than five hours at the Stadium.

I was standing with Usamah near his house when Abu Salem reappeared. We showered him with questions about what had happened during his absence. He did not seem to heed our questions, but started telling his story as if he were reliving it:

"When I entered the stadium, I was led by an Israeli soldier who did not say a word to me. He took me into the middle of a long line of people who were moving slowly, one by one, past a military jeep in which sat a hooded

person. When it was my turn for inspection, the person made the dreadful nod of the head when he wanted to indicate a 'suspect.' Another Israeli soldier came and, after taking my travel document, led me toward a huge crater that had been made in the ground by one of Israel's bombs during the war. He pushed me into it; several men were already there. I could distinguish at least four of them: a chicken-seller whose stand used to be at a corner in the Sabra vegetable market, a young street-vendor whose stand was near the Arab University campus, and the other two men I had met in the 'al-Fatha' café in Sabra.

"After a while, a nearby bulldozer started roaring and moving toward the crater. I was sure they were going to bury us alive. The bulldozer stopped short of the edge of the crater and retreated. Our sigh of relief did not last long. The bulldozer started moving toward us again. Several times, the bulldozer repeated the same maneuver and each time I thought it was going to heap soil over our heads. Finally, an Israeli officer came and stood at the edge of the crater and addressed us in clear Arabic. He wanted to know who among us were married. Seven of us, including myself, raised our hands. He ordered us to climb up to ground level. He asked each of us how many children we had, their ages, and how many of them were more than twelve years of age.

"Finally, he told us to go home and come back at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. He said each one should bring with him as many rifles as we could carry and approach the Stadium with a white flag. I told him I was a construction worker and that I did not know anyone in my neighborhood who might have weapons. He did not seem to listen to my pleas and insisted that we should all obey the orders."

"What shall I do?" Abu Salem asked after finishing his story, "I've put myself in a big mess. I wish I had not gone there in the first place. Now they have my travel document and they said they are going to punish those who do not report tomorrow morning. 'You know we are capable of that, and that we have our ways of reaching every single one of you,' they said."

My anger had reached explosion pitch, so I burst out, "Do not take any rifles, do not carry any white flag. Just go there and do not be afraid. Tell them you could not find any rifles, that you did not find any men still alive or any houses still intact. Tell them about their cowardly attack on civilians, on children, women and old men. Tell them how they massacred them mercilessly." My words had a morale-boosting effect on Abu Salem. He stopped panicking and smiled. But I could see that he was struggling with fear for himself, his little child and his pregnant wife. The earlier news about a possible agreement leading to the entry of the Lebanese Army into the area in the

morning was the only hope for Abu Salem to cling to. He and I decided to spend that night at Usamah's.

Monday, September 20

I woke up the next morning to Usamah's clock striking seven. Abu Salem was already sitting up on the couch he had been sleeping on. He looked as if he had not slept all that night. He was anxious to talk to someone before setting out for his dreadful appointment. He repeated the anxious questions of the previous night. What would happen to him? Should he believe their threats? Eventually, he nervously made his way, with no guns and no white flag, to his meeting with the Israelis.

A few hours after Abu Salem had left, the Lebanese Army troops started taking up their positions in the area. There was news about the possible return of the Multinational Force. People were spreading this news with tremendous relief.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, however, people began to rush north toward Corniche Mazraa, shouting, "Saad Haddad's men are back!" I left Usamah and ran in the opposite direction toward my family's place. I met them on my way. They and others were running up the street. I joined them and we walked toward the Maqassed Hospital. Some time later a young man came running through the crowd shouting out news of the real situation. It was not Saad Haddad's men who had entered Shatila. Rather, it was the troops of the Lebanese tank corps. Their fatigues, which were different from those of the infantry, had led people to think they were Haddad's men. With relief at the real news, everybody went back to where they had been staying. I left my family in my aunt's apartment and set off, without telling them my destination. I even lied to my father who asked me, with a trace of doubt, where I was going. I told him I was going back to Usamah's.

Sabra camp. A few armored vehicles of the Lebanese Army were spread along the main street. The few civilian cars were speeding toward Shatila camp. The smell of corpses was overpowering, intensifying steadily as I moved forward. A car stopped at the northern entrance of Shatila camp. The Murabitoun leader, Ibrahim Qulailat, got out of it, surrounded by three armed guards. I felt a streak of happiness, mingled with the bitterness of death, at seeing the only Lebanese leader who had vehemently objected to the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut. He was quickly surrounded by a group of women who had returned to the camps to inspect the remains of their homes and look for the missing members of their families.

Suddenly, the women rushed toward a man and started beating and cursing him. It was the collaborator who had been pointing out to the Israelis the people who were supposedly active with the PLO. Everybody wanted their share of retribution and released their anger and disgust at the collaborator. Even a Lebanese soldier joined in kicking and beating him, until other Lebanese troops broke their way through and dragged him to a military car which drove off north.

I entered Shatila camp. The killers had gone, but the results of their bloody work had stayed. Most of the corpses were piled up one over another or covered by the rubble of houses brought down on top of them. The dead were indistinguishable. The tears were pouring down my face, blurring the images of those with whom I had spent my life. The corpse of Shaikh Nouri was still lying there; the cane had disappeared. On the opposite side of the street, Mohammed Nabulsi's corpse was leaning against a wall, all swollen up in death. A few steps away lay four other corpses riddled with bullets in their backs and heads. A dried up stream of blackened blood stopped in the middle of the street. Several steps ahead I saw a corpse in front of Abu Diab's house. I assumed that it was Abu Diab.

Around me, I could hear the groans of old men wailing over the bodies of their young sons and grandsons. A woman screamed at the top of her voice, "God is great, He will avenge you, my beloved son." It was Umm Mahmoud, her headcover in her hand. She was waving it in the air in mourning. Next to her were the corpses of her sons, mingled with the rubble of their home. I approached her thinking I might calm her. I was wrong. As I touched her, she suddenly became hysterical, tugging at her dress to tear it in despair. I held her hands tightly and started shouting to get her out of that hysterical state.

Another woman came along, put her arms around Umm Mahmoud and tried to lead her away. Before she could do that, Umm Mahmoud fainted. The other woman managed to support her with my help until two young Civil Defense workers came with a stretcher. They carried her to an ambulance and sped north to the hospital.

I walked up a narrow alley toward the house of the parents of my friend, Abu Faris. In a corner several meters from his house, I saw more than ten corpses piled up against a wall. It seemed those bodies had not yet been "discovered." The smell was nauseating. The small foot of a baby poked out beneath the corpse of a man. I asked myself if it could possibly be the body of my good friend's child. I did not dare to move the swollen body. I was about to be sick and faint. I leaned against a wall for a few seconds but that did

not help. I sat down until I felt strong enough to move again. I continued up the alley. Abu Faris' house was closed. I looked through the windows and made sure the house was empty. Then I walked back to the main street.

On the way back, I met Abu Faisal, an old Palestinian resident of Shatila. His face was frozen with grief. A few journalists were walking behind him. I recalled his and his family's tragic lives since the 1975-76 civil war had begun. They had left their house in Shiah, close to the areas controlled by the Phalangists. They had moved into the camp after Salah, Abu Faisal's son, was shot dead by a sniper's bullet in the head. I remembered Salah's son, Khodr, and his grandparents moving back and forth between Shiah and Shatila, depending on the security situation, in the years that followed the death of his father. During the latest war, he had come to the front line without heeding the dangers of shelling or the insistence of the fighters that he should return to his family. The presence of Khodr's uncle, whose nickname was al-Hajj, was his excuse to stay in the entrance to the building on the front line, only a few meters from the Israeli tanks. During cease-fires he would go to that front line position with his aunt. She had fled from Ain al-Helweh camp in South Lebanon after the Israelis had arrested her husband and taken him to Ansar prison.

Right after the war, al-Hajj had been busy preparing for his wife's delivery. Shirin was eight months pregnant and her doctor expected the baby to be born any day

Abu Faisal pointed with his cane to dried-up patches of blood on the ground and then to bullet holes in the nearby wall. The traces of blood clearly indicated that the killers had dragged the bodies away. One journalist carried a movie camera. He seemed to have noticed something several steps away. He went over and started filming. I followed and saw the body of Umm Faisal in the black clothes she had always worn since her son Salah had died. A few steps further on, I saw another body in a shallow hole in the ground. It was Fatmeh, Abu Faisal's daughter-in-law. Her long dark hair was matted with dirt and blood. Next to her lay the body of her son, Ibrahim.

I followed the journalists who had gathered in a spot overlooking a nearby field. Scores of Civil Defense workers were covering bodies with blankets. I approached the scene. One Civil Defense worker whispered, while moving the earth with his hands, "There are corpses buried here." He called three of his colleagues who came with their shovels to what looked like a mass grave.

They dug carefully around the hole. The first thing that showed was the leg of a woman. They dug the body out, put it aside, covered it with a blanket and resumed their work. Abu Faisal walked toward the woman's body, with

some of the journalists following him. He raised the cover, looked at the journalists and said, "This is my daughter-in-law, Shirin." Her abdomen had been ripped open. A few moments later, the remains of a fully-developed fetus were dug out.

Abu Faisal's face was contorted with grief. I could not bear to look at him. I ran aimlessly until I reached the edge of the pine forest. There I saw the bodies of Abu Ahmed Said and Abu Ahmed Suwaid with several bullet holes in their chests. They had been on their way to try to persuade the Israelis to stop shelling the camps when they were shot down in cold blood.

Suddenly, I remembered my friend Fahd. His house was only a few steps from where I was. I jumped over the open sewage channels in the forest area and headed directly toward his house. He was there, lying on the floor of a room with his head split open by an axe. Nobody would have recognized his body had it not been left there in his room next to his mother's. Her body was slashed with deep knife wounds. The Civil Defense workers were trying to lift her body onto a stretcher.

I went toward Fahd's body. He had been very close to me. I had kept a special feeling of friendship for him since the time I had first met him at the youth club. I gathered my strength and tried to lift his body from the floor. The tears were streaming down my face uncontrollably. I couldn't carry him myself and the Civil Defense workers came to lift his lifeless body onto a stretcher. As they carried him away, I followed them and threw myself at Fahd's body, crying and trying to kiss and touch his bloodied face for a last time.

Love does not know the stench and gore of death.