

Assad dynasty responsible for Sabra and Shatila

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Syrian Responsibility for the Sabra and Chatila Massacres

This past September marked the twenty-ninth anniversary of the assassination of Lebanon's president-elect Bashir Gemayel. Like its most recent clone, the 2005 murder of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, memories of the 1982 crime continue to haunt many Lebanese, some of whom are still persuaded its perpetrators to have been Syrian operatives bent on scuttling end-of-conflict prospects for Lebanon. Today, as Syria's "Alawite era" teeters on the edge of its twilight, and as the international community prepares to indict it for ongoing crimes against its own people, the regime's shady gruesome past is coming back to assail its tattered present days.

Although few Westerners today might remember Bashir Gemayel (or his assassination), and fewer still might be tempted to consider the motivations of those who commissioned his murder, rare are those who would not readily recall the massacres at Beirut's Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps, and rarer still are those who would not attribute those crimes to "right-wing" Lebanese-Christian militiamen—ostensibly bent on avenging their fallen leader. Never mind that Gemayel's elimination and the ensuing massacres of Palestinian civilians hardly served the cause of Lebanon's Christians. Indeed, the events in question plunged Lebanon into another eight years of bloodshed, tightened Syria's grip over the country, turned it into a Syrian "satellite state" wholly bound to the whims and will of Damascus, and reduced the status of Lebanon's Christians to a state of subservience and political insignificance. Yet, the narrative that attributes Gemayel's killing to Israeli agents, and the Sabra and Shatila massacres to Israel's Lebanese Christian allies—getting Syria off scot-free—still has its defenders, and still defines a significant chapter in Lebanon's modern history.

Today, as Syria veers toward civil war, as its military occupation of Lebanon seems to be a thing of the past, and as the international "Special Tribunal for Lebanon" readies to finger Syrian officials (beginning with the recent indictment of their Hezbollah foot-soldiers) for a string of political assassinations that have shook Lebanon since 2005, a revision of the pleasing narrative of an Israeli and (a "right-wing") Lebanese Christian involvement in Sabra and Shatila seems fitting.

Besides the Kahan Commission's mention of armed elements dressed in Lebanese Forces uniforms entering Sabra and Shatila between September 16 and the morning of September 18, 1982, there is no hard usable evidence to support the scenario of murderous Lebanese Christians itching to mete out revenge on Palestinian refugees for the assassination of President-elect Bashir Gemayel; that is to say there is no concrete usable evidence besides eyewitness reports of "men dressed in LF uniforms"—knowing full well that "uniforms" of every stripe were a dime a dozen in civil-war-era Lebanon.

Of course a scenario such as this remains tempting, and in the context of Lebanon's war—and its cycles of tit-for-tat massacres and counter massacres—it would have made plenty of sense for Christian militias to exact revenge on Palestinians for the killing of their leader. However, there is no evidence to bear this out beyond the circumstantial. Of course, an argument could be made—and indeed one was made—that rogue elements of the Lebanese Forces, without knowledge or express directives from the LF's leadership, entered the camps with the intent of killing Palestinian civilians. The question that begs being asked in this case would be, "why would LF members commit these crimes, flaunting easily identifiable insignia and uniforms, incriminating themselves and their community, at a time when Lebanon's Christians had been hard at work for reconciliation with other constitutive elements of Lebanese society?"

It should be noted here that Bashir Gemayel's first official act as President-elect of the Lebanese Republic in 1982 was not—as many at that time might have predicted—dismissing Lebanon's Muslims, suing for partition, or signing a peace treaty with Israel without the endorsement of Lebanon's Muslims. To the contrary, his first official act was to reach out to Lebanon's Muslims and attempt to build a national unity government that would have eventually signed a peace treaty reflecting national consensus, not Christian communal interests.

Incidentally, throughout their troubled twentieth-century history, Lebanon's Maronites always opted for reconciliation, power-sharing, and a "multi-ethnic," rather than a purely Maronite or a Maronite-dominated state. To wit, when the French warned the Maronites about the "demographic time bomb" that Grand Liban of 1920 would become in twenty years' time and advised them to construct a smaller "Christian homeland" instead, the Maronites opted for a "larger Lebanon" as a model of multi-ethnic (Christian-Muslim) coexistence. When another such opportunity for a smaller, culturally homogenous, Christian Lebanon offered itself in 1926, the Maronites still opted for "coexistence" with

Lebanon's Muslims. They did so time and again in 1936, in 1958, in 1976, and most importantly, at the height of their political and military power, in 1982. What is more, Bashir Gemayel's assassination dashed the hopes and snuffed the exuberance of a wide cross-section of Lebanese society—Muslims and Christians alike—and in the aftermath of his death the LF were scrambling to deal with the trauma, the disarray, the mass popular despondency, and the political vacuum that his sudden disappearance had left. It is, therefore, more than dubious that in a moment of national trauma such as this, the LF leadership would be plotting and executing a massacre that not only would have tarnished their image among the Muslims they'd been courting, but one that would have impugned their very legitimacy in the wider Arab world—which Bashir had been visiting for years prior, promoting his presidential platform and his national salvation and reconciliation project, and hawking his intent on hammering out an eventual "end-of-conflict" agreement with Israel.

The missing link in this drama is Elie Hobeika, a former LF member and senior officer long suspected of being a Syrian agent. In January 2002 Hobeika was assassinated in a car bomb plot reminiscent of the one that killed former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Lebanese officials (then still under Syrian occupation) immediately blamed Israel for the Hobeika assassination given that the latter had allegedly been preparing to testify in a Belgian court case believed to be on the verge of implicating then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon in the Sabra and Shatila massacres. However, close Hobeika associates and family members recently revealed that, at that time, Hobeika had been more concerned with clearing his own name than with implicating Sharon in the massacres. Indeed, a Belgian senator who had met with Hobeika shortly before the latter's assassination revealed to al-Jazeera on January 26, 2002 (two days after Hobeika's assassination) that Hobeika had no intention of identifying Sharon (or Israel for that matter) as the responsible party in the Sabra and Shatila massacres. This leaves (as only remaining "person of interest") Baathist Syria; a notoriously murderous regime that is showing its mettle in today's Syria, and that had mastered to the hilt the skills of "arsonist-fireman" in Lebanon these past forty years.

Syria stood to gain most from the assassination of Bashir Gemayel, as well as from the Sabra and Shatila massacres. Among other payoffs reaped, this "cold case" stunted all attempts at Lebanese national reconciliation, it scuttled the prospects of peace with Israel, it extended the Lebanese war for another decade, it maintained Syria's occupation of the country for another twenty-three years, it tightened its grip over the functioning of the Lebanese state, it continued using Lebanon as a launching pad for Syria's regional settling of scores, and it provided the Alawites with a bottomless private piggy-bank bankrolling their wars-by-proxy.

Murder, mayhem, arson, and intrigue have indeed defined the Alawite era in the modern Levant, and have kept Syria's Alawites firmly ensconced in power. The world's powers that be ignored (or condoned) Syria's bad behavior. They did so mainly for fear that what may be lurking in a post-Alawite state might prove much worse than the inconvenient present: "it is us or chaos" went an ominous forewarning that the Assads conveyed to credulous visiting dignitaries—among them America's seasoned Clintons and Kerrys. But has the Alawite "Us" been anything but "Chaos" these past forty years? Isn't it time the world considered the "chaotic" alternative? Isn't it time inhumed "cold cases" got lain open again?

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