

Ten Days in West Beirut - The Untold Story

The Takeover of West Beirut, September 9 – September 24, 1982

Major (Res.) Shai Lachman

On September 15, 1982, in the wake of the assassination of President-elect Bashir Gemayel, the IDF entered West Beirut. The entrance timed to coincide with the attack of the 96th Paratrooper Division, commanded by Brigadier General Amos Yaron, from the south, and the 91st Division, commanded by Brigadier General Yitzhak Mordechai, from the east and westward from the Port of Beirut. At the time, there were about two thousand Palestinian terrorists in West Beirut, and thousands of al-Mourabitoun militia and leftist organization fighters, allies of the Palestinian organizations.



Major Shai Lachman (first to the right)
with his staff in Lebanon, 1982

When the operation began, I was sent as a POW interrogation officers from Unit 504 to the 91st Division's headquarters, situated at the top of a silo in the Port of Beirut, and from there, joined the 828th Brigade's headquarters, located in the hotel district in west Beirut. Once there, Brigadier General Amos Kotzer of the 828th School for Infantry Corps Professions and Squad Commanders, Lt. Col. Zalman Kovarsky, commander of the 906 battalion, informed me that the breach of the western part of the city had met with substantial resistance from armed fighters, some of whom belonged to the Shi'ite Amal movement and some to al-Mourabitoun movement.

The largest armed Muslim militia in Beirut took the unprecedented step of changing sides and actively supported the IDF forces in the city.

During the exchanges of fire, contact was made with a group of local fighters who were not participating in the combat. Their commander was willing to help extract a group of IDF soldiers who had been cut off from their unit and were trapped on a bridge over one of the highways. The rescue operation was successful, and the commander was summoned to a meeting the following morning, and I was appointed to negotiate with him.

At exactly 5:30 in the morning, a party of armed men arrived, led by the commander and accompanied by two bodyguards. He was short, wore an olive-green uniform, and carried a submachine gun. Two ammunition belts crossed his chest, and a silver handgun was stuck in his waistband.

He identified himself as Abu Ibrahim, commander of Beirut's al-Mourabitoun militia. He said he had been happy to help extract the soldiers the previous day and wanted only peace.

A silent prayer accompanied the envoy as he rushed to his destination. The tension in the air was palpable.

The al-Mourabitoun movement, "the Independent Nasserites," was Lebanon's strongest Sunni militia and allied with the Palestinian organizations. Its power center was in Sunni West Beirut, where it recruited most of its fighters. Al-Mourabitoun had been active in combat during the Lebanese civil war, fighting alongside the Palestinian organizations, with about 17,000 fighters and several tanks and APCs.



Ibrahim Kalilat, Head of the Mourabitoun
https://historica.fandom.com/wiki/Ibrahim_Kulaylat

After a short negotiation, Abu Ibrahim announced he surrendered to the IDF and would meet our conditions: they would lay down their arms; turn over, within an hour and a half, all their heavy weapons; and allow the Israeli forces to take control of the al-Musseitbe al-Mazraah, Beirut's largest and most densely populated district. In return, he and his men would keep their personal weapons and would not be detained, and the local population would not be harmed. The surrender was confirmed with a handshake. I didn't insist on a written agreement, and in retrospect, judging by the outcome, I think it was the correct decision. The fact that Abu Ibrahim had not been humiliated in front of his men but was treated with respect, and the conditions were met helped build trust and paved the way for future cooperation.

The surrender went into effect immediately. The Mourabitoun laid down their arms and ceased all hostile activity. About an hour and a half later, four large pickup trucks drove up packed with weapons, including heavy machine guns, light mortars, and RPGs. By complying with the conditions for surrender within the time frame, the al-Mourabitoun leader proved he was in control, and his intentions were serious.

Preparation for house-to-house fighting

I used the time while waiting for the heavy weapons to be delivered for a thorough interrogation of Abu Ibrahim. He provided a great deal of information on the al-Mourabitoun militia under his command, the order of combat in the Beirut area, the deployment of the Palestinian organizations in the city, where their headquarters and offices were located, and collaboration among the various local organizations. He also reported that the road along which the IDF brigade was advancing was held by the largest hostile organization, the Arab Socialist Union, an armed Nasserist organization, and a PLO ally financed by Libya. The Union was an umbrella organization for terrorist organizations and local militias and had two leaders, a political secretary named Abd al-Rahim Murad and a military commander named Omar Hussein Harb. Its headquarters, situated about a kilometer from us, served as the main headquarters for all the leftist forces in Beirut. The organization, I was informed, was prepared for battle and, during the night, had positioned snipers and RPG ambushes along the main routes and junctions with the intention of attacking the IDF forces.

The overall picture was alarming. It would mean urban warfare, street-by-street house-to-house fighting. The enemy could be hidden in every building, on every roof, or behind every window, aided by a local population that helped it plan its defense, diversions, and attacks. It would involve unreasonably high casualties; dozens of soldiers could be killed. I looked for a way to avoid the need for combat. Based on previous military experience in Lebanon, I suggested to the brigade commanders that the Arab Socialist Union be contacted with a proposal for surrender. The idea was discussed and accepted by the Division Command, and one of Abu Ibrahim's aides was chosen as envoy. He was briefed and left with a short message for the organization's commander, according to which IDF forces had encircled the city, avenues of retreat were blocked, and the war was a lost cause. Fighters who laid down their arms would be allowed to leave unharmed.

The envoy returned about twenty minutes later with a refusal. The Union fighters were prepared for battle and had no intention of surrendering. They were fully armed and determined to fight against the IDF.

I refused to give up. While the battalion was preparing for battle, I went to the Forward Command Squad. The brigade and battalion commanders were busy, but I asked to speak with them. I said, "I don't think we have anything to lose. We have time, the battle isn't going anywhere. It will be awful urban fighting in a densely populated area. Look at those tall buildings. I'm afraid we'll suffer terrible losses." They did not understand what I was talking about and said, "We don't understand what you want." I said there was no point in rushing and suggested we send the messenger back. Enemy headquarters was besieged, the men were stressed and, in the end, might prefer not to fight.



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Their doubts notwithstanding, and after consulting the division commander, they gave me a green light. The messenger was sent again but almost immediately ran back, panting and barely able to catch his breath. He reported they hadn't even allowed him to approach their headquarters. Some of the fighters threatened to shoot him and demanded he leave immediately, cursing al-Mourabitoun as traitors collaborating with the Israeli enemy. They then shot at him, he said, missing him by inches.

It seemed all was lost, and I was both disappointed and frustrated. Soon the order would be given, and there would be heavy fighting all around us.

In retrospect, I find it difficult to evoke the moments during which I decided to do something which even today seems hopeless. I got up, went to the command group, and pulled aside the brigade commander, who was busy giving orders to his young officers. I made the conversation short.

In a street conversation that morning while waiting for al-Mourabitoun to hand over their weapons, the 906th battalion commander boasted that during all the battles he had fought since the start of the war, including entering west Beirut, his battalion had not suffered a single loss. I reminded him what he had said and looked him right in the eye, and said, "I'm sure you want all your soldiers to return home safe and sound, but you know that urban fighting will have a heavy price. They shouldn't have to be killed fighting here." He was openly bewildered. "I don't understand what you're talking about, Shai, what do you want from me now?" he snapped angrily.

"I'm asking you to give me another chance," I replied, "I want to send the messenger again, but this time with a letter from me in Arabic for the organization commander. I will offer him a surrender on the same terms we gave al-Mourabitoun. I'm sure something is happening at headquarters. Time has passed since our last attempt, and the tension and pressure on the people in headquarters is increasing. I'm sure there are differences of opinion among them and that some of them would prefer to surrender or leave instead of fighting. I think it's worth checking what the situation is there – we have nothing to lose." He said nothing, his face a picture of disbelief, and nodded goodbye to me. I was sure that was the end of the story. I understood him perfectly. After two failed attempts and shots fired at our messenger, sending him a third time sounded futile and hopeless. And besides, we were in a war situation. The war horses had been stamping in place for hours, eager for battle. Who would stop them? It was, therefore, easy to imagine my surprise when I was informed that the division had approved my proposal.

Leaning on the roof of a parked car, with Abu Ibrahim's help, I drafted a short letter in Arabic. Addressed to the commander of the leftist force's organization in Beirut, Lt. Col. Omar Hussein Harb, it called on him to surrender to the IDF forces, and in return, neither he, his men, nor the civilian population would be harmed. I signed the letter in Arabic and English with my name and rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

We silently prayed for the messenger's safe return as he rushed off for the third time. The tension was palpable. It was clear that another failure would mean combat. Only a few minutes passed, and the messenger came running back with the surprising news that the organization's commander and his men had abandoned the headquarters. Not only that, but some of the fighters had also left, and the few who remained were asking for time to consult their superiors in Beirut.

A few minutes later, a man appeared up the street holding a white handkerchief. He identified himself as Abu Hassan, the organization's administrative and supply officer. He announced that all fighters at the headquarters had abandoned their positions and fled. The building was now totally empty.

IDF forces as an insurance policy against acts of revenge

Shortly afterward, the battalion's forces were ordered to prepare for combat, moving in two columns along the road leading to enemy headquarters. Halfway there, balconies on the high floors of the buildings on both sides of the road were suddenly filled with crowds. Hundreds of men, women, and children waved in peace as they showered us with rice and candy. It was truly delusional. Instead of a bloody battle, we were getting candy and cheers.

Thus, at around 1:30 p.m., after five hours of waiting and three attempts at negotiation, units of the 828th Brigade entered the headquarters of the leftist forces in Beirut and took it over without a fight.

The four-story building contained offices, a sophisticated wireless switchboard, and large food warehouses. My advice was to distribute the food to dozens of local needy families. Huge stockpiles of weapons and ammunition were also discovered in the headquarters' underground cellars. It took dozens of military and civilian trucks a solid week to remove and transfer the stockpiles of weapons to Israel.

Leaders and dignitaries of the local Muslim, Christian, Druze, and other communities were summoned to meet with me and instructed to maintain peace and order in their communities, obey IDF orders, and report on potential hostile elements and activity.

Abu Ibrahim came to my office every morning and helped with the day-to-day activities. He made intelligence materials available and provided personal contacts and methods for peaceful control. On his orders, his fellow al-Mourabitoun fighters joined the IDF forces and assisted them in searching the city.

On September 19, the IDF took control of the al-Basta al-Foka and al-Basta al-Tahta neighborhoods north of Corniche al-Mazaraah. The ruling faction in the area was a small Nasserite organization called Ansar al-Thawra. After a short tough negotiation in my office, its commander signed a surrender agreement, and within two hours, an armored IDF force took control of the whole area.

The action ended the takeover of West Beirut without a fight or any IDF or local population casualties.

However, overnight, the situation changed for the worse. The massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps caused immense shock and an uproar. A wave of rumors of mutual acts of revenge swept Beirut. On the morning of September 20, a mass exodus of Muslim families from the southern neighborhoods to the northern suburbs of the city began, while Christian families prepared to flee, fearing revenge from the Muslims. It was only thanks to the quick intervention of the IDF that calm, and peace returned to the streets.

The bloody events caused an unexpected change in the al-Mourabitoun position towards Israel. They gradually realized that only the IDF could protect the Muslim population in Beirut. Therefore, the al-Mourabitoun militia, as well as the local Muslim population, both Sunni and Shi'ite, chose to put their trust in the IDF, hoping it would protect them from further acts of revenge by the Christian phalanges.

Thus, in an unprecedented move, the largest armed Muslim militia in Beirut switched sides and began to assist the IDF forces in actively controlling the city.



Mouvement des Nasséristes Indépendants

Over the course of ten days, large quantities of weapons and ammunition were taken out of stockpiles in West Beirut. There were 520 tons of ammunition, 12 cannons, and eight heavy mortars, as well as vehicles carrying Katusha rockets.

Wikipedia :Independent Nasserite Movement (Al-Mourabitoun)

حركة الناصريين المستقلين-المرابطون

About a thousand buildings were searched by IDF forces in West Beirut, about half of which were headquarters, bases, and ammunition depots, targets not all of which were known to the IDF before the operation.

The political leader of the al-Mourabitoun movement in Lebanon, Ibrahim Koleilat, gave official approval and authorization for the about-face in the movement's position. A personal envoy on his behalf asked me if we would be willing to meet with him secretly. I recommended the military command respond in favor of the proposed meeting on the eve of IDF withdrawal from Beirut.

The meeting with Ibrahim Koleilat was meant to take place that evening at the Palm Beach Hotel in West Beirut, A messenger on behalf of Abu Ibrahim was sent to finalize the details but got stuck on the way and had to return. The next day, Abu Ibrahim tried to contact Koleilat at his home in Beirut but without success, thus ending the first initiative of its kind by the Lebanese al-Mourabitoun leader to dialogue with Israel during a war.

West-Beirut occupation: conclusions and lessons

The conquest of West Beirut without a fight and casualties can be considered one of the outstanding achievements of the First Lebanon War. It was an impressive military operation achieved in a concise time framework.

From the point of view of the IDF and its military theory of applied warfare, one of the main lessons that can be learned from the operation concerns how POW interrogators are used during a war. It became clear that negotiation techniques can make it possible to dialogue with hostile parties even during the war, weakening enemy positions and morale and, in certain circumstances, even harnessing them to contribute to our intentions. Subduing an enemy through negotiations is intended to reduce military activity with the potential for many casualties, especially in built-up, densely populated areas such as West Beirut.

Estimates of the expected casualties in occupying West Beirut are controversial. According to material published in recent years, apparently, the IDF command expected between 300 and 400 IDF soldiers would be killed in the operation.

Statement of Brigadier General Mil. Amos Kotzer, 828th Brigade in West-Beirut:

"In the brigade, divisional and command summaries, I stated that the main lesson we learned was activating the POW interrogators unit because the intelligence usually flowing to the brigades was shallow and outdated and did not match the battle as it unfolded. In Beirut, the only genuine source of information was the POW interrogators unit, which managed to collect and provide real-time, up-to-date, and relevant data for the battle, including at the lowest tactical level, anti-tank ambushes and troop concentrations, and at the highest level, the location of terrorist headquarters and offices and the possible intentions of the various organizations..."

"But my main lesson from the war in West Beirut was that communicating with al-Mourabitoun and the ability to use judgment and act against them with wisdom instead of force had a great weight and was even decisive in the brigade's fighting in Beirut, both in gathering intelligence on the ground and in neutralizing the enemy's fighting spirit.

"I saw cooperation with the POW interrogators and the ability to talk to armed enemy forces and make them surrender without a fight as equivalent to artillery softening or close air softening."

(Interview, April 2nd, 2019).

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Statement of Lt. Col. Mil. Zalman Kovarsky, 906th Battalion commander in the 828th Brigade in West- Beirut:

"Before the breakthrough to West Beirut, I had gone with the battalion through Tyre, Sidon, Burj al-Barajneh to Damour and Alei in the eastern sector along the Beirut-Damascus axis, and I did not have a single casualty. That was why I let you [Shai] exhaust all options before using force like hitting your head on the wall in difficult battles. Therefore, I recommended to the brigade command and Division commander, Itzik Mordechai, to accede to your repeated requests to try to make the enemy surrender without a fight.

Without your support, the intelligence materials you provided and the repeated attempts you initiated with the enemy headquarters, we would not have successfully carried out the mission. You were an integral part of the battalion that provided enormous help in carrying out the mission without a fight or losses. While engaged in locating terrorist headquarters, and clearing weapons warehouses [in West Beirut], we were acting according to your suggestions and instructions"

(Interview, March 25th, 2019).