

Handout 12: The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War

Session: Chronology

The below is an abridged version of Sune Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War, Mass Violence & Resistance"¹

Introduction

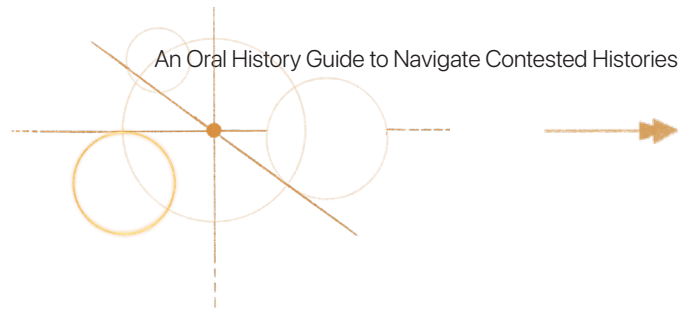
The Lebanese Civil War was both an internal Lebanese affair and a regional conflict involving a host of regional and international actors. It revolved around some of the issues that dominated regional politics in the Middle East in the latter part of the 20th century, including the Palestine-Israel conflict, Cold War competition, Arab nationalism and political Islam. Conflicts over these issues intersected with longstanding disagreements in the Lebanese political elite, and in parts of the population, over the sectarian division of power, national identity, social justice and Lebanon's strategic alliances.

During 15 years of fighting, around 90,000 people lost their lives, according to the most reliable statisticians, Labaki and Abou Rjeily (1994). The much higher numbers of up to 150,000 that are often given appear to have been based on international press reports from the early 1990s and subsequently repeated uncritically (Hanf 1993: 339). By contrast, Labaki and About Rjeily, supported by the second most reliable statistical source (Hanf 1993: 339-57), base their figures on information from the Lebanese army, security forces, Red Cross and various professional organisations, parties and militias, as well as reports in the Lebanese press during the war. Even so, this information was gathered under extreme difficulties, and it is possible that the real number exceeds 100,000. Of the 90,000 killed, close to 20,000 are individuals who were kidnapped or disappeared, and who must be assumed dead as they have not been accounted for. Nearly 100,000 were badly injured, and close to a million people, or two-thirds of the Lebanese population, experienced displacement (Labaki and Rjeily 1994: 20).

In addition to the large number of dead, much of Lebanon's infrastructure was shattered, as was Lebanon's reputation as an example of cross-sectarian coexistence in the Arab Middle East. The Lebanese Civil War was one of the most devastating conflicts of the late 20th century. It left a number of political and social legacies that make it paramount to understand why it involved so many instances of mass violence. The question of Civil War memory is acute for many Lebanese, who have come together in the post-war period to debate the war and create public commemoration. In their view, the war has continued through other means in the post-war period, and the periodic rounds of violent conflict plaguing Lebanon since 1990 are directly related to the Civil War. Remembering, analysing and understanding mass violence in Lebanon, therefore, is not just an academic exercise, but for many Lebanese an urgent task directly linked to political reform and reconciliation. The Ta'if Accord that ended the war in 1989 failed to resolve or even address the core conflicts of the war, including the sectarian division of power in Lebanon, the Palestinian refugee issue, the presence of Syrian

¹ Sune Haugbolle, "[The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War, Mass Violence & Resistance](#)," 25 October, 2011, Science Po





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forces on Lebanese soil and Syrian tutelage, and Hizbullah's status as the only armed militia. The killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, and continued political instability in the country have only added to the sense among many Lebanese that political violence is endemic to their body politic. In daily discourse in Lebanon, and even in academic writings about the war, the widespread experience of being caught in recurrent cycles of mass violence can translate into descriptions of violence as "irrational", or simply beyond belief (see Khalaf 2002: 1-22 for a discussion of the "rationality" of civil war).

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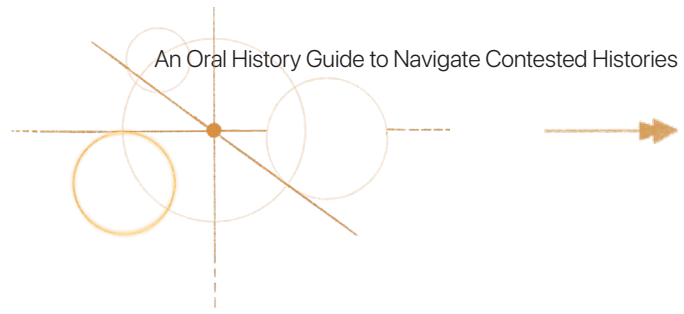
A. Outbreak, cores issues and driving forces of the war

What is habitually referred to as the Lebanese Civil War was in fact a series of more or less related conflicts between shifting alliances of Lebanese groups and external actors, who from 1975 to 1990 destabilised the Lebanese state. The conflicts can be divided into five main periods: 1) the two-years war from April 1975 to November 1976; 2) the long interlude of failed peace attempts, Israeli and Syrian intervention and a host of internal conflicts between November 1976 and June 1982; 3) the Israeli invasion and its immediate aftermath from June 1982 to February 1984; 4) the internal wars of the late 1980s; 6) and finally the intra-Christian wars of 1988-90, which led to the end of the war.

In each of those periods, notorious battles, massacres and assassinations took place, including the Black Saturday, Tal al-Za'tar and Damour massacres of 1975-76; the War of the Mountain between Druze and Christian forces in 1982-83; Israeli bombardment of West Beirut in August 1982, and the Sabra and Shatila massacres that followed; the War of the Camps between Palestinian and Shiite forces from 1985 to 1987; and Michel Aoun's war with Samir Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces and the Syrian army in 1989 and 1990. Debates over these particular events intersect with a number of thematic debates, which this review will summarise.

There is agreement among historians that the war broke out as a result of a period of growing division between those Lebanese who supported the right of the Palestinian resistance to stage operations against Israel from Lebanese soil, and those who opposed it. This division intersected with other contentious issues, most prominently whether or not the system of power sharing in place since the 1943 National Pact was sustainable or due for radical reform, and whether Lebanon should orient its international alliances towards the Arab world and the Soviet Union or towards the West and its local allies. On the one hand, the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), under the leadership of Kamal Junblatt, called for an overhaul of the sectarian quota system, and for a leftist-Muslim alliance that would realign Lebanon with other "radical" regimes including Syria, Libya and Iraq. Destabilisation of the internal security situation allowed various militias to arm, not just those affiliated with the LNM, but also the Christian-conservative front. Hence, many scholars (e.g. Traboulsi 2007: 174) point to





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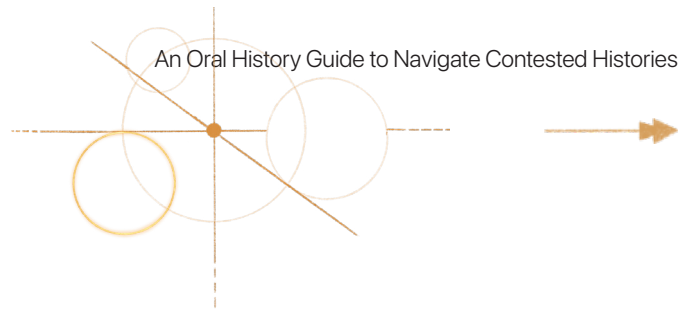
President Suleiman Franjeh's decision to dismantle the deuxième bureau security services in 1970 as a crucial turning point following the statist approach of his predecessors Fouad Chehab and Charles Helou.

The biggest bone of contention regarding the outbreak of the war is the role of the Palestinian armed presence. The historiographic debate is not just over the Palestinian question as such, and the right of the LNM to support the PLO, but over whether or not Lebanon from 1943 to 1975 had developed a viable system of consociationalism, and over the relative impact of external powers on the Lebanese state. In "Breakdown of the State in pre-war Lebanon", Farid Al-Khazen (2000: 385) argues that the Lebanese system had by and large proven itself a flexible mode of power sharing between the countries' sects. From the Cairo Agreement in 1969 to outbreak of war in 1975, he points out, all but one of Lebanon's many cabinet crises revolved around the PLO. The destabilisation of the Lebanese state, therefore, must primarily be seen as an effect of the Palestinian question.

Although well argued and scholarly, Al-Khazen's book can be boxed with more simplistic attempts to place the blame with outside forces. For those who stress internal factors such as the inability of the quota system to deal with the rising numbers of Shiites, and Maronite hegemony over the state more generally, emphasis on the Palestinian issue overwrites critiques of the Lebanese system, and can even be read as part of a "Christian" or conservative historical discourse that seeks to admonish either the Christian right or the sectarian system. A famous shorthand for externalising the war by pointing to outside forces is the idiomatic term "a war of others", or *une guerre pour les autres*, the title of journalist and diplomat Ghassan Tueni's renowned 1985 book (Tueni 1985). After the war, "a war of others" became shorthand for externalising collective and individual feelings of guilt associated with the Civil War. Much of public debate about the war since 1990 has revolved around the external/internal question, and critical historiography has not been immune to these debates (Khalaf 2002: 15-22).

Another group of scholars who stress the internal dynamics of the Civil War are interested in interpretations of political economy. They highlight the over-reliance of the Lebanese economy on Western capitalism from the late 19th century onwards. Inspired by dependency theory, sociologist Salim Nasr (1978), among others, shows how the penetration of foreign capital dovetailed with the social and political dominance of a both local and wider Arab bourgeoisie in Lebanon. This bourgeoisie was in collusion with the *zu'ama* political class of political bosses of wealthy and influential families. As Michael Johnson showed in his 1986 study "Class and Client in Beirut," the *zu'ama* were critical in maintaining a check on violence at a local level. By controlling lower-ranking political bosses, who in their turn reigned in "the street", the *zu'ama* were critical both to the parliamentary system of consociationalism, and to the local negotiation of sectarian power and influence. When their influence – particularly that of the Sunni *zu'ama* in West Beirut – waned in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Johnson argues, the wider system of social control in Lebanon began to unravel (Johnson 1986). In a later work entitled "All Honourable Men," Michael Johnson returns to his earlier work and critiques it for being too based on a class reading of the roots of the Civil War. Instead, he proposes a socio-psychological reading





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that places emphasis on the changing relations in the nuclear family in Beirut before the war (Johnson 2002).

B. Debates over sectarian violence

The work of Marxist sociologists like Salim Nasr (1983), Fawwaz Traboulsi (1993) and Fuad Shahin (1980) presents a corrective to what they see as over-reliance on sectarianism as a catchall to explain the conflict. The sectarian explanation is even more problematic, as it dovetails with hardened stereotypes repeated in journalistic accounts of the war as a resurgence of age-old sectarian hatred. Sectarian identification and the way in which it shaped political subjectivities during the war and leading up to it, however, cannot be explained away completely. The issue of sectarianism in the war intersects with a much longer debate about sectarianism in Lebanon going back, at least, to the 1840–60 wars in Mount Lebanon (Weiss 2009). One side in the debate believes that Lebanese nationalism emerged not because of political sectarianism but despite it. As Firro (2003: 67) puts it, the French creation of Lebanon in 1920 empowered sectarian representation and the leadership of political oligarchies locally and nationally. In this view, the institutional arrangement of sectarianism has produced an idea of two separate people and coexistence between them. Critics of the sectarian system believe that only the resilience of civil society during the war saved the future existence of Lebanon as a country. Frequent sectarian bickering in the political leadership, resulting in political stalemate, inefficiency and stalled reforms, has only reinforced this view in the post-war period.

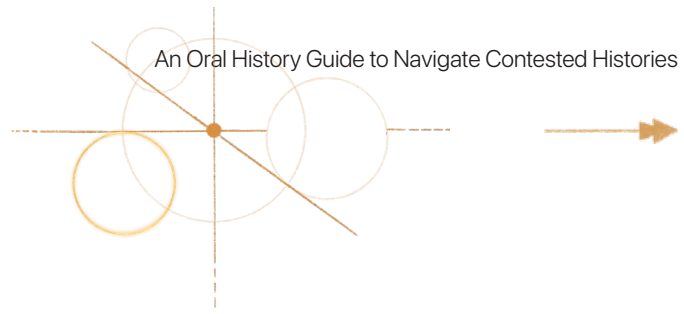
On the opposing side in the debate, proponents of the confessional system stress its historically proven ability to contain and resolve conflict (Weiss 2009: 143–4). As Samir Khalaf (2002: 327–28) has formulated this idea, despite their ungratifying social and political expressions in the recent past, communitarian roots can be stripped of bigotry and become the base for equitable forms of power sharing. The Lebanese national identity may be fragile, but it is nevertheless a well-established identification with a long history that rests on an overlap of multiple identities. The insistence on one seamless national unity led to disasters for Lebanon as well as for its proponents in the Lebanese National Movement. Lebanese nationalism in this view can be defined as “a fragile net of confessional identity, national identity and superstrata ideologies”, and the acceptance of this loosely connected net (Reinkowski 1997: 513). In political terms, this implies that, because the sectarian system merely reflects the makeup of society, it is ultimately better suited to regulate conflict than a secular system would be (Messara 1994).

[...]

C. Massacres and mass violence

There is no disagreement over the fact that several massacres took place and that hundreds, in some cases thousands of civilians were murdered. Rather, historiographic debates centre on the interpretation of the political circumstances surrounding the massacres and the perceived necessity of these crimes. In several





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cases, the events have become foundational for the self-understanding of political groups. Disentangling them from ideological discourse is a difficult task, and not one that Lebanese historians are always able to fulfil. Today, a phalangist narrative, as represented on the Lebanese Forces' webpage, maintains that the massacres of 1975-76 and 1982 were in fact reactions to onslaughts on the Christians of Lebanon, defensive measures made necessary by the actions of the LNM. Conversely, proponents of the left (who outnumber "rightists" in the group of intellectuals and artists dominating public debate about the war) stress that the worst massacres were committed by members of the Christian right.

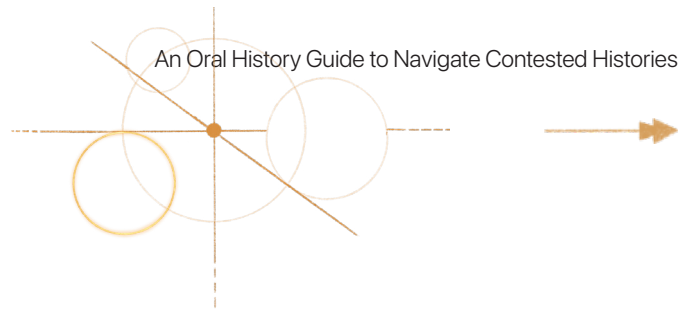
Massacres of the two-years war

The outbreak of the war was marked by its first massacre, known as the Ayn al-Rumana incident on 13 April 1975, where 27 Palestinians were killed by Kata'ib militants (Picard 2002: 105). Although the assault was clearly committed by Kata'ib, Christian leaders accused the Palestinians and their leader Arafat for provoking a confrontation in an environment of heightened tension (Hanf 1993: 204). Ayn al-Rumana was followed by other massacres in the so-called two-years war from April 1975 to November 1976. As Elizabeth Picard points out, the attacks on refugee camps and villages in this period were not the product of lawlessness and militias ruling the street, although a vast number of militias were active and many areas were quite lawless. Rather, the massacres followed a logic of forming homogeneous cantons propagated by leaders such as Pierre Jumayil and Camille Chamoun, but equally – even if in retaliation – by leaders of the LNM like Kamal Jumblatt (Picard 2002: 110). The logic necessitated cleaning areas of non-Christian, or non-progressive, elements, and it sanctioned mass murder.

The killing of civilians was also motivated by a cycle of revenge (*dawrat al-intiqam*), as massacre followed massacre in the two-years war. The first major incident was the Black Saturday massacre of 6 December 1975, when Phalangists killed between 150 (Chami 2003: 57) and 200 (Hanf 1993: 210) civilians in East Beirut. The LNM responded to Black Saturday and the ensuing massacre of civilians in the slum districts of Maslakh and Karantina on 18 January 1976, where several hundred (Hanf 1993: 211) – perhaps as many as 1,500 (Harris 1996: 162) – civilians were murdered, by bombarding and pillaging the coastal cities of Damour and Jiyé on 20 January, killing more than 500 inhabitants (Nisan 2003: 41).

In the meantime, Kata'ib laid siege on the Palestinian camp of Tal al-Za'atar. The camp fell on 12 August 1976. Syrian forces participated in or at least accepted the massacre that followed. The number of people killed varies. Harris (1996: 165) writes that "perhaps 3,000 Palestinians, mostly civilians, died in the siege and its aftermath", whereas Cobban (1985: 142) estimates that 1,500 were killed on the day and a total of 2,200 throughout the siege. More reliable is Yezid Sayigh's estimate of 4,280 Lebanese and Palestinian camp dwellers, as he bases it on reports in the immediate aftermath of the massacre (1997: 401). In retaliation, LNM forces attacked the Christian villages of Chekka and Hamat, killing around 200 civilians (Chami 2003: 94).





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1982 invasion and Sabra and Shatila

The Israel Defence Forces' (IDF) invasion of Lebanon and subsequent shelling of West Beirut in the summer of 1982 must be considered an instance of mass violence. The invasion was the single most violent incident of the war, costing at least 17,000 people their lives and wounding up to 30,000 others (Hanf 1993: 341). One of the most influential artistic renderings of the civilian experience of invasion is Mahmoud Darwish's long prose poem "Memory for Forgetfulness" Beirut August 1982 (Darwish 1995), a series of testimonies and reflections on the relation of writing to memory and human suffering.

[...]

D. Shelling, car-bombs and "habitual" forms of mass violence

[...] Although the massacres described above account for around one fifth of the 90,000 killed during the war, the largest number of civilians perished in almost daily shelling, sniper fire, murder, and other indiscriminate acts more or less directly related to actual warfare throughout the 1975-1990 period. In the struggle for control over Palestinian camps in West Beirut, known as the "War of the Camps", between former allies of the LNM from April 1985 to 1987, more than 2500 Palestinian fighters and non-fighters are estimated by the Lebanese government to have been killed (Brynen 1990: 190). The real number is likely to be higher, because thousands of Palestinians were not registered in Lebanon, and since no officials could access the camps in the aftermath of fighting, the casualties could not be counted. In addition, Amal and Shiite inhabitants suffered considerable losses (Sayigh, 1994).

[...] Although the famous massacres of the war were very serious instances of mass violence, they tend to overshadow less prolific forms of violence that became an "habitual" part of life during the war. Part of this habitual violence took place between soldiers and militiamen. [...] During all phases of the war and on all sides, atrocities were committed against both [civilians and combatants]. Kidnappings, road block executions on the basis of people's sectarian identity, revenge killings of civilians, random shelling of residential areas, and many other breaches of the conduct of war were integral parts of the Civil War (Hanf 1993).

Another category of mass violence was car bombs and planted bombs, which throughout the war claimed more than 3,000 lives, most of them civilian (Chami, 2003). At least 49 political and religious leaders were murdered between 1975 and 1990 (Chami 2003: 323-26). However, these numbers are pale in comparison with the kidnapped and disappeared during the war, which have been estimated at 17,415 by the civil society Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, [founded in 1982]. [...]

