In Memoriam

In this insightful case study, Hassan S. Alminhali delves into the intricate complexities of the Lebanese Civil War spanning over 15 years. This conflict significantly reshaped the Middle East beyond religious boundaries to encompass wealth distribution and educational disparities. Through a meticulous phased analysis, he reexamines the roots of this pivotal chapter in Lebanon's history, shedding light on the often-overlooked Black September events in Jordan.

This essay is being published in loving memory of Hassan. Even though he left us all too soon, his words are meant to keep his scholarly passion alive. Through his work, I hope you will know the scholar who wanted to make a positive difference, even if it meant going slow and taking small steps, the son who cherished his parents, his siblings, his family, the friend we learned from and trusted, and the man I adore.

May our souls reunite at the gates of heaven, without ever having to say goodbye again. I will tell you how the world felt empty when you stopped laughing Hassan.

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The Lebanese Civil War 1975-1990: Causes and Reflection

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Abstract

The Lebanese Civil War is one of the most significant events in the contemporary history of the Middle East; not only Lebanon but also the entire region still suffers from the implications and struggles to overcome it. It introduced new players and eliminated others. In this case study, I look at the initial gunfire, the root causes of the war, and what fueled it to continue for a decade and a half. While the dominant academic explanation for the civil war is the sectarian nature of the Republic of Lebanon, relying on census data to showcase the various religious and ethnic groups and examine the wealth distribution and education level in order to highlight the divisions that ignited the crisis, this study proposes that the fundamental cause stemmed from the actions of Palestinian commando forces and groups that acted as a 'state within a state,' repeating the same mistake as in Jordan five years prior. However, unlike the tribal nature of the Kingdom of Jordan, Lebanon's aggressive sectarianism exacerbated the conflict, leading to widespread devastation and a decade-and-a-half-long struggle. Therefore, sectarianism is identified not as the initial spark, but as the fuel that sustained the fire of war. This conclusion is drawn from an analysis of events preceding the war and dividing the conflict into phases to exhibit its causes and fuel.

Introduction

In order to create a complete narrative of the Lebanese Civil War, a minor event must not be overlooked, which occurred in Jordan five years prior to the crisis in Lebanon— Black September. Many scholars consider it a civil war, however, Black September lacks the fundamental elements of a civil war. This is because, while it was indeed a violent conflict, it may not fit the conventional definition of a civil war for several reasons. Firstly, Black September primarily involved the Jordanian government's suppression of Palestinian guerrilla organizations, notably the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), rather than multiple internal factions vying for control over Jordanian territory or government. Secondly, the conflict was more limited in scope and duration compared to typical civil wars, and it did not result in widespread upheaval or fragmentation of the Jordanian society, making it rather difficult to label it as a full-scale civil war.[1]

Black September: From September 15 to September 25, 1970

Black September, spanning from September 15 to September 25, 1970, marked a significant period of violent confrontation in Jordan. During this time, the Jordanian military clashed with a coalition comprising Palestinian insurgents and radical Jordanians. These tensions stemmed from various factors, including the PLO's increasing influence and military activities in Jordan, which the Jordanian government perceived as a threat to its sovereignty and stability. The conflict was further exacerbated by regional dynamics, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the involvement of external powers, contributing to a complex and volatile situation that eventually erupted into violence in September 1970. The clashes, characterized by intense fighting and political upheaval, had profound implications for both Jordan and the broader Middle East region. It ended in a Jordanian triumph, and among Palestinians, it became known as Black September, symbolizing a significant setback in their struggle for self-determination and national liberation.

In the spring of 1970, there were sporadic skirmishes between the 55,000 Jordanian solid military and the growing number of armed Palestinians in Jordan.[2] When King Hussein bin Talal agreed to the Rogers Peace Plan in early August, the Arab League-mediated cease-fire between them seemed shaky. Relations between him and the PLO deteriorated since his move went against the position on peace with Israel that was taken by the fourth Arab League summit in Khartoum. Following the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine's (PFIP) breaking up of three Western airplanes at a field close to Amman on September 12, in response to Israel's refusal to free its Palestinian captives, tensions increased.[3]

On September 15, Hussein assembled a military cabinet while the US dispatched ships and aircraft to the area. The two factions started fighting right away in Amman and northern Jordan. Irbid was taken on September 19 by the tank battalions of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) stationed in Syria. Hussein asked for American action, but Washington decided to align itself with

[1] Paul, C., Clarke, C. P., Grill, B., & Dunigan, M. (2013). Jordan, 1970–1971: Case Outcome: COIN Win. In Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies (pp. 331–339). RAND Corporation. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.39

[2] Hiro, D. (2003). The essential middle east: A comprehensive guide. Carroll & Graf.

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Israel instead.[1] The Jordanian troops, however, stopped the approach of the Palestinian tank. Hussein used his air force to attack the Palestinians in the Irbid region, knowing that the United States and Israel would support him. The Palestinian armored battalions fled to Syria after General Hafiz Assad's air force declined to act on their behalf. On September 25, a cease-fire that the Arab League brokered became effective.[2]

Furthermore, there was a lot of fighting in the camps and a high death toll due to Palestinian militia forces frequently stationed there and using them as bases. Around 4,000 Palestinians perished. The United States increased its financial help and airlifted weapons to Jordan. With his position strengthened, Hussein applied pressure on the Palestinian commandos and eventually drove them out in July 1971 after destroying their final strongholds in the hills surrounding Ajloun.[3]

When the Palestinian commandos and the PLO arrived in Lebanon in the early 1970s, the long-standing conflict between right-leaning Maronite Christians and left-leaning Muslims was further exacerbated. Additionally, by March 1975, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy to advance the Middle East peace process had run out of steam. The Arabs being involved in a civil war to divert their attention from US diplomatic failure served the interests of the US.[4] The start of a Civil War was heralded by a Phalange militia attack on Palestinians in East Beirut on April 13, 1975. This continued through the subsequent phases and ended on October 13, 1990.[5]

Phase 1: April 1975 to May 1976: Ascendancy from the coalition of reformists

The nation was overrun by violence. The principal legal opponent of the Lebanese national movement (LNM), Lebanese soldiers under Bashir Gemayel's leadership, faced opposition from various factions. This included Shiite Muslims led by Kamal Jumblatt and the Lebanese Front led by Camille Chamoun and supported by its militia. Amidst escalating sectarian tensions, the PLO and LNM forged an alliance, establishing a unified command. The LNM advocated for an end to the confessional political system, which disproportionately favored Christians, in order to create a fairer political landscape for the Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities, who together formed the majority of the population.[6]

Before discussing political and constitutional reform, the Lebanese Front insisted on the departure of the armed Palestinians from Lebanon. Both sides decided to remove hostile pockets within their enclaves at this phase. The Lebanese army was disbanded due to violent country-wide warfare in January 1976 that damaged important governmental institutions and public structures. The LNM-PLO coalition had gained control of two-thirds of the nation by early April. In a state of desperation, the Lebanese Front, led by President Suleiman Franjieh, turned to Syria for

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[2] Ashton, N. J. (2006). Pulling the Strings: King Hussein's Role during the Crisis of 1970 in Jordan. The International History Review, 28(1), 94–118. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40110724

[3] Hiro, D. (2003). The essential middle east: A comprehensive guide. Carroll & Graf.

[4] Hiro, D. (2003). The essential middle east: A comprehensive guide. Carroll & Graf.

[5] Makdisi, S., & Sadaka, R. (2005). The Lebanese Civil War, 1975–90. In P. Collier & N. Sambanis (Eds.), Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis (pp. 59–86). World Bank. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02484.7

[6] Hiro, D. (2003). The essential middle east: A comprehensive guide. Carroll & Graf.

support.[1] Apprehensive that extremist elements within Lebanon might take advantage of any void created by the withdrawal of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and escalate the conflict with Israel, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad decided to back the Lebanese Front, primarily composed of Maronite Christians.[2]

Phase 2: June 1976 through February 1978: Syrian hegemony and interference

During Phase 2, spanning from June 1976 to February 1978, Syria exerted hegemony and interference in Lebanon, preventing any single faction from achieving complete victory. Syrian military action thwarted the ambitions of various contenders. Subsequently, diplomatic efforts led by Libya facilitated a ceasefire, laying the groundwork for a presidential election. In September 1976, a Syrian-backed candidate was elected and sworn in as president.[3] Meanwhile, Syrian influence expanded, with a military presence establishing itself across the nation. However, pockets of resistance persisted, particularly in southern Lebanon, where Christian militias, supported by Israel, impeded the PLO's actions against Israel.[4]

Phase 3: From March to October 1978: The first Israeli aggression

Following a gorilla attack by Palestinians against the Jewish state on March 11, 1978, South Lebanon was attacked by Israel. Maronite leaders Pierre Gemayel and Camille Chamoun travelled to Israel in May to procure weapons. A Phalange team murdered Tony Franjieh, the son of Suleiman Franjieh, on June 13 in order to eliminate any potential opposition to Bashir Gemayel and his presidential campaign.[5]

Phase 4: November 1978 through May 1982: The idea of a Christian mini-state

The Phalange and a militia from the National Liberal Party (NLP) started fighting in May and June of 1979. The Phalange's victory against the NLP combatants in July 1980 marked the end of the fighting. Israeli forces fired upon and shot down two Syrian helicopters during the action in late April 1981 between the Phalange and its Syrian adversaries for control of Mount Sanin, northwest of Zahle.[6] Three months later, a cease-fire in southern Lebanon resulted from a three-way agreement between Israel, Syria, and the PLO that the United States mediated. Israel began its arms shipments to the Maronite militias after Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon met with IDF commanders in January 1982 to discuss plans for an Israeli invasion of Lebanon.[7]

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[1] Hudson, M. C. (1978). The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War. Middle East Journal, 32(3), 261–278. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4325767

[2] Lawson, F. H. (1984). Syria's Intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, 1976: A Domestic Conflict Explanation. International Organization, 38(3), Lawson, F. H, 451-480. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706467

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Phase 5: June 1982 through February 1984: Second Israeli War and its consequences

Israel attacked Lebanon on June 3rd after an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Shlomo Argov, the Israeli envoy to Britain.[①]

On September 13, incoming president Bashir Gemayel was killed in an explosion that destroyed his Phalange party headquarters. Israeli troops moved into Beirut to uphold the peace and avert reprisals. The Phalange militia slaughtered some 2000 Palestinian refugees between September 16 and September 18 in the camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut. The US, British, French, and Italian battalions that make up the Western Multinational Force (MNF) started to deploy on September 20. Amin Gemayel was chosen as president by the parliament the next day. The Israelis departed Beirut on September 29.[②]

After being unanimously approved by the Lebanese parliament on May 17, 1983, Israel signed the Lebanese-Israeli peace treaty, but President Amin Gemayel refused to do the same. The Phalange militia and the Lebanese army occupied the Israelis' outposts in the Shouf region after they withdrew on September 3.[③] As a result, they clashed with the Druze-PLO coalition. Two warships and aircraft carriers from the United States and France intervened on behalf of the Lebanese army. On September 25, Saudi Arabia brokered a cease-fire. However, the United States kept conducting reconnaissance flights over west-central Lebanon from its aircraft carriers.[④] On October 23, a truck bombing at the military headquarters of the US and France killed 241 US soldiers and 59 French soldiers. After the Lebanese army and the Lebanese forces LF attacked West Beirut's Shia suburbs on 3 February 1984, fighting broke out between the military and the LF on one side and the Amal-Druze alliance on the other. The first national reconciliation conference was held in Geneva in early November. US warships engaged in combat with Muslim forces. The Amal-Druze alliance drove out the Christian army from West Beirut when Muslims left the Lebanese army. The United States deployed its troops on February 7, 1984. The Western MNF's other members did likewise.[⑤]

Phase 6: March 1984 to January 1986: Syria regaining its hegemony

Assad gave President Gemayel encouragement to abrogate the Lebanese-Israeli peace deal draft. On March 5th, the Lebanese parliament did so. A national reconciliation government was established in the middle of March following the second national reconciliation summit in Lausanne, Switzerland (Hiro, 2003).[⑥] Israel handed over its posts in southern Lebanon to the Christian militia it controlled on June 6, 1985, completing the penultimate stage of its withdrawal from Lebanon but still leaving 1000 Israeli soldiers behind. The national accord to end the

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[①] Siklawi, R. (2017). The Palestinian Resistance Movement In Lebanon 1967–82: Survival, Challenges, and Opportunities. Arab Studies Quarterly, 39(3), 923–937. https://doi.org/10.13169/arabstudquar.39.3.0923

[②] Paul, C., Clarke, C. P., Grill, B., & Dunigan, M. (2013). Lebanese Civil War, 1975–1990: Case Outcome: COIN Loss (Mixed, Favoring Insurgents). In Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies (pp. 383–393). RAND Corporation. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.45

[③] Paul, C., Clarke, C. P., Grill, B., & Dunigan, M. (2013). Jordan, 1970–1971: Case Outcome: COIN Win. In Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies (pp. 331–339). RAND Corporation. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.39

[④] Hiro, D. (2003). The essential middle east: A comprehensive guide. Carroll & Graf.

[⑤] Makdisi, S., & Sadaka, R. (2005). The Lebanese Civil War, 1975–90. In P. Collier & N. Sambanis (Eds.), Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis (pp. 59–86). World Bank. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02484.7

[⑥] Hiro, D. (2003). The essential middle east: A comprehensive guide. Carroll & Graf.

Lebanese problem was signed by the commanders of Amal, the Druze militia, and the LF before the end of December and described political reform and ties between Lebanon and Syria, but the deal has yet to materialize. The LF commander was unsuccessful in getting his executive committee's support.[1]

Phase 7: February 1986 through September 1988: Syrian power's limitations

Syria sent its forces, which were removed in September 1982, to West Beirut in response to fighting between Amal and the Druze militia in February 1987 to restore peace. However, tensions persisted, and in April 1988, clashes erupted between Amal and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. The conflict between the two groups stemmed from a power struggle and ideological differences, with each vying for influence and control in the region.[2] Meanwhile, efforts to address political change in Lebanon were underway, with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and US Secretary of State George Shultz agreeing on a coordinated policy in the middle of April.[3]

On September 22, 1988, when parliament could not choose a new leader, outgoing president Gemayel gave his chief of staff, General Michel Aoun, the order to establish a temporary military government. Three Muslim officers declined to join the other five officers he appointed to his cabinet.[4]

Phase 8: from October 1988 to September 1989: the Aoun method of campaign and liberation

Aoun proclaimed a war of liberation against Syria in March 1989 after attacking and suppressing the LF in the Christian enclave. The Christian enclave was placed under a land and sea embargo by Syria.[5] A committee made up of the leaders of Algeria, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia was established by the Arab League summit on May 25th to resolve the Lebanese conflict within six months. 14 Lebanese factions created an anti-Aoun Front in the middle of August.[6]

Phase 9: October 1989 to October 1990: The Taif Accord

In Taif, Saudi Arabia, between September 30 and October 22, 58 of the 62 still functioning Lebanese parliaments discussed and modified the national reconciliation charter. The Maronite Lebanese front endorsed it, but Aoun rejected it. The Taif Accord was ratified on Lebanese soil in Qulayaat on November 5, and Rene Muawad was chosen as president by the Lebanese Parliament.

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[1] Makdisi, S., & Sadaka, R. (2005). The Lebanese Civil War, 1975–90. In P. Collier & N. Sambanis (Eds.), Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis (pp. 59–86). World Bank. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02484.7

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[6] Hiro, D. (2003). The essential middle east: A comprehensive guide. Carroll & Graf.

He was murdered on November 22. Parliament selected Elias Hrawi to serve as president two days later.[1]

There was fierce fighting between Aoun supporters and the LF from January to March 1990. As a result, Aoun only obtained a third of the Christian neighborhood. Hrawi was labeled the LF's ally (Hiro, 2003). The Taif Accord's revised constitution was approved by parliament on August 21. The LF supported Hrawi's decision to isolate Aoun's Enclave with land a month later.[2] By this point, Syria had joined the coalition led by the US against Iraq during the crisis brought on by Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait. The Lebanese and Syrian forces beat Aoun's fighters on October 13 and ended the Civil War with a coordinated air and ground battle.[3]

Conclusion

Dissecting the Lebanese Civil War brings a new perspective to the table. The fundamental cause of the civil war could easily be attributed to the Palestinian commando forces and groups that acted like a state within a state—repeating the same mistake as in Jordan five years before. However, despite the tribal nature of the Kingdom of Jordan, it lacks the aggressive nature of sectarianism that Lebanon is infamously known for. Therefore, The Palestinians made the same mistake but with entirely different outcomes. The latter was deadlier and pushed an entire country to absolute detestation.

Sectarianism is not out of the picture; it is not the spark; it is the fuel that kept the fire of war lighting for a decade and a half. The same fuel that handicaps every attempt to make Lebanon stand on its feet again. The same players who wore camouflage and held rifles are now wearing suits in the parliament while maintaining the ownership of aggressive militias waiting for orders to finish what the Taif Accord stopped them from doing.

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[2] Siklawi, R. (2010). The Dynamics of Palestinian Political Endurance in Lebanon. Middle East Journal, 64(4), 597–611. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40926502

[3] Hiro, D. (2003). The essential middle east: A comprehensive guide. Carroll & Graf.

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