



# Lebanon's civil war: seven lessons forty years on

by Florence Gaub

Four decades ago, on 13 April 1975, the Lebanese civil war broke out. The conflict, which lasted 15 years, cost 150,000 lives, injured 300,000, and led to the emigration of almost a million people, brought the Lebanese state to near collapse. With similar conflicts now spreading throughout the Middle East, Lebanon's tragic history can provide useful lessons on civil wars – and in particular on how to end them.

**1. Conflict causes evolve:** on the surface, the civil war erupted because the Phalangists, a Christian militia, clashed with Palestinian factions over the latter's armed struggle against Israel from Lebanese territory. But the conflict changed rapidly into a fight over the Lebanese state and its political system. This first became apparent during the opening round of political negotiations in 1975, and once again when Israel ejected the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) from Lebanon in 1982. The war then continued because it had evolved beyond its alleged initial causes. Because conflicts are dynamic phenomena, the issues which fuel them can and will change over time.

**2. Beware conflict rhetoric:** though the Lebanese civil war is often portrayed as a Muslim-Christian conflict, its underlying causes were political and not religious in nature. In fact, some of the most violent episodes of the war took place within religious groups: Sunni Palestinians fought against the largely Sunni Syrian army, Shia Hizbullah

against Shia Amal, Muslim Amal against Muslim Palestinians, and the largely Christian remnants of the Lebanese army against the Christian *Forces Libanaises* (FL). The rhetoric of religious divisions was, however, employed by the plethora of militias which sought to pose as the defenders of their respective communities. Yet the fragmentation of the country along religious lines ('Lebanonisation') was never supported by the Lebanese population as a whole. Even at the height of the war, only 4% of the Lebanese people supported the idea of giving each religious group its own state, whereas 80% remained in favour of the idea of a national unity government. It should therefore be remembered that during civil wars, what political leaders proclaim can differ dramatically from facts on the ground.

**3. Conflict begets conflict:** like many other civil wars, the Lebanese conflict created conditions which encouraged further bloodshed. The spiral of violence, economic implosion and erosion of state authority not only increased the number of men under arms, it also created new political stakeholders with an interest in prolonging the conflict. For example, the size of the militias increased two- or threefold from their initial number of 20,000 as a result of growing insecurity and economic advantages: in the absence of jobs, militia salaries became an attractive alternative to poverty. The funds for these militias were likewise raised through violence and illegal activities: the smuggling of drugs and oil, looting,

the robbing of banks and trade in contraband are estimated to have generated around \$15 billion. Consequently, warlords emerged who had no desire to see an end to hostilities.

#### **4. External forces exacerbate conflict:**

Lebanon's civil war had an outside dimension from the outset. Syrian troops, for instance, crossed the border to fight the Palestinian forces in support of the Phalangist militia, but the allies fell out a few years later when the Christian force demanded that the Syrians leave the country. The South Lebanon Army, a militia group, collaborated with Israel in the country's south, Hizbullah consistently received Iranian support, and several Christian militias were backed by various Western actors. In total, Lebanese militias received some \$30 billion in outside assistance – double the amount they managed to raise themselves. But as elsewhere, this support was not enough to tip the scales so that any one party could claim victory. The provision of arms and financial assistance by outsiders therefore helped to prolong the conflict, as it made the costly business of war more affordable.

**5. Intervention has its limits:** several countries intervened militarily in the Lebanese civil war. Syria was the first from 1976 until 2005, mostly in the country's east with 20,000-40,000 troops present over the years. In 1978, Israel's invasion led to the deployment of the (still operational) United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which fluctuated in size between 4,000-15,000 troops. In 1982, Israel invaded again, occupying 10% of the country until 2000 with 1,000-1,500 troops. In the same year, a 6,000-strong multinational force made up of American, French, Italian and British troops were deployed to oversee the withdrawal of Palestinian forces, but quickly found itself the object of hostilities: its barracks were bombed in 1983, resulting in almost 300 casualties. Although thousands of foreign military personnel were stationed in Lebanon throughout the war, they were unable to alter the dynamics of the conflict significantly. Crucially, they were also not flanked by a comprehensive agreement involving all Lebanese stakeholders.

**6. Wars have inner clocks:** bringing a civil war to an end is difficult – in the Lebanese case, it took at least 12 attempts (smaller initiatives not included) to finally implement an agreement. The 1989 pact which laid the ground for the end of hostilities, along with the ill-fated initiatives which came before it, show one thing in particular: the points of contention did not

change significantly over time. Reform of the political system, the Palestinian armed struggle in Lebanon, militia disarmament and foreign relations all featured one way or the other in every round of negotiations. Foreign mediation was not lacking, either: Syria, Saudi Arabia, France, the US, the UN and the Arab League all attempted several times to bring the war to an end. The main thing that did change was the conflict parties' perception, capacity and commitment to implement a peace agreement, in what is sometimes referred to as the 'inner clock' of a civil war. It should be noted that this phenomenon also makes conflict resolution particularly hard in the first three years of such conflicts.

**7. Militia rule must end:** Lebanon's security sector was in disarray at the war's end: desertion and disintegration had weakened the armed forces, militia groups abounded, and weapons were present in almost every household. Parts of the country were occupied by Syria and Israel, and Hizbullah was allowed to maintain its arsenal as it assumed a role as a national resistance movement. In spite of these obstacles – and the slightly haphazard manner in which Lebanese security sector reform was conducted – Lebanon succeeded in putting an end to 15 years of militia rule. The most important factor was a new-found political consensus, which robbed militias of both their legitimacy and their *raison d'être*. This then created the basis for a societal push-back when the FL attempted to rearm: in 1994, its leader Samir Geagea became the only militia leader to be charged with, amongst other things, 'maintaining of a militia in the guise of a political party'.

Second, popular support for the Lebanese army gave the ramshackle force under reconstruction the necessary legitimacy to resume its role as the main security provider in Lebanon in spite of financial and political challenges.

Third, 6,000 militiamen were successfully integrated into the security sector (4,000 in the armed forces, 2,000 in internal security). Though they only counted for a fraction of the tens of thousands of militia fighters, their reintegration was a positive move, insofar as it symbolised the long-awaited end of militia rule.

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