

Civil War Relapse?: Hezbollah & Sectarianism in Post-War Lebanon

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LUKE FALKENBURG, DEC 11 2012

After emerging from a brutal 15 year civil war, Lebanon attempted to promote peace and establish a democratic state representative of all sects. However, products of post-war Lebanon have created an environment where the possibility of a relapse into sectarian war is always imminent, and in order to avoid this fate Lebanon needs to confront its past.^[1] Currently Hezbollah, a sectarian Shi'ite movement, is the largest obstacle for peace and democracy to flourish in Lebanon, and as long as Hezbollah remains armed and unaccountable for, their actions and activities the possibility of war looms. Unless Hezbollah fully disarms, fully demilitarizes, fully integrates into the political system, stops acting as a nation within a nation, and is held accountable for past violence, the chances for strong central authority and democratic Lebanon remain slim.

This paper attempts to avoid the role of external actors, except when necessary, includes Lebanese acceptance of the role of the UN Tribunal in establishing peace, and focuses primarily on the internal struggle inside Lebanon because of Hezbollah. Therefore this paper first addresses the legacy of amnesia that the civil war brought Lebanon, which is essential to understanding the environment that permitted the development of Hezbollah post-war, which then illustrates the need to learn from past mistakes so as not to repeat them. Next, the specific ways Hezbollah has encouraged the social division of Lebanon and escalated the possibility of relapse into civil war will be addressed. Finally, future prospects and the ability of Hezbollah to disarm and demilitarize are examined, as well as the necessity of Hezbollah to fully engage in the democratic process and to be held accountable for past actions via the UN Tribunal, which will only then promote a united Lebanon.

First of all, historically, Lebanon has experienced numerous sectarian divisions. For example, traces of division are evident during Lebanon's colonial period, when Ottoman oppression led Maronites to ally with the French, the Druze with the British, and Sunnis/Muslims with the Turkish Ottomans. During Lebanon's civil war, which began in 1975, the Lebanese government proved itself incapable of providing necessary services to its citizens. Instead, local militias provided these services in exchange for the locals' support and loyalty.^[2] These militias were often organized along pre-existing sectarian lines, and their violence devastated Lebanon. As a result of the war, 144,240 people died, 17,415 went missing, and 197,506 were injured. Furthermore, an estimated third of the population emigrated, and it is believed hundreds of thousands became displaced.^[3]

However, it was the handling of post-war Lebanon which continued to produce an atmosphere of sectarianism which fostered an environment in which Hezbollah was capable of surviving. For example, Lebanon's bloody fifteen year civil war ended in 1990 under the Ta'if agreement, when sectarian factions came together to form a new government through a system of power sharing. Because of Ta'if, sectarianism continued to be encouraged, as the government guarantees a president headed by a Maronite/Christian, a Sunni prime minister, and a Shi'ite parliamentary head. As the case of Lebanon shows, the power-sharing system currently in place has contributed to sustaining a divided society, which, in the long term, increases the likelihood of a relapse into violence along sectarian lines instead of accomplishing its intended purpose of mitigating risk.^[4] Violence along sectarian lines has proven to flourish when social interaction is isolated to one's own group. When these various associations intermingle, the risk of violence and post-conflict relapse becomes significantly reduced.^[5] The current lack of a strong sense of national identity and the continuation of emphasis on sectarianism, based even in government, has continued to encourage deep divisions

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along religious lines that can be traced back throughout Lebanon's short and bloody history. Thus democracy has led to instability, which continues to cause the Lebanese mentality to identify with their religious affiliations rather than encouraging social cohesion. Furthermore, it continues to cause internal strife, legitimizes Hezbollah, and threatens the renewal of hostilities.

Societal division was promoted further when, in 1991, the Lebanese Parliament offered a general amnesty to militia members. Former militia leaders were effectively exempt from prosecutions in response to any atrocities they were accused of.^[6] By failing to confront the past, the 1994 conference titled, *Acknowledgment, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation: Alternative Approaches to Conflict Resolution in Post-War Lebanon*, stated,

Rather than a cohesive group of individuals bound together by an agreed-upon set of rights and obligations...the Lebanese instead compromise an agglomeration of competing communities, each of which requires absolute allegiance... from its members. Every one of these communities feels that the others have victimized it.^[7]

Ignoring the issues of Lebanon's past did not make them go away. By addressing the issues and requiring accountability, reconciliation, trust, and social cohesion would have occurred, and Hezbollah would not have been able to retain legitimacy.

In addition, Lebanon's different groups chose to avoid coming to terms with the past civil war and have been unable to even complete a standard history book, an essential building block for the identity of a post-war state. When sensitive topics are introduced, they fail to produce a cause and repercussion analysis of the war, and they present it diplomatically to avoid triggering tension. This paints the picture that harmony between Lebanon's diverse factions is at its all-time high.^[8] This inaccurate picture of Lebanese history may have severe consequences for the present. The aftereffect, post-civil war, is that if Lebanon does not confront sensitive issues, it may be doomed to repeat past mistakes. With groups like Hezbollah increasing the likelihood of renewed hostilities, it becomes imperative for the Lebanese people to come to terms with their past, so they are capable of confronting the current environment that sustains Hezbollah.

Despite strong aspirations, the hope for a post-war unified Lebanon never materialized. Jean Said Makdisi wrote in the 1999 *Afterward* to her *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir*,

During the war, our eyes were always fixed on what we were sure would be the halcyon of days of the future after it ended. Let the war end, we thought, and all would be well... Historical quarrels and divisions would mutate into a harmonious and productive unity based on justice. We had paid a heavy price for the evils of the past, and we deserved a better future. But the future is now, and it is a hard reality, shorn of these illusions. There was to be no reward, after all, for the suffering. ... a decision was made to forget the past and to move on... What was past was past... A general amnesty was declared to wash away the sins of the past. A clean start, it was said, was the right course of action to take, and we were to turn a new page. But there has been no redemption; oblivion and amnesia are not redemption. (J. Makdisi 1999: 256-258)^[9]

The concept of a Lebanese citizen never materialized because of the failure to address the past. This social amnesia, clearly visible in Lebanese politics and society, fostered an environment which permitted the growth and prosperity of Hezbollah. However, the possibility of rectifying past injustices, and not repeating some of the mistakes of the past, are now possible. Only then will Lebanon truly prosper.

Secondly, current deep sectarian differences, largely remnant of the war, remain. Although the civil war was essentially defined as a conflict between Christians and Muslims, the stage has now changed into a predominately Sunni and Shi'ite confrontation. Since the civil war, Lebanon's historically marginalized minority Shi'ite community has increased numerically and influentially. It is now believed that they outnumber Sunni and Christian populations.^[10] Accordingly, Shi'ites, through organizations such as Amal and Hezbollah, desire to increase their relevance in Lebanon's affairs.

Hezbollah continues to be the main threat to the stability of Lebanon. For example, Hezbollah refused to follow the

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lead of other militias in 1991 that deactivated their militant components.^[11] Instead, they continue to stockpile arms, and occasionally wage guerilla-style wars despite U.N. resolution 1559 (2004) calling for their disarmament. Another problem with a group such as Hezbollah is that it is part of the established government, but maintains, arguably, a stronger military presence than the state. Therefore, on impulse, Hezbollah can act outside of state jurisdiction. Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, has justified Hezbollah's stockpiling because of external threats saying, "the need for weapons to remain in the hands of Hizbullah or in the hands of the remaining parties as part of the broad resistance, because Israel will remain a threat to Lebanon's stability and security."^[12]

Hezbollah's actions outside of state control, which undermine the state, threaten to renew internal hostilities, and only made possible because of their stockpiling, have been responsible for entangling Lebanon in several external wars with Israel in 1993, 1996, and 2006. The inability of the Lebanese government to hold Hezbollah accountable for these wars severely cripples the government's legitimacy and ability to establish stability. For example, on July 12, 2006, Hezbollah set off a war with Israel after killing and kidnapping several Israeli soldiers. Hezbollah was initially applauded by the Arab world and Lebanese citizens for fighting the regional power Israel to a stalemate.^[13] However, the reality on the ground was that Israel demolished much of Lebanon and southern sections of Beirut, to the detriment of its inhabitants.^[14] Thus, Christians, Sunnis, and Druze became upset with the economic costs of war on things such as infrastructure and the tourism industry, for a fight they did not pick. Therefore, in order for a truly democratic and stable Lebanon to emerge, the Lebanese government has to be accountable for the violence that Hezbollah exports from its borders.^[15] Hezbollah's independent actions outside of state control illustrate that power-sharing, in the case of Lebanon, have reinforced sectarianism. This sectarianism has contributed to weak central governance, which is unable to manage Hezbollah's action within its own borders, loses the confidence of its citizens, and thus increases and demonstrates the probability of relapse into violence.^[16] Hezbollah and actors such as Hassan Nasrallah need to be held accountable to the state for true stability to form.

Traditionally, Hezbollah uses its military might to act in its own interests when it deems force necessary. For example, the 2006 war with Israel had more to do with the fact that in March 2006, a "National Dialogue" to address Hezbollah's arms build-up was facilitated by the Lebanese leadership.^[17] Before a consensus could be reached, Hezbollah initiated the war so they could justify their arms stockpiling as a response to the Israeli threat.

Moreover, Hezbollah illustrated their ability to act independently in 2008: Hezbollah, feeling threatened by government resolutions to target its communications network, effectively held Beirut captive and proved their superiority by dominating Sunni fighters who offered them resistance.^[18] In this instance, Hezbollah went against its justification for arms stockpiling when it turned its force internally against fellow Lebanese. Hezbollah easily defeated Sunni militias, which only led to more sectarian strife, an escalation of tensions, and questioned who really runs Lebanon. A *New York Times* article at the time wrote:

Hezbollah's brief takeover of Beirut led to brutal counterattacks in northern Lebanon, where Sunni Muslims deeply resented the Shi'ite militant group's display of power. The violence energized radical Sunni factions, including some affiliated with al-Qaeda, and extremist Sunni web sites across the Arab world have been buzzing with call for jihad to avenge the wounded pride of Lebanese Sunnis.^[19]

And,

In the mountains east of Beirut, Druze militiamen kidnapped three Hezbollah members, and the bodies of two of them were soon found outside a hospital, shot and stabbed. In northern town of Halba, an angry mob set fire to the offices of a militia allied with Hezbollah and killed 11 of its members.^[20]

However, Hezbollah gunmen forced March 14th, the ruling coalition at the time, to accept a power-sharing deal, thus achieving their initial aim and effectively forcing the government to accept the authority of a non-state actor operating inside Lebanon. This effectively entrenched hostile attitudes between Shi'ites and Sunnis, and split the remaining Christian community into various factions.^[21] Actions such as this by Hezbollah weaken moderate Sunnis such as Sa'd Hariri, the recent-former prime minister, and increase the ideology of extremist groups operating inside Lebanon, like Fatah al Islam, which in turn increases the risk of renewed hostilities. Therefore, if Lebanon is to be

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united and stable, Hezbollah's continued ability to operate outside of the state when convenient cannot be tolerated or catered to, regardless of which party holds power.

Another issue at hand is Hezbollah's alleged use of internal violence through assassinations to achieve their aims. The most notable case is Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination, with likely links to Hezbollah, in 2005, which threatens to jeopardize the fragile sectarian peace. Initially, the assassination led to the "Independence Intifada" or the "Cedar Revolution," a coalition of Sunnis, Christians, and Druze, which led to the creation of the March 14 Coalition and the successful removal of Syrian troops from Lebanese soil in 2005, despite strong Shi'ite opposition. Initially, this seemed to signify the unprecedented social cohesion of Lebanon finally forming. However, Hezbollah's lack of participation and strong condemnation displayed a sectarian split that still continues to grow.

The March 14th Coalition formed primarily around Sa'd Hariri, the son of the assassinated Rafik Hariri, his Sunni Future Movement, and Walid Jumblatt's Druze party, which took control in the 2005 elections. However, despite strong Maronite support for March 14th, Jumblatt made arrangements with Hezbollah to marginalize the newly returned Michael Aoun, a former general, prime minister, and leader of the Maronite "Free Patriotic Movement" (the most powerful Maronite group in Lebanon) who was exiled from Lebanon during the Syrian mandate. As a result, the Maronite community felt betrayed and denied their proper place in Lebanese politics, dependent of Hariri, Jumblatt, and Shi'ite parties to maintain their Parliamentary seats.^[22]

Assassinations, mostly attributed to Hezbollah, continued to be part of the landscape of Lebanon. On November 21, 2006, Pierre Amine Gemayel, a Maronite Christian and son of a former president and grandson of the founder of the Maronite Kataeb party, was assassinated. This ignited the fear of Maronites that they were becoming a weak religious minority with no authority, despite their historic ties in Lebanon. This marginalization and fear on the part of the Maronites is significant because it led to the current alliance between Aoun and Hezbollah, which made the toppling of Hariri's government possible in 2011.

This sectarian fear as the result of the assassinations and Hezbollah's actions outside the state were being echoed elsewhere, and raised the question: if Hezbollah doesn't disarm, will other groups begin arming themselves as well? Walid Eido (assassinated 2007), a Sunni judge and Parliament member, speaking in regards to Hezbollah, said, "The army will first protect us, but if we find ourselves obliged we will take to the streets, and a peaceful confrontation will be faced with a peaceful confrontation, and clashes will be faced with clashes.... We will sell our blood to buy weapons and confront them. We will never let them control the country."^[23] Hezbollah needs to fully integrate itself into the political system and disband their paramilitary branch in order to restore confidence inside Lebanon, and reduce already inflamed tensions.

Finally, there are several possible ways to de-militarize and integrate Hezbollah into Lebanese society, while at the same time holding them accountable for past actions. Attempting demilitarization is necessary; because otherwise Lebanon will be repeating its past errors in dealing with the civil war, increase the likelihood of renewing those sectarian hostilities, and fostering an environment for new militias to form. One possible way to curb Hezbollah's stockpiling of arms would revolve around external actors. Here the issue of Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights would need to be addressed, which has been used as a justification for provocation on the part of Hezbollah. Hezbollah would clearly be weakened if Syria and Israel made peace over the Golan Heights, regardless if Bashar al-Assad remains in Damascus. Although a new deal on the Golan would not end the existence of Hezbollah, it would reduce their capacity to instigate conflict by shutting down Iranian supply lines that run through Syria.^[24] This would weaken Hezbollah's paramilitary branch, already unpopular among non-Shi'ite Lebanese, and force it to engage in the democratic process and recognize the legitimacy of the Lebanese military.

In addition to disarming Hezbollah and integrating them fully into the political system, the demilitarization and integration of the militant branch of Hezbollah into the Lebanese Army may prove to be paramount. The unfounded fear among many Lebanese is that Hezbollah has infiltrated the army. Between 1991 and 2004, according to data collected by Barak Oren, "of 664 officers (23.4%), 52% were Muslims and 48% were Christians, with Maronites comprising 30.3%. The Druze now constituted 9% of the officer corps, the Sunnis 16.1%, and the Shi'is 26.8%."^[25] In addition, in another study out of 175 Lebanese officers (6.2%), only one was known to have links with Hezbollah,

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and four with Amal.^[26] Although some figures may be higher, they pose no cause for concern. Shi'ite numbers are increasing but expected, and it is realistic to believe some will have links with Hezbollah, as many of the other sectarian branches may still retain links to their old militias as well. However, eventually loyalty with newly integrated Hezbollah members will shift from Hassan Nasrallah to the legitimate state of Lebanon, and the ability of Hezbollah to act outside the state will be reduced. Other groups will no longer feel threatened and the likelihood of a relapse into war will be diminished.

Perhaps the looming question in Lebanon now is what will happen to those indicted by Hariri's assassination tribunal? The UN Tribunal offers the opportunity to address past injustices and promote democracy, unlike post-civil war Lebanon, which chooses to ignore the opportunity. Due to the weakness of the state to hold Hezbollah accountable, the tribunal may provide the pivotal moment for deciding Lebanon's future, and Hezbollah's response will determine the fate of Lebanon. However, there is a concern that coming to terms with the past may be used as a justification for violence. Meaning, the tribunal's verdict may landslide into outrage at other grievances that could stretch back to the Civil War. Many politicians, such as Aoun, were former militia leaders themselves, and the ability for them to assume their former roles at any time is an unfortunate reality for Lebanon.^[27] Regardless, Lebanon's only chance as a successful democratic state lies in its ability to bring all elements of society together and have reconciliation. The tribunal provides the opportunity for reconciliation, accountability, and the ability for Hezbollah to integrate into the democratic process successfully.

The case has 60 victims, in addition to former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who were murdered, and 494 individuals who were injured between 2004 and 2008.^[28] Implications of the likely indictment of Hezbollah officials is a cause of great concern, which would tatter Hezbollah's claim as a resistance group that is armed only to defend the Lebanese people against external threats such as Israel. Hezbollah denies responsibility for internal violence in Lebanon, and passionately defends their acquisition of weapons.^[29] Nasrallah has declared anyone who attempts to disarm the "resistance" will have his or her hands chopped off.

To reduce the tension, Sa'd Hariri, prior his removal from power, offered Hezbollah reassurance, claiming the organizations implicated members would not be associated with Hezbollah.^[30] In addition, the infamous Imad Mughiniyah, former head of Hezbollah's paramilitary operations, largely believed to have been a main orchestrator in Hariri's assassination is dead. These factors offer Hezbollah, still defiant of its involvement, a chance to act accountable for past actions while still retaining face in the eyes of the Lebanese.

In addition, Hezbollah began using constitutional methods, which toppled the government of Sa'd Hariri and established Najib Mikati as the new Prime Minister of Lebanon after being nominated by the March 8th Coalition (the Shi'ite coalition opposed to March 14th) in 2011. For Hezbollah to now use internal violence like did in 2008 would undermine its current coalition, erode any legitimacy, and confirm its involvement in Rafik Hariri's assassination. In order to effectively operate in a democratic system, Hezbollah cannot pick and choose when it allows justice to prevail if it hopes to retain legitimacy among the Lebanese. Therefore, Lebanon must act as a stable cornerstone for the UN tribunal, whose purpose is to help Lebanon reconcile itself with its past.^[31] Failure to accomplish this increases the prospect that counter-violence will be used as the only means capable of achieving justice. Government officials must realize this, support the Tribunal, and distance themselves from the violent offenders whether they associate with them in a sectarian sense or not.^[32] So far the path Hezbollah has taken is counterproductive.

However, despite what actions the Shi'ites/Hezbollah may take, several Sunnis have initiated a "New Intifada" in response to March 8th. One member of the Future Movement lamented, "The head of the Sunnis is being isolated, without regard for the opinion of the political group he represents. The nomination of Mikati is neither a democratic step nor a compromise."^[33] Undoubtedly, it is hard for many sectarian factions to accept March 8th after Hezbollah's violent past. Hence, it is clear that sectarian tensions in Lebanon are rising. If Hezbollah chooses to accept the tribunal, it could pacify some discontent, which could lead to reconciliation and avert the possibility war.

However, how serious is Hezbollah about promoting democracy? Hezbollah does follow Ayatollah Khomeini's teaching which urges for Shari'a.^[34] Although Hezbollah currently operates in the democratic system and relies on their Christian allies, the possibility they may attempt to implement their Islamist version of Shari'a law remains

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relevant. Historically, Hezbollah operates democratically only when it fits their interests.

All in all, Hezbollah has clearly demonstrated itself to be the greatest threat to the stability of Lebanon post-civil war, as it frequently acts outside of state control, holds the populace hostage to its demands, and entangles Lebanon in external conflicts with Israel. Lebanon's social amnesia, a product of its civil war, has encouraged an environment beneficial to Hezbollah. By understanding past mistakes, the realization emerges that unless Hezbollah disarms, demilitarizes, and fully integrates in the democratic process, the chances of Lebanon relapsing into sectarian civil war are not only probable but most likely imminent. Although many factors are essential in the dismantling of Hezbollah's militant factions, the current ripe and unique opportunity to accept the UN Tribunal, unlike the civil war's general amnesty, may prove to be the most pivotal factor in Lebanon's future.

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[17] Barak, "Don't Mention the War? The Politics of Remembrance and Forgetfulness in Postwar Lebanon." p. 69.

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^[18] Worth, p. 1, 10.

^[19] Ibid, p. 1, 10.

^[20] Ibid p. 1, 10.

^[21] Anonymous. "Lebanon and the Region: Can There Be Justice as Well as Stability?" *The Economist*. London: November 13, 2010, V. 397, Iss. 8708; p.53.

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