



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Lebanese Civil War 1975–90

Executive Summary

The Lebanese Civil War was an exceptionally complex internal conflict that fractured Lebanon's diverse ethnic and religious blocs along fault lines present in Lebanese society for centuries. The Ottoman Empire ruled over the territories that comprise modern-day Syria and Lebanon for centuries, but after World War I and the empire's subsequent collapse, a League of Nations mandate gave control of both to France. Lebanon's Christian Maronite communities advocated for a separate and distinct country from Syria. Meanwhile, many of the Muslim communities desired to be incorporated into a new Syrian state.¹ In 1943, the Christian and Muslim communities agreed to form a separate and independent Lebanese state.

At this time, the sectarian communities in Lebanon agreed to establish a confessional political system based on a 1932 census, which calculated that roughly one-third of the country was Christian Maronite, one-third was Sunni Muslim, and one-third was Shia Muslim. The census found that the Christians had a slightly higher population than the other two groups. Thus, the confession-based system reserved the Lebanese presidency for the Christians, the prime minister position for the Sunnis, and the speaker of parliament role for the Shia. Additionally, it granted six Christian seats for every five Muslim seats. Similar quotas also characterized the state administrative bureaucracy and different aspects of Lebanese life. By 1975, many within the country sought to reform the system, with some arguing for more equal distributions between Christians and Muslims and others advocating for a secular governing structure. The Maronites, who held more seats in parliament under the existing system and benefited from holding the presidency, generally resisted such changes.² Some Maronites, however, argued for replacing the sectarian system with a secular one.³

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which began in 1948, compounded the problem. Following its expulsion from Jordan in 1970 for attempting to overthrow the Jordanian government, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) transferred its headquarters to Beirut. The Palestinians from Jordan added to the Palestinian refugee population already in Lebanon—swelling their numbers to approximately 400,000.⁴ The PLO and other Palestinian movements based in Lebanon launched attacks on Israel. Israel responded with military strikes on Lebanese territory. Lebanese groups viewed the PLO presence differently, with the Sunnis and Druze viewing the PLO as providing them armed support, the Shia holding mixed opinions on hosting the PLO, and the Christians objecting to the PLO incurring Israel's wrath while also fearing the PLO's ability to augment the strength of the Sunni militias. The Lebanese National Movement, which sought to replace the confessional system with a secular one, also supported the PLO and partnered with it.⁵

The Lebanese Civil War began when Maronite Christian Phalangists attacked a bus carrying Palestinian refugees on April 13, 1975, in response to a Palestinian attack on its leadership.⁶ It ended in 1989 when the Tā'if Accord reformed the government along new power-sharing formulas and, on paper, ended private

militias. When the conflict began, Lebanon quickly splintered into areas controlled by the main ethnic and sectarian blocs of Lebanese society: Sunni, Shia, Christian Maronites, Palestinian, and Druze.⁷ Political infighting led to further divisions within religious groups as well, and Lebanon became a “militia republic.”⁸ The 15-year civil war saw militias switch sides frequently, invasions by Syria and Israel, failed international peacekeeping missions, the ejection of the PLO, and the founding of new armed political groups such as Hezbollah. The 1989 Tā’if Accord brought an end to the conflict in 1990 based on alterations to Lebanon’s confessional governing structure.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. The question of Lebanon’s nationhood is complex, because the line between one’s ‘confession’ and Lebanese identity is vague. The notion of a “Lebanese” identity developed over several centuries and reflected the political arrangements between the people living there and their imperial rulers. By the early twentieth century, Lebanon’s Christian groups and Druze communities had developed a Lebanese identity. Lebanese Sunni and Shiite communities adopted a “Lebanese” identity by the 1940s but only after the passing through debates about being included in a “Greater Syria” and flirtations with pan-Arabism. So, a sense of national identity among the Sunni was not universal.⁹

The agreement to form a Lebanese state did not resolve the question of identity, as Lebanon’s political structure organized citizens by their sectarian classification. Lebanese society structured itself largely along sectarian lines, and the sectarian groups developed their own militias.¹⁰ Considering that the populace was almost equally divided into thirds, it would be reasonable to assert that less than 85 percent of the country had a national identity in 1975. The social division of Lebanon along sectarian lines, however, does not necessarily mean that some members of the different confessional groups did not also identify simultaneously, or at a secondary level, as Lebanese, complicating the determination of identity.

The question of the Palestinian population is also difficult to adjudicate within the Five Factors model. Considering that the Palestinians in Lebanon had the goal of resisting Israel’s existence and reoccupying its territory, it is reasonable to conclude the exiled Palestinians did not see themselves as Lebanese but rather as Palestinians in exile. Per the many policies the Lebanese state passed between 1948 and 1975, it also is reasonable to conclude that the Lebanese did not consider the Palestinians to be Lebanese.¹¹ Based on the nature of Palestinian identity and the sectarian and confessional divides that descended rapidly into internal violence, we can infer that less than 85 percent of the population of Lebanon identified itself *first and foremost* as Lebanese.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. In general, non-Maronites believed the government only represented Maronite interests before the war.¹² The Lebanese government was organized to reflect the country’s major sectarian and confessional demographics captured in the 1932 census. The system gave Christians a greater ratio of parliamentary seats (6:5), which was than their proportional status in the population (one-third). It also reserved the presidency for the Maronites. The presidency had strong executive power, including the power to nominate the Sunni prime minister. The arrangement positioned the Maronites to be the most powerful political bloc in the country. Before the war, the non-Christian groups unsuccessfully sought to recalibrate the confessional power-sharing ratio to more equitable terms. Generally, the Maronites

opposed such reforms, but there were calls by different groups from all sectarian backgrounds to replace the confessional system with a secular system.¹³ As with the question of national identity, this case study could not identify precise polling on the percentage of Lebanese who supported reforms or a new secular government. Lebanon's even split between Christian, Sunni, and Shia blocs indicate that less than 85 percent of the population saw the government as fully legitimate.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

No. The Lebanese Civil War quickly devolved into cantons controlled by militias. The prewar government was dominated by elites in the Maronite Christian population. The Christian Phalange militia and other Christian militias were notionally allied with the small Lebanese army but they controlled and provided security for their own territories.¹⁴ Prior to the war, the small Lebanese military was criticized for being used primarily to limit internal dissent and for being incapable of providing national security. This weakness was seen in the case of Israeli armed reprisals into Lebanon for Palestinian attacks on Israel and the Lebanese army's inability to stop them.¹⁵ During the war, the small Lebanese army and the Lebanese Front (LF), led by the Phalangists, represented and secured the Maronite Christians.¹⁶ Maronites may have constituted as much as 40 percent of the population in 1975, but Maronites fled the country in disproportionate numbers during the conflict, decreasing the percentage of population protected by the government.¹⁷ (Maronites remain approximately one-third of Lebanon's current population.¹⁸) However, during the conflict, Maronites also fought each other, reducing their security. A former commander in the Lebanese Army and then–Prime Minister Michel Aoun, for example, attacked the Lebanese Front in 1989, leading to thousands of deaths in Beirut, mostly Maronite.¹⁹ Thus it can be seen that the small Lebanese Army, which was intended to be the government's national security force, never managed to maintain or achieve security control over 85 percent of the population even with the aid of allied irregular forces. Each of the sectarian communities and territories was under the nominal security protection of its own sectarian militia. For example, of an estimated population of 2.7 million in 1975, Palestinian refugees constituted approximately 400,000 (14.8 percent of the population of Lebanon).²⁰ Under the Cairo Agreement of 1969, the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon had notional control over their own encampments.²¹

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. Each militia had external support, and each sectarian canton controlled a port where the aid could be delivered.²² This case study did not find a record of external sanctuary for specific militias apart from the PLO, which represented about 8 percent of the overall population. The Palestinian Liberation Army regularly crossed from Lebanon into Syria for training and armaments.²³ The Palestinian Liberation Organization also recruited many Palestinians living in Syria.²⁴

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. In 1975, at the start of the civil war, Lebanon had a small, weak military that obeyed civilian orders.²⁵ It tried to maintain internal loyalties among the confessions in its ranks and could not contend with the various militias or the invading armies.²⁶ The Lebanese Army split along sectarian lines in the early stages of the war. It lost credibility among Muslims after it defended and supported the Lebanese Front and other Maronite leaders for their role in the 1975 attack on Palestinian refugees. Many Muslims quit the Lebanese armed forces and formed militias, including the Lebanese Arab

Army. Many Maronite soldiers deserted and joined the Lebanese Front. This left the army grossly undermanned and unable to carry out most orders. The remnants of Lebanon's army were personally loyal to Aoun and fought for him after his dismissal by the government.²⁷ The army was reconstituted to varying degrees throughout the war but remained a minor factor in the conflict.²⁸

Outcome

After 15 years of conflict, the Tā'if Accord ended the Lebanese Civil War. The prewar governmental system positioned the Maronites as the most influential political bloc within the country.²⁹ The civil war ended that privileged position and changed the Lebanese governmental system. The Tā'if Accord led to a governing structure which was already familiar to the Lebanese people in its basic power-sharing approach, though concessions and alterations to the power-sharing ratios were made. For example, the 6:5 ratio of Christians to Muslims in the parliament was abolished, and parliamentary seats are now determined on a more equitable basis. The (Maronite) president no longer appoints the Sunni prime minister. A system of confessional reservations and quotas still form the core of the Lebanese system of government.³⁰

The 1975–90 Lebanese Civil War is a difficult one for determining whether the government won or lost by the definition for winning used by the Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC): “The government that was in power at the start of the conflict, or its natural successors, was still in power 18 months after the end of the conflict, and the country's territorial integrity remained intact.” Of all the case studies undertaken by SOIC, the Lebanese Civil War is one of the most difficult to adjudicate as a government victory or a government defeat. The Maronite-dominated government in power at the start of the conflict was substantially changed by conflict's end, and the privileged position of the Maronites among the major sectarian and confessional power blocs was lost. The Maronites no longer had disproportional representation in government, no longer appointed the Sunni prime minister, and the 6:5 quotas it enjoyed at all levels of the prewar government bureaucracy were abolished. On balance it would have to be adjudged as a government defeat, as the government dominated by the Maronites was forced to yield to a more balanced and proportional system of representation.

Most studies of the Lebanese Civil War organize it along the lines of pro-government and anti-government—placing the Christian Maronites and their supporters in the former group and the PLO and other Lebanese groups in the latter. The complexity of the war and the various motives among the sects and militias, however, make this rubric too simplistic. For example, the war included intense intra-coalition fighting and inter-coalition fighting, and organizations such as Amal (a group within the Shia social reform movement) were as interested in reforming the status quo confessional system to benefit the Shia as they were in limiting the PLO's influence in southern Lebanon.³¹ Conversely, Hezbollah, which replaced Amal as the leading Shia group, was primarily founded to counter Israeli intervention in the war and the intervention of states that Hezbollah considered to be imperialist.³² (It was Hezbollah which carried out the October 23, 1983 attacks on French soldiers and US Marines in Lebanon as part of a multinational peacekeeping force³³). Hezbollah was not founded specifically to alter the Lebanese government's structure at the outbreak of the war. Hezbollah, nonetheless, agreed to the reformed structures under the Tā'if Accord. Hezbollah also participates in the government system—lending the post-civil war system additional legitimacy, given Hezbollah's position in Lebanese society and politics—while also maintaining its own formidable militia as a check against the system. The Lebanese National Movement, on the other hand, which partnered with the PLO and could be considered anti-government using the pro-/anti-government rubric to analyze the conflict, sought the replacement of the confessional system with

a secular governance structure. The Lebanese National Movement failed to achieve this goal, which could be considered a failure of one insurgent group to achieve its core political goal.

Since the Tā'if Accord, Lebanon has experienced frequent turmoil and violence. Syria assassinated one Lebanese prime minister. Saudi Arabia detained another Lebanese prime minister and forced him to resign. Israel and Hezbollah went to war in 2006 and again in 2024, financial crises have crippled the nation's economy, and a devastating accidental explosion at Beirut's main port further undermined confidence in the state. Future civil strife based on the sectarian lines that fueled Lebanon's 15-year civil war is avoidable, but because of the country's political structure, it cannot be ruled out. Lebanon remains a deeply politically divided and fragile state.

LEBANESE CIVIL WAR 1975–90	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

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