Lebanese American University

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Amnesia in Post-War Lebanon: A Recipe for Violence & Instability

by

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Abstract

Lebanon is a country characterized by a history of mass human rights violations and recurrent cycles of sectarian conflict. The most defining of these conflicts was the Lebanese Civil War, which spanned from 1975 to 1990, leaving countless dead, wounded, displaced, or disappeared. The war formally ended in 1990 – more than 30 years ago - when the country's political elite signed the Document of National Accord. In the aftermath of the war, the country needed to institute a comprehensive transitional process to steer the country toward peace and stability. However, until today, Lebanon has failed to shed its conflict-prone past and continues to witness periodic outbreaks of instability and violence. In this study, I argue that the recurrent cycles of instability that the country has witnessed in the post-war era stem from the post-war strategy that the state adopted. What ensued in the post-war era was a flawed transition process based on state-sponsored amnesia characterized by amnesty laws, minimal truth-seeking, and limited memorialization of the war. This created a culture of forgetfulness which has left communities with competing war narratives and victims without answers regarding what happened during the war, allowing tensions to build and grievances to accumulate. This study illustrates how the state-sponsored amnesia has contributed to the ongoing instability in Lebanon today. It also sheds light on why this strategy was adopted, and how an alternative transition process based on truth and memorialization would have aided national reconciliation.

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Abbreviations

DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
SOLIDE	Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile
LF	Lebanese Forces
FPM	Free Patriotic Movement
IER	Instance Equité et Reconciliation
CMP	Committee on Missing Persons
EU	European Union

Appendix IV
School of Arts and Sciences
Department of Social Sciences
Course Senior Study POL499

Senior Study Repository Form

Student Name ID Email	Shady Abi Fares 201805063 Shady.abifares@lau.edu
Senior Study title	Amnesia in Post-War Lebanon: A Recipe for Violence & Instability
Senior Study description / Summary (brief)	This senior study tackles the case of the post-civil war transition in Lebanon. I contend that the main catalyst for violence and instability in the country emanates from the state-sponsored amnesia that ensued in the post-war era.
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Introduction

Lebanon is a deeply divided country with a legacy of mass human rights violations and recurrent cycles of systemic violence. From 1975 to 1990, the country suffered a devastating civil war that left an estimated 2.7 percent of the population dead, 4 percent severely wounded, 0.75 percent forcibly disappeared, and more than 30 percent displaced (Smairs & Cassehgari, 2014). The war ended in 1990 with the Document of National Accord - a power-sharing agreement that aimed to achieve national unity between the warring factions. However, in the 32 years that followed, Lebanon has not witnessed a prolonged period of sustainable peace. Instead, what ensued in the post-war era was a fragile peace built on consensual security in the presence of Syria as an external guarantor. Since the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005, the country has witnessed successive periods of instability and recurrent internal conflicts that are reminiscent of the pre-war era and risk escalating into another protracted conflict.

Today, more than three decades after the cessation of the conflict, Lebanon is still very much a troubled country. Tensions between the different communities have persisted and are made evident by multiple assassinations, explosions, and violent skirmishes in different areas across the country. Periodic violent episodes such as the May 7 Clashes in 2008, the Tripoli clashes in 2013, and most recently the Beirut clashes in October of 2021 serve as reminders that communal tensions are still very much alive. Even in the absence of direct violence, communities remain segregated and harbor feelings of fear and hatred toward one another.

Scholars attribute the precarious situation in Lebanon to several different factors. Some trace the ongoing instability to external factors such as regional instability and foreign meddling in local affairs, while others assert that the sectarian system makes the country prone to persistent

conflict. This study, however, will attribute the country's inability to shed its conflict-ridden past to the flawed post-war transition.

More precisely, this research will explore the relationship between the ongoing instability in Lebanon and the post-war transition that ensued. In so doing, the study will address the following research questions: Why has Lebanon continued to face periodic outbreaks of violence and instability more than 30 years after the end of the Civil War? Why did the state-sponsored amnesia regarding the war exacerbate conflict and instability in post-war Lebanon? How can the employment of truth and memorialization aid the national reconciliation process? The purpose of this research is thus to prove the following hypotheses: While factors such as regional instability and foreign intervention have helped fuel sectarian conflict in Lebanon, the principal driver of conflict in Lebanon is rooted in the flawed post-war transition that was based on state-sponsored amnesia. The policy of state-sponsored amnesia hindered the reconciliation process by preventing any official acknowledgment of the war, undermining accountability for past crimes, and exacerbating tensions between the different communities. The adoption of an alternative model based on truth and memorialization would have aided the reconciliation process by reconciling competing narratives about the past, preserving public memory of the war, and easing tensions and security fears between communities.

In advancing these hypotheses, I will first evaluate the post-war transition in Lebanon and its contribution to the current state of instability and violence in the country. This will be followed by an overview of the security situation in Lebanon today. I will then provide a detailed account of how collective amnesia has and still actively feeds communal violence and tensions. Finally, I will explain the benefits of employing the first model of post-conflict transitions with particular emphasis on the roles of truth and memory in the Lebanese context.

Literature

In any post-conflict society, the state is faced with several options for strategies to transition away from conflict and build peace. The choice and subsequent effectiveness of the post-conflict strategy are highly dependent on the context of the post-conflict society; the nature of the conflict, the duration of the conflict, how the conflict ended, and the stage in the post-conflict transition are all important factors. Nevertheless, the literature on post-conflict transitions categorizes these strategies within two broad models. The first is a top-down conflict resolution model that prioritizes peace and stability at the expense of truth and reconciliation. The second model favors the adoption of inclusive initiatives that address the history and legacy of the conflict as a means towards reconciliation.

Proponents of the first model denounce the importance of truth and memory on multiple bases. Meier (2010) denounces the importance of creating a "culture of remembrance" as a social mechanism to overcome a shared history of violence, going as far as suggesting that acts of remembrance and memory help sustain past cultures of violence and destruction. On this basis, Meier argues that states reeling from civil wars must go as far as suppressing public discussions about the war to not allow new resentments to surface from remembering past injuries and injustices. According to him, peace and justice are incompatible, and invoking public memory of past crimes as a means to achieve justice will only risk disrupting social harmony. Similarly, Buckley-Zistel (2011), in focusing on the post-genocidal situation in Rwanda, advocates for intentional forgetfulness as a means of dealing with past atrocities. She refers to "chosen amnesia" as a policy to deliberately forget particular social cleavages that triggered the genocide itself in the first place. She argues that such selective forgetfulness not only lays the ground for peaceful

coexistence but may actually prevent the recurrence of violent episodes that hinder the post-conflict transformation. Valiñas and Vanspauwen (2009) highlight the inherent tensions between truth and justice, stipulating that in most cases, truth-seeking has been an obstacle to reconciliation, and instead advocate for a peace process characterized by policies of silence and avoidance.

On the opposite end, scholars argue that truth and memorialization are integral to reconciling post-conflict societies. According to Freeman and Hayner (2003), providing an accurate historical account of the country's past is among the most important steps in the national reconciliation process. They claim that truth-telling has the potential to promote tolerance and empathy by making the grievances of conflicting parties known to one another. This, they argue, can be a platform for reconciliation by actively engaging victims, offenders, and other community members in the mediation process. More importantly, they assert that truth-seeking mechanisms, such as truth commissions, can help establish an accurate, impartial, and detailed account of the conflict which helps reconcile competing narratives about the past. Kriesberg (2007) argues that the acknowledgment of the suffering and losses experienced by one party at the hands of the other constitutes a fundamental aspect of reconciliation. Kriesberg further elaborates that the reconciliation process is strengthened if past enemies share understandings about who suffered at the hands of whom and if these shared understandings are brought to the forefront of public attention. In conjunction with this view, Fischer (2011) identifies memories and relationships as integral to the reconciliation process. In doing so, he explains that the behavior and attitudes of the different parties toward one another are largely determined by their memory of what happened in the past. How groups remember and frame their past is often used as a tool to mobilize for conflict, which makes remembrance and truth all the more important to the reconciliation process. Finally, Mendeloff (2004) claims that truth-seeking might be of utmost value in post-conflict societies that

are deeply divided along ethnic lines in which groups are forced to live and interact with one another. In such contexts, he argues, uncovering the truth may help ease tensions between communities and inhibit security fears. This is particularly true in the presence of a weak state in which elites are likely to use "ethnic scapegoating" and "fearmongering" to raise concerns about group security.

The Lebanese Case

The literature on Lebanon is in overwhelming agreement that the country constitutes a failed case of post-conflict peacebuilding. There is also a general consensus that this failed transition is a significant contributor to the persistence of violence and instability in the post-war era. Ghosn & Khoury (2011) contend that the reason that reconciliation has not been achieved in Lebanon is that priority in the post-conflict transition was placed on the short-term absence of violence rather than longer-term sustainable peace. From that viewpoint, they argue that the "state-sponsored amnesia" is precisely what rendered Lebanese communities unable to reconcile their differences, and thus insist Lebanon must urgently address the past to achieve national reconciliation. In further support of this argument, Picard and Ramsbotham (2012) claim that conflicting discourses about the war among different communities have continuously fostered tensions between them. In this light, they stress the importance of truth and memorialization initiatives in challenging politicized memory discourses as a way to facilitate national reconciliation in Lebanon.

In Lebanon, the state relied on the second model in the post-war era, opting to sacrifice truth and memory to maintain order and stability. In doing so, the state adopted a process that was largely devoid of justice, truth, or reconciliation, which led many scholars to describe it as a "state-

sponsored amnesia" characterized by active efforts from the political establishment to suppress historical accounts of the war and erase it from public memory.

Background

The Lebanese Civil War broke out on April 13, 1975, in the Beirut suburb of Ain al-Rummaneh when gunmen from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) fired at a bus carrying members of the Phalange party. While this incident is widely regarded as the spark that ignited the conflict, the years leading up to the war were rife with confrontations between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and other Lebanese parties. A domestic environment characterized by socioeconomic inequalities and Palestinian armed presence and a regional one characterized by a prolonged Arab-Israeli conflict created further divisions among the different sects and facilitated the breakout of the conflict.

Over the next 15 years, the war was fought in several stages with alliances shifting and new actors coming into the fold. While the war was predominantly fought by Lebanese militias, it soon transformed into a regional conflict amid extensive direct foreign intervention from Israel, Syria, and Palestinian factions as well as indirect foreign sponsorship from the likes of France, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. This meant that longstanding issues among the Lebanese over national identity, social justice, and sectarian power divisions intersected with themes that dominated regional affairs at the time, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, Arab nationalism, and Cold War ideology.

The war was manifested through different forms of violence such as massacres of one sect at the hands of the other, arbitrary detentions, widespread torture, and rape. Other grave human rights violations included kidnapping, mass displacement, and enforced disappearances. Official

figures regarding the casualties of the war remain highly contested, yet the numbers above present the most accurate estimates; in the 15 years of conflict, 90,000 people lost their lives, more than 100,000 were severely wounded, 20,000 were kidnapped or forcibly disappeared, and approximately 1 million were displaced (Labaki & Rjeily, 1994).

The war formally ended with a politically brokered agreement between Lebanese leaders signed on October 22, 1989, in the Saudi city of Ta'if. The agreement produced the Document of National Accord – the Ta'if Agreement - which delineated the post-war political structure and aimed to consolidate national unity and peaceful coexistence between the different communities. The terms in the agreement provided a basis for more proportional political representation for Lebanon's sects while reinforcing state authority, national unity, and power-sharing. The constitution was subsequently amended to adjust the balance of power and demobilize the remaining militias. However, as will be shown throughout this study, the transitional process that emanated from the Accord was flawed, selective, and incomplete.

Lebanon Today

It has been 32 years since the Ta'if Accord brought an end to the Civil War and ushered in a new era of peace in Lebanon. This peace, however, has proven to be extremely fragile, and in the absence of an external guarantor – Syria – the country has continuously relapsed into instability and conflict. That being said, Lebanon today can be described to be in a state of negative peace, characterized by the mere non-occurrence of violence. Even in the absence of overt violence, the persistence of a precarious political environment elicits memories of the pre-war period. Thus, in the three decades following the war, the Lebanese state has failed to build positive peace with resilient institutions and social structures that can sustain mutual coexistence. While it may be futile to evaluate the political situation under Syrian occupation, the post-2005 era brought forth a

new opportunity for national reconciliation and peacebuilding. Instead, however, what society has settled for is a fragile peace built on consensual security which has given rise to recurrent cycles of instability and violence. This situation is characterized by violent clashes, war-like public discourse, and communal fears and segregation.

Violent Clashes & Assassinations

Conflict in Lebanon is indeed complex and multidimensional, drawing on dynamics between political, social, and economic issues. However, in most instances, clashes have carried sectarian undertones, and inter and intra-communal violence are continuously perpetuated by deeply-rooted tensions and painful memories. In post-war Lebanon, most violent clashes that have occurred have resulted from sectarian tensions that are reminiscent of war dynamics.

One such conflict has been the decade-long Bab al-Tabbaneh–Jabal Mohsen conflict in Tripoli. Residents in the two neighborhoods, Sunnis in the former and Alawites in the latter, engaged in armed violence on numerous occasions from 1976 until 2015. The conflict dates back to the Civil War, in which the Jabal-Mohsen-based Arab Democratic Party fought along with the Syrian Army against the Sunni Islamic Unification Movement of Bab al-Tabbaneh. The conflict persisted well into the post-war era, with several clashes occurring from 2007 to 2015, resulting in more than 200 deaths and around 2000 injuries (Soukkarieh, 2020).

The Bab al-Tabbaneh–Jabal Mohsen conflict coincided with the May 2008 clashes between the Lebanese government and opposition militias led by Hezbollah. The conflict was the most evident manifestation of the March 8/March 14 political divide, with the March 14 camp being led by the pro-government Future Movement and Progressive Socialist Party, and the March 8 camp led by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement. The clashes broke out on May 7, 2008, after the

government decided to dissolve Hezbollah's telecommunications system and dismiss the Head of Security at the Airport who was allegedly close to the party. While clashes began in Beirut, the violence spread to other regions such as Aley and Tripoli, resulting in around 100 casualties. The conflict ended with the signing of the Doha Agreement on May 21, which brought an end to the violence and the 18-month-long political crisis that preceded it. While the conflict was primarily triggered by political disputes over the division of power and the pro-Western course of the Lebanese government at the time, the violence had a sectarian dimension, with the March 8 Shiite duo – Hezbollah and the Amal Movement – accusing the Sunni government of abusing its power to its own gains. In return, the March 14 alliance had repeatedly cited Hezbollah's armed status, which was the only militia to retain its weapons after the war, as a major hindrance to internal stability and security. Despite widespread inter-communal violence, the Lebanese Armed Forces did not attempt to mitigate the clashes, instead opting to remain on the sidelines out of fear of inspiring internal sectarian divisions within the army, as was the case during the Civil War.

The next decade continued in the same vein, with periodic episodes of inter and intra-communal violence throughout the country. The latest of these clashes came on October 14, 2021, in the Tayouneh neighborhood of Beirut. The clashes erupted in response to a Hezbollah and Amal-led protest against Judge Tarek Bitar, who was leading the probe into the August 4th Port Explosion. The parties involved were Hezbollah, Amal, and unidentified gunmen who were allegedly tied to the Lebanese Forces. The conflict resulted in 32 injuries and 7 deaths, including one civilian death. In many ways, the violence was reminiscent of the war era; former militant groups once again engaged in armed clashes and the conflict carried sectarian undertones. The clashes even occurred near the Justice Palace in Beirut – along a former Civil War front line

between the Muslim Shiite and Christian areas. The conflict represented the deadliest clash since May 2008, which sparked widespread fears of the country's relapse into the Civil War days.

Public Discourse & Sectarian Rhetoric

Although insecurity in Lebanon is most evidently manifested by the episodes of overt violence, the current political discourse provides further proof of instability that is related to Civil War tensions. Political discourse is most clearly manifested in speeches of political elites which evoke memories of the Civil War. As will be further discussed in the study, the fact that several wartime issues and tensions have been left unresolved enables communal leaders to continuously manipulate public memory to incite fear and hatred towards other communities. An example of this politicization of memories is FPM leader Gebran Bassil's comments in his visit to the town of Souk el-Gharb – a site for violent clashes between the Maronites and the Druze during the war. During his visit, he asked for the "bones of the disappeared", referring to those who were forcibly disappeared during the clashes. His comments elicited a violent reaction from the Druze community, who perceived it as an accusation of war crimes and a blatant attempt to intimidate the Druze sect. This instance proves the existence of underlying sectarian tensions that date back to events that occurred during the Civil War. It also demonstrates a continuation of communities' attempts to frame the Civil War as a "war of others" that was fought on the country's soil (Barak, 2007). In the post-war era, this tendency to blame other sects and political parties continues to be used in political, social, and economic matters, giving a sectarian dimension to virtually all public issues. In 2015, then-Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri described the prevailing garbage crisis as a result of the fact that "Christians will not accept Muslim garbage, and Muslims will not accept Christian garbage". A more recent example was the October 2019 wildfires, which some political elites attempted to imbue with sectarian threats and fear. This shows that even issues that are not

directly related to wartime tensions continue to be framed in a sectarian lens that is reminiscent of the pre-war tensions, and even social or environmental matters have the potential to disrupt the current fragile state of coexistence in the country.

Communal Fears & Segregation

Literature on Civil Wars and post-war settlements argues that at the end of a prolonged civil war, fear among different communities often lingers in the post-war years (Kern, 2012). In Lebanon, amid severe inter and intra-communal strife during the war, communities still live in fear of one another to the present day. These fears are primarily perpetuated by political elites, who continue to weaponize sectarian divisions to mobilize their communities and convey themselves as the saviors of their sects.

A study on the perceptions and attitudes of residents in Greater Beirut towards measures used to deal with the country's legacy of violence found that communal violence gave rise to a "geography of fear". This fear is the result of the mass displacement that occurred during the war, which divided the population into territories based on a confessional basis. This, in turn, rendered some communities extremely weary of crossing certain geographical boundaries, leaving communities largely segregated in the post-war era. The study further found that even people who lived in mixed-sect neighborhoods were burdened by similar fears due to war-related experiences. Residents of the Chiyah/Haret Hreik area explained the unconscious fear and vulnerability that arises from crossing from one's own neighborhood into a neighborhood of a different sect (Silva et al., 2014).

Against this backdrop, it can be said that Lebanon today has still not successfully ushered in an era of positive peace. What ensued in the post-war era is a state of negative peace,

accompanied by episodic outbreaks of violence that have persisted until the present day. In this vein, Ghosn and Khoury (2011) argue that the civil war has not yet ended; the Ta'if Accord formally ended the military war, but a political war continues to be waged amongst the political elite. Despite the absence of a protracted civil conflict, the situation has continued to deteriorate, as public discourse still takes on a sectarian and violent character, and communities remain segregated, living in fear of one another.

The Lebanese State-Sponsored Amnesia

As aforementioned, while other post-conflict societies have found success in adopting an inclusive and victim-centered post-conflict resolution model, successive Lebanese governments have opted for a model that prioritizes mutual coexistence and short-term stability over truth and reconciliation. The manner in which the state went about dealing with the war was dubbed a "state-sponsored amnesia" as it actively sought to implement a policy of forgetfulness and constrained what war-related issues could be brought to the public's attention. This policy was carried out through three main channels: sweeping amnesties, limited truth-seeking, and minimal memorialization.

Successive Amnesty Laws

In light of the new political order established by the Ta'if Agreement, the Lebanese Parliament passed the General Amnesty Law on August 26, 1991. The effect of the law was to pardon all political crimes committed before March 28 of that same year. Political crimes covered by the amnesty law included homicide, torture, and kidnapping. Under article 2.3 of the law, crimes repeated by perpetrators after the date on which the law was promulgated would negate the effect of the amnesty. Exceptions were made for particular crimes and certain targets of crimes. For

instance, crimes related to fraud, forgery of foreign or domestic currency, theft of antiques, forgery of official documents, or bankruptcy were excluded from the amnesty. Article 3.3 also exempted "crimes of assassination and attempted assassination of religious figures and clerics, political leaders, and foreign or Arab diplomats" (Smaira & Casseghari, 2014). This meant that the law covered members of militias such as the Lebanese Forces, which were considered active participants in killings during the war, but the assassin of Bashir Gemayel, the head of the Lebanese Forces, was not. In the scope of international law, the General Amnesty Law can be seen as a violation of international humanitarian law as it gave more weight to political assassinations than it did to crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Syrian withdrawal in 2005 presented a new opportunity to further the reconciliation process by addressing the history of the conflict and the events that occurred over its course. With the return of General Michel Aoun after a 15-year exile, Samir Geagea – leader of the Lebanese Forces – was freed from prison having been previously convicted of at least four assassinations and having been considered a significant contributor to the enforced disappearances during the war. This was the result of Law 677, which was passed by parliament on July 19 in the name of national reconciliation.

Investigations into the Truth about the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared

In the years following the war, the Lebanese government made minimal efforts to uncover the truth about events that occurred during the war. There was no state investigation into the war, which rendered the documentation of official numbers regarding the injured, displaced, missing, or dead impossible. Concerning enforced disappearances, in 1991, the state abandoned the search for those who went missing during the war and declared that there were no longer any detainees held by political parties. Seeing that there were no state-led investigations into the issue, the state

relied on reports by political parties led by former militia leaders. This decision was followed four years later on May 25, 1995, by Law 434 on the "principles for declaring the missing dead". The law attempted to close the issue of the disappeared by regarding any person who had been missing for more than four years as legally deceased. This was regarded as a blatant attempt by the state to rid itself of the issue of enforced disappearances along with the pressures exerted by the families of the disappeared by declaring them dead.

It took ten years after the end of the war for the government to establish the first commission on the missing and forcibly disappeared. This also came after relentless pressure from the families of the missing and disappeared and increasingly mobilized civil society. The commission's report acknowledged the existence of mass graves, yet denied that it was possible to locate or identify the remains of the dead after two decades had passed. It also reiterated claims that there were no Lebanese detainees in either Israel or Syria. In the same vein, the report referenced Law 434, claiming that families declare their loved ones dead even in the absence of evidence or knowledge of where their remains lie. The 2000 commission was followed by two subsequent commissions: one in 2001 which aimed to investigate the disappeared who may potentially still be alive, and another in 2005 which was established jointly between the Lebanese and Syrian regimes. Both commissions were considered to have failed in advancing the search for the missing or providing closure for their families as no investigations were undertaken and no reports were produced, which meant that the last findings concerning the missing were the ones present in the 2000 report. At the same time, the government was obstructing the work of civil society actors in furthering the search for the missing and disappeared. In 2009, amid requests from two organizations – The Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon and Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE) – to obtain a comprehensive

report of the commission's investigation, the Prime Minister's office provided only two contradictory reports pertaining to the identification of remains. Thus, the government provided limited information and then denied further inquiries as it considered the report to had already been disclosed.

The issue of the missing and forcibly disappeared received renewed attention in the aftermath of the Syrian withdrawal in 2005. The joint commission created in 2005 pledged to pursue the issue of the missing Lebanese in Syria but to no avail. In 2008, in an unprecedented oath to the Lebanese population, then-President Michel Suleiman emphasized the need to exert "strenuous efforts" to address the issue. However, besides the opening of a mass grave in Yarzeh, success in identifying the remains of the disappeared remained very limited amid the government's unwillingness to address the issue.

Public Memory and Education in the Context of State-Sponsored Amnesia

One of the core aspects of the reconciliation process in post-war societies is preserving public memory of the war and producing a unified account of the events that occurred throughout it. In Lebanon, the post-war era witnessed the prevalence of collective amnesia characterized by a near total silence regarding the war with few memorialization initiatives. In attempting to enforce a policy of collective amnesia on the Lebanese population, the state failed to create a comprehensive national memory of the civil war, and in the absence of a unified historical account of the war, communities were left to adopt different interpretations of the events that happened. Besides its inability to create a national narrative that reconciles communal interpretations, the Lebanese state did very little to produce any national memory to unite citizens apart from the classical ode to Lebanese independence. Battles throughout the war are rarely commemorated, there are no state-sponsored memorials or war museums, and besides a few public squares in Beirut

such as the Martyr Square, very limited public spaces were devoted to consolidating memories of the war. The state did incorporate Martyrs' Day as an annual national holiday on May 6th; however, it is still not celebrated as an official holiday by most private institutions in the country, which undermines its relevance as a national memory. Most importantly, the absence of a national narrative or commemoration for martyrs created a vacuum in the public memory for political parties to fill through partisan commemorations of their own martyrs which are selective and politicized.

Another way in which state-sponsored amnesia was manifested in public memory was through the country's educational system. While the Ta'if Accord emphasized the importance of education in achieving a unified national identity, school curriculums were not updated to reflect a unified history textbook that covers the 1975-1990 period. Official history textbooks only cover until 1943 – the year of Lebanon's independence from the French Mandate - meaning that for three decades, successive generations have grown with scant knowledge of their country's history.

Why did the state adopt this model?

The Lebanese government's decision to implement a post-conflict transition based on collective amnesia can be attributed to three main factors.

First, the political class which emerged in the post-war era was predominantly composed of wartime militia leaders. This meant that most of the political elite were either directly or indirectly – through their combatants – responsible for crimes committed during the war. Thus, it would not have been to their advantage to establish efficient commissions or investigations into the atrocities committed during the war as it would risk uncovering any killings, kidnappings, or disappearances they were responsible for (Ouaiss & Rowayheb, 2017). Additionally, it could potentially open the

door for judicial investigations or widespread demand for reparations from victims, especially in the face of rising pressure from civil society organizations to challenge the policy of amnesia.

Second, in the presence of institutionalized sectarianism, the political elite stood to benefit from keeping communal tensions and grievances unresolved. As aforementioned, the absence of a coherent and unified historical account of the war allowed communities to develop their own narratives and interpretations of the war. In the presence of such competing narratives, the political elite would be able to use historical distortions to mobilize their base by appealing to group security concerns through the use of fearmongering or ethnic scapegoating (Mendeloff, 2004). According to Barak (2007), another political benefit of avoiding discussions about the past stems from the country's parliamentary electoral system. As elections are held on a regional basis, politicians' electoral success would depend on their ability to appeal to different communities. In this sense, evoking memories of the past would be self-defeating as it would risk fueling sectarian tensions, and subsequently erode cross-communal support.

Third, the domestic political environment must be considered to have at least been conducive to the prevalence of collective amnesia. To elaborate, the Syrian occupation from 1990 to 2005 created a major obstacle to national reconciliation, largely due to its prominent role in the 15-year conflict. Out of fears that any findings might implicate its troops in crimes that had taken place throughout the war or lead to internal strife that might challenge its hold over Lebanese affairs, the Syrian regime actively sought to suppress truth-seeking initiatives. Thus, even if there had been a genuine political will from the Lebanese state to investigate the events of the war, Syrian presence on Lebanese soil would have been a significant deterrent to fact-finding (Ouaiss & Rowayheb, 2017). Even after the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005, its continued influence

over political figures in the March 8 camp further complicated the establishment of effective truth commissions and investigations.

Amnesia as a Deterrent to Peace

Amnesty Laws: Forgetfulness & Impunity

The literature on amnesty laws in post-conflict settings recognizes that in some cases, and if designed in an inclusive manner, amnesty laws are effective in consolidating peace in the aftermath of civil wars. In a study on the effect of amnesties on helping end civil wars, Dancy (2018) found that amnesty laws are likely to be more effective if they are packaged as part of wider peace agreements and that they can have no positive effect in cases of serious human rights violations.

According to then-President Elias Hrawi, the rationale behind the 1991 General Amnesty Law in Lebanon was that a clean slate given to sectarian leaders and their combatants was essential to the maintenance of order and the preservation of peace in the post-war era. However, in truth, the sweeping nature of the amnesty law, as well as its exclusivity to particular crimes and perpetrators of these crimes, severely undermined the accountability process for past human rights violations. The same can be said regarding the 2005 amnesty granted to LF leader Samir Geagea, in which the government gave an ex-militia leader yet another clean slate. Neither law had anything to say about victims' rights, which goes to show how the government continuously marginalized victims legally and politically while protecting militia leaders who were suspected to have committed egregious violations of human rights (Jaquemet, 2008). Due to the highly unequal treatment of leaders and citizens under the amnesties, both laws were met with widespread opposition. Therefore, by resorting to both amnesties, state authorities categorically neglected national reconciliation in favor of protecting a narrow section of the political elite. In doing so,

they helped create and normalize a culture of impunity that is still pervasive in Lebanese society today as the immunities granted by the blanket amnesty indicated that there were no reasons for changes in behavior.

Therefore, the amnesty laws can be seen as a state's failure to document the war's events and provide victims with their right to truth and justice. The prevailing culture of impunity as a result of the amnesties helped create a political environment that was favorable to instability and violence as it undermined efforts to restore respect for human rights and the rule of law. It also prevented the official acknowledgment of the war in that it encouraged the Lebanese to forget their crimes and move on, all while creating an environment of mistrust and resentment towards the past.

The Missing and Disappeared: Injustice & Unresolved Grievances

Lebanon's failure to acknowledge and address the legacy of the war is most clearly manifested in the silence on the fate of the missing and disappeared. This silence left a space that was taken up by civil society actors such as the Committee of the Families and SOLIDE, who were adamant about furthering the search for the disappeared and achieving justice for their families. The clash between the state and civil society's approaches to dealing with the issue has rendered it in a state of in-between, or what Comaty (2019) refers to as "liminality". The fact that civil society has been pushing for a politics of truth and remembrance, and the state for one of amnesia and silence, is preventing the issue from passing from one state to the other. This has rendered the issue in a "permanent state of in-between"; it is being addressed, yet it is not being resolved. Lebanese society stands in a state of ignorance about its past, and the families of the kidnapped, missing, and forcibly disappeared remain in what seems to be a never-ending search for truth. In the absence of closure regarding their loved ones, families of the disappeared continue to bear the

psychosocial ramifications of unresolved grievances. While this issue may concern a narrow segment of Lebanese society, it represents the state's policy of silence and forgetfulness that has permeated every aspect of the post-war transition.

Collective Amnesia: Competing Narratives & Communal Tensions

The post-civil war era saw an emergence of politicized communal memories. The warring militias-turned-political parties that were affiliated with particular sects began to develop methods to commemorate their own fallen militants. In the absence of an overarching national narrative of the civil war, political parties have made use of the space to strengthen communal memory at the expense of national memory (Aboultaif & Tabar, 2019). Against the backdrop of a weak national memory brought on by state-sponsored amnesia, communities have engaged in a competition regarding the production of communal memories and their projection onto the nation as a whole. The result has thus far been an attempt to marginalize national memory and elevate communal ones to the national level, which has sustained divisions between different communities and undermined the state's legitimacy.

What worsens the issue is the fact that the communal memories developed by political parties are sectarian and exclusive. For instance, the LF holds a Christian mass to commemorate its martyrs, even as it attempts to establish that their martyrs are for all Lebanese. The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), for instance, tries to impose its narrative on the entire Christian community. In 2005, then-FPM leader Michel Aoun referred to October 13, 1991 – the date of his official defeat in the war – as a "rediscovery of sovereignty and national identity" as to claim that the FPM was the only faction that fought for Lebanese independence and sovereignty. These types of efforts to dismiss other communities' narratives help perpetuate civil unrest as well as communal and intra-communal tensions.

The prevalence of competing narratives is further perpetuated by the outdated national educational curriculum. This is because, in the absence of a common national history curriculum that covers the events of the war and its legacies, successive generations have grown up with little to no knowledge of the war. In the context of widespread silence and avoidance, this also means that they are not able to critically engage or discuss conflicting narratives of the war, Therefore, what little knowledge that post-war generations carry of the war is transmitted through older generations who have vastly differing accounts of the war. In light of increasingly politicized communal memories, this makes younger generations more susceptible to sectarian rhetoric that political elites use to mobilize their communal bases as they begin to perceive the war and post-war politics exclusively through this lens.

Truth & Memorialization: An Alternative Model

The Lebanese state pushed a policy of collective amnesia in the aftermath of the civil war, opting to sacrifice truth and reconciliation for immediate peace and coexistence. Based on the aforementioned, the model was not successful in building sustainable peace in the post-war era. The literature on transitions in societies reeling from civil wars suggests an alternative model aimed at achieving reconciliation through truth and memorialization. In what follows, I explore how the employment of different truth and memorialization initiatives can aid national reconciliation in Lebanon by reconciling competing narratives about the past, preserving public memory of the war, and easing tensions and security fears between communities.

Truth-Seeking Measures

In the absence of effective truth-seeking measures, reparation programs designed have been inadequate in addressing the needs of victims, the fate of the missing and disappeared, in particular, has not been clarified, and inter-communal fears remain high. An effective and

comprehensive truth-seeking process can thus facilitate the healing process on both an individual and societal level (Silva et al., 2014). Concerning the issue of the missing and disappeared, strengthening truth-seeking measures can bring a sense of peace and closure to the victims' families. This can begin with codifying the Draft Law for Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons that was developed by civil society organizations including the Committee of the Families in 2014. Adopting the law would prompt the beginning of a truth-seeking process that includes the families of the victims and satisfies their right to truth, including the verification of facts and public disclosure of the events. In the wider context of truth about the war, providing a historical account of the gross human rights violations and any violations of international law since 1975 could help Lebanese society move past politicized narratives of the war and establish a shared understanding of past events by acknowledging the suffering and losses they experienced at the hands of the other.

In light of the Lebanese case of deferred truths, it may be useful to look at truth-seeking initiatives in other post-conflict settings and evaluate the extent to which similar initiatives would have sped up the reconciliation process had they been implemented efficiently. Two such cases are the Instance Equité et Reconciliation (IER) in Morocco and the Committee on Missing Persons (CMP) in Cyprus. The two cases are appropriate to be evaluated as they show the potential of truth-seeking measures in restrictive political environments. Their cultural proximity to Lebanese society also makes them suitable for comparison. Morocco is a fellow Arab state with a predominantly Muslim population, while Cyprus is very close to Lebanon and shares historical economic links with the country. It is also predominantly composed of Sunni Muslims and Greek Orthodox Christians, which makes it closer to the highly diverse religious population in Lebanon.

In Morocco, the IER found limited success in uncovering the truth about past violations and providing reparations to victims' families. Public hearings were televised, with King Hassan II publicly acknowledging that the state was responsible for the enforced disappearances. The IER was also successful in establishing tens of exhumations, resolving more than 742 cases of forced disappearances, and providing reparations to more than 15,000 survivors (Jaquemet, 2008). The shortcomings of the commission, on the other hand, were characterized by its failure to hold any individuals accountable for the crimes committed, the inability to dig up all mass graves, and the persistence of impunity for most perpetrators. The CMP witnessed moderate success considering its limited mandate, going on to locate more than 60% of the missing and carry out 400 exhumations from the two communities. Of these 400, the CMP was able to identify 84 of them and return them to the victims' families. The success of the CMP, however, was heavily determined by the intervention of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights, which exerted significant external political and judicial pressure.

Both the Moroccan and Cypriot experiences had shortcomings but were still able to bring closure to several victims' relatives. The contextual differences between Lebanon and each Morocco and Cyprus are apparent; Lebanon's power-sharing system as opposed to Morocco's monarchy means that an official decision to address the missing in Lebanon would require consensus from multiple political groups. The country does not benefit from the same regional support that Cyprus received from the EU and other European institutions either. However, some reassurance can be found in the fact that in neither case, perpetrators were named or held criminally accountable, but hundreds of mass graves were still opened and remains were given to victims' relatives. This shows that adopting a similar strategy in regard to the missing and disappeared in

Lebanon may simultaneously bring closure to their families without reigniting civil unrest in the country.

Memorialization

Implementing meaningful memorialization initiatives can promote peace and the non-recurrence of conflict by highlighting the underlying causes and impacts of the war. Preserving memories of the war can help sustain a culture of remembrance and awareness which would help create a coherent national memory of the war (Fischer, 2011). This would ensure that citizens remember the causes, atrocities, and impacts of the war, and thus guarantee non-repetition. This can be achieved by transforming public spaces into memorials that could encourage interfaith dialogue and ease tensions between communities. The process of commemorating the war through different initiatives (i.e. museums, memorials, art, film, etc..) would potentially help sustain memories of the war for future generations, especially in the absence of war history from education curriculums.

The absence of state-sponsored truth-seeking and memorialization initiatives prompted a response from Lebanese civil society to push for establishing the truth about events that occurred during the war and to solidify it in the national memory. Such initiatives have included documentation, dialogue, and providing support to victims and their relatives. They have also adopted various approaches to advancing reconciliation, including truth-seeking, reparations, memorials and commemorations, and psychosocial support. Between 1990 and 2008, a total of 156 reconciliation initiatives were implemented by civil society actors, with the majority of initiatives – 85 – being undertaken by local organizations. In the same time frame, on the other hand, Lebanese governments have recorded a mere 8 initiatives, mainly legislative acts such as the establishment of the Ministry of Displaced and the Central Fund of the Displaced in 1993. In the

post-war era, civil society actors have found very limited success in advancing reconciliation in Lebanon in the face of active suppression and resistance from the state. This shows that truth and memorialization initiatives in Lebanon have the potential to advance reconciliation and positive peace in Lebanon, but support from the state is desperately required. In the absence of state initiatives and amid ongoing collective amnesia, any civil society initiatives are likely to yield very minimal success.

Conclusion

Since the end of the war in 1990, Lebanon has not witnessed a prolonged period of peace and stability. Instead, what emerged in the post-civil war era was a fragile peace in the presence of Syria as an external guarantor. After Syria's withdrawal in 2005, the country witnessed an increase in all forms of violence, as longstanding sectarian tensions manifested themselves in the presence of a weak state. Since 2005, assassinations, car bombings, and armed clashes have occurred periodically.

Today, Lebanon finds itself in the context of new challenges amid a changing political climate. In the last three years alone, the country has witnessed nationwide protests, an unprecedented economic crisis, and one of the largest man-made explosions in human history with the August 4 blast. However, in the face of new crises, the country is still very much haunted by past events, with the 2021 Beirut Clashes serving as the latest reminder of decades-long unresolved tensions resurfacing. The persistence of these wartime tensions, even in the light of new political and socioeconomic challenges, sheds light on the unresolved legacies of the war. This has prompted scholars to speculate that Lebanon is constantly trying to cope with the past, but is unable to deal with it.

From 1990 until today, Lebanon has been in a state of negative peace, characterized by the non-occurrence of violence, but in which a stable political environment for building sustainable peace does not exist. This "peace" is occasionally interrupted by episodes of violence due to underlying tensions between the different communities. The state of Lebanon today can thus be attributed to the cost of avoiding its violent past. In the aftermath of a 15-year war, the Lebanese state and emerging political class opted for a policy of state-sponsored amnesia, in which a politics of silence and forgetfulness was enforced on the population.

The state-sponsored amnesia was carried out through successive amnesties, ineffective truth-seeking, and very limited memorialization. The 1991 General Amnesty Law, along with the 2005 amnesty, represented the state's unwillingness to pursue perpetrators of past crimes, instead opting to protect warlords and ex-militia leaders at the expense of victims. The state effectively swapped out justice for impunity, thereby undermining accountability and encouraging society to forget the egregious crimes that occurred during the war. Similar neglect was given to the tens of thousands that were kidnapped or disappeared. Several truth commissions were implemented, but their work was hindered either by Syrian political control or by the absence of sheer political will to pursue the truth. This forced families of the victims to take on the searches independently – a cause they are still pursuing today. The state's inability to create a strong national memory gave rise to contending communal memories, with each community attempting to elevate its own narrative to the national level. This left the different communities with drastically different accounts of the war which they aimed to perpetuate through communal memorials. This issue was even further compounded by the lack of a unified educational curriculum, which has produced multiple generations with little to no knowledge of the war, and who, in the absence of a national

narrative, have been forced to resort to communal narratives and familial accounts to learn about their country's past.

All of the aforementioned have contributed to creating a political climate in which constant instability and periodic violence have thrived. As such, thirty years after the civil war, Lebanon finds itself in a fluctuation between violence and coexistence, and between past and present. According to Lebanese sociologist Samir Khalaf, today, Lebanese society is "trapped in a disparaging threefold predicament: alienation from the past, anxiety and unease about the present, and uncertainty about the future". Indeed, in the face of unprecedented political and economic challenges, and amid a new wave of political mobilization, the country finds itself yet again in a situation reminiscent of the pre-war era. Will the country relapse into yet another protracted conflict? Will the political status quo persist in the face of popular upheavals? In the current political context, it is difficult to address either question with much certainty. However, what has proven to be certain is that the country will not reach a state of positive and sustainable peace and coexistence if it does not address the legacies of its past.

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