Voices from the civil war

NOW Lebanon gets accounts of the period from Assad Chaftari and Wadad Halawani
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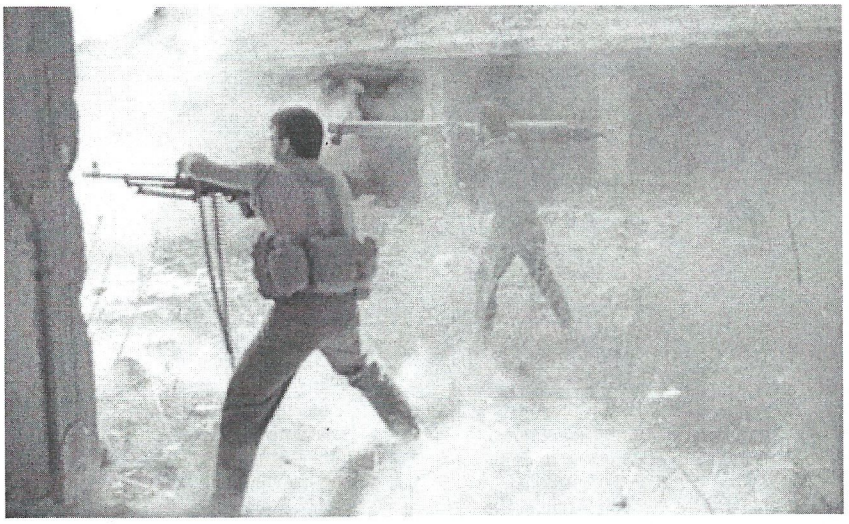

Militiamen fire bazookas during the Lebanese civil war. (AFP/Ramzi Haidar)

On the morning of April 13, 1975, Palestinian gunmen fired from a speeding car at a church in Ain al-Remmaneh, a Christian suburb east of Beirut, killing four people, including two Kataeb party members. Later that day, Kataeb gunmen ambushed a bus full of Palestinians in revenge. Although the attack on the bus in Ain al-Remmaneh was not the only reason behind Lebanon's civil war, it did mark the beginning of a conflict that lasted 15 years and resulted in an estimated 250,000 deaths.

Assad Chaftari and Wadad Halawani are two names often mentioned when it comes to accounts of the war. NOW Lebanon talks to Chaftari, an influential Kataeb/Lebanese Forces member during the war, and Halawani, who is still looking for her husband Adnan, one of the estimated 17,000 who went missing and whose fate is still unknown almost 20 years after the conflict ended.

On my way to meet Chaftari, I asked the taxi driver to drop me off at Nejmeh Square. He looked at me and asked, "Do you mean downtown Beirut?" It occurred to me then how easily the Lebanese avoid talking about the civil war, not calling places by the names commonly used at the time of the conflict.

"Downtown Beirut should not have been cleaned up that fast," Chaftari said when I told him about the taxi ride. "Or at least not all of it. Some aspects of the war should have been left to set an example for the younger generation to learn of the tragedies we committed.

"There's a general fear of talking about the war; people of all types still want to cover it up, they don't want to remember it. I'm only reminding people of it, so we don't repeat it."

Chaftari spoke of how his experience during those bloody 15 years began, and the role he played in the conflict as it ignited and raged on.

"For me," he said, "the fire was heating up way before April 13, 1975. When I was younger I used to hear about how Muslims don't believe in Lebanon the state, and how they would rather belong to an Arabic or Islamic Umma. I used to

hear of how Christians are among the minorities and how they feel threatened, fearing that Muslims would want to bring an end to their existence just like in other Arab countries, and by the time the civil war broke out, the idea of Muslims being a potential threat or even enemies had long resided in my mind."

Indeed, tension ran high in the country before that April, mostly revolving around the Israeli-Palestinian dispute simmering just south of Lebanon and the strain of an increasing number of mostly Sunni refugees flooding into the country, which was already dealing with a precarious sectarian balance. Chaftari noted the Cairo Accord, Black September and the increasing number of Palestinians in the country as precursors to the outbreak of war, but the incident that he said was the most closely linked to the breakout of violence happened in the summer of 1973, when clashes broke out between the Lebanese army and Palestinian factions near Sports City in the Cola area. When the Lebanese army decided to take action and strike back at the camps, various Arab leaders objected, the Syrians sent forces to close the borders, and the Lebanese army commander was going to be prosecuted.

"It was harsh for me to see the Lebanese army under so much pressure, I felt that with everyone turned against it, the Lebanese army was bound to crack, and it would no longer be able to fulfill its duty, which, in my opinion, was to protect the Christians. The Palestinians, on the other hand, had the Lebanese Muslims' support, even in the face of their own state's army. It was a sign for me then: My army was facing what was for me a de facto enemy. It was at that point in time that I began looking for a convenient party to join. I joined the Kataeb party, and by 1975, I was ready, and we all felt it coming."

Before Chaftari worked in the Intelligence unit in his party, he fought in one of the famous battles of the hotel wars, which took place around the Hilton and Phoenicia hotels.

"I wasn't a field officer," he said. "The only battle I fought was that of the hotels, against the Mourabitoun, the Palestinians, the Libyans, what made up the Lebanese National Movement. I used to call them the keshkesh group for national dance," he joked. "Their group joined anyone who used to call himself a patriot at the time, even if he came from another country. While on the other hand, we were all of one color, of one kind," he said.

"I was still a student at the time, fourth year in Electro Mechanical Engineering. I took a course in radio transmissions, so as soon as the unit was created for such causes, a sister unit was also created for Intelligence, and as the party grew, I grew with it, and in short time, I had become the number two Intelligence man in the party. I was second after Elie Hobeika and worked close to him as forces were joined to form the Lebanese Forces.

"Even if I rarely held a gun, life and death decisions were all in my hands. I used to decide people's destinies. For investigation purposes, I was able to kidnap, to kill. For security purposes I was able to assassinate, plant car bombs, plan battles and investigate the outcomes. If at times I felt civilians were going to be subjected to danger from our operations, I didn't care; I felt that the greater interest of the Christians was much more important, and I had decided that."

Wadad Halawani, now head of the Committee of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon, was one such civilian subjected to the dangers that Chaftari was referring to, along with her husband, Adnan, a civil activist, who was taken away for investigations and never heard from again.

"On September 24, 1982, after President Bachir Gemayel's assassination and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the capital, Adnan was kidnapped," she said. "In broad daylight, two men came into the house and took him, saying that he had been involved in some car accident and they needed to investigate. They came in civilian clothing, holding guns, and presented identification cards as proof of their belonging to army Intelligence. I was there; it all happened in front of me. I was objecting to their right to do so, because I knew that there was no accident, and it was uncommon for the government to interfere to that level for such a thing. It was supposed to be a five minute investigation."

According to Halawani, "survival of the fittest" was the name of the game at the time. She explained that if two different factions didn't think alike, or if they weren't from the same area or same sect, they would consider each other a threat or even an enemy, and at that point, terminating the opposing side was merely a way to preserve one's

own existence. The country was divided, and all its institutions had been infiltrated by militias that had the power to obstruct the role of the state.

When asked why she assumed Adnan was targeted by the Intelligence forces and who she suspected was behind it, Halawani said, "Adnan was very active in the civil sense; he wasn't a military man. He was a member of the Communist Action Organization in Lebanon. During the Israeli invasion, his duty was to support the Lebanese that stayed in Beirut to enhance resistance in the face of the Israeli occupation. He used to provide bakeries with flour to make bread, and provide petrol, gas and fuel for hospitals for them to take in the sick and the injured. He used to call upon his fellow teachers to open school classes for the students to minimize chances that these kids would join militia forces and turn to the streets.

"His movement was not falling in the interests of those known to have been aligned with Israel at the time. The army Intelligence itself was divided and infiltrated then. They later on handed him over to the Lebanese Forces," she said.

"The last information I got about him was clear and straight. The officer at the army Intelligence told me that if I had my links, or connections, to the LF, to use them. When I turned to those I knew close to the LF, they would tell me that the response they got was that if I looked any further, then my fate would be the same as his."

Assad Chaftari had a lot of power in those days. He says that his source of strength was the arms and intelligence he had access to and his power to influence the state, but mainly the belief that he was doing the right thing.

"I was thinking in terms of the interest of the group and not the individual, I was defending Christianity. As I grew more powerful, it started to get to me. I started making decisions on behalf of everyone. I was making decisions on my behalf, on my group's behalf, on the behalf of our opponents, and on behalf of the civilians. I had forgotten that all Lebanese are my people; to me only Christians were Lebanese, and any harm done to them, it would be inexcusable for me. I saw horrible things.

"The Karantina incident was one of the worst and most atrocious I had ever seen," he said, referring to a massacre against Muslims in the early days of the war that left approximately 1,500 dead. "I went in to see what had become of the place after the massacre to see what information I could collect. The sight of the corpses laying there, the blood covering the place and the smell of death was something I could not forget. I have seen a lot; people would die under investigations, when I think about it now, I realize that I was not aware that the person in front of me was human too, with a family who loves him. I never questioned my actions; I was convinced that I was merely protecting my country."

As Chaftari was trying to do what he thought was right and protect his country, Halawani was trying to find out what happened to her husband. Though she turned to government officials and representatives hoping they would provide her with some information, the only thing she learned was that she was one of many in her situation. It was then that it occurred to her to set up a committee of families of those missing in an effort to exert more pressure on the authorities.

"I called for a meeting on a national radio station called Sawt Lubnan al-Arabi for a get-together for families of those kidnapped and missing. I was hoping to find two or three people that were going through what I was. I was shocked at the sight of hundreds of women and children when the appointed day came. Suddenly I realized that I wasn't just looking for Adnan anymore; I was looking for hundreds of him. We formed the committee and began our movements, which consisted of visits, demonstrations and sit-ins aimed at the prime minister, the Justice minister, the mufti and even the president. Reactions were only emotional talk. They would tell us that we're right, and they support us, but there wasn't much they can do, and that militia power was greater than state power."

Instead of getting the attention and support they needed, Halawani said her group received threats and even got shot at during demonstrations.

"We were bribed most of the time; they would ask us for money in return for information about our families. One lady who was active among us, known as Um Nabil, had both her sons kidnapped. A man kept contacting her, asking for

money in return for information. She'd be sitting among us in our meetings and then suddenly pick herself up and leave without telling us where she was heading. One day when she couldn't provide him with any more money, he killed her," she said.

"With the end of the war, we thought that it would be the end of our miseries. The Taif [Accord] was signed in 1991, and everybody was excited, thinking that the war that once took our families was over and now peace would be bringing them back. Again we turned to our government for answers, but found nothing. The situation didn't change; it just looked different. Those that once wore militia outfits took them off and wore good-looking suits and were assigned to positions in the Lebanese parliament to form the new government. We made no accomplishments because the militias were disbanded but were all moved into central government authority."

National committees were formed in an effort to follow up on the cases of those kidnapped or missing during the war. The first round of investigations took place in the year 2000 under the auspices of then-Prime Minister Salim al-Hoss and concluded that in Lebanon there were none to be found alive. Syria said didn't have any missing Lebanese citizens inside its borders, and Israel said it had 17. The study concluded that anyone who went missing four years prior to the report was to be considered dead. In five months, however, 54 detainees were released from the Syrian prisons.

"Families went hysterical," Halawani said. "To tune down the reaction, the government decided to establish another committee. After four years, the report that was presented said nothing of Lebanese involvement, though it condemned Syria and Israel, as if the Lebanese didn't do anything and didn't kill each other, and that the truth can only be provided by Syria and Israel."

"During the war, [their excuse for not dealing with the issue of the missing] was that the militia powers were much stronger than the state, and there wasn't much that can be done. Then after Taif in 1991, they would say that priority was to liberate all Lebanese land from the occupation of the Israelis. In 2000, the Israelis withdrew from southern Lebanon, and the excuse became that they could not accuse Syria of being involved the kidnappings. Now after Syria's out and presumably there shouldn't be an excuse, there is still no effort to tell the truth."

Though things remained the same for Halawani and there was little progress made in her quest, after the war, Chaftari's life changed dramatically. He and Hobeika went their separate ways, and he began to see things differently. "I realized that I hadn't been a true Christian; I had been fighting in Christ's name when he hadn't asked me to. On the contrary, in his teachings he was saying to do the exact opposite of what I was doing. I joined Initiatives of Change, an international NGO dedicated to building trust across the world's divides. From that point I dedicated my time to building awareness on the atrocities of war and on the need for change. "

Chaftari knows Halawani, and they usually collaborate in the hope that the truth will be revealed on the fates of those who went missing during the war.

"I'm with the need to learn of these people's fates," Chaftari said. "The state has its fears though. It assumes that if these files are open, then disparities would come up in regards to the number of those killed form either side, putting more blame on one side than the other. The same is the case with regard to mass graves, depending on the location, since it would condemn one side more than the other, and given that these [same people] are all still in power, it would threaten civil peace. In any case, that should not be a reason to keep the truth hidden; with proper mechanisms, transparency and awareness, all strife can be avoided."

Collective burials after 2000 became a "political bazaar," Halawani said, "depending on the party that would be condemned." Referring to the mass graves found at Anjar, an area formerly controlled by the Syrian intelligence services before their withdrawal in 2005, she said, "the site of them digging up using those machines was horrible. It was as if they were pulling down an old building and digging up the leftovers. Imagine how the mothers felt at that site. Specialized tools and apparatus need to be used to detect who the remains belong to. The place became a touristic site where journalists and people go to take pictures. When its serves the ruling elites' interests, they dig up and look, and when it doesn't, they open it and close it carelessly."

"To know the truth is a right. Nobody is going to hang the other. We just don't want to go on stepping and walking all over our families' remains. The truth is a right for everyone and also a responsibility for everyone. Why is it that at one point, the truth is a right and worth getting the people and the country into a conflict, and at another point, it will cause the country to go into war? It depends on who is asking for that right."

The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of NOW Lebanon. No side in the Lebanese civil war had a monopoly on atrocities and war crimes, and the groups mentioned above were just a few of the many that participated in, and were responsible for, the 15 year conflict.