



Beginning of the war

Toward the end of the presidency of Charles Hélou, the various factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) began to clash with Lebanese security forces. Under an agreement announced in Cairo on Nov. 3, 1969, the Lebanese government gave the Palestinians virtually a free hand in the refugee camps and at forward posts in the south

along the Israeli frontier. In return, the PLO promised not to intervene in Lebanese politics; this was difficult for the Palestinians and not desired by the Lebanese left. When the Lebanese failed to restrain the Palestinians, the Israelis began to raid the south with increasing severity, and this encouraged the Lebanese Christian right, particularly the militant Phalangist Party, to attack the Palestinians with its well-organized and well-armed militia.

It was in this atmosphere that Suleiman Franjeh was elected president on Aug. 17, 1970. Franjeh, however, was not able to solve the two basic political and foreign problems that troubled the country: should more power in the Lebanese government be given to the Shi'ites and other Muslims who had become a majority of the population, and should Lebanon support or suppress the PLO? Events moved rapidly toward civil war, and by 1975 the mostly Muslim Lebanese National Movement led by Kamal Jumblatt sought political reform and support for the Palestinian guerrillas. Into this arena stepped the relatively deprived Shi'ite Muslims, by now the most numerous religious community in Lebanon. Maronite Christians, intent on preserving their concept of Lebanon, frantically sought to keep their political dominance by crushing the power of the Lebanese leftists and particularly the PLO, whose actions seemed (from the perspective of many Maronites) to threaten the unity and safety of the nation.

Hardly a day passed after the beginning of full civil war in April 1975 without a battle somewhere in Lebanon. The country was torn apart, and the central government virtually ceased to exist. The army, long the mainstay of the government, largely dissolved while the combatants, amply supplied by various foreign groups, turned upon one another with a ferocity—and firepower—almost unequaled in such a small area of the world.

Final phases of the war

Gradually the left and the Palestinians began to win the war. By the early months of 1976, it seemed clear that the Christians were losing and that either they would be defeated (so that Lebanon would be reconstituted as a left-dominated, pro-PLO state) or Lebanon would be partitioned. Either case appeared to the Syrians likely to bring Israeli intervention. This realization forced a reversal of Syrian policy, ending in Pres. Hafiz al-Assad's support for the Christians. Ironically, both the Syrians and the Israelis, so opposed to one another on other issues, took up the cause of the Lebanese Christians. Syria prevented the Palestinians from taking strategic points, while Israel blockaded the coast, trained a contingent of Lebanese in Israel, and shipped equipment to the Christian sector. During the summer of 1976 Syrian military units entered the country from the east with about 20,000 soldiers. The Christians, with strong support from Syria, began to win the civil war as they attacked Palestinian refugee camps.

Parliament elected a new president, Elias Sarkis, on May 8, 1976, with the support of Syria, but he was not inaugurated until September 23. Meanwhile, Lebanon was effectively partitioned along the "Green Line," which passed through the centre of Beirut (east-west) and along the main road to Damascus; to the north was a Christian government, to the south a leftist (Druze-Muslim-Palestinian) government led by Kamal Jumblatt until he was murdered in March 1977.

Repeated attempts were made to bring the fighting to an end, until finally a formal "summit" meeting, held on Oct. 25-26, 1976, established an Arab League peacekeeping force of 30,000 troops, who were mostly Syrian. By the end of November, despite continued minor clashes, the intensity of the civil war decreased, but it did not really end, since the major issues that had caused the fighting to start in 1975 remained unresolved.

Continued fighting among the Lebanese factions led to the loss of prestige of the former political elite and to the emergence of a new generation of militia leaders, except in the Phalangist Party, whose existing leadership dominated the Christian-rightist coalition so successfully that the Syrian army of occupation once again began to support the Muslim-leftist-Palestinian groups in 1978. The destruction and violence had caused hundreds of thousands of Lebanese to flee their homes in southern Lebanon, where the threat of Israeli intervention stopped Syria from imposing a peace. Israel invaded the area on March 14-15, 1978, to destroy Palestinian bases and to force Lebanon to curb raids by the PLO into Israel. A small contingent of UN forces replaced the Israelis by June; Israel continued, however, to supply arms, money, and troops to the Christians in the south, while the Palestinians soon returned to the same region.

Consequences of the war

The civil war was a catastrophe for the Lebanese, whose country lay in ruins. There seemed to be no compromise acceptable to the Muslims, who numbered more than one-half of the population, and to the Christians, who were determined to keep their control of key government institutions. Foreign intervention merely restrained open, full-scale warfare. Economic destruction was massive, but this was overcome to a certain extent by increased remittances from Lebanese working abroad during the boom years in the oil-producing countries. From 1975 to 1982,

while tourism and industrial production declined sharply, capital invested in real estate, banking, and the newly decentralized commercial and service sectors helped compensate for economic losses. The chief political problem was the bitterness caused by the thousands of deaths and the ensuing hatreds that promised to destroy the possibility of Lebanese living together again in one nation with one government.

The war left the Palestinians with perhaps 20,000 killed and twice that many wounded. The Syrians appeared stronger than before, but, having got into Lebanon, they faced the problem of extricating themselves. Only Israel among the states of the Middle East appeared to have "won." The Palestinians lost their major bid, Syria feared Israeli intervention, and the Lebanese Christians were in Israel's debt. More important, the horror of the war had caused Arabs everywhere to question, as never before, the very dream of pan-Arabism.

The Israeli invasion of 1982

The political disintegration of Lebanon led directly to intensified external intervention. Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the Phalangist militia, whose strength derived in part from extensive Israeli aid, forcibly united under his control all the Maronite private armies and thereby created a ministate in East Beirut and the northern coastal sector of Lebanon. The Syrian army was dominant in most of the rest of Lebanon, but a jumble of factions, many of which were armed and paid by outsiders, disputed Syria's power and wreaked havoc because of their internecine quarrels.

Israeli forces bombed PLO headquarters in West Beirut on July 17, 1981, causing in the process more than 300 civilian deaths. This attack led the United States to arrange a cease-fire between the Israelis and the PLO, which, it was hoped, would

end raids into northern Israel. The situation, however, erupted on June 6, 1982, when an estimated 60,000 Israeli troops invaded Lebanon.

Although the stated goal of Israel was only to secure the territory north of its border with Lebanon so as to stop PLO raids, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin sought to destroy the PLO and establish in power a Lebanese government that would conclude a peace treaty with Israel along the lines of the Egyptian-Israeli peace of 1979. The invasion was successful, as Syrian forces were defeated, the PLO retreated to West Beirut, and Egypt and the other Arab states did little but protest. From late June to August, Israel hesitated to attack PLO and leftist Muslim troops in densely populated West Beirut. Instead, Israel shelled, bombed, and blockaded the area to pressure the PLO and Syrian garrisons to evacuate their forces.

Under supervision by an international (U.S., French, and Italian) force, PLO leaders and troops left Beirut for a number of Arab countries in late August. Because Syria supported the PLO forces remaining in northern Lebanon and in al-Biq'a valley, the forces could not be compelled by Israel to leave, but the Syrian backing was used to foster a PLO leadership that opposed the PLO chairman, Yasir 'Arafat. (In heavy fighting near Tripoli, 'Arafat was forced into exile in December 1983 for a second time, on this occasion at the instigation of the Syrians.) The Israeli victory in the south and centre was shared by the Phalangists, who then had no barrier to electing their leader president of Lebanon. Bashir Gemayel, however, was assassinated before his inauguration. The Phalangists then secured the election of Bashir's brother, Amin Gemayel, to replace the exhausted and ineffectual Sarkis as president. After West Beirut was occupied by the Israelis, Phalangist militiamen massacred perhaps as many as 1,000 Palestinians in two refugee camps in Beirut in revenge for the death of Bashir Gemayel.

On May 17, 1983, Israel and Lebanon concluded what was very nearly a peace treaty. It called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces, a special security zone in the south, and the establishment of bilateral relations. Israel's power in Lebanon deteriorated as growing opposition from various Lebanese groups resulted in armed attacks on Israelis, and Israeli casualties mounted; in September 1983 Israel began withdrawing its forces. The international peacekeeping force left Beirut in February 1984 after suffering heavy casualties, and in March Syria and Lebanese Muslims and leftists forced Pres. Amin Gemayel to abrogate the Lebanon-Israel agreement. By June 1985 Israel had withdrawn its military from most of Lebanon. This abrupt reversal among the intervening foreign states exacerbated political instability inside Lebanon. The Christian and rightist movement, the Shi'ite-Druze alliance, and the PLO all split asunder over the question of accepting or rejecting Syria's leadership.

President Gemayel rejected in 1986 the Syrian-arranged compromise proposal backed by the leftist militias, whose power was weakened by the fighting between Amal (a Shi'ite political and military organization) and the PLO. The amazingly resilient Lebanese economy itself finally began to collapse under the cumulative strain of years of warfare and destruction, as the value of Lebanese currency drastically declined and public services in the country deteriorated. When Gemayel's term ended on Sept. 22, 1988, Parliament could not agree on the selection of a new president; instead, Gemayel named Gen. Michel Aoun as prime minister, despite the continuing claim to that office by the incumbent, Salim al-Hoss. Lebanon thus had no president but two prime ministers, and the complete partition of the country seemed inevitable.

Lebanese of nearly all factions and groups rejected the possible disappearance of their country. Instead, the chief issue became which one of the groups would dominate a newly reunited Lebanon. In March 1989 General Aoun launched a

“war of liberation” against Syria and its Lebanese allies; despite Iraq's covert assistance, this war failed, and in September Aoun accepted a cease-fire.

On October 22 most members of the Lebanese Parliament (last elected in 1972) met in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, and accepted a constitutional compromise that adjusted the Parliament, presidency, and cabinet so that Christian and Muslim representatives would equally share power. On November 5 the old Parliament elected René Moawad as president. Moawad, however, was assassinated on November 22, and, though Elias Hrawi was elected two days later, General Aoun denounced both presidential elections as invalid since the whole process of political compromise ignored the issue of Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. After more factional fighting in early 1990, Syria finally took decisive action against Aoun—on October 13 the Lebanese government's central army and the Syrians forced his surrender. President Hrawi then embarked upon the delicate and dangerous process of consolidating and extending the power of the Lebanese government, first by disarming the militias in Beirut and then by reaching out into other parts of the country.

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From the beginning of the civil war in 1975 to the early 1990s, perhaps as many as 150,000 Lebanese died in the various types of fighting. About one-quarter of the country's population fled abroad, and hundreds of thousands were forced to move from one part of Lebanon to another. The Lebanese were exhausted by the interminable violence, and most seemed prepared to accept the compromise peace that continued in Lebanon throughout the 1990s, as Sunnite, Shi'ite, and Christian factions vied for political power within Lebanon's revived constitutional framework.

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Although small pockets of violence continued in the country throughout that decade (particularly along the Israeli border), the presence of a large number of Syrian troops within the country, although unwelcome by many Lebanese, served to bolster Lebanon's central government. Reconstruction of the country, particularly war-torn Beirut, began apace during the 1990s, as the Lebanese government, particularly its energetic prime minister, Rafiq al-Hariri, sought substantial investment from abroad to revitalize the country's shattered economy, once the healthiest in the region.

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