Maronite Conflicts and the Rise of Bashir Gemayel

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The outbreak of the second Lebanese Civil War in 1975 and the collapse of the Lebanese state transformed Lebanon from a model Middle Eastern democracy into a notorious example of anarchy, factionalism, and repression. Most often the Lebanese conundrum is explained in terms of religious animosity between Muslims and Christians and as a political struggle between the Left and Right. Undoubtedly these have been the most ostensible causes of the fourteen year civil war. What is less known, however, is the extent to which the Muslims and Maronites have been ripped apart by competing internal factions. Within the Maronite community, the struggle for power at the beginning of the Civil War exacerbated long-standing feuds that had existed since the creation of the National Pact in 1943. One curious phenomenon of the Civil War was that once the shooting began, intra-religious killing also became more prevalent. In fact, the free-for-all mentality of the Civil War, it appears, gave Bashir Gemayel the opportunity to consolidate his power and eliminate his rivals for the 1982 presidential election.
In order to understand the changes that occurred within the Maronite community, it is important to understand the drastic changes that took place in Lebanon as a whole. Before 1975, Lebanon was considered the business, cultural, and democratic center of the Arab world. However, the Lebanese Civil War changed all this.

By most accounts, the Lebanese Civil War began at Ain Rummaneh, a Christian suburb of East Beirut on April 13, 1975. At a Sunday gathering, unknown assailants fired on Pierre Gemayel, leader of the Maronite Phalanges and killed two of his bodyguards. Hours later, Phalange militiamen ambushed a bus full of Muslim political activists. Twenty-eight passengers were massacred (see Khalidi 1979, 47). Throughout the country, clashes broke-out between maronite military groups and members of the Muslim-dominated National Movement.

The fighting gradually snowballed. By September 1975, two chief belligerents emerged: the predominantly Christian Lebanese Front and the Nationalist Movement, comprised of Druzes, Shiites, Sunnis and Lebanese Communists. In December of the same year, the Palestine
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Liberation Organization (PLO) officially entered the war. The reason the PLO hesitated for over seven months was most likely a result of wanting to avoid overt war with the Maronites. In the first year of the war, nearly 50,000 Lebanese were killed (McDowall 1983, 50).

Internal Maronite Conflicts

A significant source of friction between the Lebanese Christians and non-Christians was the National Pact of 1943, an agreement between President Bishara al-Khoury and Prime Minister Ryad al-Sulh requiring that the major government positions be divided among Lebanon's largest religious sects. As the largest religious faction in Lebanon, the Maronites, with 52 percent of population (according to the 1932 census—the only official census in Lebanese history), were guaranteed the presidency (see McDowall 1983, 11). The institutionalization of government positions created stability for over thirty years among the Muslims, Christians, and later the Palestinians; however, in the short run, a fracturing effect occurred within the Maronite community.
The Maronite community, perhaps the most politically visible religious group in Lebanon, historically has been plagued by inveterate family and presidential rivalries. In fact, in the typical Middle Eastern pattern of patriarchal leadership, the major factions within the Maronite community coalesced around a political strongman who, in most cases, was either a former president of the Lebanese Republic or a prominent politician with presidential aspirations. Indeed, the presidency was the crowning jewel in any Maronite family's treasure chest. With the presidency came the prestige of international recognition, the ability to solidify political alliances, and the means to dispense patronage. In fact, in order to understand the effects of the institutionalized presidency, it is important to understand the history of rivalry between the major Maronite factions and the changes that took place in Lebanese society. A combination of these factors as well as the 1975 Civil War account for Bashir Gemayel's rise to power.

Chamoun's National Liberal Party

Following World War II, the most influential Maronite leader was Camille Chamoun, the president and
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founder of the National Liberal Party. With his British connections and his pro-Arab positions, he was respected by Arabs and Maronites alike. In fact, Chamoun's strong Arab views helped him defeat his political rival Hamid Franjieh in 1952 after President Bishara al-Khouri resigned (see Deeb 1980, 25).

However, during Chamoun's presidency his relationship with the Muslim community declined. According to Marius Deeb, "(Chamoun) did not have a stable working partnership (between 1952 and 1956) with a strong Muslim leader as prime minister" (Deeb 1980, 26). Also, Chamoun exploited Maronite fears that Nasserism was undermining the independence of Lebanon. As part of his plan to protect Lebanon from the pervasive influence of Nasserism and Pan-Arabism, Chamoun announced his acceptance of the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957.

By accepting the Eisenhower Doctrine (which enabled U.S. allies to request military help from the United States) Chamoun placed Lebanon in open opposition with Egypt and Syria. Consequently, Chamoun disillusioned his Sunni Muslim allies and atomized Maronite political unity. Conservative Maronites, such as Raymond Iddi, Pierre Gemayel and Charles Malik supported Chamoun's new
stand. However, prominent Christian leaders like Hamid Franjieh, Henri Far'un, and Charles Hilu openly criticized him for placing the government on a collision course with Egypt and Syria (see Cobban 1985, 86).

The Shihabist Party

The U.S. Marines landed in Beirut in July 1958. Arguing for Lebanese domestic stability, the United States pressured Chamoun not to run for an unprecedented second term. With U.S. support, General Fuad Shihab reluctantly agreed to run for the presidency. In the 1958 election, Shihab received nearly seven times the votes of his opponent Raymond Iddi.

The Shihabist era covered both Shihab's own term (1958-64) and that of his successor and disciple Charles Hilu (1964-70). The primary concern of the Shihabist governments was the economic development of Lebanon. During this period the Lebanese Christians took advantage of their tradition of commercial and financial expertise. Vast amounts of fugitive Arab capital flowed into Beirut—the bastion of stability in the tumultuous Middle East. The Shihabist governments catered to the
merchant classes by lifting foreign-exchange controls and enacting banking secrecy laws.

Undoubtedly, Lebanon during the Shihabist era experienced great economic gains. However, a small portion of the populace reaped inordinate economic benefits. For example, during the 1960s, 4 percent of the population disposed of 32 percent of the GNP. The bottom 50 percent accounted for only 18 percent of GNP (McDowall 1986, 13).

Also, the Lebanese geo-political landscape changed considerably. From 1930 to 1980, Beirut increased in population by tenfold. By 1977, only 39 percent of Lebanon's population was rural. Consequently, the infamous "Belt of Misery" encircled prosperous Beirut (and also Tyre, Tripoli, and Sidon) in a ring of slum and squatter areas.

The Maronites, like every group in Lebanon during the 1960s, struggled to adapt politically to the significant political changes. Increasingly, many Christians and most non-Christians viewed the Shihabists as the party of the jet-set Beirut socialites (see Cobban 1985, 95). The Maronite Community became more visibly divided between the mountain and the city. The poorer, non-urban Maronites became identified with the more militant
Phalange and Franjieh parties, Urban Maronites, especially the merchant and professional classes, advocated tolerant Arabic policies. Conversely, the less educated, rural residents of Northern and Central Lebanon favored a less tolerant attitude towards the Arab World and strongly advocated Lebanese nationalism.

In fact, the gap separating the Maronite community was widening so rapidly during the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seems that only an event as threatening as the Civil War could have re-united the Maronite community.

The Franjieh Family

Another Maronite political leader at the time of the Civil War was Sulayman Franjieh who replaced his brother, Hamin, as party leader in the late 1950s. Sulayman Franjieh's 1970 election win over Shihabist presidential candidate Ilyas Sarkis was something of a surprise. Franjieh's election was, in part, a result of the non-urban Maronites' political mobilization.

However, Franjieh's election augured a disturbing trend within the Maronite community. Because Franjieh had only a regional political
following near Zgharta, his clan's headquarters, he naturally had difficulty inspiring his fellow countrymen and co-religionists. As tensions mounted in the early 1970's, Maronite paramilitary groups began to act individually on behalf of the state (see Stoakes 1975, 221). In short, Franjieh's inexperience and manipulability created a vacuum that Bashir Gemayel and his Phalangist military were eager to fill.

The Phalange Party

The rise of the Phalange Party, led by the Gemayel family, was, perhaps, the most interesting development within the Maronite community since the creation of the National Pact. Before the Phalange Party's emergence, the schisms within the Maronite community stemmed, as already mentioned primarily from familial, geographic, and socio-economic differences. The Phalange changed the political battle into a military war.

The Phalange party was organized in 1936 by Pierre Gemayel, a pharmacist. Gemayel patterned the party organization after the Sokol youth groups he observed while visiting Germany for the 1936 Olympic Games. During the first years of its
existence, the party was essentially an apolitical youth athletic club.

However, the 1958 Civil War politicized the party and increased Phalangist clout. From mid-September to mid-October 1958, the Phalanges kidnapped travellers, killed and tortured people found in the "wrong areas," and participated in some of the bloodiest events of the 1958 Civil War (see Cabban 1985, 91).

Also, the Phalanges were able to successfully call for mass strikes in certain parts of Greater Beirut in order to challenge the authority of the new Shihabist regime. Before the end of October 1958, Shihab decided to placate the Phalanges by including them for the first time ever in Lebanese government. According to historian Samir Khalaf the 1958 war "enlarged the political constituency of the party and transformed it from a paramilitary youth movement into a disciplined and highly organized mass party" (89).

Interestingly, Phalangist military prowess in both the first and second civil wars propelled the Phalangists into power. In fact, it seems that the Phalange has excelled the most politically during times of civil war. For example, some experts believe that without the first or second civil wars, the Phalange would not have had a realistic chance at the presidency (Haddad 1983, 118).
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During the late 1960's and early 1970s the Phalangists relied more heavily on their military prestige and anti-Palestinian rhetoric. Reflecting the party's anti-Palestinian viewpoint, Bashir Gemayel, in a 1979 interview said, "I am in favor of any solution which would relieve us of 600,000 Palestinians...We gave them all the necessary facilities. The result of their ingratitude was the war of '75" (Gemayel 1979, 58).

It appears that a combination of anti-Palestinianism and the reckless leadership of President Franjieh led many Phalangists, especially the younger, more radical faction of the party, to believe the Lebanese state was incapable of dealing with the PLO challenge and Muslim calls for a redistribution of power. Consequently, the party became more willing to use its military prowess to enforce Maronite hegemony in Lebanon. In other words, the Phalangists became, by self-definition, "the supervigilantes...builder, surrogate, and defender of the state" (Rabinovich 1984, 63).
Without question, the new militaristic emphases in Phalangist policies detailed nicely with Bashir Gemayel's prescription for Lebanon's ills. In 1975, Bashir Gemayel, at age 27, was a major player in the Phalange Party. On August 30, 1976, Bashir was elected commander of the Joint Command Council of the Lebanese Forces (Snider 1984, 8). Bashir succeeded William Hawi, who was killed while inspecting his troops at Tal Zaatar on July 13, 1975. Hawi's death was so fortunate for Bashir's career, that many Lebanese were convinced that he was responsible (see Randal 1980, 115). Considering Bashir's proclivity for temerarious behavior, it is not surprising that the party elders, including Pierre Gemayel, only hesitatingly endorsed him in his new position as the commander of the Lebanese Defense Forces (Randal 1983, 115).

However, if the party elders feared Bashir would usurp power from them, they were mistaken. Bashir, it would appear, had no intention of taking over the party that his father had built; instead, with his military power, Bashir built his own organization. According to Jonathan Randal the men who comprised the Lebanese Forces "were Bashir's men
and not those of his father's and his brother's party' (Randal 1983, 118).

This is important because Bashir knew he could count on his own men to consolidate power and eliminate his political and military rivals. In fact, on at least two occasions, Bashir massacred those whom he felt stood between himself and the presidency.

For example, in June 1978 about one-hundred of Bashir's men attacked the Franjieh house in Zgharta and killed Tony Franjieh, commander of the Marada Brigade. Bashir excused his actions as a legitimate mistake. However, the fact that Tony Franjieh was the heir to the Franjieh political dynasty and Bashir's chief Maronite military rival makes Bashir's claim seem almost ridiculous.

The bloodiest of Bashir's consolidating efforts occurred on July 7, 1980, when troops under his command simultaneously attacked the barracks, offices, and storehouses of Camille Chamoun's Tiger militia, killing approximately 500 Christians.

Despite the immediate outrage from the majority of Christian Lebanese, Bashir's ruthless tactics appeared to pay off in the long run. The remnants of the Tiger militia were absorbed into the Lebanese Defense Forces, and, for the first
time, the Maronites of central Lebanon were united by a single organization. According to Lewis Snider, "With the elimination of the Chamounist militia, the autonomous existence of the original militias came to an end. This meant that the political groups comprising the Lebanese forces no longer had any independent military structures of their own" (Snider 1984, 10).

Despite his ruthless military tactics, Bashir displayed political advantage. In less than 6 years, Bashir built an organization that threatened the existence of the Lebanese state. Under his leadership, the Lebanese Defense Forces became more than just a loose amalgamation of family militias. By 1982, the LDF had its own foreign affairs department with representation in major world capitals and a public services department with civilian popular committees in villages and areas controlled by LDF Forces. These committees provided a wide range of public services: police protection, public transportation, and water, telephone, and electricity services; moreover, under the aegis of the LDF, there were agencies responsible for the regulation of consumer prices as well as a radio and television network (see Barakat 1988, 309-10).

Bashir was hated by the majority
of his countrymen; but he was loved and lionized by those who benefited from his patronage. Perhaps his considerable accomplishments within the Phalangist community caused the leadership-starved Lebanese to flock around him—even after his controversial election.

Within days after his election Bashir began to feel confident enough in his new role as president-elect to distance himself from his Israeli military allies. Also, according to David McDowall, Bashir began to realize that if Lebanon were to be re-united, he must forsake his bullying techniques and become more moderate (see McDowall 1983, 17)

Lessons From Bashir Gemayel

Whether Bashir could have successfully ended the civil war had he lived is a matter of conjecture. Most likely he would have failed. Although popular among the masses of Lebanese Christians, Gemayel, as his assassination proved, had powerful political enemies. The Chamoun and Franjieh factions, whose support Bashir would have needed, detested him for the slaughter of their family and party members. Moreover, the Israeli and Syrian presence in Lebanon made it virtually impossible
for anyone to have anything more than regional control of the country. Also, it was planned to use Gemayel as a surrogate in ousting the PLO from Beirut.

Of course, it is purely speculative to discuss what might have happened if Bashir had lived. However, such speculation can be important in understanding what is, perhaps, the heart of the Lebanon's problem: The Maronites feel that they are losing control of the state which they claim they almost single-handedly created. In fact, Maronites often justify their destructive, belligerent behavior in words similar to the following: "We made Lebanon, we can destroy it."

Symbol of the Presidency

The Maronites have historically been suspicious of Muslim loyalty to the Republic of Lebanon. In fact, according to Kamal Salibi, before the Republic of Lebanon was created in 1926, "the Sunnites had pronounced pan-Arab sympathies, and their leaders clamored for union with Syria, which was predominantly Sunni" (1976, 9).

Therefore, from a historical perspective, it is understandable why the Maronites view the presidency as
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a symbol of the state that belongs, historically, to them. In this way, the presidency has been both a source of unity and division for the Maronite community.

The presidency has had a fracturing effect on the Maronite community in another way. As the formulator of foreign policy, the president must make decisions vis-à-vis the Arab world that could exacerbate existing divisions inside the Maronite political community. This became clear shortly before Bashir Gemayel's death as doubts about the long-standing alliance with Israel became a source of conflict. Some Maronite leaders favored the alliance while the majority did not. According to Raymond Helmick, the "whole issue (was) made dangerous through the reaction of a third group, which is bitter about the alliance and ready to purge those most associated with Israel" (Barakat 1988, 316).

The presidency has appeared to divide the Maronites in still one other important way. Any Maronite president who wants to truly be the president of Lebanon must ultimately decide whether he wishes to be a Maronite politician or a statesman for all Lebanese. This is a serious dilemma because, according to Raymond Helmick, "there is no consensus on
whether or not to trust Muslims sufficiently to try to build a joint society. For many leaders it is still a matter of ambivalence; they haven't decided" (Barakat 1988, 315). This ambivalence prefaces the question that gets to the heart of the Lebanese presidential dilemma: Is the president the leader of all Lebanese? Or is the presidency an institutionalized mechanism meant to preserve the power and prerogatives of the Maronite community? In other words, the Maronites must ask themselves how committed they are to the idea of a pluralistic society.

The test of Lebanon's viability will continue to be whether or not the Maronites will view themselves first as Lebanese and second as Maronites. After the 1975 Civil War began, one of the first to try reconciliation with the Muslim community (after he ruthlessly consolidated his power within the Maronite community) was Bashir Gemayel. Whether Bashir's attempts to mend relations with the Muslim Lebanese led to his assassination is still a matter of conjecture. However, killing politicians who favor reconciliation between the confessional groups is a familiar phenomenon in Lebanese politics. Both Bashir Gemayel and Rene Moawad's assassinations seem to confirm this.

In conclusion, the symbol and
quest for presidential power has magnified existing tensions within the Maronite community. Before 1975, the presidency was very much a boon for the Maronite community. However, after the Civil War began, bullets rather than ballots determined Maronite leadership. Consequently, Maronite political rivalries became more treacherous. Bashir Gemayel took advantage of the donnybrook mentality of the Civil War and used the LDF's military prowess to solve the problem of Maronite leadership succession. In short, an understanding of the divisions within the Maronite community help diagnose what might be considered Lebanon's disease: the subordination of the nation's good for the amelioration on factional well-being.


Rabinovich, Itamar. 1985. The war for
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