

MAPPING COMMEMORATIVE CULTURES, BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

CASE STUDY: Lebanon

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Unlike other countries where people celebrate the end of the conflicts they have been through, in Lebanon it is the day that marks the beginning of the Lebanese war that is commemorated. This most unusual situation can be explained by the fact that there seems to be no real ending point to the war. Even though October 13, 1990 marks the cessation of the armed conflict with the fall of the government of General Michel Aoun, the fact that the Asaad regime of Syria took hold of the country, left the Lebanese with a sense of bitterness that grew throughout the years and bursted into an uprising after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, which led to the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon by the end of April 2005. Still, the war didn't come to an end then, since the Lebanese people had to face a most unsteady situation: assassination of numerous political and intellectual figures, unrest in Palestinian camps and outburst of violence led by radical Islamists, and last but not least the war between Israel and Hezbollah during the summer of 2006. Even today, the general feeling is that the war has not really ended in Lebanon, and the current crisis, which incriminates the Lebanese political class that emerged from the war, reinforces the impression that what started on 13 April 1975 is still not over.

1. Background describing the period of violence examined

The period of violence examined in this report revolves around a particular date, April 13th, 1975. Events that happened that day led to a cycle of violence accompanied by a political crisis in Lebanon. The degree of violence that erupted in the suburbs of Beirut spread rapidly to other parts of the country. Militiamen turned peaceful neighborhoods into dangerous zones of combat, dragging the civilians into a turmoil that would last fifteen years. It was the beginning of the war in Lebanon.

What happened in the Ain El Remmaneh neighborhood of Beirut on Sunday 13 April 1975? 47 years after the facts, the course of this day continues to intrigue and fascinate the Lebanese people, scholars and observers. In the absence of a precise reconstruction of the facts, various assumptions have been made and many questions remain unanswered. As with all the dates that were subsequently set up as founding events, the collective memory has taken hold of 13 April 1975 to give changing versions of it, sometimes not without a certain amount of mystery. Whether one is in one camp or another, the perception of what happened is naturally not the same.

In the 15 April 1975 edition of an-Nahar newspaper, the first elements of the investigation carried out by the Mount Lebanon public prosecutor, Sabah Haydar, were published. He established a sequence of events in four stages, with many gray areas and imprecisions, particularly regarding the time frame in which the successive incidents occurred and the actors who were involved:¹

1. At an unspecified time, a fedayeen (Palestinian fighters) crossed Ain El Remmaneh twice in a Jeep and had an altercation with a person who was there. In addition, the fedayeen refused to obey the traffic officer who ordered him not to stop and to continue his journey. The release does not give any information about his whereabouts.
2. Without it being specified how long afterwards, a man by the name of Mountasser Nasser arrives at the wheel of a Volkswagen. Armed men in Ain El Remmaneh forced him out of his vehicle and pushed him forcefully, causing him to fall to the ground. Wounded in the hand, he was taken to al-Quds hospital, but his subsequent fate remains unknown.
3. At an equally undetermined moment, a Fiat 1500 with a covered number plate crossed Maroun Maroun Street, with five armed men on board who exchanged fire with armed elements present in the street. It is not clear who started shooting. The public prosecutor was unable to determine the origin of the shots. But he makes a summary list of the victims, naming only one person, Joseph Abou Assi, (one of the bodyguards of the leader of the Kataeb party, Sheik Pierre Gemayel, but the report omits to say so) who was killed as well as other people who were in the street. One of the passengers in the Fiat, fedayeen Ahmad

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al-Tawil, a Lebanese from Kfar Kila in southern Lebanon, was injured and taken to al-Quds hospital. As with the previous ones, it is not known what happened to him afterwards.

4. At 11:45 a.m, a bus coming from the Martyrs' cemetery in the direction of Dekwaneh and Tall el-Zaatar, with 29 fedayeen on board, passed a patrol who signaled it to stop, but it did not comply. Armed men then confronted and surrounded it. The report does not give any details about those armed men. Their identity and where they came from remain unknown. A number of fedayeen then got off the bus and came under fire, targeting them and the bus itself. Among the passengers, there are only two survivors: Sharif Zaydan Dakhil and Abdallah Ali Allush. It is not known whether the number of dead is 26 or 27, since the communiqué of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), mentions 26 victims, whereas in his telegram sent to Arab monarchs and presidents, Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the PLO Executive Committee, speaks of 27. One of the critically wounded was said to have died, but there was no statement about him. It was also said that a number of fedayeen were on the bridge of the bus, which attracted attention.

The Advocate General's report was published two days after the events, when other versions had already begun to circulate. Indeed, in the hours following the events, different parties, whether involved or not, rushed to express themselves, each putting forward their version of the facts.

Thus, on the evening of 13 April, the Lebanese government met and issued a communiqué read by the Minister of Information, Mahmoud Ammar. This text dates the start of the incidents to 11:00 a.m. Of the first two altercations that appear in the report of the public prosecutor, it mentions only one, without specifying whether it was the driver of the Jeep or the Volkswagen who provoked it. He then refers to the passage of the Fiat without mentioning the identity of the armed men deployed in the street who exchanged fire with the passengers in the vehicle. Only one victim is mentioned, Joseph Abu Assi, presented simply as a "Lebanese". The government's communiqué does not specify the time of the bus's passage or its origin. The central incident of the killing is expressed in the passive voice and the number of victims is 22, which is a plausible estimate at a time when the facts are much too recent to have a definitive number of casualties established. The Lebanese government assures that the security forces are working to contain the incident, and are actively pursuing and arresting "the perpetrators and instigators" who remain unidentified.

In his telegram to Arab monarchs and presidents sent on the same day, Yasser Arafat identified the culprits and the motives for the attack, which he said targeted a bus carrying civilians, including women and children. The perpetrators are the "armed gangs of the Kataeb party" who acted under an imperialist and Zionist plot to sow dissension between Lebanese and Palestinian people. Arafat openly calls on the Arab heads of state to intervene in Lebanon in order to "foil this plot" and bring the Lebanese authorities to crack down on "the Kataeb gangs". It is clear that the PLO's leader only retains the bus shooting and puts forward the idea that the victims are civilians, women and children in particular, which accentuates the dramatic tone of the telegram.

In the version of the events issued by the Kataeb party through the voice of its leader, Pierre Gemayel, there are details of the circumstances in which the tragedy took place. It states that there was a religious ceremony in the Christian suburb of Ain El Remmaneh. The inhabitants were gathered for the inauguration of a church, which suggests that they were only peaceful and unarmed worshipers. Pierre Gemayel's testimony mentions the Volkswagen, situating its passage at 11:00-a.m., and then mentions the bursting of the Fiat "a few moments later",

speeding along with four armed men on board, followed by the bus which, for its part, included 20 armed men. According to Pierre Gemayel, it was the occupants of the Fiat who fired on “the groups of faithful”, leaving some injured and others dead, including Joseph Abou Assi and Antoine Michel Husseini, another member of the Kataeb party. The passengers of the Volkswagen also fired at the crowd, before disappearing in their vehicle. There is no mention of the bus shooting in the Kataeb leader’s account. It was learned that the owner of the Volkswagen is Muntasir Ahmad Muntasir.

Not present at the scene of the tragedy, the national and progressive parties and forces, better known under the name of the Lebanese National Movement, met “urgently” according to the terms of the communiqué issued at the end of this meeting, and described the incident as a “massacre” which would have made more than 25 “martyrs”, all Palestinian “civilians”. For them, as for Yasser Arafat, this massacre was perpetrated by “Kataeb gangs” in the framework of a “Zionist colonialist plot” that targets the Palestinian resistance but also the Lebanese National Movement. Taking up the request made by Yasser Arafat in his telegram to the heads of Arab states, the national and progressive parties and forces urge the Lebanese state to “strike with an iron fist” the Kataeb party.

It is clear that the vision of what happened in Ain El-Remmaneh was blurred since the very first day. This had an effect on later stages by fueling the confusion, and encouraging different narratives to emerge throughout the years, as we will see in the following.

2. Official/dominant narratives and narratives of victims and survivors around the 13 April 1975 event

In Lebanon, one topic that was not addressed after the “termination” of the conflict in its military aspect, was the war and its repercussions. The state in Lebanon has refrained from dealing with the war and with the question of who did what to whom in its course. Dealing with the conflict was not necessary for attaining their goals and could even obstruct them. Bringing up the past, which is liable to fuel intercommunal tensions, is self-defeating since Lebanon’s leaders in the postwar era had been, and still are, the warlords who commanded the militias in the war.

The unwillingness to engage with the war is manifested in an unspoken will designed to allow its memories to quietly fade away. This behavior has created a void that civil society groups in the country were eager to fill. The refusal of Lebanon’s leaders to come to terms with the conflict was also evident in their commemorative efforts. The state declined to commemorate the conflict. In the late 1990s, when asked if there would be a war memorial in Lebanon, Interior Minister Michel el-Murr answered that the Lebanese Army already had a memorial; when asked what of the civilians, he replied that the army represents the nation.

In 2005, two months following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, when the withdrawal of Syrian army from Lebanon was taking place, the memory of the war happened to be different on its anniversary, because the assassination caused a great shock that brought the concepts of responsibility, truth, crime and punishment back into circulation. When the families of the missing demanded that the anniversary of the beginning of the war, April 13th, be declared a “day for memory and the disappeared”, it sounded like a direct challenge to the political establishment, where some members rejected the call to commemorate domestic -

as opposed to external - acts of violence. As one MP has argued: "The only memorial we will construct will be to the resistance against Israel, and no other."²

3. How is the 13 April 1975 event commemorated in the public sphere?

Therefore, official commemoration of the civil war doesn't take place in Lebanon, but rather some political parties commemorate April 13th independently and others just deliver speeches in events organized by civil society organizations. In 2005, the slogan "It is our right to know" raised by the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared, an organization created by missing people's families on October 25, 1982, turned from a slogan confined in narrow circles to one that resounded loudly throughout the country. In that year, on April 13th, "A historic event" as described by an-Nahar newspaper occurred when representatives of sixteen Lebanese sects gathered in front of the National Museum, which was a contact line and an area of tragedies during the fateful war, to raise together a unified prayer and with one voice for peace and unity.

Four years later, in 2009, on the same occasion, the Minister of Interior and Municipalities, Ziad Baroud, represented the President of the Republic, Michel Suleiman, in a ceremony announcing the establishment of a joint national monument to honor the memory of the war victims. It was pointed out that the monument would be carried out thanks to the cooperation of Beirut municipality and Solidere (a Lebanese joint-stock company in charge of planning and redeveloping Beirut Central District during the 1990s), and would be implemented according to a book of conditions that adopts a design allowing the names of the victims to be listed.³ However, the construction of this monument has been impeded due to tensions regarding the names of the victims to be listed.

In 2010, Lebanese politicians, led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, faced off at the Sports City Stadium in Beirut in a football match organized on the 35th anniversary of the outbreak of the civil war as a symbol of the will to work together for the benefit of the country, regardless of political affiliation. The match was held under the slogan "We are all one team". It was initiated by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Parliamentary Committee for Youth and Sports.⁴

Recently in 2019, a few months before the uprising events of October 17th, the Kataeb party inaugurated an "Independence Museum" in Jounieh, a town situated north of Beirut, at the very heart of what used to be the Christian zone during the war. The Secretary General of the party, Nizar Najarian, indicated in an interview that the idea to hold a central celebration had existed for some time, and they wanted to allocate a day to remember the "heroic martyrs", who sacrificed their lives for Lebanon.⁵ Thus, they decided that April 13 would be a proper day to honor the memory of those martyrs because it embodies the beginning of the war and the fall of the first Phalangist martyr, Joseph Abu Assi. According to the story of the Kataeb party that can be seen on their website, he fell in the incident of the Ain El-Remmaneh bus, whose occupants fired heavy fire in front of the church on the day of its opening by the founding head of the Kataeb party, Pierre Gemayel. This shows how the party's leadership has prioritized the narrative of their own heroic triumph or suffering, while neglecting victims they consider not "theirs" or outside of their group. This distorts the past, and further excludes certain social groups that are perceived as "others". One can also note that after the inaugural ceremony of the museum, no one from the opposing parties got into a debate with the Kataeb party and thus it is clear how conflict was avoided.

4. How is the significant date or event commemorated in the local sphere by victim and survivor communities/ victim- and survivor-centered associations/civil society organizations?

Lebanon's civil society is highly variegated and includes actors who operate in many spheres. Members of private organizations tried to stimulate a public debate on the war, lobbied for specific war-related issues, held seminars, conferences, and workshops, and set up websites dedicated to the war that serves as "virtual" commemoration, especially when official memorials were requested. All these actors have tried to mark the war's anniversary, April 13th, in an unofficial manner through different practices.

For example, Offrejoie, an association which was founded in 1985 by a group of young volunteers from every social class and religious sect, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, other associations and a number of public and private schools, organized various activities under the title "Peace be upon Lebanon." On April 13th, 2010, all schools were asked to begin their day by raising the Lebanese flag and singing the national anthem in addition to reciting a mutual prayer to protect Lebanon and prevent recurrence of the war. Also, there were activities like having school children paint scenes of the Lebanese heritage on walls on Damascus Road that still bear the effects of the war, in addition to an afforestation campaign of Horsh Beirut, the pine forest that lays at the outskirts of the city. A study class was dedicated during the day to highlight the importance of fortifying civil peace through a role-playing game prepared by educators on the subject.⁶

Also, as a reminder of the missing, Umam Association for Documentation and Research, (a nonprofit organization founded in 2004 by Lokman Slim that works towards raising awareness of civil violence and war memories in Lebanon), opened a photo exhibition in Beirut central district that included pictures of people who were kidnapped or missing during the war, under the title "...and they never came back." It also included a series of pictures from the Lebanese war, based on the principle of "an eye on what was, an eye on what is to come", according to the organizers.⁷

On April 13, 2008, under the title "Our Unity is Our Salvation", a march took place throughout the capital Beirut, along old contact lines and buildings that still bear the traces of that black day. The representatives of the former parties at war were absent in this march.⁸ As for April 13, 2009, the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, revived the anniversary by lighting candles in the memory of the 17,000 kidnapped and missing persons and all the victims of the war.⁹

5. Act for the Disappeared commemoration of the 13 April 1975 event

Act for the Disappeared (ACT) is a Lebanese human rights association founded in 2010 by young independent activists, whose mission is to contribute to the clarification of the fate of the forcibly disappeared and missing of the Lebanese civil war, support the families in their search process and foster a sustainable reconciliation process. While the state calls for forgetting and oblivion, ACT aims to prevent the distortion of the past by resisting amnesia through memorialization and documentation projects. Thus, it started commemorating the April 13 event in various ways.

On April 13, 2016, in order to pay tribute to the missing and disappeared persons and to generate a better understanding of the conflict, ACT created the online memorial FUSHAT AMAL (which means “Space for hope” in Arabic) that consists of collecting information about the missing persons and dedicating a space for each of them on a digital memorial that displays - if available - biographical information, photos and information about their disappearance. By doing so, it aims to reclaim the identities of the missing persons and restore their rightful place as members of the society. It also provides a bridge that seeks to connect families who can share their personal experiences with other citizens. It is also meant to pressure the authorities to create a list of the disappeared.

On April 13, 2017, ACT launched the “Empty Chairs, Waiting Families” project in partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) where family members could design and paint a chair in remembrance of each missing person. Chairs symbolize the empty spaces that the missing left behind. Each one of them is the creative work of a family - most of whom had never held a paint brush before - and reflects the missing loved one’s personality and the memories his/her relatives have of him/her. They were built during group sessions that allowed the families to share their suffering with others who have experienced a similar situation and transform it into a meaningful art expression. The chairs have also provided the families with a way to honor their missing persons by expressing themselves to the community through art.

On April 13, 2018, ACT launched a memory map in an attempt to create a space where anyone can share their stories, and contribute to shed light on Lebanon’s traumatic past. Visitors to this map can learn about the main events of the Lebanese war and watch or listen to people’s memories and experiences of the Lebanese conflicts. This effort aims above all to prepare the ground for the National Commission, whose mandate has been established after passing Law 105 on the missing and forcibly disappeared to investigate the fate of the disappearance. Also, as part of the campaign, ACT installed three-dimensional figures representing the disappeared in 35 different places in Beirut and the suburbs where people were kidnapped. Each figure had the following message: “People were abducted here. Here or there, it is time to know what happened to them”.

6. Lessons and best practices

As we wrap up this report, we can highlight the shortcomings of what has been done on the behalf of official or semi-official political leaders. Our findings show that there is still a hidden war about the legacy of the war among those who have seized power for the last 30 years. Whilst they represent the state, they have failed in their commemorative efforts, and have thus caused further division that has deepened the gap between the narratives and driven the Lebanese people away from reconciling opposing accounts, because the “other” remains an enemy. One of the main manifestations of this situation is the ongoing inability of the Ministry of Education to develop a curriculum that would strengthen national affiliation and uniformity in books in the fields of history and national education. So far, history school books tend to offer an incomplete and truncated narrative of events that all stop in the early 1950s. Officially, nothing has happened in Lebanon ever since. This explains the frustration of generations of young Lebanese deprived of a proper education on their past.

As for the civil society actors who have strived in their commemorative efforts, they have vowed to keep the memory of the war alive by challenging the notion of “collective amnesia” and engaging, in their practices, the youth who would otherwise be unaware of their history. By insisting on commemorating the war, civil society groups sought to assert themselves especially through their efforts towards the government to investigate and clarify the fate of the missing and forcibly disappeared.

In November 2018, the long-lasting struggle of the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared ultimately led to the passing of the Law on the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared (Law 105/2018). This law legally recognizes the “right to know”, publicly certifies the status of the disappeared and officially defines the mandate of the National Commission. However, four years later, this commission is still not operational due to lack of means and budget. Unlike the commission, civil society actors seem to have greater assets; however, they cannot make up for the shortcomings of governmental action and their work may seem as lacking coordination and effectiveness. For example, on April 13th, 2005, two civil society organizations held distinct commemorative activities at different times of the day, in different points at the heart of the city of Beirut. One arranged activities around the National Museum, where youth from various areas gathered to make this location a communication line rather than it being a former demarcation line. Then, on the same day, at night, the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared, as well as Communist party students, lit candles in memory of the missing in Martyrs’ Square. This lack of coordination may convey the impression that the Lebanese are still divided. As a result, coordinating efforts is critical. This can be also applied to the exchange of archives; many organizations are documenting about the war and the missing, but they fail to combine their efforts to make the most of this documentation.

In light of the foregoing, societal reconciliation cannot take place unless the groundwork for a collective healing process is laid. Different practices are being implemented by civil society organizations for this purpose, as follows:

- Research documentation initiatives centered on events and locations of the Lebanese civil war that can contribute to understanding the conflict and help in the clarification of the fate and whereabouts of the missing and forcibly disappeared. This work is of utmost importance to set the ground for the work of the commission once operational and may be useful for future attempts to publish a history book. The Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon has created an archive for the disappeared from the perspective of the disappeared and their families. The founder of the Committee, Wadad Halawani, states that “In case the families of the kidnapped and disappeared do not find the bodies or remains of their loved ones, the archive at least confirms that these individuals existed. Even if the state can suppress movies, studies, statements, and activities that shed light on truths that it wants to keep hidden and buried in the past, it will not be able to suppress or delete this archive—or to bury it like it did with the bodies of the disappeared.”¹⁰
- Open dialogue with the youth about the war, not to reminisce about the past, but rather to use the knowledge of past experiences to avoid repeating them. For example, to mitigate the destabilizing impact of past and recent violations and ensure that the processes will be trauma sensitive across generations, ACT conducted a consultation initiative to allow Lebanese of various generations to speak up and better understand

