Causes Of The Lebanese War Essay, Research Paper

The essence of quiescence in Lebanon was, from its formation, co-operation and co-existence between the various religious sects in the country. Although sectarianism was the major cause for the 1975 civil war, foreign interventions and interests lead to an explosion of these tensions and subsequently lead to the start and maintenance of the bloodiest war ever fought by the Lebanese people, the effects of which are felt to this day.

By the summer of 1970, attention turned to the upcoming presidential election of August 17. Sulayman Franjiyah who had the backing of the National Bloc Party and the center bloc in the Chamber of Deputies, was elected president by one vote over Ilyas Sarkis, head of the Central Bank, who had the support of the Shihabists (those favoring a strong executive with ties to the military). Franjiyah was more conservative than his predecessor, Hilu. A Maronite leader from northern Lebanon, he had a regional power base resulting from clan allegiance and a private militia. Although Franjiyah had a parochial outlook reflecting a lack of national and international experience, he was the choice of such persons as Kamal Jumblat, who wanted a weaker president than Sarkis would have been. Franjiyah assumed office on September 23, 1970, and in the first few months of his term the general political atmosphere improved.

The expulsion of large numbers of Palestinian guerrillas from Jordan in late 1970 and 1971, as a result of severe clashes between the Jordanian army and the PLO, had serious repercussions for Lebanon, however. Many of the guerrillas entered Lebanon, seeing it as the most suitable base for launching raids against Israel. The guerrillas tended to ally themselves with existing leftist Lebanese organizations or to form various new leftist groups that received support from the Lebanese Muslim community and caused further splintering in the Lebanese body politic. Clashes between the Palestinians and Lebanese right-wing groups, as well as demonstrations on behalf of the guerrillas, occurred during the latter half of 1971. PLO head Arafat held discussions with leading Lebanese government figures, who sought to establish acceptable limits of guerrilla activity in Lebanon under the 1969 Cairo Agreement.

The Chamber of Deputies elections in April 1972 also were accompanied by violence. The high rate of inflation and unemployment, as well as guerrilla actions and retaliations, occasioned demonstrations, and the government declared martial law in some areas. The government attempted to quiet the unrest by taking legal action against the protesters, by initiating new social and economic programs, and by negotiating with the guerrilla groups. However, the pattern of guerrilla infiltration followed by Israeli counterattacks continued throughout the Franjiyah era. Israel retaliated for any incursion by guerrillas into Israeli territory and for any action anywhere against Israeli nationals. An Israeli incursion into southern Lebanon, for example, was made in retaliation for the massacre of Israeli Olympic athletes in Munich in September 1972. Of particular significance was an Israeli commando raid on Beirut on April 10, 1973, in which three leaders of the Palestinian Resistance Movement were assassinated. The army’s inaction brought the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Saib Salam, a Sunni Muslim leader from Beirut.

In May armed clashes between the army and the guerrillas in Beirut spread to other parts of the country, resulting in the arrival of guerrilla reinforcements from Syria, the declaration of martial law, and a new secret agreement limiting guerrilla activity.

The October 1973 War overshadowed disagreements about the role of the guerrillas in Lebanon. Despite Lebanon’s policy of noninvolvement, the war deeply affected the country’s subsequent history. As the PLO’s military influence in the south grew, so too did the disaffection of the Shia community that lived there, which was exposed to varying degrees of unsympathetic Lebanese control, indifferent or antipathetic PLO attitudes, and hostile Israeli actions. The Franjiyah government proved less and less able to deal with these rising tensions, and by the onset of the Civil War in April 1975, political fragmentation was accelerating.

The spark that ignited the war occurred in Beirut on April 13, 1975, when gunmen killed four Phalangists during an attempt on Pierre Jumayyil’s life. Perhaps believing the assassins to have been Palestinian, the Phalangists retaliated later that day by attacking a bus carrying Palestinian passengers across a Christian neighborhood, killing about twenty-six of the occupants. The next day fighting erupted in earnest, with Phalangists pitted against Palestinian militiamen (thought by some observers to be from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine). The confessional layout of Beirut’s various quarters facilitated random killing. Most Beirutis stayed inside their homes during these early days of battle, and few imagined that the street fighting they were witnessing was the beginning of a war that was to devastate their city and divide the country.

Despite the urgent need to control the fighting, the political machinery of the government became paralyzed over the next few months. The inadequacies of the political system, which the 1943 National Pact had only papered over temporarily, reappeared more clearly than ever. For many observers, at the bottom of the conflict was the issue of confessionalism out of balance–of a minority, specifically the Maronites, refusing to share power and economic opportunity with the Muslim majority.

The government could not act effectively because leaders were unable to agree on whether or not to use the army to stop the bloodletting. When Jumblat and his leftist supporters tried to isolate the Phalangists politically, other Christian sects rallied to Jumayyil’s camp, creating a further rift. Consequently, in May Prime Minister Rashid as Sulh and his cabinet resigned, and a new government was formed under Rashid Karami. Although there were many calls for his resignation, President Franjiyah steadfastly retained his office.

As various other groups took sides, the fighting spread to other areas of the country, forcing residents in towns with mixed sectarian populations to seek safety in regions where their sect was dominant. Even so, the militias became embroiled in a pattern of attack followed by retaliation, including acts against uninvolved civilians.

Although the two warring factions were often characterized as Christian versus Muslim, their individual composition was far more complex. Those in favor of maintaining the status quo came to be known as the Lebanese Front. The groups included primarily the Maronite militias of the Jumayyil, Shamun, and Franjiyah clans, often led by the sons of zuama. Also in this camp were various militias of Maronite religious orders. The side seeking change, usually referred to as the Lebanese National Movement, was far less cohesive and organized. For the most part it was led by Kamal Jumblat and included a variety of militias from leftist organizations and guerrillas from rejectionist Palestinian (nonmainstream PLO) organizations.

By the end of 1975, no side held a decisive military advantage, but it was generally acknowledged that the Lebanese Front had done less well than expected against the disorganized Lebanese National Movement. The political hierarchy, composed of the old zuama and politicians, still was incapable of maintaining peace, except for occasional, short-lived cease-fires. Reform was discussed, but little headway was made toward any significant improvements. Syria, which was deeply concerned about the flow of events in Lebanon, also proved powerless to enforce calm through diplomatic means. And, most ominous of all, the Lebanese Army, which generally had stayed out of the strife, began to show signs of factionalizing and threatened to bring its heavy weaponry to bear on the conflict.

Syrian diplomatic involvement grew during 1976, but it had little success in restoring order in the first half of the year. In January it organized a cease-fire and set up the High Military Committee, through which it negotiated with all sides. These negotiations, however, were complicated by other events, especially Lebanese Front-Palestinian confrontations. That month the Lebanese Front began a siege of Tall Zatar, a densely populated Palestinian refugee camp in East Beirut; the Lebanese Front also overran and leveled Karantina, a Muslim quarter in East Beirut. These actions finally brought the main forces of the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), into the battle. Together, the PLA and the Lebanese National Movement took the town of Ad Damur, a Shamun stronghold about seventeen kilometers south of Beirut.

In spite of these setbacks, through Syria’s good offices, compromises were achieved. On February 14, 1976, in what was considered a political breakthrough, Syria helped negotiate a seventeen-point reform program known as the Constitutional Document. Yet by March this progress was derailed by the disintegration of the Lebanese Army. In that month dissident Muslim troops, led by Lieutenant Ahmad Khatib, mutinied, creating the Lebanese Arab Army. Joining the Lebanese National Movement, they made significant penetrations into Christian-held Beirut and launched an attack on the presidential palace, forcing Franjiyah to flee to Mount Lebanon.

Continuing its search for a domestic political settlement to the war, in May the Chamber of Deputies elected Ilyas Sarkis to take over as president when Franjiyah’s term expired in September. But Sarkis had strong backing from Syria and, as a consequence, was unacceptable to Jumblat, who was known to be antipathetic to Syrian president Hafez al Assad and who insisted on a “military solution.” Accordingly, the Lebanese National Movement successfully pressed assaults on Mount Lebanon and other Christian-controlled areas.

As Lebanese Front fortunes declined, two outcomes seemed likely: the establishment in Mount Lebanon of an independent Christian state, viewed as a “second Israel” by some; or, if the Lebanese National Movement won the war, the creation of a radical, hostile state on Syria’s western border. Neither of these possibilities was viewed as acceptable to Assad. To prevent either scenario, at the end of May 1976 Syria intervened militarily against the Lebanese National Movement, hoping to end the fighting swiftly. This decision, however, proved ill conceived, as Syrian forces met heavy resistance and suffered many casualties. Moreover, by entering the conflict on the Christian side Syria provoked outrage from much of the Arab world.

Despite, or perhaps as a result of, these military and diplomatic failures, in late July Syria decided to quell the resistance. A drive was launched against Lebanese National Movement strongholds that was far more successful than earlier battles; within two weeks the opposition was almost subdued. Rather than crush the resistance altogether, at this time Syria chose to participate in an Arab peace conference held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on October 16, 1976.

The Riyadh Conference, followed by an Arab League meeting in Cairo also in October 1976, formally ended the Lebanese Civil War; although the underlying causes were in no way eliminated, the full-scale warfare stopped. Syria’s presence in Lebanon was legitimated by the establishment of the Arab Deterrent Force (ADF) by the Arab League in October 1976. In January 1977 the ADF consisted of 30,000 men, of whom 27,000 were Syrian. The remainder were token contingents from Saudi Arabia, the small Persian Gulf states, and Sudan; Libya had withdrawn its small force in late 1976. Because of his difficulties in reforming the Lebanese Army, President Sarkis, the ADF’s nominal commander, requested renewal of the ADF’s mandate a number of times.

Thus, after more than one and one-half years of devastation, relative calm returned to Lebanon. Although the exact cost of the war will never be known, deaths may have approached 44,000, with about 180,000 wounded; many thousands of others were displaced or left homeless, or had migrated. Much of the once-magnificent city of Beirut was reduced to rubble and the town divided into Muslim and Christian sectors, separated by the so-called green line.

As Palestinian guerrilla activity launched from Lebanon against Israel increased in the late 1960s, it gave rise to serious security and political problems for the Lebanese government. The PLO forces in southern Lebanon created what amounted to a distinct Palestinian entity, outside the control of the central authorities. PLO transgressions (tajawuzat) against the Lebanese populace and Israeli military attacks made the situation critical. Political battles between Christians and Muslims centered on the role in Lebanon of Palestinian guerrillas, who were effectively conducting foreign policy that had deep repercussions for the Lebanese government. The 1969 Cairo Agreement, brokered by other Arab states, was an attempt to reduce tensions by limiting the scope of Palestinian actions in Lebanon; this arrangement, however, was never successful.

During the 1975 Civil War, the Palestinian population in the Beirut area suffered extraordinarily, as urban refugee camps were besieged by Christian militias. In contrast, some Palestinian liberation groups were in the middle of the fiercest fighting and inflicted considerable damage on the Lebanese Front. Furthermore, the PLO increased its dominance because its forces controlled areas out of the reach of the Lebanese Front.

Throughout the 1980s, Palestinian fortunes in Lebanon dwindled. The Israeli invasion was a serious setback, followed closely by the Sabra and Chatila massacres. In 1983, intra-Palestinian hostility was particularly pronounced, as factions battled near Tripoli; in the process, pro-Arafat forces were evicted by Syrian-backed elements. Moreover, the war of human attrition between Palestinians in the refugee camps of Beirut and the Amal militia that began in 1985 had not ceased by late 1987. This tragic situation illustrated the complexity of Lebanese political events, showing that hostility to the PLO was not confined to Christian groups. Nonetheless, by late 1987 the PLO still enjoyed control of much of the Sidon region and retained a strategic foothold in Lebanon.