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## **Ex-militia fighters in post-war Lebanon**

**Dima de Clerck**

After the end of Lebanon's war (1975-1990) a political decision to disarm and demobilize all militias was taken on 28 March 1991. An Amnesty Law (26 August 1991) covered all political and wartime crimes prior to 28 March. Most militias had officially handed over heavy weaponry, headquarters and barracks to Lebanese or Syrian army officials ahead of the 30 April deadline. But some 50,000 militia fighters from all denominations had 'vanished' – estimates differ regarding the 1990 numbers of militia fighters among Lebanon's estimated population of around 3.25 million, from 1.25 per cent (40,000) to 3 per cent (nearly 100,000). In reality, post-war militias sold armaments abroad, hid heavy weapons in remote mountainous areas, kept light and medium weapons to hand and continued to train potential fighters.

Demobilisation was highly selective, largely because of Syria's interest in keeping its proxies armed. Exemptions included Palestinian militias and Hezbollah – as a resistance force against ongoing Israeli occupation. The Israeli proxy, the South Lebanon Army (SLA) rejected a proposal for its integration into the regular forces. Continued collaboration with Israel prevented them from benefiting from Lebanon's Amnesty Law. When Israel withdrew from south Lebanon in 2000, many SLA members fled to Israel or emigrated.

Today, sectarian groups in Lebanon show characteristics of minorities 'under siege', anxious about their future and wary of rivals within and enemies without. This mindset perpetuates the militarization of Lebanese society, while lasting political stalemate hampers the consolidation of peace.

### **Reintegration into the state**

As part of the official demobilisation effort, on 5 May 1991 the government offered to 'rehabilitate' 20,000 militia fighters – divided between Christians and Muslims – in administrative and military state institutions. Law 88 (June 1991) allowed the integration of 6,000 militia fighters (out of which 5,000 Muslims) into the army and interior security forces. An estimated 2,000 were recruited into the civil administration, but no further phases of demobilisation followed.

Syrian stewardship of post-Taif Lebanon was an important factor in dealing with the different militias. The primary 'winners' in the rehabilitation process were Syrian allies and clients, including the Druze Progressive Socialist Party, Shia Amal, the Frangieh's *Marada*, followers of Elias Hobeika –former commander of the Lebanese Forces (LF) militia turned Syrian ally in 1986, the Sunni Popular Nasserist Organisation, and the secular Baath and Syrian Social Nationalist Parties. Former militia warlords, now cemented as sectarian leaders, were able to place their supporters at all levels of national institutions. Insertion and amnesty gave peacetime legitimacy to militia fighters. Along with the persistence of 'gun culture' and predatory behaviour in society, militia

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fighters were able to pervade the administration and further corrupt it, instead of becoming 'civilianised'.

The leaders of the defeated LF found themselves in a weaker position to negotiate integration of their fighters. Their incorporation into the army failed and emigration was facilitated for hundreds of undesirable LF elements. Only a few who had the required credentials and were backed by post-war political Muslim elites were able to join the public sector.

The government's neglect of sustained reintegration is attributable amongst other things to its fear from new polarization risks in the Army, and from intensifying ex-combatants' self-perceptions as a distinctive social group capable of challenging sectarian leaders' authority. With no comprehensive strategy for insertion, the civilian administration was encumbered with a surplus of recruits and a depleted budget. Rafiq al-Hariri's governments (1992–98) granted his Sunni, Shia and Druze allies ministries, administrative positions and funds, but abandoned further plans to insert militia fighters. Hariri feared he could not control them, since he had no militia of his own while ex-militia leaders ran the core of the administration.

Many ex-militia fighters who successfully enrolled in the army were posted to their hometowns, which effectively legitimised their wartime causes and allowed for bonds to be created between the sectarian population and the military institution. In some cases, ex-militia fighters moved from secular militias to religious armed groups: jihadist networks for Sunnis and Hezbollah for Shia. Many ex-combatants of all factions turned to religion more generally, which often played a major role in their recovery. Some concentrated on theological studies to better understand the religion in whose name they fought; others became monks or sheikhs.

It is common for ex-fighters (including those living abroad) to have maintained strong group identities and kept ties with their former leaders. When militias were 'civilianised' in the 1990s, morphing into political parties, ex-fighters were encouraged to rejoin the newly reconditioned structures. Some even got elected to parliament; others as members of local municipalities.

### **Reintegration into society**

Former militia fighters have had uneven experiences reintegrating back into Lebanese society and economy. Former militia leaders were able to place their men in private firms in Lebanon or abroad. Demand for their services was high during the 1992–96 post-war economic boom, due to the absence of a skilled workforce in Lebanon owing to massive emigration and wartime disruptions, such as schooling. Some were directed towards domestic or foreign private security companies, for instance in Iraq from 2003. Religious institutions and their associated social and educational networks employed some ex-fighters, but fewer than expected – probably fearing this might leave the impression that they condoned their wartime conduct.

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Society has looked upon former militia in different ways. Ex-fighters described by Najib Hourani as 'iconic' – poor and somehow 'pre-modern' – as well as those reputed as having been especially sanguinary, have struggled most to find employment. Children of the upper classes found a safe haven in their families regardless of whatever crimes they had committed. Those on society's bottom rungs found it harder to re-socialise: their increased wartime status and power did not upgrade them in their families' eyes, especially as the army would not integrate them. Nevertheless, strong kinship ties have helped people to cope in times of crisis, particularly in rural communities and city suburbs, where families live close together. Families filled the void when there was no institutional support for reintegration and caring for the wounded and disabled after political parties stopped paying indemnities or hospital fees.

Young men became involved in the war believing they were protecting their community and way of life. Once it was over, however, some found themselves neglected by those communities. The Sunni *Murâbitûn* who fought alongside the National Movement, for example, were disregarded by the new Sunni elite. In contrast, the Druze community honoured its fighters as having acted as shields against their adversaries.

Today, few ex-fighters are inactive; 40 per cent are self-employed – as businesspeople, contractors, carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, taxi-drivers, etc. Around 15 per cent are employed by private companies or banks. Others (mostly women) are in social work and entertainment. Those who resumed their studies achieved professional conversion more easily. According to a 2008 UMAM poll, 72.3 per cent of fighters who stayed in Lebanon claimed to have achieved complete integration in *their environment*, even if 38 per cent do still consider emigration, mainly for economic reasons.

### **Psychological and ethical challenges**

In the absence of a viable public rehabilitation policy, ex-combatants were left to struggle with psychological disorders on their own – post-traumatic stress or depression. Very few ex-militia fighters have undergone psychological treatment. Many have kept war reflexes, suffer from severe paranoia or feel vulnerable without weapons. Alcohol, drugs, domestic violence and divorce are common. Dealing with authority in a work environment is often problematic. Some ex-fighters have become involved in illegal or criminal activities, have ended up murdered or dead from drug overdoses or suicide. An estimated 12–20 per cent of ex-fighters have served prison sentences for murder, rape, assault with a deadly weapon, crimes related to state security, smuggling, fraud and drugs.

Nevertheless, many ex-fighters claim to have reintegrated reasonably well into Lebanon's post-conflict reality. If some blame the war for their troubles, most avoid talking about it. They tend to evade responsibility for violence through denial, and the state-sponsored 'collective amnesia' certainly helps. Very few concede that their wartime actions were horrific, sedating themselves by adhering to their self-proclaimed innocence. According to the UMAM survey, 57 per cent say they have no regrets at all, and 62 per cent will not apologise for their deeds.

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## **Conclusions**

The lack of a comprehensive rehabilitation programme has helped encourage new young militia recruits from post-war generations, who carry their fathers' frustrations and romanticise the civil war. The main pre-war incentives for militia mobilisation in the early 1970s – frustration, fear of the enemy within, lack of education, unemployment – remain today. Political tensions and poverty have deepened since 2005. Fuelled by propaganda, these dynamics put pressure on people and could help to propel them towards violence.

Post-war, militias are able to recruit and train a new generation of young men by exploiting their 'heroic' image, a delusion facilitated by the widespread unwillingness to speak about horrors of war. By neglecting 'demobilisation of the mind', sectarian leaders have kept new and former fighters ready to mobilise at any time: 33 per cent in the UMAM poll declared their readiness to fight another war. Some harbour frustration about past defeats and think of revenge and continue to train for combat along with their children.

In the two last decades the deliberate deficiency of state demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration has not been addressed by international engagement, by states or NGOs –except isolated and extremely limited programmes such as was introduced by Moral Re-Armament, dedicated to effecting social change through personal change.

What is urgently needed is proactive international engagement to help complete the disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life as part of broader peace building strategy, assisting them reconcile their personal perspectives with Lebanon's current social reality, and combating the prevailing gun culture. This could start with a thorough census of all ex-combatants and their grown-up children, to identify the most vulnerable (ie the least integrated and most zealous) and offer them psychological and economic assistance.

Working with ex-fighters and involving them in reconciliation activities is the best way to endow Lebanese society with 'bottom-up' immunity to the country's tendency to war. Without this, there can be no guarantees for peace in Lebanon.

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