

# PEACE UPON YOU

## REVISITING PAST ATTEMPTS TO END LEBANON'S CONFLICTS



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
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**Embassy of Switzerland in Lebanon**



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Documentation & Research

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Documentation & Research



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*During its decade-plus of existence, UMAM Documentation and Research (D&R) has pursued its overarching mission through a lengthy series of documentation, research and artistic initiatives. Those efforts have taught us that within every conflict—armed or unarmed, large or small—the premises that are key to its factual or virtual termination are present. Thanks to support from the Swiss Embassy in Beirut, UMAM D&R launched in early 2016 a program titled “PEACE UPON YOU – REVISITING PAST ATTEMPTS TO END LEBANON’S CONFLICTS.”*

*Similar to previous programs in which UMAM D&R has engaged, this effort combines a documentation and research component with an awareness-raising effort that seeks to advance exchanges (particularly among the Lebanese), that focus on relations within the country's various components, its interaction with neighbors near and far, as well as other vital topics. Of course, this program includes a great deal of work on the past (primarily the recent past), so it should be evident that its purpose is not only to help see the present more clearly, but also to devise useful strategies for the future.*

The documentation, confined thus far to Arabic language material, is available on UMAM D&R's online MemoryAtWork.org database.

*While the name of this program describes its intent, a few remarks may help situate the effort vis-à-vis current developments and concerns.*



In 2015, the Lebanese commemorated the 40th anniversary of the day on which several coincidences somehow aligned to spark the country's civil war: April 13, 1975. The Lebanese did so, however, *with obvious indifference and aloofness....*

In reality, that was not the only anniversary the Lebanese *could* have chosen to observe that year. For instance, they might have opted to commemorate the 380th anniversary of the execution of Prince Fakhreddin Maan II, an iconic figure some Lebanese see as the founding father of the Lebanese entity (April 13, 1635). They could

also have observed the 30th anniversary of the outbreak of the “The War of the Camps” or the 1985 Tripartite Agreement that was signed in Damascus by three of Lebanon's illustrious community leaders/warlords (one of which was killed by a car bomb in 2002 after a parliamentary and ministerial career, while the other two continue to play major roles in Lebanon's affairs).<sup>1</sup> They might even have

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<sup>1</sup> “The War of the Camps” (1985 – 1988) is an excellent example of the kind of extremely costly confrontations that occurred during “the war,” but which *political correctness* discourages people from remembering. Interestingly, the oblivion generated by such political correctness not only encompasses military showdowns, but also peace initiatives. For instance, the Tripartite

opted to reflect on the 25th anniversary of the Taif Agreement (1990), which heralded the beginning of Lebanon's Second Republic. In short, the Lebanese could have celebrated any of several other events that influenced the country's history to varying extents.

Regardless of the myriad reasons that might have distracted the Lebanese from commemorating that 40th anniversary on April 13, 2015, *as it should have been observed* (though it would be interesting to graph the changes in their enthusiasm/apathy about that anniversary), they still have an opportunity to redeem themselves in 2016.<sup>2</sup> As if by coincidence, the first, serious attempt to end the "war" occurred in 1976. But while that bid has long since disappeared from the country's collective recall, it is as worthy of reminiscence as the many peaks and valleys of that war.

However well intentioned

that initial attempt may have been (an assumption that is not immune to criticism), it failed dramatically, and the war persisted. Nowadays, that

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Agreement (a precursor to the Taif Agreement where terms and provisions are concerned) is typically viewed as an episode in the "family history" that is best forgotten, while the Taif Agreement is lauded as a particularly brilliant solution.

<sup>2</sup> The distressing date of April 13 did not automatically become a fixture on the Lebanese calendar. Rather, similar to other dates on that calendar, its history still needs to be told. Where 2015 is concerned, one of the significant debates that occurred in April centered on the relevance/irrelevance of establishing an official commemoration of the 100th anniversary of a tragedy that befell another nation: Armenia. Along that line, Lebanon's minister of education announced that April 24 would be a day off for schools: "this [announcement] caused significant opposition from within the [Sunni] Muslim milieu. Despite the 'support' the minister's decision received from the cabinet, it did not prevent some people from requesting that 'the commemoration be confined to private schools that wish to commemorate that day without extending it to Muslim schools [to wit: Sunni Muslim] and public schools.'" In addition, it did not prevent requests for the commemoration of other mass killings (e.g., "Sabra and Shatila, Kosovo, Burma"). Further, it did not dissuade criticism that commemoration of the Armenian genocide is merely "an incitement to old hatreds and sedition. (For the quotations, see *an-Nahar*, April 22, 2015 and *al-Akhbar*, April 23, 2016).

first, failed effort is typically considered by most Lebanese as the official commencement of Syria's political and military/ security presence in Lebanon, which lasted until 2005. Nevertheless, despite the inglorious outcome of that first attempt to halt the bloodshed, the year 1976 is reflected on the Lebanese calendar as the end of the *Two Years War* (despite the conclusion of which, the larger war raged on).<sup>3</sup> A second, unsuccessful bid took place in 1982 and coincided with Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Finally, a third failed attempt was made in 1985 when the Tripartite Agreement was signed. The Taif Agreement that ultimately halted the violence in Lebanon remained largely theoretical until a military operation was waged against the Baabda Presidential Palace (occupied at the time by one of the war's primary actors, who steadfastly rejected its substance).

Yet, while Taif ended the war in Lebanon and marked the beginning of the era of *Syrian tutelage*, it also heralded the commencement of a new period. In that case, regional and international powers either blessed or accepted as a fait accompli (directly or indirectly) the nascent yet intimate coexistence of *Reconstruction* and *Resistance* within the tiny country of Lebanon,

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<sup>3</sup> "Two Years War" is the name given to the dozen-plus rounds of violence that occurred in Lebanon between April 13, 1975 and the beginning of Syria's official armed presence in the country following the Riyadh and Cairo Arab summits of October 1976. Notably, the expression "Syrian presence" is not only problematic, but also tends to downplay the "occupational" nature attributed to that presence by many Lebanese. Nevertheless, even those who typically highlight the nature of Syria's *occupation* of Lebanon do not place it on equal footing with the Israeli occupation. An interesting example of this dichotomy can be found in the April 25, 2005 edition of *an-Nahar*. While the headline reads, "The coming hours will witness the end of 30 years of Syrian presence," the editorial by the late Ghassan Tueni is titled "Day one 'evacuation.'" The Arabic rendition of the word "evacuation" is tainted heavily with the notion related to the withdrawal of an enemy force.

particularly since Israel was still occupying a large part of the country.<sup>4</sup> As of February 14, 2005 (the day a huge explosion rocked Beirut killing (among others) the champion of the country's reconstruction), Lebanon began yet another (ongoing) phase in its history. In typical Lebanese fashion, however, even this latest stage has been marked by episodic violence, sometimes taken to the extremes. In fact, that seesaw violence lingered until regional and international actors interceded to produce the 2008 Doha Agreement, referred to often as a "booster shot" for the Taif Agreement.

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The efforts referenced above are among the more salient points along the timeline of attempts to "end the war." Regardless of the character and sponsors (local, regional or international) of such

efforts, all had to consider the extant, domestic Lebanese bones of contention, and none could avoid suggesting "solutions" to those disparities—even when those "suggestions" were extremely temporary in nature. Regardless of the weight exerted by external and foreign factors (e.g., negative weight that pushes a domestic disagreement toward violence or positive weight that contains such escalation), they relate consistently to specific local (domestic) or even indigenous terms, such as the ceaseless debates over Lebanon's Arab

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<sup>4</sup> Defining the 15 years of Syrian presence that stretched from the Taif Agreement to April 2005 was anything but simple for the Lebanese. Referred to sometimes as the "era of Syrian tutelage" (a term that seeks to exonerate the Lebanese from having supposedly "collaborated" with the occupier), that moniker most likely originated during a televised interview with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt (*an-Nahar*, April 27, 2005). The general acceptance of this exceedingly accommodating euphemism helps explain the persistent reticence about examining that period.

identity, its system of “confessionalism,” the nature of its relationship with Syria, etc. Moreover, these terms offer proof that efforts made to “terminate war” cannot be quantified simply by measuring the length of time a country experiences respites in violence, as doing so would give a false impression of “peace” per se. Rather, the metric selected must include the development (or lack thereof) of the debate over particularly contentious matters. It must also be considered that some terms of those debates, which can become obsolete or sometimes vanish altogether, may indicate the relative condition (i.e., prognosis for survival) of ongoing intra-Lebanese discussions. We might even suggest that those we refer to as the “Lebanese partners in the debate” are not always constant. Indeed, a brief review of the period from 1975 to today demonstrates that

the main turning points in Lebanon’s history emerged as “revolving doors” through which some actors left the game and others joined—bringing with them new terms for the debate or adopting and redefining the old ones.

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Until recent years, existential Lebanese debates over the country’s identity and commitments—manifested periodically through displays of fierce violence—seemed to be exceptions to the general rules regarding political and security “stability” throughout the Middle East. Today, however, those rules have been broken. The entire region has degenerated into a breeding ground for conflicts and wars in which old adversities, long since considered by many to be little more than vestiges of the past, are being reawakened. Like several of its neighbors (though still spared from the levels of violence

that has stricken them), Lebanon now appears to have lost its exceptional status. Moreover, like other Middle Easterners, the Lebanese must not only commence some very serious soul-searching efforts, but also explore new intra-Lebanese political deals. Despite all of this, however, it

is certainly worthwhile to review some of the historical attempts made to achieve peace in Lebanon. After all, drawing lessons from those attempts—even considering their lack of success—might prove valuable not only for Lebanon, but for other countries as well.