A Massacre in the Village... and Wounds That Never Heal

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More than half a century has passed since the Lebanese Civil War, yet I still see its traces in every corner of our lives—on the streets, in our conversations, and in the silences that stretch between people. Yesterday's massacres have not been forgotten, nor has the violence been fully buried. At times, it feels as though the war never truly ended; it simply changed form and slipped back into our lives in different guises.

I live between two generations: one that fought in that war and refuses to forget, and another born after it but who inherited its wounds—as though memory itself passes through blood. I often ask myself: was silence ever a real choice? And can forgiveness mean anything without accountability?

In this piece, I return to the Ain Toura massacre of March 1976, which occurred in my birthplace, to ask whether the absence of justice allowed violence to repeat itself, and whether we can truly build a future without confronting our past with honesty.

I spoke with the local head of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) as well as members of the Kataeb Party, comparing testimonies and narratives in search of a thread of truth amid conflicting memories.

According to one version, the events began when Ahmad al-Khatib's army entered the village and discovered that nearly every home bore the SSNP emblem, even though many of the residents were affiliated with Kataeb. Suspicion deepened after several young Kataeb members were kidnapped. Yusuf Fouad of the SSNP attempted to negotiate their return but was assassinated. After al-Khatib's forces withdrew, Kataeb youth regrouped in Antelias and marched toward Ain Toura. By the time they arrived, the army had already retreated, yet a massacre followed, and many SSNP members were brutally killed, some at the hands of fellow villagers. Among the most harrowing testimonies was that of a father who witnessed his son's murder, then paid money

just to bury him with dignity. In retaliation, the SSNP killed and tortured those involved in the massacre, as well as Kataeb members who had not taken part.

When I asked the SSNP official about commemorating the massacre, he replied firmly: “We do not want to return to the past. We only honor our martyrs.”

On accountability, he stated: “We are not seeking trials. We only want an apology. We once tried to reach such a settlement in a meeting with the Kataeb representative and the local priest. We were ready to apologize, but at the last moment, they backed down.”

The Kataeb, for their part, described their village as having been under “occupation” by outsiders: al-Khatib’s troops, Palestinian fighters, and the SSNP. Many residents, caught in the crossfire, fled to neighboring towns after heavy shelling.

Al-Khatib’s forces accused Kataeb of killing a family of ten, with only two survivors. In response, Kataeb youth attacked to retake the village, insisting their aim was to expel the outsiders, not to fight fellow villagers. Still, the violence left casualties on all sides, and civilians bore the heaviest cost.

One Kataeb witness recalled that, prior to the massacre, villagers from the SSNP had tried to convene a meeting to regulate weapons and avoid escalation. There was even hope that al-Khatib’s army would simply pass through without occupying the village. But the opposite happened; the army stormed Ain Toura, burned homes, and imposed a six-month occupation.

As for the failed reconciliation attempt, a Kataeb member told me their party never rejected the idea of an apology. The deadlock, he said, was because the SSNP demanded that Kataeb accept full responsibility without offering any reciprocal acknowledgment. “We wanted to apologize as a gesture toward calm,” he explained, “but their refusal to admit responsibility made reconciliation impossible.”

Other testimonies remain etched in memory. A man who was only eleven at the time said the sound of shelling still haunts him. His uncle, uninvolved in any political group, was killed like many other innocents caught in a war that recognized no neutrality.

Listening to all these accounts, it becomes clear that the truth is fragmented. The horror cannot be denied, but it is nearly impossible to establish who struck first or what triggered the spiral of violence. Each side felt it was defending its identity and survival.

This cycle of grievance and retaliation made it impossible to assign all blame to one party.

The lack of apology, and the refusal to confront the past, allowed the circle of violence to endure into the next generations. Young people raised in its shadow became victims of a heavy legacy. Without honest reckoning or acknowledgment, each side has clung tightly to its narrative.

This reality surfaces even in small gestures—a photograph hung on a wall, a simple public act, a partisan song—that spark renewed tensions. In 2018, for instance, the local Kataeb head hung a portrait of Bashir Gemayel in March, the very month of the massacre's anniversary. SSNP youth considered it a provocation, stormed his home, tore down the picture, and physically assaulted him.

In another incident, a man once involved in the massacre returned to the village and, with unsettling nonchalance, drank beer in public. His presence reignited anger, leading SSNP youth to confront him at his home. Violence was narrowly avoided, but the encounter showed how raw the wounds remain.

Even religious celebrations became flashpoints. During the Feast of the Virgin Mary in Ain Toura, a young man sang Lebanese Forces party songs at a table where SSNP members sat. They quickly retaliated, throwing bottles at him. No one was injured, but the episode was another reminder of how easily the old fault lines can erupt.

These clashes among younger generations are proof of a deeper problem: reconciliation never truly happened. Violence, whether in words or actions, became a language of frustration for youth burdened by an unresolved history.

Decades after the Ain Toura massacre, its scars still shape daily life. The wounds were never properly treated; instead, they remain visible to new

generations. Real reconciliation cannot happen without a candid confrontation with the past and acknowledgment of its painful truths.

Violence does not fade with time. It mutates, especially when silence takes the place of justice. Delays in accountability have only frozen society in its wounds. Attempts at reconciliation, though well-intentioned, faltered under hesitation and retreat. As a result, they did not bring healing but left the roots of conflict untouched.

The road to reconciliation is not easy—it demands collective effort and sincerity. It cannot rest on temporary truces or simplified agreements. It requires full acknowledgment of the past and a serious reckoning with its legacy. Despite the obstacles, even small steps toward justice and mutual understanding remain the only way to imagine a future different from the past: one free of rancor and resentment, where peace is possible at last.