

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

SYRIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION IN THE JORDANIAN  
AND LEBANESE CIVIL WAR: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND  
MOTIVATIONS

by  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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Title: Syrian Military Intervention in the Jordanian and Lebanese Civil War: Historical Context and Motivations

This paper will examine the military intervention of Syria in the Jordanian Civil War of 1970-1 and the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-90, focusing specifically on what were the determining factors that caused the government in Damascus to act the way it did. As there is no broad agreement on a single unifying factor that dictated Syrian decision-making, a review of the literature on both conflicts is the best method for examining the sometimes complimentary, something contradictory arguments. The paper will be broken down into two main parts: one on the Jordanian Civil War and one on the Lebanese Civil War. Within these two parts, there will also be two sub-sections: one summarizing the historical setting and events of the conflict prior to Syrian intervention and one laying out the factors that led to their military involvement.

In the Jordanian Civil War literature, the authors posit that the main factors motivating Syria's decision-making were the protection the Palestinian revolution from the Jordanian regime, a desire to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy or machinations to settle a domestic political struggle through the foreign military intervention in Jordan. Meanwhile, in the case of the Lebanese Civil War, the literature argues that Syria's actions could primarily be attributed to the need to protect its own security concerns, both domestically and regionally, along with furthering its goal to establish itself as the preeminent Arab power in the Levant.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The period that witnessed the Jordanian and Lebanese Civil Wars was one of immense political change and upheaval in the Arab world. Coming in the wake of the 1967 War, which resulted in the loss of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, along with the decimation of the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies, Arab politics became more divisive as societies argued about the best course of action to confront Israel, solve the Palestinian question and stabilize their own domestic political situations. The internal fighting that Jordan witnessed in 1970-1 and that gripped Lebanon from 1975-90 can be seen as attempts by various groups to dictate their solutions by force to the problems that emerged from the 1967 War. These conflicts not only affected the domestic political climates in Jordan and Lebanon, but also had enormous ramifications for Syria, a neighbor of both countries. The regime in Syria, driven by both domestic and foreign policy concerns, became an active belligerent in both conflicts in attempt to advance their own political agenda.

This paper will examine the military intervention of Syria in both of these conflicts, focusing specifically on what were the determining factors that caused the government in Damascus to act the way it did. As there is no broad agreement on a single unifying factor that dictated Syrian decision-making, a review of the literature on both conflicts is the best method for examining the sometimes complimentary, something contradictory arguments. However, before examining the arguments put forth by various academics and authors on



Syria's intervention in Jordan and Lebanon, it is necessary to provide some historical context and narrative to the conflicts. As a result, the paper will be broken down into two main parts: one on the Jordanian Civil War and one on the Lebanese Civil War. Within these two parts, there will also be two sub-sections: one summarizing the historical setting and events of the conflict prior to Syrian intervention and one laying out the factors that led to their military involvement. In the Jordanian Civil War literature, the authors posit that the main factors motivating Syria's decision-making were the protection the Palestinian revolution from the Jordanian regime, a desire to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy or machinations to settle a domestic political struggle through the foreign intervention in Jordan. Meanwhile, in the case of the Lebanese Civil War, the literature argues that Syria's actions could primarily be attributed to the need to protect its own security concerns, both domestically and regionally, along with furthering its goal to establish itself as the preeminent Arab power in the Levant. After examining the arguments laid out in the literature, I hope to make a determination on whether Syria's intervention in the internal wars of its neighbors can be explained by consistent motivations over both conflicts, or whether Syrian actions were mainly dictated by concerns that were unique to that time.

## CHAPTER II

### JORDANIAN CIVIL WAR

#### **A. Conflict before Syrian intervention**

The roots of the conflict between the Palestinian fedayeen and the Jordanian state that led to civil war in 1970 can be traced to the immediate aftermath of the defeat of Arab armies to Israel in 1967. During this period, King Hussein, distraught by Jordan's military defeat and the loss of the West Bank and Jerusalem, chose to pursue a strategy of negotiations with Israel over armed struggle in attempt to gain back some of the land lost during the war. In doing this, Hussein ignored the advice of other factions with the Jordanian government, who advocated for "picking up the rifle of Arab liberation" and bringing the Palestinian resistance under the banner of the Jordanian state.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the role of reclaiming Palestinian land by force shifted from Arab states to a more radicalized Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) led by Fatah, a secular movement based on Palestinian nationalism. Fatah saw their popularity soar to never before seen heights after the Battle of Karameh in 1968, after which they rode of the wave of popular support to head of the PLO in 1969. In failing to bring the Palestinian resistance against Israel immediately under the umbrella of the Jordanian state, King Hussein allowed a popular, independent Palestinian movement to emerge that would become a major threat to his throne.

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<sup>1</sup> Hupp, Clea Lutz. *The United States and Jordan: Middle East Diplomacy during the Cold War*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014. p. 166

Following the defeat of Jordan to Israel in the 1967, King Hussein, desperate to recover the lost land, chose to pursue a policy of diplomacy in alliance with Egypt and the United States. Together with Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser, Hussein hoped to build “an axis of moderation in the Arab world” that would provide him political cover to negotiate with the Israelis and counter the PLO’s calls for armed struggle.<sup>2</sup> With the Jordanian monarchy focusing on negotiations with Israel in attempt to regain the land lost during the 1967 war, the Palestinian fedayeen began to build support for itself within Jordan and carry out operations from the East Bank of the Jordan River against Israel. Groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Marxist-Leninist groups that had grown out of the Arab Nationalist movement, enjoyed considerable popular support within Jordan. PLFP leader George Habash had roots in the Jordanian National Movement, the first Arab Nationalist opposition movement in Jordan. Nayyef Hawatmeh, the leader of the DLFP, was a Transjordanian Christian from the town of Salt.<sup>3</sup> The PFLP had some 300-400 fedayeen carrying out operations against Israel from the East Bank when they were joined by around 500 Fatah members, who migrated to the East Bank after their plans to carry out sabotage operations from within the occupied West Bank proved unsuccessful.<sup>4</sup> Fatah, whose leadership had almost no roots in Jordan and espoused a Palestinian nationalist ideology, chose to recruit adherents from among the Palestinian refugee population in

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<sup>2</sup> Susser, Asher. *On Both Banks of the Jordan: A Political Biography of Wasfi Al-Tall*. Newberry Park, Great Britain: Frank Cass, 1994. p. 129

<sup>3</sup> Mukhar, Randa. "A Study in Political Violence: The Jordanian Internal War of 1968-1971." Thesis. American University of Beirut, 1978 p. 54-55

<sup>4</sup> Sayigh, Yazid. *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997. p. 177

Jordan. 300,000 Palestinians had fled the West Bank and Gaza during the 1967 war, settling in camps around major Jordanian population centers such as Amman and Zarqa. With this second wave of Palestinian migration to the East Bank, the first of which took place after the establishment of Israel in 1948, it was estimated Palestinians made up roughly 60% of Jordan's population at the time of the civil war.<sup>5</sup> As various Palestinian fedayeen groups launched operations against Israel from the East Bank, Jordan did little to prevent these attacks, owing to their degraded and demoralized army and the sympathy and political cover granted to the fedayeen by other Arab governments. Instead, Jordan's top priority remained the rebuilding its military capability and monitoring the activities of the numerous Palestinian organizations that made up the PLO.<sup>6</sup>

The string of guerilla attacks and Israeli reprisals following the 1967 war culminated in the Battle of Karameh, which is often pointed to as the event that put Jordan on the road to civil war. On March 18, 1968, an Israeli force of 15,000 troops moved against the Palestinian fedayeen base at Karameh. There, it clashed with some 200-250 Fatah guerillas and the Jordanian 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry division, supported by tanks and artillery. Although both sides sustained heavy losses and the Israelis accomplished most of their tactical goals, the myth of a tiny Palestinian armed force standing strong against an overwhelming Israeli army resulted in a massive political and propaganda victory for Fatah and the fedayeen. Yassir Arafat, who, according to legend, planned the defense of Karameh and participated in the fighting before escaping through Israeli lines on a motorcycle,

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<sup>5</sup> Pappé, Ilan. *Jordan Between Hashemite and Palestinian Identity* In: Jordan and the Middle East. Ilford, Essex, England: Frank Cass, 1994 p. 71-72

<sup>6</sup> Robins, Philip. *A History of Jordan*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2004. p. 127

became a hero of the Palestinian resistance and was named leader and official spokesman of Fatah, before riding the tide of popularity to the head of the PLO in 1969.<sup>7</sup> However, this myth clashes with the reality in which the Jordanian army did the majority of the fighting. But it was the Palestinian guerillas whose popularity soared, with over 5,000 volunteers attempting to join Fatah in the 48 hours following the battle.<sup>8</sup> The aftermath of the clash also saw increased cooperation between Fatah and Nasser's Egypt, who provided weapons, propaganda support and military and weapons training to the Palestinian movement, helping to further establish themselves as the preeminent group in the PLO.<sup>9</sup> The "astute manipulation of the media by the guerillas" that led to them receiving the lion's share of the credit for Karameh alienated many officers and soldiers in the Jordanian military and further antagonized the relationship between the army and the fedayeen.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the sudden rise of an armed movement, espousing a Palestinian nationalism ideology and with bases across Jordan, represented a direct threat to the authority of King Hussein's rule over his subjects.

The period of 1968-1970 saw a low intensity conflict between the Jordanian state and the PLO simmer below the surface before exploding into full-scale war in September 1970. During this time, the PLO and Jordanian government traded recriminations and sometimes bullets in a series of incidents that disturbed the civil peace in Jordan. Despite the simmering tension and occasional bouts of violence, no unified calls for regime change

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<sup>7</sup> Terrill, Andrew. "The Political Mythology of the Battle of Karameh." *The Middle East Journal* 55.1 (2001): p. 98

<sup>8</sup> Terrill, *The Political Mythology of the Battle of Karameh* p. 100

<sup>9</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle & The Search for a State*, p. 180

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 179

from the PLO or an overall decision by the Jordanian monarchy to crush the fedayeen developed until September 1970. Instead, this period saw the growing of factions within both the PLO and Jordanian regime who favored alternative courses of action. This uneasy state of relations continued until September 1970, when hardliners within both groups won out and PLO-Jordanian coexistence reached the point of no return.

The expansion of the Palestinian guerilla presence east from the Jordan Valley to the urban centers of Jordan throughout 1968 presented the first challenge to law and order in the kingdom and proved to be the impetus for the first clashes between the fedayeen and Jordanian state. PLO forces, whose ranks were bolstered following the Battle of Karameh, were driven out of the Jordan Valley by the summer of 1968 by Israel military pressure. The groups settled away from the front lines and around urban centers and refugee camps, where many of their core supporters resided. While setting the foundations for an armed presence not under state control in Jordanian cities, the fedayeen also began to establish party headquarters, administrative offices, clinics, media offices and supply centers.<sup>11</sup> The actions of the PLO engendered much resentment from native Jordanians, who endured harassment and believed that they were paying the price for the PLO's actions. 65,000 residents along the West-East Bank border were forced to flee from Israeli military action against the guerillas, causing agricultural production to severely decline. King Hussein eventually declared that he would not allow the fedayeen to continue to create the pretext for Israeli reprisals but his calls went unheeded.<sup>12</sup> Clashes finally broke out in October 1968

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<sup>11</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle & The Search for a State* p. 183

<sup>12</sup> Axelrod, Lawrence W. "Tribesmen In Uniform." *The Muslim World* 68.1 (1978): p. 32

in Amman between the Jordanian regime and the fedayeen. By the time an agreement was brokered, which saw some fedayeen relocate from Amman to training camps near Salt, Jerash and Karak, 94 people had been killed. The Jordanian regime blamed a rogue fedayeen group called Kataeb al-Nasr, led by Tahir Deblan, for starting the conflict by extorting money from Jordanian citizens and firing on the Jordanian army. The PLO, on the other hand, accused Deblan and his group of being a creation of Jordanian Intelligence to discredit the Palestinian fedayeen as a whole.<sup>13</sup> There very well could be some truth behind the fedayeen claims, as chief of the Royal Court Zaid Rifai told US official Joseph Sisco in April 1969 that the Jordanian government had “successfully penetrated the fedayeen groups and worked to incite internal division.”<sup>14</sup>

As the PLO continued to grow more brazen in their activity, hardliners emerged within the Jordanian regime that pressured King Hussein to act against the PLO presence in Jordan, revealing the existence of multiple camps within the regime. Wasfi al-Tell, a former and future prime minister from the East Bank town of Irbid, railed against then Prime Minister Bahjat al-Talhuni’s soft policies towards the fedayeen and Egypt.<sup>15</sup> The hard-line presented by Tell likely reflected the view of many in the Jordanian army, particularly the native Transjordanian soldiers. The army resented both bearing the brunt of Israeli reprisals against the fedayeen and the fedayeen masquerading as “a second army” in Jordan who “paraded armed and uniformed through Jordanian towns.”<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, King Hussein

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<sup>13</sup> Mukhar, *The Jordanian Internal War of 1968-1971* p. 74-75

<sup>14</sup> Hupp, *The United States and Jordan* p. 167

<sup>15</sup> Susser, *Both Banks of the Jordan*, p. 135-136

<sup>16</sup> Axelrod, *Tribesmen In Uniform* p. 34

continued to vacillate between accommodation and cracking down on the PLO. In February 1970, after another round of clashes between the PLO and the Jordanian army, Hussein caved in to fedayeen demands and removed PLO opponents Muhammed Rasul-Kaylani, Nasir bin Jamil, and Zayd bin Shakir from their posts of Interior Minister, Commander in Chief of the Army, and Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division of the Jordanian army respectively. Hussein's submission to PLO demands, "aroused the indignation of key figures in the Hashemite family, in the Transjordanian political elite and in the senior officer corps."<sup>17</sup> Hussein's indecisiveness was likely the result of trying to juggle the demands of the PLO, the hardliners within his own government and his continued attempts to seek an accommodation with Israel.

The emergence of a unified position between King Hussein and Nasser regarding negotiations with Israel in June 1970 caused leftist groups within the PLO that were calling for the overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy to win out at the exact moment that hardliners within the Jordanian government were pushing Hussein to crack down on the guerillas. This perfect storm of events would lead to open warfare in September of the same year. The acceptance of the Roger's Plan by Egypt and Jordan in July 1970 to end the War of Attrition and bring about a settlement of the conflict with Israel based on UN Security Council Resolution 242 robbed the PLO of its greatest supporter in Nasser and left them isolated. The PLO then turned their wrath on what they viewed as the traitorous Hashemite monarchy, openly calling for its overthrow. Even Arafat, who headed what was viewed as the most moderate PLO faction, reportedly said "We have decided to convert Jordan into a

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<sup>17</sup> Susser, *Both Banks of the Jordan* p. 136



cemetery for all conspirators- Amman shall be the Hanoi of the revolution.”<sup>18</sup> Now armed with the support of Nasser, Hussein moved to assuage his Jordanian base by promoting prominent tribal officers within the army, including reappointing his cousin Zayd bin Shaker as Deputy Chief of Staff, and conferring with Bedouin notables, on the best course of action to take in the looming showdown with the PLO.<sup>19</sup>

The conflict known as the Jordanian Civil War or “Black September” refers to the short period of intense fighting between the PLO and the Jordanian military during September 1970. This period saw King Hussein finally forced by hardliners within his own government to crackdown on the PLO, who were openly calling for the overthrow of the regime, and their state-within-a-state. Things came to head in early September as King Hussein survived an assassination attempt and the PFLP hijacked three commercial airlines, taking Western hostages. Refused permission to land at Amman airport, the hijackers landed the planes at the abandoned Dawson’s Field airstrip, demonstrating the shallowness of King Hussein’s authority in large parts of the country.<sup>20</sup> With the eyes of the world now on Jordan, fighting raged in Amman, Zarqa, and Irbid. Things deteriorated further when Irbid was declared a “free city” by the fedayeen and Jordanian Army Chief of Staff Manshoor Haditha defected to the PLO on September 9, further demonstrating the fractious nature of the Jordanian regime. The king responded by calling native Transjordanian Habis al-Majali out of retirement and appointing him commander-in-chief of the army. This

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<sup>18</sup> Shlaim, Avi *Lion of Jordan; The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace*. London: Allen Lane. (2007) p. 320-321

<sup>19</sup> Axelrod, *Tribesmen In Uniform* p. 34

<sup>20</sup> Mukhar, *The Jordanian Internal War of 1968-1971* p. 100

action can be viewed as a response to pressure from native Transjordanians within the army, who were on the point of mutiny. Before deciding to move against the PLO, Hussein declared martial law on September 16 and appointed a military government led by General Muhammed Daoud, a Jordanian of Palestinian origins. Another Palestinian present in the cabinet was Adnan Abu-Odeh, a major in Jordanian intelligence.<sup>21</sup> However, the composition of this cabinet was for show; an attempt to convey to the Palestinian population of Jordan that the army's subsequent action was not directed against them as a whole but against the Palestinian fedayeen. During the conflict, the real power within the Jordanian regime rested with the native Transjordanian officer corps of army and Wasfi al-Tell, who, despite having no official title, personally advised the king throughout the crisis in Hummar Palace.<sup>22</sup>

Army units composed mainly of Bedouins and native Transjordanians entered Amman and deployed around other urban centers controlled by the PLO on September 17. The Jordanian 60<sup>th</sup> Armor Brigade, who entered Amman without a real battle plan after the defection of its former chief of staff, met stiff fedayeen resistance and proceeded to shell the Hussein and Wahdat refugee camps.<sup>23</sup> This haphazard attack on Palestinian population centers (Wahdat housed 31,000 Palestinian refugees) would be used by the Palestinian fedayeen to create the propaganda of the "Black September massacres" or "genocide" against the Palestinian people.<sup>24</sup> These narratives were attempts by the Palestinian fedayeen

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<sup>21</sup> Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan* p. 324-325

<sup>22</sup> Axelrod, *Tribesmen In Uniform* p. 39

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Nevo, Joseph. "September 1970 in Jordan: A Civil War?" *Civil Wars* 10.3 (2008): p. 226

create a divide between the Palestinian population of Jordan and the native Transjordanians by filling the media with tales of “enraged Bedouin troops raping and slaughtering.” In actuality, given the large number of combatants in the conflict, there was very little hand-to-hand combat and fighting usually subsided at night.<sup>25</sup> The massacre narrative can also be seen in the inflated reporting of Palestinian casualties from the first 10 days of major fighting, which stretched from 3,400 on the high end to around 900 on the low end.<sup>2627</sup> The Jordanian army also sustained relatively low casualties figures, leading to speculation that the fedayeen did not deploy their full forces to protect their positions and rather chose to retreat. In the end, the greatest military threat to King Hussein’s regime during the civil war did not come from Palestinian militias, but rather the entry of the Syrian military into the country in support of the PLO.

## **B. Syrian intervention in conflict**

A tank column from the Syrian army entered northern Jordan on the night of September 18-19 with the aim of providing military support to the beleaguered PLO. The intervention was ordered by Salah Jadid, who headed the more radical branch of the Syrian Baath party and was one of the two strongmen of the country. The other, Hafez al-Assad, Syria’s defense minister and head of the air force, led the moderate faction of the Baath party. The invasion force that crossed the border was roughly the size of an armored

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<sup>25</sup> De Atkine, Norvell. "Amman 1970, a Memoir." MERIA 6.4 (2002) p. 5

<sup>26</sup> Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan* p. 326

<sup>27</sup> Alexrod, *Tribesmen in Uniform* p. 40

brigade, consisting of 250 to 300 tanks, according to Israeli intelligence estimates. The tanks were also disguised with marking from the Palestinian Liberation Army, a group that was ostensibly set up as the military wing of the PLO, but was more often used as a proxy force by the Arab governments that hosted it. The Syrian tanks enjoyed initial success against the Jordanian army, reaching the town of Irbid, which caused King Hussein to reach out the United States and Britain to request military intervention, even if it came from Israel, against the advancing Syrians.<sup>28</sup>

The US, who had taken over for Great Britain as Jordan's primary outside patron in the 1950s, had displayed willingness to project its diplomatic and military might in Jordan to ensure the stability of King Hussein's regime in the past.<sup>29</sup> During the Jordanian Civil War, King Hussein was in direct contact with the US through CIA agent Jack O'Connell and US Ambassador L. Dean Brown. King Hussein's urgent appeals for US military assistance following Syria's invasion fell on favorable ears in the Nixon White House. The National Security Council under Kissinger tended to see conflicts as a zero-sum game with the Soviet Union and thus sought to ensure the survival of their ally in Jordan against what they viewed as a communist-backed attempt to overthrow over the monarchy. After warning the Soviets against involving themselves in the conflict in Jordan, the United States also appealed to Israel to project their military might in hopes that it might compel the Syrian tanks to withdrawal. With Hussein requesting air support "from any quarter," the

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<sup>28</sup> Quandt, William B. *Decade of Decisions: American Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976*. Berkeley: U of California, 1977. P. 117

<sup>29</sup> Little, Douglas. "A Puppet in Search of a Puppeteer: The United States, Hussein, and Jordan, 1953-1970." *The International History Review* 17.3 (1995): p. 530

US said it would look “favorably upon an Israeli attack” against Syrian troops in Jordan.<sup>30</sup> Some within the Israeli cabinet were in favor of engaging in airstrikes to save the Hashemite regime while other hardliners believed the establishment of a PLO state in Jordan would ultimately serve Israel’s interests. However, King Hussein was wary of Israeli intentions and terrified at the possibility he could lose credibility forever in the Arab world if he were seen being saved by the Israelis. So, rather than risk perennial isolation or a possible Israeli land grab, Hussein sent the Jordanian Air Force into action against the Syrian tanks and ultimately pushed the force back.<sup>31</sup> During the fighting, the Syrian Air Force did not enter Jordan to protect its armor columns, which doomed the invasion to failure. Therefore, when examining the underlying factors that went into the Syrian decision-making, we must examine what the literature contends was the original impetus for ordering the invasion and why the Syrian Air Force was held out of the fighting, forcing the Syrians to retreat back across the border and ending any chance of outside assistance to the PLO in their fight against the Hashemite monarchy.

Some of the literature on Syria’s military action in Jordan attempts to frame the decision to invade as one based on ideology and the need to support the PLO in their attempt to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy. Joseph Nevo recounts the history of antagonism and subversion attempts between Jordan and Syria prior to the 1970 crisis. This included propaganda warfare where both parties called for the overthrow of the government in the other country and Syria granting asylum to plotters of a failed 1957 coup in Jordan.

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<sup>30</sup> Ashton, Nigel J. "Pulling the Strings: King Hussein's Role during the Crisis of 1970 in Jordan." *The International History Review* 28.1 (2006): 99-118. p. 110

<sup>31</sup> Ashton, *Pulling the Strings* p. 115-116

Through these historic examples, Nevo attempts to frame the conflict between Jordan and Syria as one between a pro-western regime and a revolutionary one. Both countries also sought to control the Palestinian resistance for their own ends, with Nevo arguing that Syria “unequivocally supported Palestinian organizations whenever they were involved in battles with Jordanian authorities.”<sup>32</sup> This argument is supported by the western-revolutionary dichotomy that existed between Jordan and Syria, due to the fact that PLO were firmly within the revolutionary camp in world affairs. According to Nevo, the Syrian intervention in Jordan’s civil war was firmly based on its ideological clash with Jordan, with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the monarchy. This gamble was justified in the minds of Syrian decision makers because the fall of Hashemites would likely lead to closer Jordanian-Syrian governmental relations, if not total Syrian hegemony.<sup>33</sup>

Hafez al-Assad biographer Patrick Seale also seeks to explain the intervention of Syria into Jordan by its desire to protect the PLO. However, Seale does not frame his argument in as stark of ideological terms as Nevo, stating that Assad, unlike Jadid, was not a true rejectionist and merely fought against a “dishonorable and partial settlement” to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Assad also differed with Jadid in viewing the Palestinian guerillas as a destabilizing influence on Arab countries and a “military liability.”<sup>34</sup> Since Seale claims that Syria was under the full control of Assad “in all but name,” his personal view can be

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<sup>32</sup> Nevo, Joseph. “Syria and Jordan: The Politics of Subversion.” In. Ma’oz, Moshe, and Anver Yaniv. *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*. New York: St. Martin's, 1986. p. 143-4

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 152

<sup>34</sup> Seale, Patrick. *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*. Berkeley: U of California, 1989. p. 155-6

interpreted as the rationale behind the Syrian government's decision-making. Despite Assad's reservations about the PLO and their tendency to cause anarchy in Arab states, Assad initially supported the Palestinians in their fight against the Jordanian government, supplying the guerrillas with arms from the Syrian Defense Ministry. Seale also quotes Assad as justifying the Syrian invasion of Jordan as an attempt to set up a safe zone to protect the Palestinians from a massacre and from which they could negotiate cease-fire terms with King Hussein. Assad explicitly rejects Nevo's argument that Syria's ultimate aim was the overthrow of the Jordanian Monarchy.<sup>35</sup>

Several authors also point to Assad's pragmatism and the desire to avoid further fighting as the determining factor that led to the Syrian Air Force not entering the fighting in Jordan, which ultimately caused the defeat of the Syrian military adventure. Seale quotes Assad, who justifies his decision to not employ his "much stronger air force" from a desire to "prevent escalation." This benevolent statement is tempered somewhat by the fact that Jordan had already reached out to Washington, and through the US, Israel, requesting airstrikes against the Syrian armored force. The always level-headed Assad portrayed by Seale therefore had no desire to continue fighting in what would be an unequal battle with Israeli or US forces.<sup>36</sup> Seale's view that the Syrian military acted as it did due to the rational-decision-making of Assad is also backed up by Moshe Mo'az and Avner Yaniv. The authors argue that if Assad sent his air force to battle against the much weaker Jordanian planes, he would have dramatically tipped the fighting in favor of the Palestinian

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<sup>35</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria* p. 157-8

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 159-60

guerillas. This would have guaranteed either Israeli or US intervention, due to the White House's insistence on protecting against the overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy. Therefore, Mo'az and Yaniv argue that Assad, the main decision-maker in Syria, saved the country from a "possible debacle of major proportions."<sup>37</sup>

The "pragmatic Assad" dictating the decisions of war in Syria contrasted with the view in the White House at the time, which is recounted by William Quandt and Seymour Hersh. The desire of the United States to protect the Jordanian monarchy was due to their reading of the Syrian invasion as a Soviet-backed attempt to overthrow an American ally. When the initial fighting broke out, President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State sought a show of force that would deter Syria, Iraq or the Soviet Union from intervening in the conflict. This was accomplished by moving US assets to Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as through a public statement by Nixon. The president told an American newspaper that the US was "prepared to intervene directly in the Jordanian war should Syria and Iraq enter the conflict and tip the military balance against government forces loyal to Hussein." Quandt, who joined Nixon's National Security Council in 1972, recounts how the worries about Soviet intentions were only confirmed after the Syrian invasion, with the US receiving reports that Soviet military advisers accompanied the tanks to the border of Jordan.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Hersh contends that the Nixon White House's view of the conflict stemmed from their "inability to understand that the Russians were not

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<sup>37</sup> Ma'oz, Moshe and Avner Yaniv. "On a Short Leash: Syria and the PLO." In. Ma'oz, Moshe, and Anver Yaniv. *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*. New York: St. Martin's, 1986. P. 196

<sup>38</sup> Quandt, *Decade of Decisions* P. 114



behind every sand dune in the Middle East.”<sup>39</sup> Rather than seeing the PLO, Syrian and Soviets as independent actors, Kissinger believed “the Soviets are pushing the Syrians and the Syrians are pushing the Palestinians.” This thinking prevailed despite Soviet claims that they were attempting to restrain the Syrians. As a result, the US engaged in brinksmanship, positioning military assets close to Jordan and requesting that Israel begin preparations for a military strike, in what was a series of escalatory measures intended to force the Soviets to pressure their Syrian clients to withdraw. When the Syrians did not send in their air force and the tank column later withdrew under fire from Jordanian planes, the White House believed their gambit worked. Kissinger later confirms in his memoirs his belief that the Soviets were the ultimate decision-makers behind the military action in Syria, which he contends they called off on September 21 after a meeting between the deputy of the Soviet Embassy in Washington and Joseph Sisco of the US State Department.<sup>40</sup>

A contrasting argument that attempts to explain the non-intervention of the Syrian Air Force and the ultimate withdrawal of their tank formation cites an internal struggle within the Syrian regime as the main factor behind the decision-making. Quandt, despite recounting the view of the White House at the time of the crisis, argues that Nixon and Kissinger “misinterpreted the Syrian invasion, overemphasizing the Soviet role and minimizing the degree to which it grew out of internal Syrian politics.”<sup>41</sup> Assad, by not sending in the air force, ensured the failure of the military adventure championed by his

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<sup>39</sup> Hersh, Seymour M. *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*. New York: Summit, 1983. P. 234

<sup>40</sup> Hersh, *The Price of Power* p. 246

<sup>41</sup> Quandt, *Decade of Decision* p. 124

more radical rival Jadid. This would be a crucial blow to the standing of Jadid and his supporters, who later accused Assad of “aborting the decision of the Party Command to protect the Resistance.”<sup>42</sup> Their weakened position was crystallized in November 1970 when Assad launched a coup, which became known as the “corrective movement,” which sidelined Jadid and left Assad as the sole strongman in Syria for the next three decades. Other more detailed narratives describe secret communications between the Assad faction in Syria and the Jordanian regime, through the person of Wasfi al-Tell, during the crisis. Dean Brown, who was US Ambassador to Jordan at the time of the crisis, argues that the Syrian non-action in deploying their air force was more due to contacts between Tell and “certain Syrian commanders, and not to Soviet or US pressure or threats.”<sup>43</sup> Hersh also supports this argument, claiming that he was told by diplomatic and intelligence sources that Assad, through Tell, told King Hussein that the Syrian Air Force would not engage in combat with Jordanian planes.<sup>44</sup> Another American in Jordan during the conflict, CIA Station Chief Jack O’Connell, also lends credence to this argument, claiming that Assad’s ultimate goal by holding back the air force was the failure of the invasion and fall of the Jadid government.<sup>45</sup>

Among the competing arguments about what were the main factors that dictated Syrian decision-making during the Jordanian Civil War, the internal struggle between

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<sup>42</sup> Batatu, Hanna. *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999. P. 290

<sup>43</sup> Brown, L. Dean. "Review: Decade of Decisions: American Policy towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976 by William B. Quandt." *Middle East Journal* 32.4 (1978): p.478

<sup>44</sup> Hersh, *The Price of Power* p. 247

<sup>45</sup> O'Connell, Jack, and Vernon Loeb. *King's Counsel: A Memoir of War, Espionage, and Diplomacy in the Middle East*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011. P. 105

Assad and Jadid is the most persuasive. The more radical Jadid was quick to come to the defense of the PLO in Jordan, hoping their victory would put him in an advantageous position domestically against the more moderate Assad. However, Jadid was outmaneuvered by Assad, who controlled the all-important air force and most other important institutions in the country. Assad biographer Patrick Seale refutes this narrative, but this is likely due to his closeness to Assad and the Syrian leader's desire to still portray his actions in 1970 in terms of his pragmatic decision-making and commitment to the Palestinian cause. Although Seale may have inadvertently lent credence the story of back-channel talks between Wasfi al-Tell and Syrian commanders close to Assad when he recounts how Assad sent his most trusted lieutenant, then-Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas, to Jordan in early 1971 to negotiate with King Hussein and Tell, who was by-then prime minister, the withdrawal of the PLO from their last fighting enclaves in Jordan.<sup>46</sup> By putting credence in back channel talks between Assad and King Hussein, one also totally discredits the Soviet-proxy takeover argument perpetrated by the White House at the time of the conflict. The initial decision to send the Syrian army into Jordan and the subsequent decision to not send in the air force can all explained by internal Syrian regime machinations and the desire to settle a domestic power struggle between Assad and Jadid.

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<sup>46</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria* p. 282

## CHAPTER III

### LEBANESE CIVIL WAR

#### **A. Conflict before Syrian intervention**

In a broad sense, the Lebanese Civil War was a conflict between groups possessing differing visions for Lebanon, its history and place in the Arab World, and the political and social future for the country. The area known as Lebanon was carved out of Greater Syria after World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, where it became a mandate under French control until it received its independence in 1943. From its inception as a state, the Republic of Lebanon had been based on a tenuous power sharing agreement among its many confessional groups. The agreement, known as the National Pact, stated that all government positions should be distributed along confessional lines. Priority in this arrangement was granted to Lebanon's Christian community, allocating them a 6:5 ratio in Parliament over their Muslim countrymen, as well as key political and security positions such as President of the Republic and Commander of the Army. However, the National Pact did not simply outline what sect should hold what governmental position but also attempted to define the very character of the Lebanese state among the competing narratives from Lebanon's various communities. Kamal Salibi, a Lebanese historian, explained the National Pact as "Muslim consent to the continued existence of Lebanon as an independent and sovereign state in the Arab world, provided it considered itself, so to

speak, part of the Arab family.”<sup>47</sup> This consent was shattered during the civil war, as the traditional Christian view that Lebanon had a history and culture distinct from its Arab and Syrian surroundings clashed with the predominantly Muslim view that emphasized connections to their Arab and Muslim brethren around the Middle East. Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt described the conflict as “a war to determine the correct history of the country.”<sup>48</sup>

The civil unrest that eventually led to war can be attributed broadly attributed to attempts by Christian political parties, most notably the Maronite-dominated Kataeb and National Liberal Party (NLP), to retain power and control within the state against the demands of a coalition of leftist and Muslim parties for greater participation. These various parties held differing ideologies (Arab Nationalism, Socialism, Communism, Syrian Nationalism, etc) but were able to successfully unite in their opposition to the current Lebanese political system and its traditional elites under the banner of the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), led by Progressive Socialist Party and Druze chieftain Kamal Jumblatt. Challenges to the political system stemmed in large part from the changing demographics in Lebanon. Lebanon’s Christians, who made up 50% of the population in 1932, the year of the last Lebanese census, were not growing as rapidly as their Muslim countrymen. By 1984, it was estimated that Christians made up 42.7% of Lebanon’s

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<sup>47</sup> Salibi, Kamal S. *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. Berkeley: University of California, 1988. p. 186

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.* p. 201

population while Lebanese Muslims made up 57.3%.<sup>49</sup> However, despite the changing demographic realities, Christians still enjoyed a majority of parliamentary seats, as well as key political and security positions. Control over such positions gave Christians, particularly the Maronites, the greatest influence over the actions of the state out of all Lebanon's religious communities; control that Lebanon's Christian parties, who had experienced a similar challenge in 1958, were unwilling to cede to the political opposition. As the only state in the Middle East with a large proportion of Christians in its population, Lebanon's Christian parties saw any loss of power as an existential threat to the Christian community and the liberal, pluralistic nature of Lebanese society.

Compounding the unstable political situation between the various groups within Lebanon was the presence of Palestinian refugees and fedayeen guerillas, which tied Lebanon to the larger Palestinian question that was the central conflict in the Middle East at the time. The rationale behind some Christian parties viewing the Palestinian population within Lebanon as a destabilizing influence was twofold. The presence of Palestinian fedayeen within the country resulted in Israeli reprisals against both Palestinian and Lebanese interests. While some Israeli military action could be seen as retaliation for Palestinian guerilla operations carried out against Israel from Lebanese soil, some military action took the form of collective punishment against the Lebanese state that could not be directly connected to Palestinian militant action. The 1968 commando raid against Beirut International Airport that destroyed 13 of Lebanon's passenger airplanes was an example of

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<sup>49</sup> Johnson, Michael. *All Honourable Men: The Social Origins of War in Lebanon*. Oxford: Center for Lebanese Studies, 2001. p. 3

one such action, which harmed the economic interests of Lebanon and many of its leading Christian politicians.<sup>50</sup> The stateless Palestinian population also added a further complication to the demographic changes that were already occurring in Lebanon's population. Due to the fact that the majority of the Palestinian refugees were Muslim, Christian parties were against any permanent settlement or naturalization for the Palestinians, as this would lead to a further decrease in the Christian's already shrinking percentage of the overall population. To exacerbate matters, many of the Palestinian guerilla groups were aligned with the Lebanese National Movement. The LNM, who shared more in common with the Palestinians both ideologically and in terms of sectarian affiliation than Lebanese Christians, supported Palestinian resistance operations against Israel and attempted to use the military strength of the Palestinians to bring about political change within the country.<sup>51</sup>

The armed Palestinian militant groups within Lebanon, united nominally under the banner of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), were another major player in the Lebanese Civil War due to the "state-within-a-state" they established in Lebanon and their support for the LNM. These groups, as well as a sizeable Palestinian refugee population, had moved into Lebanon and resided in various refugee camps after the 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel. The government of Lebanon was in a precarious situation attempting to control the Palestinian militant groups within the country, whose cause enjoyed the backing of Arab states around the region, but whose presence invited Israeli attacks onto Lebanon

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<sup>50</sup> Johnson. *All Honourable Men*. p. 152

<sup>51</sup> Traboulsi, Fawwaz. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. London: Pluto, 2007. p. 202

soil. After the 1967 War, the increase in operations carried out by the PLO against Israel from Lebanese soil and Israeli responses against both PLO and Lebanese interests highlighted the inability of the government to exercise sovereignty over its full territory. The parties of Lebanese Christian Right were quick to decry the PLO and their presence in Lebanon, viewing them as destabilizing and a threat to the political status quo.

Clashes beginning in 1969 between the PLO and the Lebanese Army, supported by right-wing Christian militias, exacerbated political tensions within the country and set the stage for civil war. The fighting was eventually halted with the signing of the Cairo Agreement, which outlined the right of the PLO to exercise full control over the Palestinian camps in Lebanon and undertake commando operations against Israel, nominally with the Lebanese Army's approval. Sanctioned Palestinian control over their camps also helped to further entrench the PLO "state-within-a-state," which was viewed as a betrayal of Lebanon's sovereignty by many Christian parties.<sup>52</sup> Tensions between the groups only grew after the 1970 Black September conflict in Jordan and the expulsion of the PLO leadership from the Hashemite kingdom, increasing the number of Palestinian militants within the country and leaving Lebanon as the main staging ground for Palestinian resistance operations against Israeli.<sup>53</sup> After the election of Suleiman Frangieh to the presidency in 1970, a Christian alliance composed of the Kataeb, National Liberal Party, and Frangieh's Marada Movement attempted to assert their control over state. In addition to challenging Palestinian and Leftist groups within the country, President Frangieh disbanded

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<sup>52</sup> Salibi, Kamal S. *Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon, 1958-1976*. London: Ithaca, 1976. Print. p. 43

<sup>53</sup> Deeb, Marius. *The Lebanese Civil War*. New York: Praeger, 1980. P. 103



the *Deuxieme Bureau* (Lebanese Army Intelligence), replacing officers loyal to former President Fouad Chehab with men connected to the new government. However, the purging of Chehabist officers from the military intelligence left a major intelligence gap in the country, leading to increased lawlessness, lack of state control over armed groups and the expansion of foreign intelligence activity in Lebanon.<sup>54</sup>

By 1973, renewed clashes between the PLO and the Lebanese Army, each supported by their allied Lebanese militias, led to the fateful decision of Lebanese leaders to begin arming their supporters for war. Meanwhile, Israeli attacks against the PLO, sometimes deep into Lebanese territory such as the April 10, 1973 raid into Beirut and Saida, continued to split Lebanese political opinion. Lebanese Muslim and Leftist leaders blamed the Lebanese government, army and security forces for not protecting Lebanon's sovereignty while Christian leaders spoke out against the destabilizing Palestinian presence within Lebanon. This debate, which proved to be the catalyst for renewed internal clashes, was just one aspect of the deep political chasm that was growing between the two groups over their political, economic and social visions for the country. A civil war avoided in 1973 after a cease-fire was imposed in May after the intervention of Arab ambassadors with President Frangieh.<sup>55</sup> In the aftermath of these clashes, the decision was made among Christian leaders to begin arming their parties for war. Karim Pakradouni, an intellectual leader in the Kataeb, recounted "I met with Sheikh Pierre [Gemayel] and he told me President Frangieh called him and President Chamoun for a meeting and told them literally

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<sup>54</sup> Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War*, p. 60

<sup>55</sup> Traboulsi, *History of Modern Lebanon*, p. 181

... After today, there is not a Lebanese Army to count on. Count on yourselves.”<sup>56</sup> It was at this point where the Frangieh-Kataeb-NLP alliance began to arm and train their partisans for war, taking up the mantle of defenders of the state and the Christian community. They began importing arms from abroad into Lebanese ports with the full knowledge of the authorities, which were then distributed among their various supporters.<sup>57</sup> According to a US intelligence report leaked to the Lebanese media later in the war, the Kataeb, which was the largest Christian militia, imported arm from countries such as Bulgaria, France, West Germany, Great Britain and Israel at various points leading up to and during the war.<sup>58</sup> Arms also flowed into the hands of Palestinian and LNM parties from various Arab states under the pretext of the Cairo Agreement. With all groups becoming increasingly armed and militarily organized, Lebanon hurdled uncontrollably towards a conflict that would tear apart the very fabric of Lebanese society and reawaken old sectarian fears, particularly among Lebanon’s Christian community.

The outbreak of civil war in 1975 saw violence become indiscriminate and retributive in character, where revenge for one act of violence was met with another, leading to an almost constant cycle of killing. Most historians give the official date for the start of the war as April 13, 1975, when Kataeb militants responded to an assassination attempt against their leader Pierre Gemayel by killing 21 Palestinians on a bus in the Beirut suburb of Ain al-Roummaneh. Violence broke out across Beirut and the rest of the country,

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<sup>56</sup> Interview from *The War of Lebanon. Part 2: The Roots of Conflict*. Al-Jazeera, 2001.

<sup>57</sup> Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War* p. 70

<sup>58</sup> O’Ballance, Edgar. *Civil War in Lebanon, 1975-92*. Basingstoke [etc.: Macmillan, 1998. P. 101

assuming a terrible randomness that engulfed both combatants and civilians.

Assassinations, kidnappings, random sniper fire, indiscriminate shelling and tit-for-tat attacks by rival groups against non-combatants became commonplace. One of the first major instances of a massacre against civilians took place on December 6, 1975, in an event that became known as “Black Saturday.” After the bodies of four Kataeb members were found murdered, Christian militias set up checkpoints around East Beirut where they proceeded to abduct and murder hundreds of unarmed Muslims based on their confessional identity on their ID cards.<sup>59</sup>

The onset of the war also saw Christians militias attempt to ethnically cleanse Palestinian camps located near Christian population centers in an attempt create a homogenous Christian area in what they viewed as a confessional struggle for survival. This policy was a result of the fears of marginalization or extinction at the hands of the LNM and their Palestinian allies, which were propagated by right-wing Christian leaders in an attempt to awaken communal solidarity and militancy among their followers. However, this policy also had the effect of bringing the entire military might of the PLO into the fighting. Previously, radical leftist groups within the organization had fought with the LNM while Fatah focused mainly on protecting areas under PLO control. The destruction of Palestinian refugee camps was also part of the Lebanese Christian Right’s security objective to create an unbroken enclave of highly defensible Christian areas, which could have paved the way for the partition of the country along sectarian lines. This strategy sought to connect the Christian populated areas of Mount Lebanon in the north, East Beirut

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<sup>59</sup> Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War* p. 146

and its surrounding suburbs, and the Chouf Mountains south east of the capital, along with Beirut's port so Christian militias could constantly be supplied from the sea. Given the proximity of several Palestinian camps these areas (Dbayeh between Beirut and the Christian heartland to the north, Karantina near the Beirut port and coastal highway, Tel al-Zaatar between Beirut and the Metn to the east), it was imperative that the right-wing Christian militias, who came together under the banner of the Lebanese Front, destroy these camps in order to create a homogenous and defensible Christian area.<sup>60</sup>

While the eventual fall of Dbayeh and Karantina camps accomplished the military goals of the Christian right, it had devastating consequences for the conflict, further entrenching both sides in an us versus them dichotomy and increasing the spate of mass killings. According to sociologist Samir Khalaf, it was at this point that the war “acquired its own inherent self-destructive logic and spirals into that atrocious cycle of unrelenting cruelties.”<sup>61</sup> When Dbayeh and Karantina were overrun by Christian militias on December 14, 1975 and January 19, 1976 respectively, the residents of these slums were either massacred or forcibly ejected to Muslim areas of the country. It was not just Palestinians who were forcibly removed from Christian areas, as there were also poor Syrians, Kurds and Lebanese Muslims residing in the slum of Karantina. The cycle of revenge killings continued when the PLO, who entered the conflict on a wider scale following the sectarian cleansing of Dbayeh and Karantina, and LNM responded to the massacres by attacking the Christian town of Damour, south of Beirut. This attack forced the Lebanese government to

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<sup>60</sup> Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War* p. 152

<sup>61</sup> Khalaf, Samir. *Civil and Uncivil Violence: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict in Lebanon*. New York: Columbia UP p. 24

evacuate Christian residents by sea and air, including former president and NLP head Camile Chamoun, who was besieged at his home in Saadiyat. However, not all residents were able to escape and those left behind were slaughtered by Palestinian and LNM forces. The full entry of the PLO into war would prove to be a turning point that forced the Christian militias into a defensive posture and paved the way for Syrian military intervention into the conflict.<sup>62</sup>

### **B. Syrian intervention in Conflict**

Syria's involvement and subsequent military intervention in the Lebanese Civil War is explained in the literature as a response to numerous security concerns, both foreign and domestic, and the desire to prevent an outcome in the conflict that would be unfavorable to the Baathist government in Damascus. Their initial non-violent involvement can be traced to the beginning of the conflict, as President Assad sent envoys to attempt to mediate between the warring parties. However, these outside negotiations, which were often led by Syrian Foreign Minister Abdel Halim Khaddam, "had very little, if any, consequence for the development of the situation in Lebanon."<sup>63</sup> As the conflict evolved, a decision was taken by Assad in December 1975 to expand the Baathist state's role in the conflict and intervene militarily, due to certain military gains by warring parties that presented a direct security threat to Syria. Assad also used the Lebanese crisis as a vehicle to show the

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<sup>62</sup> Hanf, Theodor. *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation*. London: Centre for Lebanese Studies in Association with I.B. Tauris, 1993. Print. p. 211-212

<sup>63</sup> Dawisha, Adeb I. *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis*. New York: St. Martin's, 1980. P. 69

importance and usefulness of Syria in the region, particularly, after the Sinai Agreements between Egypt and Israel and the former's exist from the camp of rejectionist states. Therefore, to prevent outcomes that would have a negative effect on Syrian security and to demonstrate the importance of Syria in contributing to either wider war or peace in the Middle East, Assad used diplomacy and military might to check the strength of Lebanon's multiple warring parties. Through this intervention, Assad "played them all off against one another and successively supported and dealt blow ... eventually curbing or destabilizing all the various elements and turning the local balance of power in his favor."<sup>64</sup>

Syria's intervention in Lebanon can viewed as an instrument to secure both the foreign and domestic policy goals, as well as continuation in the transformation that Syria was undergoing since the rise of Hafez al-Assad to power, according to Israeli scholar Itamar Rabinovich. Rabinovich lays out the historical context that allowed for greater Syrian intervention in Lebanon, particularly the consolidation of the government under Assad. Before 1970, the Syrian regime was too beset with factionalism and infighting to influence its neighbor Lebanon in a meaningful way, despite the irredentist claims many Syrians felt over the territory that was carved out of Greater Syria by the French. However, a strong, solidified Syrian government in 1975 was able to use the conflict in Lebanon to its advantage, cultivating control of certain groups such as the PLO and the politically resurgent Shiites. By gaining a measure of control over these groups, Syria sought to replace Egypt as the main source of loyalty for the Levant's Muslims post-Sinai Agreements, as well prove its regional role in the overall Middle East peace process to

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<sup>64</sup> Batatu, Hanna. *Syria's Peasantry* p. 293

foreign powers, particularly the United States.<sup>65</sup> Assad also recognized that neither the Christian or Muslim warring factions could be allowed to achieve a decisive victory in the conflict due to the instability that would likely result. Therefore, Assad sought to undertake a Syrian military intervention that “aimed at consolidation and moderate reforms rather than radical transformation.”<sup>66</sup> Rabinovich then cites outcomes to the Lebanese Civil War that would have been negative to Syria and it therefore sought to prevent by intervening militarily: the establishment of a “Maronite Zion”, and the emergence of a radical government in Lebanon that could invite intervention by Israel or another outside power. The argument that Syria’s underlying intention was to prevent partition or the total defeat of one side in Lebanon is not unique to Rabinovich and enjoys near universal agreement on in the literature.

The establishment of a “Maronite Zion” refers to the possible partition of Lebanon into Christian and Muslim parts, which was the immediate concern that caused Assad to send the Palestinian Liberation Army into Lebanon on December 20, 1975 and increase military support to the LMN and the Palestinian fedayeen. This dramatic move was in response to recent gains by the Lebanese Front, who were rapidly creating a homogenously Christian area by expelling Palestinian refugees and Muslim inhabitants from Mount Lebanon and the surroundings of East Beirut. Theodor Hanf acknowledges the real possibility of partition at the time by citing the claim by Kataeb leader Pierre Gemayel that

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<sup>65</sup> Rabinovich, Itamar. “The Changing Prism: Syrian Policy in Lebanon as a Mirror, an Issue and an Instrument.” In. Ma’oz, Moshe, and Anver Yaniv. *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*. New York: St. Martin's, 1986. p. 180

<sup>66</sup> Rabinovich, *The Changing Prism* p. 182

the Lebanese were rapidly losing faith in the idea of coexistence and the subsequent statement by Abdel Halim Khaddam in January 1976 that Syria “would not accept any partitioning of Lebanon” and in this event, Syria would annex Lebanon.<sup>67</sup> The possibility of an independent Maronite state that would likely be aligned with western powers and Israel, another minority in the Middle East, caused Assad to move Syria away from its previous role as a “keen, passive spectator” in the conflict.<sup>68</sup> Along with the foreign concerns, the partition of Lebanon along religious lines also posed a threat to the domestic security of Assad’s Syria, another multi-sect country with power concentrated in the hands of the minority, a heterodox Shiite sect known as Alawites. In the words of Hanf, “partition in a neighboring country was a dangerous example to a country (Syria) that resorted to a rigorous Arab Jacobinism to paper over cleavages and tensions between its own religious communities.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, in response to the possible Christian designs on partition, the Syrian-backed PLA besieged the Christian city of Zahle near the Bekaa Valley and contributed to the PLO assault on Damour and Saadiyat. Along with this initial clandestine military intervention, Assad also began pushing harder for a cease-fire and a compromise that would end the fighting with Lebanon remaining as a single, unified entity. A political agreement was struck on February 14, 1976 between President Frangieh and Prime Minister Rashid Karami, after consultations with Assad in Damascus, which was introduced by Frangieh as “The New Lebanese National Covenant,” instituting cosmetic reforms to the sectarian political system in Lebanon and reaffirming the right of the PLO to

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<sup>67</sup> Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon* p. 212

<sup>68</sup> Ma’oz, Moshe and Avner Yaniv. *On a Short Leash* p. 198

<sup>69</sup> Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon* p. 208



exist in Lebanon and undertake action against Israel under the Cairo Accords.<sup>70</sup> However, this agreement was rejected by the LNM and PLO, who undertook a new offensive along with defected units from Lebanese Army under the newly formed “Joint Forces,” and began to threaten areas of the Christian interior.

While Assad sought to prevent Lebanon’s Christians from breaking away and forming their own rump state, he also could not allow their defeat and the creation of a radical government in Beirut headed by the Lebanese National Movement and supported by the PLO. A rejectionist Lebanon would have left Syria sandwiched between two likely hostile, radical neighbors (Lebanon to the west, Iraq to the east) that had the potential to destabilize Syria in the foreign arena by inviting more Israeli military action in Lebanon and domestically by encouraging co-religionists or radical elements in Syria to act against the Assad regime. Adeb Dawisha expands on this, arguing that Syria could not allow the disintegration of coexistence in Lebanon on “ideological, emotional and strategic grounds.” Along with the fact that Syria’s leaders saw the security of Lebanon inextricably linked with their own, which probably stems from the concept of Greater Syria, Dawisha argues that a Christian defeat would have harmed Arab unity, one of the ideological pillars of Assad’s Baath Party, and created a religious split that would justify Israel’s existence and give them pretext to intervene militarily in Lebanon, particularly up to the Litani River in South Lebanon in its pursuit for “natural borders with hostile neighbors.”<sup>71</sup> With these concerns in mind, Assad viewed the increased participation of the PLO, most notably

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<sup>70</sup> Excerpts from February 14, 1976 President Frangieh speech via Salibi, CtCW p. 163

<sup>71</sup> Dawisha, Adeb I. *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis* p. 72-3

Arafat's Fatah, in the fighting alongside the LNM as a direct rebellion against the political reconciliation plan that he had helped mediate. With the Christians on the defensive, Assad began supplying militias of the Lebanese Front with arms and ammunition, while the PLA also began to clash with other Palestinian militias. However, as the Lebanese Front continued to lose ground, various Christian politicians began to seek foreign intervention to save them from what they viewed as the possibility of total military defeat. After unsuccessfully appealing for the intervention of the US in conjunction with the United Nations (favored by ex-President Chamoun) or Israel, President Frangieh in March requested that Syrian troops deploy to Lebanon to stop the Joint Forces' advance.<sup>72</sup>

Before officially sending Syrian troops into the conflict, Assad met with LNM leader Kamal Jumblatt, where the Syrian president attempted to persuade the Druze chieftan to call off his offensive, laying out the reasons why Syria could allow the total military defeat of the Maronites. Hanna Batatu recounts how Assad told Jumblatt that there was a "conspiracy to dismember Lebanon and weaken the Palestinian resistance."<sup>73</sup> Seale expands on the meeting with Jumblatt in Damascus, with Assad arguing that if the Christians were defeated and driven out of Lebanon, Islam would be seen as intolerant, while Arab Nationalism would be discredited, along with the publicized Palestinian goal of a secular democratic state. In the broad sense, Assad saw Lebanon as another arena of in a regional struggle with Israel, who was attempting to reign over a "balkanized Levant."<sup>74</sup> However, Jumblatt was not receptive to Assad's "historic opportunity to orient the

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<sup>72</sup> Batatu, Hanna. *Syria's Peasantry* p. 296

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Seale. *Asad of Syria* p. 275

Maronites toward Syria” and away from their historical tendency to turn to non-Arab outsiders for protect. Jumblatt refused to halt the offensive and Arafat and the PLO the next day refused to disassociate themselves from Jumblatt and his LNM.<sup>75</sup> Assad therefore made the decision to send regular Syrian army troops into Lebanon to prevent what he viewed as inevitable Israeli intervention, either as protector of a Maronite rump state, or punisher to a radical Lebanese state supported by the Palestinian resistance.<sup>76</sup>

While there is near universal agreement that Assad was forced to intervene in Lebanon due to the dangers that partition or a total Maronite defeat could pose to Syria both internally and from foreign neighbors, there is disagreement within the literature whether Assad also used the crisis as a means of improving relation with the United States and increasing Syria’s prominence as a regional power. The assertion, which is put forward by Rabinovich, contends that “by demonstrating that it and it alone could solve the crisis in Lebanon, Syria would prove to the United States that in that part of the Middle East one had to deal directly with Syria.”<sup>77</sup> This view is also backed up Yair Evron, who argues that Syria reached out to the US first in its role as a mediator and later active participant in the fighting in Lebanon, which helped smooth relations the tense relations between the two countries post Sinai Agreements. Through US Ambassador to Syria Richard Murphy and special envoy to Lebanon Dean Brown, the US first provided tacit backing to Assad’s sponsored peace plan and later helped delineate the boundaries for Syria’s military invasion in order to avoid any conflict with Israel. This “red-line” as it became known, stated that

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<sup>75</sup> Batatu, Hanna. *Syria's Peasantry* P. 297

<sup>76</sup> Seale. *Asad of Syria* p. 276

<sup>77</sup> Rabinovich, Itamar. *The Changing Prism* p. 182

Syrian troops would not be deployed in Lebanon south of the Litani River near the border with Israel. As a result, Washington and Damascus was able to continue a dialogue that was on the verge of collapse after the Sinai II Agreement, with Syria eventually being viewed as a stabilizing force in the war-torn Lebanese arena.<sup>78</sup> Batatu also sees US influence and Assad's desire for improved relations with the superpower behind some of the Syrian leader's decision-making in Lebanon. Ambassador Murphy conveyed a message to Assad in October 1975 that the US was interested in a balance "solution" to the Lebanese Civil War and expressed interest in Syria's plans regarding a settlement. The message also contained a veiled US offer to arbitrate between Syria and Israel in the event that Syria did intervene militarily in Lebanon, which is exactly what occurred several months later.<sup>79</sup>

Contrastingly, Assad biographer Patrick Seale dismisses the notion that Syria actively sought to promote itself to the US during the Lebanese crisis, instead arguing that the US was seeking to use Syria to crush the Palestinian resistance. Allegedly the brainchild of Kissinger, who implicitly threatened Assad that if Syria did not intervene militarily, then Israel would, the US and Israel sought to crush the Palestinians and Lebanese Left through Assad, which would also tarnish the image of the Syrian leader in the eyes of the Arab world.<sup>80</sup> The idea of a duplicitous US using Syria for its own ends is also argued by Dawisha, who claims that the Syrian leadership viewed US' calls for ceasefires and attempts at diplomatic intervention as "part of the US scheme in the conflict." Instead of

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<sup>78</sup> Evron, Yair. "Washington Damascus and the Lebanon Crisis." In. Ma'oz, Moshe, and Anver Yaniv. *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*. New York: St. Martin's, 1986. P. 212-3

<sup>79</sup> Batatu, Hanna. *Syria's Peasantry* P. 294

<sup>80</sup> Seale. *Asad of Syria* p. 279-80

closer relations resulting from their convergence of interests in Lebanon, “a bad-faith model” continued to be the primary lens through which Syrian leaders viewed their relationship with the United States for years to come.<sup>81</sup>

The Syrian army officially intervened in Lebanon in April 1976, with the goal of curbing the power of the PLO and Lebanese Left. Along with sending a number of troops to set up military positions in the Bekaa Valley, Assad also managed to engineer the election of Syria’s preferred candidate, Elias Sarkis, to replace Suleiman Frangieh as president on May 8. This was a blow to the LNM, as it symbolized an important step in the restoration of the Lebanese state that it was seeking to overthrow. Later on June 1, the Syrian army invaded in force, dispatching 12,000 soldiers across Lebanon to halt the advance of the PLO and LNM. The combination of the Syrian army and Christian militias succeeded in pushing back the Joint Forces and saving besieged villages in the Christian heartland. The Syrian army was also complicit in the Lebanese Front’s siege and subsequent overrunning of the Palestinian camp of Tel al-Zaatar outside East Beirut, which resulted in the slaughter of hundreds, if not thousands of Palestinians.<sup>82</sup> However, the massacre helped rally Arab public opinion against Syria’s battle with the PLO, particularly amongst the Saudis, who cut off financial aid to the Syrian government. Coupled with the high number of casualties its army was taking in skirmishes against the LNM and PLO, and rumblings of discontent at home, with disturbances in Homs, Hama and Aleppo, persuaded Syria’s to end their offensive and agree to a Saudi-sponsored cease-fire. A conference in

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<sup>81</sup> Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis* p. 107

<sup>82</sup> Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon* p. 219-220

Riyadh on October 15, which brought together Assad and Arafat with other Arab heads of state, voted for the establishment of peacekeeping force in Lebanon, known as the Arab Deterrent Force (ADF). However, the ADF, initially formed to balance rival interests for Lebanon among Arab League member states, became little more than official sanction for Syria's military presence in Lebanon, as their troops contributed 25,000 men to the 30,000 strong peacekeeping mission.<sup>83</sup>

When examining the motives behind Syrian's intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, there is near unanimous agreement in the literature that security concerns were the primary factors dictating the decision-making of the Baathist regime. President Assad could not allow a breakaway Maronite state or the complete takeover of Lebanon by leftist forces and the PLO, believing that both situations would invite Israeli military action and harm Syria's domestic stability. There is contention in the literature whether Syria's contacts with the United States in the lead up to their intervention were the results of Syria attempting to reach out and show their worth to the superpower, or if they were US attempts to use Assad to further the foreign policy goals of themselves and Israel. Whatever the case, Syria's intervention in Lebanon did bring it closer ties with the US, which had hit near rock bottom in 1974 after Assad believed Kissinger duped him during negotiations over UN Resolution 242 to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict crisis in the lead up to the Sinai Agreements between Egypt and Israel. After Syria's military intervention, the United States came to see Syria as the Arab actor who could impose a modicum of stability upon the Lebanese scene, if only temporarily. Therefore, whether it was his intention or not,

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<sup>83</sup> Dawisha, Syria and the Lebanese Crisis p. 153

Assad did successfully market his country as the regional Arab power in the Levant that could dictate terms of war or stability and use various groups to his own ends in the struggle with Israel.

## Chapter IV

### CONSLUSION

While the military intervention of Syria into the Jordanian Civil War in 1970 and Lebanese Civil War in 1976 did share some similarities in terms of the actors involved, the factors that dictated Syrian decision-making were totally dissimilar. The invasion of Jordan in 1970 was the result of an internal struggle inside the Syrian Baath Party between the country's two strong men, Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid. Jadid, the more radical of the two leaders, sought to prove his revolutionary credentials by sending in Syrian tanks to support the PLO in their attempt to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy. It is disputed whether Assad agreed to or supported this initial action, but it is clear that his decision not to send in the Syrian Air Force to protect invasion force doomed it and the PLO to failure. While the idea that Assad held back the air force in order to not invite any Israeli or Western military intervention into the conflict is sound logic, there are too many reports of back channel communications between the Assad faction of the Baath Party and the Jordanian regime to ignore the affect Assad's decisions had on domestic political struggle that was playing out during the intervention. The fact that the Jadid faction blamed Assad for the failure of the military action and Jadid was overthrown just months later also gives additional credence to the argument in the literature that the factors that dictated Syrian decision-making in September 1970 were primarily based on domestic considerations. This differs from Syria's intervention in Lebanon, which saw a regime totally consolidated by Assad attempt to address its security concerns through foreign military action. Viewing the security of Syria and Lebanon as inevitably intertwined, Assad first sought to



diplomatically engineer an end the fighting before it became a major security threat to himself both domestically and in the form of possible Israeli military action. However, moves by Christian militias to create facts on the ground for the possible partition of the country and later gains by the LMN and PLO that threatened totally subjugate the Christians forced Assad to act. The likelihood that either result would invite Israeli military action into Lebanon and undermine the stability of his regime at home was too much to ignore. Whether Assad specifically acted with the goal of proving Syria's worth as a regional powerbroker to the United States is contested but in the end it is a minor point of contention. The contacts with the US prior to Syria's decision to invade did result in better ties post intervention, recovering from the disastrous negotiations that followed the 1973 October War between Egypt and Syria on one side and Israel on the other. Assad actions' protected Syria against immediate and pressing security challenges and allowed his state to emerge as the main power that held sway over the various groups in Lebanon for years to come.

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