

# War ghosts still haunt country

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Memories of violence etched deep as Lebanon seeks progress



Lebanese activist and former fighter Assad Chaftari speaks in front of the five-year-old sit-in tent that was erected by families of the disappeared, as he apologises for his role in the Lebanese civil war and suggests a committee to help search for missing people. Image Credit: AFP

Beirut: A bullet-scarred concrete hulk squats in the heart of Beirut's rebuilt downtown area, a visual affront to those who prefer to forget Lebanon's civil war.

A cacophony of car horns and construction clatter make the derelict former cinema a noisy place for contemplation. Lavish new buildings are growing around it to complete the restoration of a once-devastated city centre.

Lebanon is caught up in a property boom, which, along with an influx of tourists and bank deposits, is fuelling growth that hit 9 per cent last year, despite a global economic downturn.

So if the good times are here again, why dwell on the pain of a conflict that erupted in April 1975?

To avoid repeating it, say the creators of war exhibits in the oval former cinema now known as the Dome.

"The problem about the war in Lebanon is its recurrence, the re-emergence of violence every year or so," said Alfred Tarazi, a 29-year-old artist and graphic designer whose eerie collages of civil war-era photos fill several walls in the exhibition.

"Violence is a social habit rooted in our society and it always seems a plausible option to resolve a political crisis," Tarazi said. "I am worried about what can happen."

Visitors can write on the walls or record the names of loved ones killed in the 15-year war. The audio clips are looped into a ghostly chorus accompanying a video projection of black cloths swaying above a beach, with the Dome itself apparently afloat offshore — echoing the exhibit's title: 'In a sea of oblivion'.

## **No memorial**

Lebanon has no national war memorial, perhaps understandably in a land where sectarian tensions remain so deep-seated and contemporary events so disputed that school history textbooks do not go beyond independence from France in the 1940s.

After a messy compromise ended the civil war in 1990 and ushered in an era of Syrian domination, many Lebanese, thirsting for normality, seemed to gloss over the cruelties of the past.

A formal amnesty made most warlords-turned-politicians safe from any accountability for the blood on their hands.

Nevertheless, the families of an estimated 17,000 people still missing after the conflict refused to bury the issue.

Hundreds of photos of those victims, many of them young, are displayed at the Dome as part of a project by the private Lebanese group UMAM to research and document the civil war.

Among them is a haunting portrait of a young Palestinian woman and her four small children, in a Red Cross convoy to escape a siege of their Beirut town in 1976.

"They never arrived," said Marie-Claude Souaid, a researcher at UMAM. "That phase of the war saw the first big waves of displacement. How to displace people without massacres?"

She believes it will take many years for the Lebanese to overcome their troubled past or even to abandon violence.

"There is still this fear," she said of a country prone to conflict. Hezbollah and Israel fought a war in 2006. Lebanese factions flirted with renewed civil strife when Shiite fighters briefly seized mainly Sunni -parts of Beirut in May 2008.

"Our wars are not over yet," Souaid said. "We have not yet taken the decision to use something other than weapons."

## **Mass graves**

The Lebanese state has formally taken up the issue of the missing, but a solution would take time, she said, recalling the 30-year struggle of the mothers of Argentina's "disappeared".

Bodies would have to be recovered from mass graves, either in cemeteries under Christian or Muslim religious authorities or in areas known to have been controlled by certain armed groups.

"That means pointing the finger at those responsible," Souaid said. "To reach reconciliation, one must admit responsibility."

Intellectuals often fret over Lebanon's perceived failure to come to grips with its past, but this does not mean the Lebanese have simply forgotten the war, argues Sune Haugbolle, Danish author of a new book on War and Memory in Lebanon.

"This idea of amnesia is problematic because there were a lot of ways in which people dealt with the memory of the war, but just not in the way the intellectuals would like them to."

Haugbolle cited the posters of "martyred" leaders that plaster certain Beirut neighbourhoods, reinforcing sectarian narratives. Those who constructed a memory of the conflict as a "war of others" often ignored the reality of communal violence.

"This war of others is not just the war of outsiders, as in Palestinians, Syrians, Israelis, Americans and so on," said Haugbolle, who is Assistant Professor in Modern Islam and Middle East Studies at the University of Copenhagen.

"It's also the idea that a few militia leaders manipulated the whole Lebanese population, who then had no responsibility for what happened — a romanticised idea of the civil war."

The war cost an estimated 150,000 dead and many more wounded or displaced. Initially fought between Christian militias and leftists allied to Palestinians, it spawned a dizzying array of conflicts as Syria, Israel and others intervened.

Sectarian boundaries were briefly blurred in the mass protests that followed former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, but politicians soon reverted to business as usual, playing on communal fears when it suited them. Yet overt sectarianism is frowned on and for now Lebanon is enjoying fragile political detente that has helped the economy.

Politicians, including some from rival wartime factions, played a soccer friendly on April 13, the civil war anniversary, to send a message that they are "all one team".

The slightly comic spectacle generally went down well. "We had a good laugh," said one newspaper vendor. "But if they run the country the way they play football, we have a big problem."

Such displays mask underlying tensions and fears that obstruct any kind of reconciliation process from below.

"There isn't a single Lebanese who doesn't know how harmful the civil war was. If the war was over, everyone would engage in this process," said Tarazi, gesturing at the photos in the Dome.



Saudi women look at pictures during their visit to the "Missing" exhibition in Beirut on Tuesday. The event features photographs of people who disappeared during the civil war. Image Credit: EPA

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