

APOLOGIES IN POST-WAR LEBANON: AN EXAMINATION

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Following the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) the country entered into a period of 'collective amnesia' whereby the Lebanese avoided discussing the conflict at all costs. This amnesia was encouraged by Lebanon's key politicians and elites, who were often perpetrators of violence or leaders of militias. However, since 2001, a series of political apologies have occurred in Lebanon. These apologies have been discussed and debated in the Lebanese press; they have also encouraged various responses from the public regarding motives and sincerity. Using examples of apologies between Lebanon's Christian community and Palestinian refugees, this article will highlight how apologies are becoming part of the country's civil war discourse. Art, the press and film will also be examined, as they are other areas which have linked apologies to civil war memory and discussions.

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This article examines the emergence of apologies in Lebanon's civil war discourse. In the last two decades several politicians, political groups and different forms of media have either apologised for the civil war or referred to apologies in some way, displaying a significant break from the country's period of *state sanctioned amnesia* in the 1990s. The terms *state sanctioned amnesia* and *collective amnesia* have become widely linked with post-war Lebanon and this is partly due to a lack of consensus regarding the causes of the conflict, as well as fears of reigniting sectarian divisions. This article will examine how Lebanon's elites, including political organisations, former warlords and members of militias, used apologies to address the Civil War. It will also demonstrate how apologies concerning the Civil War era are now being explored and demanded by the Lebanese people themselves through a number of mediums.¹

¹The author would like to thank the reviewers of this piece for bringing the work of Nadia Anne Harb to their attention. This article originally formed part of my MA thesis in History at the University of Melbourne (2016). The thesis was titled, 'Feeling Sorry? An Examination of Apologies Given for Civil War Atrocities in Lebanon (1975-2014)'. Oren Barak, "Don't Mention the War?" The Politics of Remembrance and Forgetfulness in Postwar Lebanon', *Middle East Journal* 61 (2007): 50; Sune Haugbolle, 'Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25 (2005): 193. Barak notes the scholars to first coin these terms. He mentions Carole Dagher (an activist and scholar) who spoke of a "national amnesia" in Lebanon, and Michael Young, (an opinion editor in Lebanon's *Daily Star* newspaper) who argued that Lebanon's post war society "has been rebuilt on a foundation of state-sponsored amnesia." Barak also notes

The Lebanese Civil War saw a number of terribly violent incidents, which etched themselves on the nation's psyche. The Karantina, Damour, Tel-al Zataar and Sabra Shatilla massacres, which took place from 1976 to 1982, continue to cause feelings of resentment amongst sectarian groups (namely Maronite Christians and Muslims.)² With foreign intervention the 1990 Taif Accord ended the Lebanese civil war and addressed issues of Lebanon's identity. Militias were to be disbanded and Lebanon was classified and viewed as Arab in identity, yet the Accord made no attempt made to address measures of reconciliation and redress. The 1991 General Amnesty laws also prevented former militia members and leaders from being prosecuted for violent acts committed during the Civil War. The amnesties were given even though militia members did not have to provide information about their involvement in atrocities. Instead, policies were directed towards reintegrating militia members into Lebanese society. Discussions concerning the past were avoided at all costs and the discussion of the Civil War became a taboo subject amongst Lebanon's citizens. After nearly sixteen years of conflict, the government and its members, who had nearly all participated in the war, preferred to leave the past behind them. They feared that an examination of the past could lead to another deadly conflict and also feared being implicated.³

Lebanon's failure to embrace apologies and reconciliation practices contrasted with the emergence of reparation politics elsewhere in the world, whereby governments and organisations around the world made forms of redress a priority. From the late 1980s to the present day, apologies have become the central element in the politics of reparation.⁴ Recognition of past suffering is identified as the most crucial element in post-conflict reconstruction. The act of apologising is supposed to be an affirmation of the suffering of a tormented group. This can open discussions amongst grieving parties, which can in turn lead to progress in, and even the achievement of, reconciliation between formerly opposed groups. Jean Hampton writes that recognition 'un- states

Samir Khalaf's coining of the term "collective amnesia."

² The literature concerning the Lebanese Civil War is extensive. The following works are but some examples that trace the conflict: David C. Gordon, *Lebanon: The Fragmented Nation* (London: Hoover Institution Press, 1980) and Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985*, Second ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

³ Dima de Clerck, 'Ex-Militia Fighters in Post-War Lebanon', *Accord Magazine*, (24) 2012. Accessed at https://www.c-r.org/downloads/Accord24_ExMilitiaFighters.pdf; Lynn Maalouf, Habib Nassar and Marieke Wierda, 'Early Reflections on Local Perceptions, Legitimacy and Legacy of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 5 (2007), 1070.

⁴ Karen Grainer, Louise Mullany and Sandra Harris, 'The Pragmatics of Political Apologies', *Discourse & Society* 17 (2006): 716.

[the] moral worthlessness,' that often follows when recognition is not accorded to groups that have experienced atrocities. To deny a group's suffering is an act of 'moral contempt', the likes of which 'can be as devastating as the original wrong itself'. Hence, Hampton argues that to not recognise pain is equivalent to repeating the violent act itself because it again subjects victims to trauma:

Although an apology cannot undo a wrongful act, it can "un-state" the implicit claim that the wronged person has no moral worth and merits no moral consideration. It is the cancellation of this profoundly insulting and potentially humiliating message that can inspire the ending of anger and resentment on the part of the victim.⁵

Apologies can signify a new era, a progression of thought whereby value is placed on reconciliation practices and past sufferings are recognised by perpetrators of violence.⁶ They also allow for the identities of perpetrators to be reformulated, since those that were once violent can be seen as initiators of peace. Apologies create a new vantage point from which wrongdoing can be judged and can usher in a new era for both apology makers and recipients.⁷ In post-war societies, these sentiments and re-inventions are invaluable and are directly linked with a country's future peace and stability.⁸

Once recognition is granted the wheels of change begin to turn, wherein discourse concerning the past can suddenly flourish in a formerly constrained society. These discussions can potentially create a process of transitional justice for past wrongdoings. This is why apologies have become a crucial element in propelling transitional justice practices; an apology signifies recognition, which can help quell anger and promote the crucial discussions needed to ignite judicial recognition of past wrongdoings.⁹

⁵ Wilhelm Verwoerd and Trudy Govier, 'The Promise and Pitfalls of Apology', *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002): 70.

⁶ Emil B. Towner, 'Apologising for Genocide: The Subtleties, Significance and Complexity of Contrition in Rwanda's Reconciliation', in *Thinking and Practicing Reconciliation: Teaching and Learning Through Literary Responses to Conflict*, eds. Leo W. Riegert, Jill Scott, Jack Shuler (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 74.

⁷ Graham G. Dodds, 'Government Apologies and Political Reconciliation: Promise and Pitfalls', in *Peacebuilding, Memory and Reconciliation: Bridging Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches (Studies in Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding)*, eds. Bruno Charbonneau and Genevieve Parent (New York: Routledge, 2012), 174.

⁸ David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse (eds.), *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2003.

⁹ Brenda Coughlin and Jeffrey K. Olick, 'The Politics of Regret: Analytical Frames', in *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices*, ed. John Torpey (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003), 42.

This process did not begin in Lebanon until the year 2000. On the 10th February 2000, Assad Shaftari, once a senior member of the Lebanese Forces (a Christian militia) publicly apologised to those he had tormented during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). The intelligence that Shaftari provided to his senior commanders concerned the deaths of hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians, mostly Shia or Sunni Muslims. Shaftari had wanted to 'destroy' his Muslim foes and for the first ten years after the war ended, gave no sign of any remorse for his actions. However, Shaftari went on to declare a public apology to those affected by his hate: 'I apologise for the horror of war and for what I did during the Lebanese civil war in the name of "Lebanon", the "cause", and "Christianity"'.¹⁰ Similarly, in perhaps the most astonishing apology of all, one of Lebanon's most controversial politicians (and former Christian militia leader), Samir Geagea, apologised for his actions during the civil war period: 'I fully apologise for all the mistakes that we committed when we were carrying out our national duties during past civil war years', he said. 'I ask God to forgive, and so I ask the people whom we hurt in the past. I want to tell those who are exploiting our past mistakes to stop doing so because only God can judge us'.¹¹

I have elsewhere written about Shaftari and Geagea's apologies, with a particular emphasis on how these former warlords used apologies as a way of being reintegrated into society.¹² The present article highlights the *general* change in discourse that has occurred within Lebanon over the last twenty years, particularly amongst Lebanon's Palestinian refugee and Christian populations. In order to achieve this, this article will first trace the apologies exchanged between the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Christian representatives and examine how apologies have become linked to the Palestinian and Christian experience. Second, the way in which the Lebanese media has called for apologies will be noted, displaying a change in discourse within Lebanon's post-Civil War environment. Art will also be examined, as apologies are now present within forms of satire and Civil War remembrance.

¹⁰ Michael Young, 'The Politics of Saying, I'm Sorry', *Daily Star*, 21st February 2000. Accessed at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2000/Feb-21/104715thepolitics-of-saying-im-sorry.ashx>; Rachel McCarthy, 'After the Lebanese Civil War, An Apology', *The Story*, 26th September 2013. Accessed at <http://www.thestory.org/stories/2013-09/after-lebanese-civil-war-apology>.

¹¹ Hussein Abdullah, 'Geagea Apologises for LF's Wartime "Mistakes"', *Daily Star*, 22nd September 2008. Accessed at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/Sep-22/50570-geagea-apologizes-for-lfs-wartime-mistakes.ashx>

¹² Nayree Mardirian, "Lebanon's 'Age of Apology' for Civil War Atrocities: A Look at Assad Shaftari and Samir Geagea," *ANU Historical Journal II*, 1 (May 2019): 137-157.

In order to undertake this analysis, newspapers will be used to assess public opinion towards apologies. Historian Roger Owen has noted that while there is 'no substitute for original documentation' newspapers are 'rich and rewarding' sources in their own right.¹³ Indeed, newspapers and media sources are crucial when studying Lebanon. For a country that struggles with its Civil War memory, newspapers allow historians to examine discussions of the past and how the Lebanese people have approached their trauma: they highlight changes in public opinion and sentiment.

By examining the link between apologies and Civil War memory, this article will challenge previous assessments that the Lebanese public has largely ignored apologies.¹⁴ Furthermore, although Nadia Anne Harb has examined apologies in *Political Forgiveness as Conflict Resolution: A Case of Post War Lebanon*, her study traced the likelihood of forgiveness after apologies. It also used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to assess the role of apologies in promoting forgiveness between sectarian groups. Harb's 2010 study argued that apologies in Lebanon were far too limited in scope to be impactful amongst ordinary Lebanese citizens but that there was a willingness to forgive amongst sectarian groups.¹⁵ However, this article will provide additional examples of how apologies are being demanded, explored and even mocked within Lebanon. By doing so, it will argue that apologies are becoming a part of the civil war discourse.

THE PLO AND CHRISTIAN GROUPS

The relationship between the Lebanese (both Christian and Muslim) and the Palestinians is complex. In post-war Lebanon, Palestinians are predominantly viewed negatively by the Christian community and are treated as if they are either 'potential terrorists or wanted criminals'.¹⁶ Their participation in the Lebanese Civil War led to resentment among the Maronites, due to their alliance with Lebanon's Muslims. Christians used the Palestinians' presence in Lebanon as justification for arming themselves and forming military

¹³ WM. Roger Louis, 'Britain and the Crisis of 1958', in *A Revolutionary Year: The Middle East in 1958*, eds. WM. Roger Louis and Roger Owen (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 8. Louis' research also concerned Lebanon and Middle Eastern politics throughout the 1950s (with a focus on the 1958 Marine deployment to Beirut.)

¹⁴ Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 151-159.

¹⁵ Nadia Anne Harb, 'Political Forgiveness as Conflict Resolution', (MA Thesis, American University of Beirut, 2010), 134-138.

¹⁶ Qassem, Qassem, 'Lebanon in the Eyes of Palestinian Refugees', *al-Akhbar*, 24th November, 2011. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/1799>

organisations. Due to their alliance with Lebanon's Muslim-leftist factions, they were viewed with suspicion and, as such, were subjected to severe violence. The Palestinians were also the vanguard of the Arab nationalist movement, a movement which further exacerbated Maronite resentment. In terms of the Palestinians' position in post-war Lebanon, the Palestinians were (and remain) ostracised from society. Firstly, the PLO was excluded from the 1991 amnesty laws and its mistakes were not forgotten, unlike those of others who participated in the war.¹⁷ The Lebanese Government implemented widespread restrictions on Palestinian employment and property rights.¹⁸ With thousands being left homeless because of the destruction or evacuation of Palestinian camps during the Civil War, refugees were (and continue to be) unable to re-establish themselves in Lebanese society due to 'the spatial, economic, social and political marginalisation imposed by the Lebanese government'.¹⁹ There are no prospects of citizenship, and they have become stuck in permanent limbo. Distinct lines of division have been drawn between communities. 'There are no shared resources or social services, no shared ideology, and very little socialising', writes academic Julie Peteet.²⁰ Lebanon's Palestinian community often refers to their treatment in post-war Lebanon as 'strangulation'.²¹ In an interview with Peteet, a young Palestinian man spoke of the disenchantment that the new generation of Palestinians is feeling in the country. He told her that 'We are the new generation and we have a new sense of what we want. We want respect and to leave Lebanon. We are fed up with this treatment at the roadblocks. They shout at us "Get Down!" "Give me your identity card!" "What are you looking at?" We just want to be treated with respect'.²² Indeed, the Palestinians have always been treated with scepticism and suspicion, and the constant restrictions regarding their employment and living situations in Lebanon exemplifies this phenomenon.²³

Along with these political frustrations comes the issue of past violence between the PLO and the predominantly Maronite militias. The past remains

¹⁷ Are Knudsen and Nasser Yassin, "Political Violence in Post- Civil War Lebanon," in *The Peace in Between: Post-War Violence and Peacebuilding*, eds. Mats Berdal and Astri Suhrke (New York: Routledge, 2012), 120.

¹⁸ Lisa Khoury, 'Palestinians in Lebanon: 'It's like Living in a Prison'', *Al Jazeera*, 16th December, 2017. This article highlights how Lebanon *continues* to persecute Palestinians and the extent of their living conditions within the country.

¹⁹ Julie Peteet, 'The Dilemma of the Palestinians in Lebanon', in *Lebanon's Second Republic: Prospects for the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Kali C Ellis (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2002), 87.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 87.

²¹ *Ibid*, 82.

²² *Ibid*, 78.

²³ *Ibid*, 82.

a key issue among the Palestinian community: 'We don't like those who took part in killing us', said Fadi Muhammad, a Palestinian refugee from Bourj el-Barajneh camp. Muhammad, a college student, named the Lebanese political parties that participated, one way or another, in carrying out massacres against Palestinians. 'The Phalange party destroyed Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp. The Lebanese Forces committed the Sabra and Shatila massacre and the Amal movement conducted a devastating war on the camps'.²⁴ When asked about past relations between the Palestinians and the Lebanese, another student gave the following response, 'I used to hear my parents say that the Lebanese Forces committed the Sabra and Shatila massacre and that my mother survived because she was able to run inside the camp before they were able to get to her'.²⁵ He did not wish to meet a member of the Lebanese Forces 'because I don't know what my reaction would be towards him'.²⁶ These statements display the hostility the Palestinian community continues to feel towards the militias that attacked them during the war. In an attempt to try and bridge ties with the Lebanese population, the Palestinian Declaration for Lebanon was issued on the initiative of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and issued by Abbas Zaki, the representative of the PLO in Lebanon, on 7th January, 2008. In the Declaration, the PLO apologised for 'any damage [the Palestinians] have caused to our dear Lebanon whether intentionally or not, since 1948'.²⁷ The document also urged the Lebanese to improve the living conditions of the Palestinian refugees and outlined the PLO's proposals for its future relations with Lebanon. Issues regarding the resettlement of Palestinian refugees were also discussed.²⁸ According to *Initiatives of Change International*:

the document emphasised Palestinian respect for Lebanon's independence and sovereignty and stated their wish that all weapons in possession of the various Palestinian factions, whether inside or outside Palestinian refugee camps, should be subject to Lebanese laws and not used in any inter-Lebanese conflict.²⁹

In response to the PLO's Declaration forty-four Christian Lebanese (whose names and political associations have been extremely difficult to obtain) signed a letter, headlined *Appeal to our Palestinian Brothers in Lebanon*, which appeared

²⁴ Qassem, 'Lebanon in the Eyes of Palestinian Refugees', *al-Akhabar*, 24th November, 2011.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 'Palestinian Apology Draws Lebanese Response', Initiatives of Change International, last modified 28th May, 2008. <http://www.iofc.org/de/node/2386>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

in the *An-Safir* newspaper on 12th April, 2008, the thirty-third anniversary of the outbreak of the Lebanese war. It read:

We Lebanese Christians must recognise that some of us committed unjustified acts during that long war which resulted in the death of innocent fellow Palestinians. This hurts us and we would like to apologise, asking God to show us how to compensate, if possible, for the injustice perpetrated. We call on our fellow Palestinians to enter into relations and dialogue with us in the service of a decent, secure and fraternal life for us all. We are confident that what we express here is shared by many of our fellow Lebanese.³⁰

The difficulty in obtaining a transcript of the forty-four Christian leaders' apology must be addressed: this particular apology was not widely accessible on the Internet, nor could a transcript be obtained in Arabic or English when researching this article. This raises questions regarding the apology's purpose. If an apology cannot be widely documented for the public, is it any use at all? How will the public be able to establish the exact names of the forty four leaders? How will they know who apologised? Perhaps the apologies were a form of political opportunism for each community and a way for each group to rebuild their reputations. Despite these hurdles, the apologies provided by these two groups are still significant, especially the events that followed.

In response to this apology letter the PLO representative in Lebanon made the following statement:

We are very pleased with the exchanged apologies, which reflect the respect of the Palestinians for the Lebanese, and the respect of the Lebanese for their fellow Palestinians, as well as the recognition of the sanctity of the causes of the two peoples which are vulnerable to oppression and which have suffered over a long period due to political maps imposed on the region. These apologies constitute a good beginning for mutual understanding of the need for the Lebanese for stability and the need for Palestinians to return to their homes. On our part, we stress after this Declaration, that we place ourselves at the disposal of Lebanese unity and the stability of Lebanese security. We will not let anyone disturb our good relations with the Lebanese state and people.³¹

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

This exchange of apologies is noteworthy because though Geagea and Shaftari's apologies were undoubtedly significant they did not directly address the issue of Palestinian and Christian hostilities. Based on the history of mutual violence between these two groups, such statements of regret are significant. They have allowed dialogue to take place amongst these two groups, which can aid in initiating psychological healing amongst victims of violence. Their publication in *An-Nahar* newspaper allowed for a wide distribution of readers to view the apologies and has even allowed an 'Openness and Reconciliation Conference' amongst representatives of the Phalange, Palestinian and Muslim-leftist forces.³² It was at this conference that Zaki explained that by giving an apology, 'We adopted an [approach] of existence in Lebanon - we recognised the temporary nature of our presence, strive to refrain from interference in Lebanese affairs, and maintain equal distance from all internal Lebanese [factions]'.³³ Amin Gemayal, the Maronite leader, also went on to stress the importance of unifying Palestinian refugees and Lebanon's citizens:

We should - rather than remember the battles and heroism that occurred between us and the Palestinians - recall the relationship between Lebanon and Palestine before the Naqba [of 1948] ... the social, cultural, and spiritual proximity between our two peoples that made Palestine, of all Arab states, closest to Lebanon.³⁴

The apologies by both the PLO and the Christian leaders marked a shift in the relationship between these groups. Narratives were re-constructed to try and turn former enemies into allies, and apologies were used by the PLO and the Christian forces to carry out this task. There are varying responses to these apologies and Lebanon's Palestinian population has not simply ignored them. For example, a Palestinian refugee, Abu Mustafa Taqa, gave the following statement to journalist Qassem Qassem: 'Samir Geagea apologised for what happened during the civil war and Abbas Zaki apologised for what we did. That's why we should open a new page'. 'Everyone apologised for what they did during the civil war except Nabih Berri. He did not apologise for what he did to us during the War of the Camps', Taqa said.³⁵ Berri is a prominent member of Lebanon's Amal Movement, whose forces battled against the Palestinians throughout the civil war. The mention of Berri's *lack* of apology demonstrates

³² Anthony Elghossain, 'Gemayal, Zaki Headline Reconciliation Confab', *Daily Star*, 16th April, 2008. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/Apr-16/49033-gemayal-zaki-headline-reconciliation-confab.ashx>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Qassem Qassem, 'Lebanon in the Eyes of Palestinian Refugees', *al-Akhbar*, 24th November, 2011.

just how relevant apologies have become in Lebanese society and how they are not simply dismissed, but are often welcomed by their recipients.

It is true that these apologies have not become a panacea for Christian-Palestinian hatred. Despite participating in the 'Openness and Reconciliation Conference', Christian leaders are still reluctant to incorporate a large number of Palestinian refugees into Lebanese society and to allow Palestinians to obtain Lebanese citizenship. Amin Gemayal openly stated at the conference that while the Palestinians in Lebanon were welcome as political refugees, 'any surrender of the right to return is a failed vision'.³⁶ This statement reflects the sectarian imbalance that Christians fear could result if Palestinians are granted citizenship. The right of return refers to the Palestinians' desire to return to, and to claim, their properties in present day Israel and the occupied territories. In order to achieve this, Palestinians must remain refugees and not integrate into Lebanese society. This support for the Palestinians' right to return could be an attempt to prevent an increase in Lebanon's Muslim (in particular, Sunni) population, which would undoubtedly occur should refugees be allowed to become citizens. Such an occurrence could help thwart the balance of Lebanon's current confessional system.³⁷ Once again, true motives cannot be thoroughly dissected, but the inclusion of Gemayal's remark at the conference is significant. Palestinians, in return, are still frustrated by Lebanon's restrictive social, economic and political system, and sectarian divisions prevent them from leading stable, functioning lives. One resident of the Burj-al-Brajneh Refugee Camp in Beirut said 'We want to feel we are alive, because honestly we don't feel that way'.³⁸ 'When our kids graduate, where are they going to work? There are no jobs. It is all about connections, clientelism, and racism. Unqualified people. We just want to make a living and feel secure'.³⁹ Lebanon's current Christian leadership continues persecuting Palestinians; the insistence of Palestinian work permits by former Labor Minister Abu Sleiman (a member of the Lebanese Forces) raised suspicions amongst the Palestinian community, who protested against such measures in July 2019.⁴⁰ When such circumstances

³⁶ Anthony Elghossain, 'Gemayal, Zaki Headline Reconciliation Confab', *Daily Star*, 16th April, 2008.

³⁷ An exploration of Lebanon's confessionalist system can be found in the following article: Maurice Obeid, 'A Lebanese Confession: Why Religious Politics is Bad for Lebanon', *Harvard Kennedy School Review* 10 (January 2010): 104.

³⁸ Romesh Silva et al., *How People Talk About the Lebanon Wars: A Study of the Perceptions and Expectations of Residents in Greater Beirut* (Lebanon: International Centre for Transitional Justice, 2014), 21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Ali Younes, "Why Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon are Protesting," *Al Jazeera*, 20th July, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/palestinian-refugees-lebanon->

are plaguing the lives of Palestinian refugees (and they continue to be used for political expediency), it is difficult to grasp the real impact and effectiveness of any apology given. There is also an element of elitism in these apologies and their delivery. Are representatives of a community able to apologise on behalf of a particular group? These are relevant points that impact the efficacy of such apologies.

Nonetheless, it is significant that there were apologies at all, as well as the fact that the community at large has discussed them. It shows that apologies are not being ignored, but rather are integrated into the discourse surrounding the Civil War era. A recent film by Ziad Doueiri, *The Insult*, highlights this. In the film, a Palestinian refugee, Yasser, is subjected to Lebanon's harsh living conditions and is sued for insulting and assaulting a Maronite Christian named Tony, a vehement Lebanese nationalist. The plaintiff demands an apology from the Palestinian man and what ensues is a brutal exploration of the realities of Palestinian life in the country and the civil war itself. 'You know what? You people are lousy bastards', says Tony to his Palestinian foe. '...Otherwise you would have apologised. That explains your bad reputation'.⁴¹ Doueiri was inspired by his experiences of the civil war era:

...It's something that we lived through, all the dynamics that you saw in the film, we are very familiar with it. You know, the Palestinian point of view, the Christian point of view. These are things that are so familiar to us. You know it's this thing that we grew up eating and drinking and living. We were stopped at checkpoints, we hid under the bombs, we lived in shelters in Beirut in the 70s and the 80s and the 90s. So that all kind of like go[es] into your USB hard disk and then you memorise it and then you register and it makes you who you are today. The film is, in a way, autobiographical.⁴²

The Insult was controversial in Lebanon and some Palestinians (and Muslims in general) boycotted the film. Doueiri received criticism due to his history of filming in Israel, and his depiction of Palestinians as perpetrators of violence only exacerbated resentment amongst Lebanon's Palestinian and Muslim

protesting-190719194412471.html

⁴¹ *The Insult*, directed by Ziad Doueiri (Beirut, Lebanon: Ezekiel Films, 2017), DVD. Doueiri's 1998 film, *West Beirut*, also examines the civil war era and has become a classic in Lebanese cinema.

⁴² Jennifer Hijazi, 'The Insult, Lebanon's First Oscar Nominated Film, Examines a Country's Deepest Wounds', *PBS*, 4th March, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/the-insult-lebanons-first-oscar-nominated-film-examines-a-countrys-deepest-wounds>.

population. An article published in Lebanon's *Al-Akhbar* noted how 'Ziad Doueiri is not entitled to show his film in Lebanon'.⁴³ However, the Lebanese government did not challenge the release of the film, and it was ranked number one in the country's box office.⁴⁴ It was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. Regarding its ability to help promote reconciliation between grieving parties, Lebanon's *Daily Star* remained sceptical: 'Cinema doesn't have a great record in achieving national reconciliation. It is unlikely that 'The Insult' can change that. At the end of the day a film is judged by other criteria', wrote Jim Quilty, a reporter for the newspaper.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, *Al-Monitor* reporter Chloe Domat captured the film's impact on some of its Lebanese audience. Domat interviewed several spectators, including a storekeeper named Nour Khoder, who noted that she cried 'several times' while watching. 'The narrative is so strong, it really shakes you. It brought back memories of the war, the massacres, what my family went through. I'm very moved', she said. A student, Daniel Abboud, was also interviewed for the piece: 'It feels so real...What happens in that film — it could happen now, right now, in this street'.⁴⁶

While the film might not have led to any broad reconciliation movements, its exploration of apologies and civil war trauma is noteworthy and another example of how apologies and the civil war era are becoming linked.

THE MEDIA

Along with film, Lebanon's media has also played a part in emphasising apologies. In 2007, Lebanon's *An-Nahar* newspaper released a statement in a special supplement that covered the Civil War era: 'Leaders who took part in the 1975-1989 civil war owe the Lebanese an apology for the direct as well as indirect damage they have caused to both their country and countrymen'.⁴⁷ The paper demanded apologies from Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Free Patriotic

⁴³ Jonathan Broder, "Ziad Doueiri's Controversial Film 'The Insult' Is Nominated for an Oscar After Boycotts in Lebanon," *Newsweek*, 26th January 2018. <https://www.newsweek.com/2018/02/09/ziad-doueiris-controversial-film-insult-nominated-oscar-after-boycotts-lebanon-791547.html>

⁴⁴ Ibid; Hijazi, 'The Insult'.

⁴⁵ Chloe Domat, "'The Insult' Tops Box Office in Lebanon', *Al Monitor*, 6th October, 2017. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/insult-tops-box-office-in-lebanon.html> Quilty's article was referenced in Domat's piece.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Unlike other sources from *The Daily Star* newspaper, no information was provided as to the author and date of publication for this article. The link to said article is, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/GetArticleBody.aspx?id=48944&fromgoogle=1> and the date of access was 22nd October, 2015.

leader Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea. While Samir Geagea apologised the following year, Jumblatt and Aoun have refrained from saying sorry. Walid Jumblatt was the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party and acted as allies in the Lebanese National Movement alongside the Palestinians against the Maronite militias. He acknowledged that he had made 'many mistakes' during the Civil War period, but stated he would only apologise for his actions if he would be well received.⁴⁸ 'Apologies and regrets cease to make any sense if the recipients fail to accept them', he said.⁴⁹ Michel Aoun also refused to apologise for his actions during the civil war period. Aoun was a Maronite army general who notably went against Geagea and the Syrian Army in the early 1990s. He states that the actions he undertook during the war 'were acts of self-defense, I never attacked anyone'.⁵⁰

Jumblatt and Aoun's responses provide an interesting insight into how other former warlords perceive apologies. Although Jumblatt invited the former leader of the Maronite church to a reconciliatory meeting in 2001, he refused to apologise for his Civil War 'mistakes'.⁵¹ Jumblatt viewed discussions with his former foes as necessary, yet apologies appeared to be a step too far for him. Although Aoun has not undertaken such reconciliatory measures as Jumblatt, his statement is also striking. He only sees apologising as an admission of guilt and does not wish to express such statements for actions he undertook in 'self-defence'.⁵² The fact that these men are reluctant to make such statements suggests that both of them understand the political and social value placed on apologising. Apologies are complicated and, by their very nature, acknowledge some form of responsibility for the past. Based on Jumblatt and Aoun's responses, this is not a responsibility that all Civil War leaders wish to undertake. They view the social and political ramifications that accompany apologies as too complicated to confront, which is why they are best avoided. Apologies generate discussion and debate and not every leader is willing to subject themselves to such examinations. Hence, if forgiveness cannot be guaranteed and a militia leader is still criticised for their past, what is the benefit of expressing such statements?

Indeed, Jumblatt and Aoun's statements (and the demand for apologies by *An-Nahar*) display the conflicting attitudes surrounding apologies and their importance. While some emphasise the ritualistic aspect of apology-making

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

and see it as a necessary step to healing old wounds, others do not see the benefit in making such statements if forgiveness cannot be guaranteed. Some civil war leaders relish their roles as sectarian leaders and to admit wrongdoing would only diminish their roles as defenders of their respective communities. Nonetheless, these discussions and opinions regarding apologies are now part of the discourse and signify a significant break from the amnesia that gripped the country's post-war environment.

Members of the public and cultural society have also chosen to apologise for their role in the Lebanese Civil War. Lebanese Non-Government Organisations and civil society groups, such as *Memory at Work*, have made an effort to record any apologies given and to include transcripts of them on their website. The inclusion of these apologies signifies the importance such organisations place on these statements of regret.⁵³ Apologies have also been used as a form of satire. In his 2007 exhibition, *I, the Undersigned*, Lebanese artist, playwright and actor, Rubin Mroue, apologised for his part in the war. His 'sorrow' was expressed through a visual exhibition, in which the artist looked at a screen and apologised for the past. According to T.J. Demos,

The language he (Mroue) uses suggests legal testimony, although its seeming straightforwardness gradually unravels in unexpected directions. His apologies veer from the just plausible ("for all I have done during the Lebanese civil war") to the absurd ("for not being kidnapped or assassinated.")

Demos also notes how the wording of Mroue's apology connotes a sense of absurdity: he is somewhat mocking the tragedy of events that occurred to highlight the fact that they were unnecessary.⁵⁴

Yet, the fact that apologies have been used as a way to display his feelings of frustration regarding the Civil War era is significant. Unlike Shaftari, Geagea, the Palestinians and the media, Mroue's 'apology' is not used as a way to bridge ties; it is used to highlight the absurdity of the tragic events that happened during the Civil War. This displays the sense of ambivalence that is accompanied with apologies in Lebanon: apologies can be viewed as false

⁵³ These apologies can be found at,

<http://www.memoryatwork.org/index.php/itemYear/1/22/10289/2008>

⁵⁴ T.J. Demos, 'Rubin Mroue: Bak, Basis Voor Actuele Kunst, Utrecht, the Netherlands', *Artforum International* 49 (2010): 320, An English translation is available at, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Rabih+Mroue%3A+BAK,+basis+voor+actuele+kunst,+utrecht,+the+Netherlands.-a0236980200>

gesture and not a reconciliatory tool. Nonetheless, they are being associated with the Civil War and used to promote discussion about the past.

CONCLUSION

From the growing number of apologies since the year 2000 it is clear that apologies have been used to promote discussion about Lebanon's past. Media organisations have promoted them as useful tools for reconciliation. The press has also used apologies as a benchmark for assessing a politician's regret. At the same time, the subsequent exchange between the PLO and the forty-four Christian leaders displays how apologies have become valued in Lebanese society. Films and artwork have also examined apologies for Lebanon's civil war. It is clear that far from being ignored or cast aside, apologies are becoming part of the country's Civil War discourse.