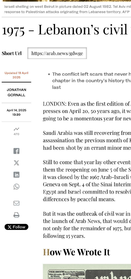
50 MOMENTS THAT CHANGED THE MIDDLE EAST

1 1975 - Lebanon's civil war



Israeli shelling on west Beirut in picture dated 02 August 1982. Yet Ariv military actions were a response to Palestinian attacks originating from Lebanese territory. AFP

1975 - Lebanon's civil war

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JONATHAN GORNALL

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- The conflict left scars that never healed, marking a bloody chapter in the country's history that would be far from the last

LONDON: Even as the first edition of Arab News rolled off the presses on April 20, 50 years ago, it was already clear that 1975 was going to be a momentous year for news.

Saudi Arabia was still recovering from the shock of the assassination the previous month of King Faisal, who on March 25 had been shot by an errant minor member of the royal family.

Still to come that year lay other events of great import, among them the reopening on June 5 of the Suez Canal, eight years after it was closed by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and the signing in Geneva on Sept. 4 of the Sinai Interim Agreement, under which Egypt and Israel committed to resolving their territorial differences by peaceful means.

But it was the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon, one week before the launch of Arab News, that would dominate the news agenda not only for the remainder of 1975, but also for much of the following 17 years.

How We Wrote It

Arab News's front page covered the assassination of Bashir Gemayel and Israel's invasion of West Beirut.

There is still no universal agreement about the precise order of the fateful events that unfolded in the Christian Ain El-Remmaneh district of East Beirut on April 13, 1975, but the bald facts are indisputable.

On a day that came to be known as Black Sunday, Palestinian gunmen opened fire on a Christian congregation gathered on the pavement outside the Church of Notre Dame de la Delivrance after a family baptism.

Four men, including the father of the child, were killed. One of the survivors was Pierre Gemayal, the Maronite Catholic founder and leader of Lebanon's right-wing Christian kataeb (or Phalangist) Party, who was possibly the target of the attack.

A terrible revenge was quickly exacted. Later that same day, a bus on which Palestinians were returning to a refugee camp from a political rally was ambushed by Phalangist gunmen who killed more than 20 of the passengers.

In the words of Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi in his 2007 book "A History of Modern Lebanon," "A war that was to last for 15 years had just begun."

Sectarian tensions had been rising in the country since the mass influx of Palestine Liberation Organization fighters to the south of the country in 1971 after their eviction from Jordan, but this was not the only cause of the civil war that erupted in April 1975.

In truth, the long fuse that ignited the conflict in the former Ottoman region was lit more than half a century earlier by the impositions of the Sanctate for Syria and Lebanon, which was granted to France by the League of Nations after the First World War.

Key Dates

April 13, 1975

Civil war begins when Palestinian gunmen open fire on Maronite Christian Phalangists outside a church in East Beirut. Phalangists retaliate by ambushing busload of Palestinians.

June 1976

Syrian troops enter Lebanon, ostensibly to protect Muslims from Christian forces.

March 19, 1978

US-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 425 calls on Israeli forces to withdraw from southern Lebanon and establishes peacekeeping UN Interim Force in Lebanon.

June 6, 1982

Israeli army invades and reaches suburbs of Beirut. In August, a multinational force arrives to oversee evacuation of PLO.

Sept. 14, 1982

After international force withdraws, Israel invades again, entering Beirut. Israeli troops stand by as Christian militiamen massacre thousands of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

1983

A series of suicide truck bombings results in withdrawal of multinational forces from Lebanon: 63 people are killed at the US embassy on April 18; on Oct. 23, 241 US Marines and 58 French soldiers die in separate attacks on their barracks.

Oct. 22, 1989

This framework, which gave Christians control of the government and parliament, was based on the results of a 1932 census. Over time, however, shifting demographics would undermine the credibility of this arrangement and its acceptability to certain groups who felt increasingly underrepresented.

These demographic changes were accelerated dramatically by the fallout from the 1967 Six Day War between Arab states and Israel, during which large numbers of Palestinians took refuge in Jordan and, increasingly, southern Lebanon.

These PLO fighters were welcomed as heroes by many of the tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees in the south of the country whose families had been forced to flee their homes during Israel's occupation of Palestine in 1948.

By the eve of the civil war, many other factors had conspired to push the country to the brink of conflict, including a socioeconomic crisis in which the cost-of-living was soaring even as wealth was becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of a privileged few political dynasties.

In the three decades after gaining independence from France in 1943, Lebanon had enjoyed a golden age. Beneath the surface, however, tensions between Christian and Muslim communities were mounting, exacerbated by what Traboulsi described as "class, sectarian and regional inequalities."

Just as Lebanon had avoided direct involvement in the Six Day War against Israel in 1967, it also kept out of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War — but once again could not escape the fallout.

By 1975, the Lebanese army had already clashed with the PLO, which was now firmly established in Lebanon, but the stark divisions in society really became apparent when demonstrations broke out in support of Egypt and Syria's war on Israel.

After it was fully unleashed on that fateful April day in 1975, the civil war escalated rapidly and brutally. In 1976 alone, Phalangist Christians killed hundreds of Palestinians in Karantina in northeastern Beirut. In retaliation, the PLO attacked Dumour, a Maronite town south of Beirut, massacring hundreds of Christians. In response, Christian militias assaulted the Tel Al-Za'atar refugee camp, killing at least 2,000 Palestinians, mostly civilians.

As the civil war continued it drew in other forces, the presence of which only worsened an already complex situation: Syrian troops, the Israeli army, Israel-backed militias, a peacekeeping UN Interim Force in Lebanon, and joint US-French-Italian multinational forces.

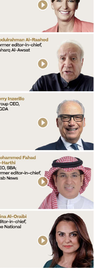
Massacres, bombings, assassinations and kidnappings became commonplace, and not without consequences. The 1983 bombings of the US embassy, a US Marines barracks and the headquarters of the French military contingent in Beirut led to the withdrawal of multinational forces.

Beirut residents watch a controlled demolition during rebuilding efforts in the Lebanese capital, which is recovering from 15 years of civil strife. AFP

In the end, it fell to the Saudis to bring the various participants to the negotiating table. On Oct. 22, 1989, three weeks of talks in the Saudi city of Taif between Muslim and Christian members of the Lebanese parliament concluded with agreement on a national "reconciliation charter."

Inevitably, the conflict's was not quite over. Maronite military leader Michel Aoun, whose appointment as prime minister of a military government the previous year had been widely contested, denounced those who signed the agreement as

In Their Words



Opinion

Souvenir Edition