

Book Interview

Tracing Boundaries Related to Lebanon's Civil War(s): Gender, Generational Divides, and Grappling with Collective Memory

Zainab Chamoun and Jennifer Philippa Eggert

Abstract

We, Zainab Chamoun and Jennifer Philippa Eggert, have been friends for five years. What started as a working relationship developed into a friendship, close despite the physical distance, Zainab living in Lebanon, and Jennifer in the UK. In this conversation, we use Jennifer's book *Women and the Lebanese Civil War: Female fighters in Lebanese and Palestinian militias*, which was published by Palgrave in 2021, as a starting point to discuss existing and historic boundaries in Lebanese society, with a focus on gender, generational divides and grappling with violence in the period of 1975 to 1990, and to examine how these boundaries have been, and can be, transgressed.

Keywords: collective memory, female fighters, gender, Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), political violence

Studying the Lebanese Civil War(s): First Encounters

Zainab: My first thorough introduction to the Lebanese Civil War came during my time in graduate school at the American University of Beirut in 2019. I was tasked with digging through Lebanese newspaper archives from 1975 to 1990 as part of my studies. Those were confusing times, with conflicting stories, numerous sources, and heart-breaking events. I struggled to grasp what really happened and the different factors at play. I spent hours reading newspapers and trying to connect the dots. I came out of that research even more bewildered, realizing just how complex the Lebanese Civil War truly is and why our parents prefer not to talk about it, upholding a boundary between their life during the War and their life after. My second encounter with this war was through your book. As I read

it, memories of my first experience came back. I couldn't help but wonder about your own journey when you decided to focus on the Lebanese Civil War. Can you walk us through your journey?

Jennifer: I came to the study of the Civil War through an interest in women's participation in political violence - women who transgress societal boundaries in terms of defying common cultural notions about their place in society and about the role they are to play in public life in general and in war in particular. I had studied the topic during my Master's in conflict studies in London, and still had so many questions that, after working for a bit after my Master's, I went back to university to delve deeper into the topic. I knew I wanted to know more about why women joined political violence as fighters, but I was not set on a specific context. I thought about comparing right-wing extremist and Salafi women in Germany (my home country), but as a Muslim woman wearing hijab, interviewing right-wing extremists would have been too dangerous. So that idea was out.

I then thought about comparing women's participation in Hezbollah and Hamas, but focusing on Middle Eastern Islamist groups was sort of what everyone expected of a Muslim woman studying female political violence, so I abandoned that idea as well. Then I came across two groups in Sri Lanka that would have made an interesting comparison. I flew to Sri Lanka, where, staying at my friend's house, I quickly realised that in the political climate at the time, I would have put research participants at risk. So that idea was not an option either. When I came back to the UK, I brainstormed once more with my supervisors, and one of them, who had researched gender and conflict in Lebanon for many years, suggested the Lebanese Civil War. There was not a lot of research on female participation as fighters. I spoke conversational Levantine Arabic and fluent French; I knew the region having worked in Palestine a few years prior, and I had family connections through my Syrian husband. This research was unlikely to be dangerous for myself or the research participants. So, the decision was made.

Making Sense of Contradictory Accounts in the Study of War

Zainab: In your book, you talk about how complex the War is, but you also give a thorough explanation of its events and the people involved. As a researcher from a different country, I'm curious to know how you handled all the conflicting facts and stories. How did you navigate the boundaries between different perspectives and make sense of the contradictory information surrounding this chapter in Lebanese history?

Jennifer: The former fighters and militants I interviewed in Lebanon may have come from a lot of different backgrounds, but behind the official narratives and ideologies, there was always a human. A human with fears, hopes, dreams, ideas - for themselves, their families, communities, their country. I may not always have agreed with the methods they used to achieve those dreams - but I could always relate to the very act of dreaming itself. And war changes a lot. I think it is not unlikely that a lot of us would also grab a weapon if we were put in a situation where the safety of the people we love is at stake. I often felt close to the Christian former fighters and militants I was speaking to, because most of my family are Christian too. I could relate to the Muslims, because I am a Muslim myself and familiar with a lot of the reasoning and narratives they shared with me.

As to the groups of the left and the Palestinians, my parents were both part of leftist movements in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, and my mum and her friends at the time had close links with the Palestinian resistance, so in lots of ways that history did not feel too foreign either. One could imagine that it would be difficult for a German researcher to relate closely to her Lebanese research participants, or for a Muslim researcher to deeply understand Christians' reasons to fight, but it turned out that a lot of the boundaries

that we often draw up between different groups of people are not insurmountable if you are willing to look for the human behind the label. That's not to say that positionalities and experiences don't matter – of course they do –but not all boundaries between us are impenetrable in all cases.

Real People Behind, and in Front, of the Weapons

Zainab: It's interesting you have brought up the profound aspect of the human element in this discussion. It's crucial to remember that there are real people behind weapons. And here, I have a disturbing question to explore further. The Lebanese Civil War was undeniably horrific and painful, marked by significant acts of violence, including against women. I'm interested in understanding how women who were engaged in combat roles felt when their respective militias were involved in violence against innocent women from other communities. I'm specifically reflecting while thinking of the disturbing atrocities that were committed during the Mountain War. How did these female fighters react to these acts?

Jennifer: This did not come up directly in the interviews. That's not to say that the women were not aware of what was happening or that they did, or did not, approve, but I think in all conflicts, there are taboos that people struggle to grapple with, especially if boundaries were transgressed in the process. I think for lots of people in Lebanon to this day, the very participation of women as fighters remains somewhat taboo. According to the dominant sociocultural view, women's roles were not to be fighters. The women's very participation in combat was a transgression, a deviance. In today's society in Lebanon, the narrative that women were victims of the War only, that the War was a "men's war", or that women were essentially opposed to the violence remains incredibly persistent and widespread. The women (and men) I spoke with did not go to war because they loved violence. They reached for weapons because they saw themselves, their communities and their country under threat. War creates impossible situations, and it's often only afterwards that you fully realize what you have done and what war has done to you.

Locating Former Female Fighters in Post-War Lebanon

Zainab: "It's often only afterwards that you fully realize what you have done and what war has done to you." You are bringing us to the present, an aspect that I'm eager to explore further in the light of your study. Who are these female fighters today? How do they reflect on and feel about their contributions during the War as they navigate the same existing complexities in Lebanon today?

Jennifer: Many of the former fighters and militants I spoke with still stood by the reasons for their involvement in the War, but they said they would not choose violence again. They saw that the violence did not lead to any solutions, but that instead, in many ways, it made matters worse. The end of the War was difficult for many of them. They had spent up to 15 years fighting, transgressed countless societal norms and boundaries – and for women in particular, this transgression carried heavy weight. It was never a simple act, but a hard decision and practice marked by consequences. And all of a sudden, they were expected to live in peace again. After a war, the majority often hasten to go back to "a normal life." But how can you do that if you have lived abnormally and if you have done abnormal things for so long? Some of the people I spoke with said it was easier for the female former fighters, because as women they had a clear way out of their war lives: they could become housewives, look after their families, lead a life in line with what many would expect a woman to live her life like – back to a life within the boundaries of the expected. But in some ways, the aftermath of the War was also more difficult for women, because their participation in the War was even more taboo than the men's. There were

women who struggled to find a marriage partner, because people were afraid to marry a woman who had been a fighter. Emotionally, it's also more difficult to come to terms with your past if there simply is no space in official narratives about the war for a woman who used to be a fighter, because apparently women "don't participate in war."

Motives for Fighting

Zainab: In your book, you delve into the multifaceted factors influencing women's involvement in combat roles during the Lebanese Civil War. One aspect that has often surfaced in our understanding, primarily through oral accounts passed down by our parents and grandparents, is the notion that many individuals were encouraged to join the War due to financial incentives. During your research and interviews, did you come across instances where this economic motivation played a significant role in driving female participation in the War - especially considering that, socially, women were not typically expected to be the primary breadwinners?

Jennifer: No, financial incentives did not come up. Everyone stressed that the women's reasons for participating in the War were based on political motives and the wish to defend their country and people. It was quite striking to see how everyone believed they were defending oneself. No one believed to have been the aggressor, which is impossible, because then no-one was to blame and everyone was innocent. But the focus on women's political motivations is important, because in parts of the literature on female political violence (let alone in media and public discourse), you can still find the assumption that women join violent political groups for personal reasons, because they lost a brother, their father made them join, they did not see any other option for them, and so on. This is not what the women (and men) I spoke with told me, so I think we need to critically review some of these assumptions that we make about gender and war.

Our Generation Has the Advantage of Distance and a Fresh Perspective

Jennifer: You were born after the Civil War, but your parents lived through it. Do you think there is a difference in how your generation and their generation would read the book?

Zainab: Being born after the Lebanese Civil War into a Muslim family in South Lebanon, I can definitely see a difference in how my generation and our parents' generation would approach reading this book. While I haven't personally lived through the nightmare of that war, as my parents call it, it doesn't mean that I don't understand how it feels. I believe that our generation, the millennials, has inherited a complex intergenerational trauma from our parents – one that influences our political affiliations nowadays, and our feelings of comradeship or alienation toward people from different backgrounds in our country.

For our parents, reading such a book would be a deeply personal experience. They would approach it with a lot of visual memories that are not all necessarily painful. My mother speaks with pride about her non-violent political activism during the War, while my father speaks about how he still avoids visiting certain areas, where checkpoints were established. They might find themselves in conversation with the book itself since they have first-hand knowledge and lived experience of the events. They have the excitement to confirm certain facts and oppose others, perhaps even narrating the Civil War from their subjective experience.

However, our generation tends to approach reading about the War with a more open perspective. We understand that the War was a complex and multifaceted tragedy, and

we are less inclined to blame it all on one side or another. I would say we are open to discussing the complexities of the conflict and actively seek to uncover one narrative, rather than conflicting ones. Whenever I read about the War, I find myself comparing what I read to what I was told. This gives our generation more space for questioning and doubting what we inherited from our parents.

In doing so, I believe we are also transgressing emotional and ideological boundaries that kept earlier generations locked into binaries. We are navigating the grey areas, stepping beyond the narratives drawn before us. Most importantly, we are able to have this kind of space because we can engage with the material without experiencing the same level of traumatic flashbacks and hard feelings. Our generation has the advantage of distance and a fresh perspective that allows us to approach the Lebanese Civil War with greater objectivity and a willingness to understand its full scope with the hope of reflecting this understanding to our present – to overcome the residues of the War.

Teaching History and War

Jennifer: You said that you did not learn about the War in school. Can you imagine a book like this being used in Lebanese schools? Based on what I know about life in Lebanon, I could imagine that it might be difficult, because some people would be worried that it would risk unsettling an already fragile arrangement based on careful maintenance of the boundaries between different sectarian groups. Would you agree with that? And what do you think would be good ways to get people to learn about the War and other parts of Lebanon's history – in general, and particularly about gender dynamics during, before and after times of crisis?

Zainab: History textbooks in Lebanon completely ignore the Civil War. They do not cover events that happened after Lebanon gained its independence in 1948. There is no consensus on one unified and accepted narrative of the War, and thus, our generation and the ones after us grew up with a very limited understanding of this chapter. Given the sectarian nature of Lebanese politics and power structures, it's crucial to acknowledge that many private schools are affiliated with and influenced by political parties and religious ideologies. In my own experience, the influence of Hezbollah and Amal were deeply embedded in subjects like history and social sciences. Similarly, many public schools are sponsored by certain politicians. Introducing a nuanced narration of the Civil War in this environment will definitely be met with suspicion and disruptions.

A book such as yours provides a balanced and objective portrayal of this dark history, but unfortunately, this does not serve the interests of the political parties in power. It can bridge the distance between the different communities, but the priority of the political class is to deepen these divisions. As an alternative, I personally advocate for education through art. Independent exhibitions, films, documentaries, and literature can play, and have played, an important role in narrating diverse and balanced perspectives on the War. Most importantly, they can be accessible to the public, eliminating the need to navigate political hegemony. Another alternative would be oral history itself. Although it's subjective and narrated by people who might be stuck in the circle of violence and pointing fingers, having well-structured and balanced oral history projects can serve as a starting point to educate and unpack narratives. This might sound cliché, but for any genuine reconciliation and education to happen, active dialogue is needed. Many dialogue circles are happening but they are sometimes poorly managed. They can exacerbate divisions and manipulate the truth. Thus, professional facilitation of these circles is essential to keep stories in order and foster a true exchange.

What Is the Point of Writing, if People Do Not Understand What You Have Written?

Zainab: Your writing style in the book achieves a balance between academic rigor and reading accessibility, making it an example of scholarly work, written by a Western researcher, that remains without academic jargon. This unique approach contributes to a smooth, swift, and engaging reading experience. It is also preferred among readers, especially those who do not come from academic backgrounds or whose first language is not English. I'm curious to know whether you intentionally chose to exclude academic jargon from your writing or did it come naturally?

Jennifer: It was both. I chose the writing style intentionally because I cannot stand the jargon many academics use. I think that some hide behind complicated terms and believe that it makes them sound more intelligent, when really it only reinforces boundaries between the academic and the rest of society. But what is the point of writing, as an academic or otherwise, if people do not understand what you have written? I think this is especially problematic if you write about people. If you write about others, they should be able to understand what you say about them without having to decipher unintelligible academic jargon. Writing the book in this way was both an intentional choice and something that came naturally, because this is also simply how I write. That being said, we all evolve as writers, and looking back on the book now, years after I started writing it, I think I would write it differently now. I would be more creative, use more vivid images, and try to make it even more accessible. Insha'allah that's something for the next book!

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