

Book Review

Nader Moumneh (2018) *The Lebanese Forces: Emergence and Transformation of the Christian Resistance*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 618 pp., ISBN 978-0-7618-7075-3

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The civil war in Lebanon, which erupted in 1975, can be succinctly described as an identity crisis. A crisis that is not limited to the civil war era, but rather encompassing the political, social, and economic state of the Lebanese nation since 1920. The country, once referred to as a “house of many mansions,” stands as a prime example of political and economic disorganisation of a fragile state. The causes of the civil war are multifaceted, stemming from both regional and international factors, yet the underlying internal fragility of Lebanon played the most significant role in its fate. As a multi-confessional country in the Middle East, Lebanon has struggled to maintain a distinct identity in the last quarter of the 20th century while facing challenges from armed Palestinian organisations, Ba’athist Syria, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite the lack of support from any regional and international power and the lack of financial and military resources, the Lebanese Christians mobilised their energies not only for their own survival but also for regaining an independent and sovereign Lebanon. The Lebanese Forces (LF) militia was born as a result.

The book under review is an expanded and revised edition of Nader Moumneh's MA thesis on LF 1993–1996. It is one of the rare scholarly works on the Christian resistance in Lebanon that is based on facts and data-based information without any emotional bias. Nader Moumneh's lengthy, meticulously researched, and extremely accurate historical narrative chronicles the formation and evolution of the Kataeb Party from 1936 to 1975 and the emergence and transformation of LF from 1976 to 2011. Most of the literature pertaining to the Lebanese civil war and, specifically, the LF party, tends to adopt a left-leaning perspective, often neglecting to offer a well-rounded evaluation of the historical context. Conversely, this unique and pioneering publication stands out as the first international work to provide a comprehensive rationale for the tactical and strategic choices made by the Christian resistance, presented from their own vantage point.

Nader Moumneh, a Lebanese Canadian author and a senior policy adviser, was born in the predominantly Christian district of Ashrafieh in Beirut. He emigrated to Canada in 1996 after completing his undergraduate and graduate studies (BA in Public Administration, MPH in Healthcare Management, and MA in Political Science) at the American University of Beirut. Although he was never affiliated with LF, he succeeded in presenting unprecedented and well-referenced research, even bringing forward the previously unknown highly sensitive intelligence information. He has meticulously compiled a wealth of information from various sources, including the Kataeb/LF documents, illuminating conversations with prominent LF leaders, perusal of Lebanese press reports, and perusal of United Nations (UN) documents.

The book consists of three distinct parts. In the first part, the author imparts a comprehensive and precise chronological account of the historical events that led to the civil war in Lebanon as well as the progression of the Kataeb party in the pre-war era. He also discusses the ascendancy of the Palestinian populace through the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1964 and the events that culminated in the Cairo Accord in 1969. The burgeoning of Palestinian martial endeavours elicited reactions from the Christian community, who apprehended the relinquishment of autonomy.

In the second part, the author discusses the formation of the unified command council for Christian militias which resulted in the emergence of LF. He elaborates on how LF also served as a political party and *de facto* government in the Christian enclave after the erosion of the state. The erosion of the state created a vacuum that LF sought to fill with the purpose of protecting its community. He also discusses the political transformation of the Lebanese forces in the post-Taif era and the full commitment of the party to support sovereignty and to strengthen the role of the central government in all aspects.

In the third and last part, the author expounds upon the Cedar Revolution and the emergence of the 14 March alliance following the assassination of Rafiq El Hariri. The rise of 14 March alerted Syria and Iran to invest heavily in an attempt to derail such political alliance. The author also discusses in depth the rise of LF's popularity in the Christian community. The rise was due to the commitment of the LF agenda to the sovereignty of Lebanon which offered an alternative to General Michel Aoun's alliance with Hezbollah.

I believe, however, that the afterword of the book entitled: "Granting Historical Justice," written by Dr. Walid Phares, is an unnecessary subjective overview for the completion of this book. Engaging in a protracted critique of Dr. Phares' perspective in this review would require a discourse far more extensive than the pages of his piece. It is readily apparent that a significant proportion of his arguments seem to aim at self-aggrandisement and validation, rather than an earnest pursuit of historical truth.

Assessment of historical events or decisions cannot be evaluated based on personal bitterness and from one-dimensional perspective but rather on the complete picture. Phares was unable to acknowledge the visionary leadership of Dr. Samir Geagea, who guided LF through one of the most difficult and unstable phases and transformed it into a formidable military strength. He also failed to acknowledge that Dr. Geagea has successfully propelled the party onto the national political stage since 2005, elevating it to a major political force within Lebanese politics, as evidenced by its substantial increase in parliamentary representation growing from a mere six elected members in 2005 to the current tally of 19.

In summary, the book under review contains an invaluable elucidation of the historical events and the difficult strategic decisions that the LF leadership was forced to take, putting it in its rightful perspective in time and place and not taken out of context. It is a seminal work, noteworthy for its meticulous adherence to historical accuracy, as well as its innovative portrayal of the perspectives of the sovereign Lebanese people. It seamlessly melds scholarly rigour with a refreshingly accessible and relatable narrative style.