Psychological Warfare: Rumours in the Times of the Lebanese Civil War

Christina Foerch Saab

It's a nice evening during the summer of 2014, a small group of old friends gather in a mountain village for a chat, a drink and some tasty Lebanese food. These friends, all of them now in their fifties, were combatants during the civil war that ravaged Lebanon from 1975 until 1990. Although they all found their way back to civilian life long ago, almost inevitably during such encounters they talk about their experiences and memories of the civil war. Those experiences, and the memories of them have become special bonds between them, and their gathering goes on until way after midnight. The next day, some of them continue their chat from the previous night on Facebook, and one of them jokingly suggests that they'd better take care of this mountain area, which is located near the Syrian border, in order to watch out for invasions by the militia of the Islamic State (IS). The joking on Facebook goes back and forth, and one of them suggests setting up a new armed force to protect their region, just as they'd done as teenagers during the times of the Lebanese civil war. Someone outside this group picks up on the Facebook conversation, taking the jokes for real, and the next day there's an article in, what I was led to believe was a well-known Lebanese newspaper, claiming that a group from such and such region is planning to take up arms to fight IS. The article also claims that another group, from a different religious confession than this group of friends, is apparently planning to do the same. It's become a rumour, a rumour taken for real information, an in-joke that was taken literally by someone on the outside, someone who didn't do their research properly, didn't bother confirm their information, but nonetheless it found its way into to the media – and the media publish such articles, following their own political agendas.

Lebanon is a small and complex country, with many TV channels and radio stations, and citizens who love to communicate via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. In such a context rumours can easily spread, and there is a danger that in a society that is deeply fragmented and prone to conflict rumours get out of hand. This is a serious matter, as a war starts in the hearts and minds of the people, long before anyone picks up a weapon - and rumours play an important role in influencing, even manipulating peoples' hearts and minds.

In the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, rumours were connected to preconceptions related to religious sects:

'All Muslims are savages who want to take over power in Lebanon.'
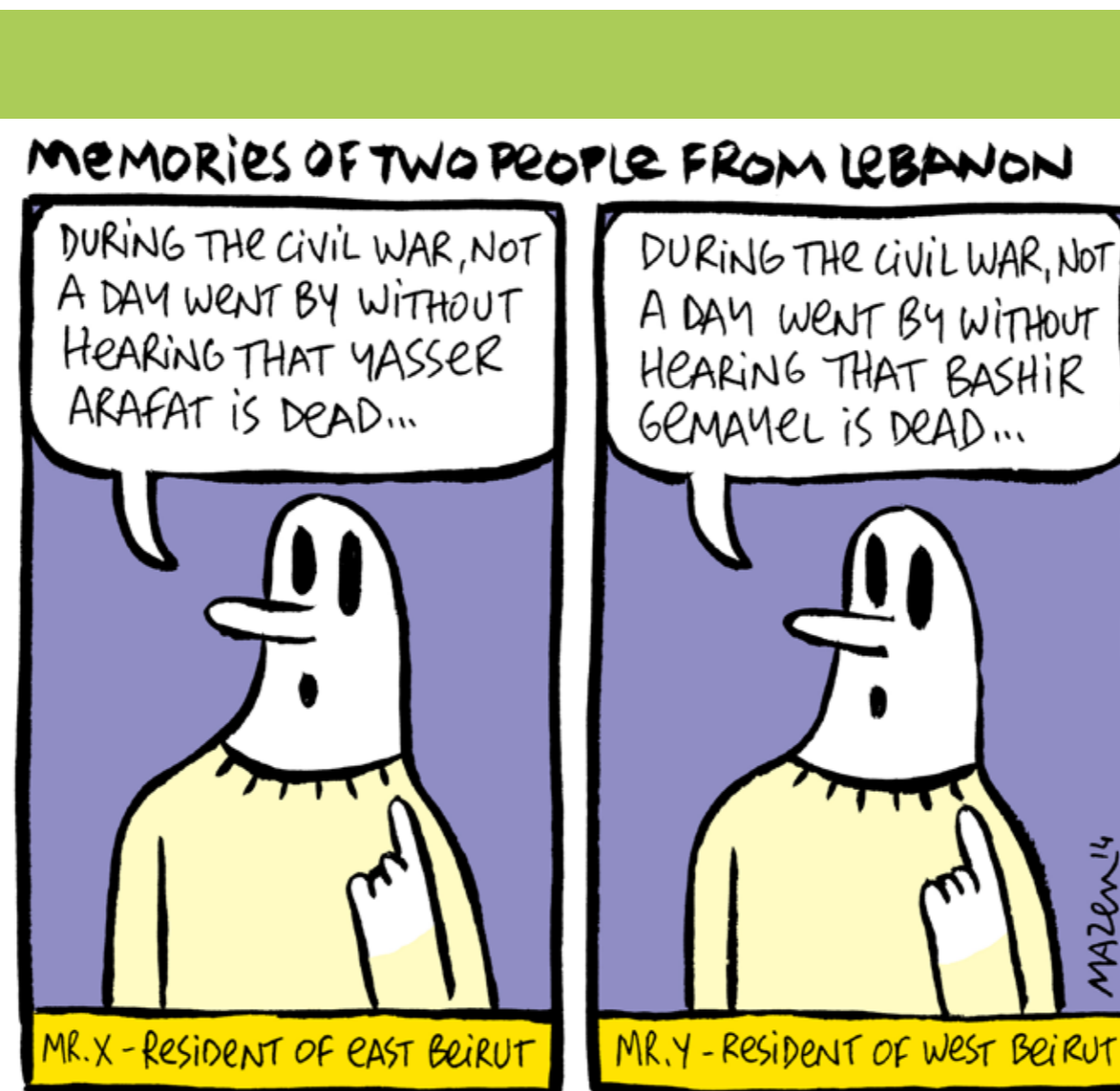
'The Christians are bourgeois capitalists who exploit the others.'

Rumours based on such preconceptions prepared the grounds for the Lebanese civil war, they prepared the minds of the people, before they joined militias, received military training, and then actually went to fight. However, the Lebanese civil war can't be defined along sectarian lines only, it was far more complex. The Palestinian presence with their armed forces was a major catalyst, and a factor central to the conflict, as in their way were economic interests, and commonplace power struggles. Last, but not least, the cold war spread its shadow over Lebanon, Lebanon being used as a battlefield for a proxy war between the West and the East.

'Rumours were intoxicating the people, and this intoxication carried bad intentions', remembers Assaad Chaftari, former leader of the intelligence office of the Christian party the Lebanese Forces. He asserts that, 'If I believe that Muslims are savages, I will believe all the rumours that confirm my belief, and I'd deny the rumours that are against my belief. I would even work on stopping such rumours.'

At the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, rumours weren't limited to general negative preconceptions about the 'Other', but became more specific. Haidar Amashi, a former combatant fighting with the al-Murabitoun (the Independent Nasserite Movement), recalls that since 1972, there was 'news' out there that Christians were getting militarily trained, and that they were forming armed groups. He recalls that, 'We believed that their aim was to fight the Muslims, to take over all the country, and to drive the Shiites out of Lebanon, back to Iraq.' In this case the main substance of the rumour – or information – turned out to be true; the Lebanese Christians did form armed groups – as did the Lebanese Muslims, the Druze, and the Palestinians. Now, 40 years later, Amashi believes that, 'Such rumours were the most dangerous weapon that prepared the ground for the civil war'.

One can distinguish between at least two different kinds of rumour. Firstly, rumours that are accidentally created, such as the rumour mentioned in the introduction. Then there are intentionally created rumours, or purposeful misinformation, that the media, as well as politicians and militia leaders use to pursue certain aims such as to scare off the enemy's militia, to weaken the morale of the opposing civilian population, or to increase the morals of their own fighters and civilian supporters. All participating parties in the Lebanese civil war – Lebanese, Palestinians, and also the Israelis –

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used rumours and misinformation, or at least the downplaying or the exaggeration of events, for their strategic purposes.

The crumbling Lebanese state regularly used the media under its control to downplay events. Hana Saleh, former director of the Communist radio station *Voice of the People* remembers that, 'During the civil war, the public radio was famous for this one sentence, the road is open and secure. For example, the radio presenter would say, "Today the road of Mathaf (the National Museum, a famous crossing between East and West Beirut) is open and secure."– But in fact, the presenter wasn't sure, he hadn't done any research. People were crossing and something happened to them.'

Lebanese historian and political scientist Nemer Frayha confirms that the state media would deceive people by downplaying dangerous events. He remembers that, 'Because of such misinformation, people would unknowingly get into danger. Many kidnappings and killings of civilians happened because the public radio or TV stations had downplayed the danger of the situation.'

Saleh recounts that, 'There was some news about kidnappings or killings somewhere, [but] there was no way of knowing if this news was right, and the news was immediately broadcast everywhere, and there were direct reactions. So many victims died because a rumour was spread by the radio.' It's a general problem of war reporting that in many cases reporters can't confirm if the news is correct or not and are forced to rely solely on testimonies. For example, certain areas might be sealed off by militias or the army who won't allow reporters to enter, or the events may have already passed, and are thus impossible to confirm.

'There were few experienced professionals in the radio stations at that time,' admits Saleh, and the journalists often weren't aware of how certain news would affect the situation on the ground. 'When the media spread news about kidnappings and killings, there would be acts of revenge,' recounts Frayha– just to find out later that such kidnappings and killings hadn't happened in the first place.

The former director of *Voice of the People* recalls that his radio station broadcast 24 hour news, and that there was tough competition between the media outlets to be the first ones to broadcast a scoop, 'This competition was at the cost of the truth' he admits, and goes on to assert that at the end of the day, 'the divisions (in the country) were so strong that you didn't care anymore about what you spoke about the other.'

During the time of the civil war, the media landscape was completely different to how it is now. In 1975, only one public TV channel existed, and a few radio stations, alongside a wide range of newspapers. According to Saleh, the advantage of this limited media landscape was that, 'information about events would reach the target audience directly'. Militia leaders and politicians from all sides used the media effectively to spread information, to downplay or inflate events, and therefore to channel information the way they wanted, and to their advantage. Further, both political and militia leaders used reporters to spread (mis)information to the other side.

Voice of the People, based in West Beirut, had some reporters on the Eastern side. These reporters were thus the main source of information from this area. 'We trusted them that they would give us the right news,' recalls Saleh. 'After a while, we realized that one of our reporters worked for (the Christian party) Kataeb. He gave us the news that Kataeb wanted to distribute.' Apparently, he did it in quite an intelligent way, at times giving the right news, and at other times giving false information. Saleh concludes that, 'About the important issues, he gave us the information that Kataeb wanted to give us. So we reached a point that we stopped working with him.'

According to Frayha, Western journalists reporting on the civil war were helping to spread false information. In his opinion, most of them were biased in favour of the Palestinian side. He claims that, 'Western media spread the rumour that the Christian militias were getting weapons from the U.S. and from France, which wasn't true. In fact, Western countries refused to sell the Christians weapons. Most weapons were bought in Eastern Europe, and later on Israel would supply weapons to Christian militias.' According to him this had significant consequences as he judges that 'the effect of the media on people was stronger than any education, and peoples, ' emotions were often abused.'

Lebanese militias used rumours in order to keep on fighting. Ex-combatant Amashi recounted that during the first years of the war, the Higher Shiite Council, represented by Sheikh Mohamad Yakoub launched an initiative with Dany Chamoun, the son of a former Lebanese president, to engage in reconciliation efforts to end the fighting. According to him the Nasserites were annoyed by this development, because they wanted to continue fighting. They spread rumours saying that if such a reconciliation initiative were put in place, Christian militias would secretly invade the Shiite area of Chiyah in Beirut and conduct

'I think it's rather amusing what some media publish. It was rumoured that I had accepted an invitation to a yacht trip with 1200 dollars' worth of wine, my father was a CIA agent, my mother was a Jew and buried on the Golan Heights – a formerly Syrian region that has been occupied by Israel since 1967. All of that is, of course nonsense. My mother is a church tax paying Protestant, lives in Berlin and is thankfully in good health.'

Detlev Mehlis, Public Prosecutor and former Special Investigator in Lebanon, 20/01/2006, Der Stern

operations from inside. Such rumours were used to mobilize people's fears and therefore were very effective in undermining any effort to solve the Lebanese civil war on a political level.

Channeling information in a certain direction, or spreading misinformation with the intent to reach a strategic aim is part of the art of psychological warfare. In the Middle East, it is said of the Israelis that they have widely used military intelligence for such tactics and strategies. For example, a certain Lebanese militia was informed that the Israelis would invade Lebanon in the summer of 1982, several months before the actual invasion happened. Bits and pieces of this information found their way to the media – it was an effective way to spread the rumour that such an invasion might actually happen, and a strategy to scare off the Lebanese and Palestinian civilians. 'Until now I am not sure why the Israelis spread this news,' says Chaftari. He conjectures that, 'They probably did it so that the world would not be shocked when it actually happened – it was a strategy to let people get used to the idea.'

Ziad Saab, a former commander of the Lebanese Communist Party, has a different memory of these events, 'I remember that the first one to speak about a possible invasion in public was Communist party leader George Hawi,' he said. 'I think that our Politbureau had this information from the Soviet secret services.' Consequently, the communists prepared themselves in South Lebanon with weapons so as to be ready to resist the Israeli invaders.

In 1985, the Israelis were still occupying the Southern Lebanese town of Saida, along with the entire Southern part of Lebanon. They used their Lebanese allies, the Lebanese Forces, to spread a rumour, saying that if the Israelis withdrew from Saida, the Muslims would massacre the Christians. 'The Lebanese

Forces used this rumour because they wanted the Christians to leave Saida, in order to make them come to East Beirut,' assumes Fouad Dirani, an ex-combatant from the Leftist party Organization of the *Communist Action in Lebanon*. As such, the Lebanese Forces' strategic purpose with this rumour was to unite the Christians, to encourage more of them to train militarily, and to spread armed men to other areas where they were needed.

'This rumour also served to divide the people between Muslims and Christians,' confirms Amashi, 'to encourage the Christians to arm themselves, and to guarantee the Israelis a safe withdrawal.' Last, but not least, the rumour also served economic interests through the sale of weapons to the conflicting parties.

All militias channelled information or spread misinformation for spying purposes, and they used the media for this purpose as well. 'The Lebanese Forces launched many campaigns through the media and even through politicians to give false information, and to let such information leak on purpose in order to achieve a certain aim,' admits Chaftari. For example, they would say that such and such militia was corrupt, or that they were getting a lot of money from abroad. He continues, 'So we'd tell their followers, 'Why do you support them with money?' By spreading such rumours, we'd try to disconnect the militia from their support group.'

The parties from both the right and from the left would use intelligence officers to spy on the other side. Agents would infiltrate the enemy's party or militia, saying that they wanted to cooperate with them against their own force. In this way, the intelligence officers would both find out which leaders could be won over, and who were the people inside their own forces who were cooperating with the

other sides.

In a deeply religious society like Lebanon, rumours with a spiritual connotation could be particularly powerful. 'The statue at Harissa turned twice during the civil war,' says Chaftari, laughing. Christian leaders would spread the rumour that this statue made out of pure concrete had turned towards a certain direction 'to protect Jounieh, or to protect the Christians in general' remembers Chaftari.

'"Miracles" of this kind were often spread among the population when we were passing through a difficult military situation', the ex-combatant explains, in order to raise the morals of the population and to tell them, 'that God will help us'. The social scientist Frayha has a similar opinion, 'You need miracles in situations of weakness, you need hope, and this comes from superstitious beliefs.' Those beliefs weren't limited to the Christian sect only, and were equally used by Muslims. The Shiites, for example, used Zeinab (a grandchild of the prophet Mohamad). 'Important Shiite figures would say that "Sitt" Zeinab had appeared in their dreams, saying that "the road ahead is long and difficult, but at the end, you will be rewarded"', recalls Amashi. This would strengthen the moral of combatants and civilians alike to endure difficult times, and keep on fighting.

The preconceptions that had existed in people's minds, and the traumas experienced during fifteen years of civil war couldn't be immediately lifted when the civil war officially came to an end in 1990.

A Christian couple got married after the end of the civil war and decided to celebrate their honeymoon in Amir Amine palace, a beautiful hotel located in a mountain area which is inhabited by Druze and Christians. A relative to the couple told them, 'The Druze will come at night and cut your throats!' The couple left the hotel in panic; their war traumas were so strong that their honeymoon was ruined.

Also, in the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Displaced People organized a summer camp in the Lebanese mountains, with the aim of contributing to reconciliation efforts among Lebanese youth from all the different religious sects. The trainers used specific activities to deconstruct the preconceptions that had existed between the different religious groups during the war. At the end of the camp, a girl came up, crying, and told one of the camp's organizers, that she couldn't go home now and face her parents. When the trainers asked for the reason, she said, 'My parents taught me that the people from the other side were bad, that they even looked differently from us. I found out that this was a lie. How can I believe my parents ever again?'

What to believe and whom to believe, that's the central question. By the way, the article on the new armed group to fight IS wasn't published in the well-known Lebanese newspaper at all. This was just another rumour. Apparently it appeared in an online magazine. I guess I should have sat down and do some proper research in order to confirm my information, too!

Note

As I am finishing this article, someone translated a paragraph that appeared in the online magazine, Lebanon Files, for me. The article was talking about an article that in turn appeared in the Al Akhbar newspaper entitled 'A training of the Socialist Party under the cover of a scout camp': 'On 20/09/2014, Al Akhbar mentioned that under the cover of a scout camp, the Socialist Party, together with the fundamentalist Druze group "Sheikh Ammar"', organized a training camp for more than 60 people in the hills of Shwaifat city. There were some sheikhs from Deir Qoubel village as well. It wasn't the first time that such training camps including military performances, as well as the firing of weapons had been seen in these hills. This time, however, the training for the participants of the camp were theoretical lessons only; about using heavy automatic weapons, especially those that you can carry on 4x4vehicles, and they were told how to use these heavy guns.'

Often, rumours carry a little grain of truth. It is true that in the past, parties from different affiliations abused scout camps for military training. It is true that currently, Lebanese civilians are pulling out their hidden guns again, and some are even forming civilian protection forces in their communities.

I happen to work for an NGO called 'Permanent Peace Movement'. The director of this NGO, Fadi Abi Allam, gave training sessions during this particular scout camp – about conflict resolution and peace building, and definitely not about heavy guns. A war starts in the minds of the people, and such articles poison the civil peace in Lebanon. Peace also starts in the minds of people. Let us not be deceived by political or military leaders and their media outlets, let us not let them manipulate our minds for war. Let us take up responsibility and create a space in our minds, free of rumours and misinformation, for peace.

The Syrian President is being Made in Lebanon?
Rumours and the Syrian Presidential Election in Lebanon

Haid Haid

The Syrian presidential elections were an event of special significance for Syrians and Lebanese alike, since holding these elections entailed prolonging the humanitarian and political crisis suffered by Syrians and the societies and states that play host to them. It was the first time that Syrian elections had allowed for out-of-country voting, and the Syrian embassy in Lebanon prided itself on having had more than 80,000 voters on the first day alone.[1] Given the time and space available for voting, it is more realistic to suggest that between 20 and 30,000 cast their vote. However, the images of crowded streets and the whole event being perceived as more of a happening than an election, led to controversial discussions, 'How could citizens who had to flee their country participate in this dog-and-pony show?' And even more so, 'How could they vote for the President who in the worst case had them persecuted, in the best case did not protect them?' In fact, some of those participating in the elections were motivated by genuine desire. Others, however, feared the consequences if they did not take part, with a number of rumours circulating, urging people to get involved, and threatening them with dire consequences if they did not. This was the result of a number of factors that this article will attempt to address by shedding light on the circumstances in which such rumours gain currency and how people respond to them.

The fear of having one's nationality revoked

As the armed conflict in Syria grew fiercer (itself the product of the regime's excessive use of force against citizens who peacefully demonstrated for political change), reports began to circulate that Bashar al-Assad and his supporters were involved in a plan to partition Syria into a number of different states. Though these claims were never verified, they caused a large number of Syrian refugees to feel that the regime was secretly plotting to revoke their Syrian nationality – for their lack of loyalty – by creating the state it desired, having accepted that it was unable to take control of all Syrian territory. Such concerns on the part of many refugees created a fertile soil for the unquestioning acceptance and circulation of any rumour which confirmed their fears that they would be unable to return to their homes. Against this backdrop, claims concerning various draft laws gave added impetus to rumours urging participation in the presidential election. The most important of these draft law rumours were:

i) 'I'm not Syrian'

In late 2013 there were widely disseminated rumours of a draft law that would revoke the nationality of all Syrians who had participated in activities against the Assad regime within Syria or abroad, by bearing arms, funding, incitement, organisation or facilitation.[2] This particular claim spread because some refugees believed that the law governing the entry of non-Syrians into Syria and their residence there also covered Syrian citizens abroad. In other words, they would be treated like foreigners in their own country. Despite being untrue, some Syrians abroad still believe in and circulate this rumour, convinced that the regime will use this draft law as a way of disposing of its political enemies and applying pressure to those states hosting them (since stripping Syrian refugees of their nationality would mean they would have to stay in their host nations). The fear of losing one's nationality is also not entirely abstract as an increasing number of Syrians are stranded

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