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.

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So many victims died because a rumour was spread by the radio. ‘It's a general problem of can’t confirm if the news is correct or not and crossing and something happened to them.’

‘When the media spread news about crossing between East and West Beirut) is open and secure. For example, the media spread 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 an intelligent way, at times giving 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 in favour of the Israeli 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 weapons. Most weapons were bought in Eastern Europe, and later on in Lebanon, to spread false information about the militia.’

Lebanese militias used rumours in order to keep on fighting. Ex-combatant Amarsi recounted that during the first years of the war, the Higher Shiite Council, represented by Sheikh Mohamad Yakoub launched an initiative, and the Nasserites, the Leftists the communists, the Socialists (the socialists) and the Christians, to engage in psychological warfare. ‘We wanted to confuse the other side. We wanted to make sure they would be confused, so they would be weak.’

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Lebanese militia was informed that the Israelis would invade Lebanon in the summer of 1982, several months before the actual invasion happened. ‘We heard the news, and that’s why we started preparing ourselves,’ says Tahtari. ‘We prepared ourselves to spread a rumour, saying that if the Israelis withdrew from Saida, the Muslims would massacre the Christians.’

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

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. 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:

1) 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. This particular claim spread because some refugees believed that the law governing the entry of non-Syrians into Syria and their residence there was 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 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’ strong that their honeymoon was ruined. This technique of spreading the rumour 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 the 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 prejudices 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