

A View From The 1990s: Lebanon's Street Politics In The First Decade After The Civil War (1989-2000)

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Understanding Contentious Politics From Below In Post- War Lebanon

The October 2019 uprising in Lebanon opened up many questions regarding the dynamics of contention from below, the exceptionality of that revolutionary moment in the history of Lebanon, and the possibilities of change through street politics in this country. The unfolding of the events since October 2019 has often been read through the lens of a “second wave of Arab uprisings’ running from Sudan and Algeria to Lebanon and Iraq. While the regional and global context of the October uprising are important to understand protest trends globally, this research is concerned with historicizing and localizing the October 2019 revolutionary moment in the context of post-war Lebanon.

This article is the first in a series of articles that will tackle the question of protest in post-war Lebanon. The analysis is based on a unique event catalogue dataset collected through newspaper archives (Annahar and Assafir, in addition to Al Akhbar post-2006) and cross-checked amongst several sources. The series will be divided into three phases: it will start with a focus on the first decade since the signature of the Taef agreement in 1989 (1989-2000), it will then move to an in-depth analysis of the 2000's and its huge transformations specifically after 2005 (2000-2010), before finally delving into the post-2011 era with a focus on the effects of the Arab Uprisings in Lebanon and the changes in street politics throughout this last decade (2010-2020).

On October 22, 1989 the *Ta'ef* Accord was signed in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to put an official end to the civil war in Lebanon. The next day, on October 23, hundreds of thousands of protesters marched to the presidential palace in Baabda in support of Aoun's rejection of the *Ta'ef* Accord. The protest was followed by a week-long strike. At that time, Aoun had already launched his “War of Liberation” since March 1989, and the political settlement had not yet stabilized to put an end to this offensive. During the first few months following the signature of the *Ta'ef* Accord, protests in Lebanon mainly focused on either the rejection of the agreement (mainly by Aoun supporters), or a support of the agreement and a rejection of Aoun's war. There were also some protests in support of the Palestinian Intifada, and sporadic protests in support of local sectarian leaders such as Junblat, Berri or Geagea. The first year following the *Ta'ef* Accord also witnessed protests rejecting the continued clashes in the various regions, such as the Amal-Hezbollah clashes in the South or the Aoun-led war on East Beirut.

Labor strikes and socio-economic mobilizations started to grow in number since mid-1990. The currency devaluation and the dwindling economic situation sparked many mobilizations throughout the year 1991 calling for the stabilization of the value of the Lebanese pound (lira). Several banks were facing liquidity problems and depositors who were no longer able to access their money staged

multiple mobilizations against their banks. In addition to the numerous labor and socio-economic mobilizations, the year 1991 also saw many protests in support of Iraq in the Gulf war, and several mobilizations targeted against Israeli interference in South Lebanon or in Palestine.

The political and economic situation in Lebanon remained unstable until 1992, when the currency collapse and the deepening financial crisis ushered the way for the arrival of Rafiq Hariri to the premiership. On May 4th, 1992, mobilizations erupted around the country from Tyre to Sidon, Nabatieh, Baalbeck and Zahle, protesting the deteriorating financial situation. The next day, on May 5th, a four-day general strike was declared and thousands of people mobilized in Beirut and the different regions (Jounieh, Deir El Qamar, Sidon, Tyre, Chtoura, Zgharta, Tripoli, etc.) blocking roads and demanding the government to find an immediate solution to the financial crisis. Under street pressure, Omar Karami resigned on May 6th, after protesters marched to his residence chanting for his downfall. By that time, the Syrian regime had already tightened its grip over Lebanon through the “Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination” signed in May 1991, followed by the “Defense and Security Pact” in September 1991. The fall of the Karami government set the ground of the first post-war parliamentary elections under Syrian tutelage, and brought the rule of the “Troika” with Elias Hrawi as President of the Republic, Rafiq Hariri as Prime Minister, and Nabih Berri as Speaker of the House. It is this regime that governed most of the rest of the 1990s.

The post-1992 era saw the period of reconstruction with Hariri’s neoliberal economic plans, and entrenched the Syrian control over Lebanon’s political and security scenes. This period witnessed an extremely active labor movement that was harshly repressed under Rafiq Hariri. It also witnessed very high protest activity in support of the Palestinian cause and of Pan-Arab causes in general. It is only towards the end of the 1990s that the political winds started to change, and voices against the Syrian occupation of Lebanon started to grow, albeit in smaller and heavily repressed mobilizations. It is in such context that the rest of this article will describe the main protest trends of the 1990s in Lebanon by answering four main questions based on the dataset collected: (1) Why did people protest in Lebanon throughout the 1990s?, (2) Where did they protest most in Lebanon?, (3) Who organized and mobilized most in those protests?, and (4) what were the main protest tactics during the first decade following the end of the civil war (how did people protest)?

I- Why Did People Protest During The First Decade Following The Ta’ef Accord (1989-2000)?

Based on the dataset collected through newspaper archives, protest trends throughout the 1990s seem to be divided into four main demands:

1. Around 34% of all protests in the 1990s carried social demands mainly focused around questions of human rights and civic freedoms, civil marriage, women’s rights, environmental activism, civil peace mobilizations, electricity, education, healthcare, or housing demands.
2. Around 32% of all protests in the 1990s were concerned with regional politics mainly in terms of Pro-Palestinian/Anti-Israeli mobilizations. This category also includes some protests in support of Iraq during the Gulf war in 1991, or the US bombing of Iraq in 1998. Towards the end of 1997, a smaller and heavily repressed movement started to mobilize against the Syrian presence in Lebanon. While regional politics shaped most of the Lebanese political mobilization scene, it was mainly concerns with the meddling of neighboring countries (Syria and Israel) and support of people’s struggle for liberation in Palestine that formed the bulk of political activism in Lebanon during the 1990s.
3. Around 22% of all protests in the 1990s were labor protests that focused on workers’ rights and labor conditions. These included the mobilizations of many employees and workers unions such as the protests of the bank employees in 1991, the port workers protests in 1992 and

1997-8, the MEA employees and workers protests throughout 1992, 1994, 1996 and 1999, teachers and university professors repeated protests and strikes throughout the 1990s, and the General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon's (GCWL) extremely important mobilizations since 1992. The GCWL was highly active and powerful in the post-war era until 1995 when the Hariri government issued a ban on protests and started its crackdown on the labor movement. This crackdown continued throughout 1996 and 1997 and ended with the fragmentation of the labor movement and the weakening and cooptation of the GCWL.

4. Finally, around 12% of all protests of the 1990s focused on internal politics in Lebanon. 5.6% of protests were concerned with security issues, whereas the rest were either in support of local leaders or focused on elections. It is interesting to note that throughout the 1990s, less than 0.1% protests were concerned with "corruption", a demand that has recently become central in the protests of the last decade (2010-2020).

In sum, socio-economic demands and regional political concerns formed the bulk of the protests throughout the 1990s. Protesters focus were clearly set on either pan-Arab causes such as Palestine and Iraq, or socio-economic interests related to everyday life and livelihood.

II- Where Did People Mostly Protest Throughout The 1990s?

The data analysis shows that while the majority of protests (34.5%) were focused in the capital Beirut, the Southern part of the country came second in terms of protest activity with 22.3% mobilizations in the South governorate and 5.3% of protests in the Nabatieh governorate. This was followed by the North governorate that witnessed around 13% of the protests during the 1990s, while Akkar – the poorest governorate in the country – saw only 1% of the protests. On another hand, Mount Lebanon captured around 9% of all protests during the first decade post-Taef. Finally, the Beqaa governorate gathered around 6% of the protest activity in the 1990s, while the Baalbeck-Hermel governorate saw 4.5% of the mobilizations of that decade.

III- Who Protested During The 1990s In Lebanon?

More than 31% of protests throughout the 1990s were led by unions and workers/employees associations. This was specifically the case after 1992 when most labor protests were organized by the then powerful General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon's (GCWL). The second biggest organizers during the 1990s in Lebanon were Palestinian factions and organizations which led around 25% of the protests during that decade. This was followed by civil society organizations (CSOs) that organized and led around 16% of the protests during the 1990s, and student groups that organized around 9% of the protests of that period. It is important to note that while social movements are often thought of as labor or civil society groups, the data shows that in the first decade after the end of the civil war in Lebanon, sectarian political parties directly led around 10% of all protests that took place. Similarly, militias, religious groups, secular parties and governmental bodies have also called for some protests but they form a minority in terms of organizers in the post-war era. It is important to note here that many secular parties (leftist and nationalist parties mainly) and CSOs have mobilized along with the labor movement that was mainly led by the GCWL, in addition to mobilizing in pro-Palestine protests that were often organized by Palestinian factions.

IV- How Did People Mainly Mobilize During The 1990s In Lebanon?

The data shows that the most used protest tactic throughout the 1990s was sit-ins or occupations (53%), followed by marches/demonstrations (22.5%) and strikes (22%). Around 1% of the mobilization tactics included road blockades. It is interesting to note that during the first decade following the civil-war, the labor movement used the tactic of general strikes as a main tool to mobilize and pressure employers and the government. This tactic proved to be highly useful and

effective in many cases; however, with the decline of the labor movement after the heavy repression in 1996, mobilizations started to move away from strikes and focused mainly on sit-ins or marches.

In sum, the first decade following the end of the civil war in Lebanon witnessed an extremely active society in terms of protest mobilization. The data shows that protest activity has increased throughout the 1990s with Beirut and the South witnessing a high rate of mobilization. Most protests were mainly concerned with socio-economic demands and regional politics linked to the Palestinian cause mainly. The movement against the Syrian presence in Lebanon was at a high during the first two years after the Ta'ef Accord (1989-1990), but it then receded until the end of 1997 when anti-Syrian mobilizations started to appear again. This period saw the rise of the security state with the arrival of President Emile Lahhoud to power in 1998 and the heavy repression of anti-Syrian protesters. This was preceded in 1996-1997 by the Hariri neoliberalization government that flourished through the heavy repression of the labor movement and the crackdown on the GCWL. While strikes were a common protest tactic used throughout the 1990s, this started to decline towards the end of that decade with the decline of the labor movement. After all, the post-war era in Lebanon during the 1990s was characterized by the neo-liberalization of the economy with the Hariri reconstruction plans, the Israeli occupation of parts of the South, and the Syrian control over Lebanon's political and security life. This socio-economic and political reality was clearly reflected in the struggles from below, where protests mainly focused on labor rights and demands for social justice, anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian protests, as well as a repressed, yet growing, anti-Syrian protest movement. These trends will further develop and transform throughout the 2000s, to create a new reality that shapes much of the political contention in Lebanon today.

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