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The Role Of Oil Politics In The Lebanese Civil War

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Abstract:

Although sectarian conflict and political division are frequently used to analyze the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the influence of oil politics on the conflict is a lesser-known but no less fascinating aspect. Lebanon's strategic location near oil-rich neighbors and transit routes drew regional and global powers into its civil war. Emerging offshore oil prospects and control over fuel supplies became tools of influence for militias and political elites, deepening sectarian divides and worsening tensions. Regional actors like Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia funded factions to advance their agendas, while Cold War superpowers intervened to protect energy interests. This fusion of local conflict and global oil politics prolonged the war and obstructed peace efforts, highlighting how resource competition can intensify instability in geopolitically sensitive regions like Lebanon.

Keywords: Middle East geopolitics, oil politics, Energy security, Lebanon's sectarian divisions, regional power struggles.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most intricate and varied wars in contemporary Middle Eastern history was the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Although political unrest, sectarian strife, and outside intervention are frequently blamed for the conflict, oil politics is a little-known but important contributing element. During the Cold War, Lebanon was an important node in the larger geopolitical plans of major powers and oil-exporting nations due to its location in the Eastern Mediterranean. The conflict's course was significantly shaped by the interaction of international oil diplomacy, regional energy concerns, and the rivalry of oil-rich Gulf governments.

The strategic interests of the regional and international countries active in Lebanon were greatly impacted by oil politics. The 1970s saw an increase in oil prices and a greater dependence on Middle Eastern energy supplies worldwide. Oil-producing countries, especially those in the Gulf, now have unheard-of riches and power because to this development. In order to preserve the stability of oil-exporting routes and safeguard their political and economic interests, these powers attempted to exert influence over regional politics. Being close to Syria and important oil transport routes made Lebanon a strategic advantage for these countries. Furthermore, significant petrodollar investments were drawn to Beirut's banking industry, which stoked domestic political and economic conflicts.¹

External powers' engagement in Lebanon was also linked to more general objectives pertaining to oil. For instance, the United States aimed to oppose Soviet influence in the Middle East and preserve its hegemony in securing oil supply routes. In order to protect energy routes and make sure that oil-rich Gulf states like Saudi Arabia could project their weight in the area without being destabilized by discontent in surrounding countries, American strategists looked at the Lebanese war through these lenses. In an effort to thwart American interests and establish a presence close to vital oil resources, the Soviet Union concurrently backed Marxist groups in Lebanon.² As competing Lebanese factions received finance and weaponry from international powers, this rivalry exacerbated the civil war.

Furthermore, sectarian division in Lebanon was exacerbated by the Gulf states' oil wealth. Shiite groups like Hezbollah were financed by Iranian oil money, while Sunni Muslim militias were mostly supported by financial aid from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. This financial support solidified sectarian differences and turned Lebanon into a theater of regional power conflicts. These oil-funded coalitions' influence extended the war and changed the political climate in Lebanon.

Gaining insight into how oil politics influenced the Lebanese Civil War highlights the larger geopolitical forces at work at the time. It emphasizes how energy resources can be used as political power tools and conflict-instigators in addition to their economic value. We can gain a better understanding of how regional conflicts and international energy policies interacted to shape Middle Eastern history by looking at this little-known facet of the conflict.

Literature review

In academic literature, the significance of oil politics in the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) is still not well understood. The majority of studies, such those by Kamal Salibi and Fawwaz Traboulsi, concentrate on militia dynamics, state breakdown, and sectarian tensions, frequently ignoring the larger oil-related geopolitical background. Despite having no oil reserves of its own, Lebanon was strategically important due to its proximity to oil-producing nations and important transit routes.

Because of Lebanon's closeness to Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria, these regional powers became involved in the conflict and used their oil profits to support friendly Lebanese factions, according to researchers like Bassil Salloukh and Hilal Khashan. Control over the provision of fuel in Lebanon became a crucial instrument for militias and political elites, acting as a resource for coercion as well as government. The work of Jad Chaaban demonstrates how, in times of wartime scarcity, fuel turned into a tool for political patronage.

¹ Hirst, D. (2010). *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East*. Faber & Faber.

² Khalidi, W. (1983). "Conflict and Violence in Lebanon: Confrontation in the Middle East." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 12(3), 85-101.

International experts like Fred Halliday and Charles Tripp contend that Cold War superpowers saw Lebanon as a component of a Middle Eastern oil-related strategic network. Concerns about energy security affected U.S. and Soviet involvement, frequently through regional proxies. In general, the length of the conflict, foreign interventions, and domestic division were all indirectly impacted by oil politics.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR AND REGIONAL WORLD POLITICS

A complicated battle marked by shifting alliances, regional involvement, and sectarian tensions, the Lebanese Civil War raged from 1975 to 1990. Fundamentally, the war was fueled by socioeconomic disparities and internal political unbalances. Nonetheless, the conflict was significantly shaped by the regional and international dynamics of oil politics, which affected both its trajectory and the participation of outside forces. With an emphasis on the convergence of regional oil politics and the geopolitical tactics of major Middle Eastern actors, this chapter examines the historical background of the Lebanese Civil War.

1.1 THE PRE-WAR POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The 1943 National Pact created Lebanon's distinctive political structure, which distributed authority according to sectarian quotas. A Maronite Christian was designated as president, a Sunni Muslim as premier, and a Shia Muslim as speaker of the parliament. Although this system first promoted a precarious coexistence, it also formalized sectarian divisions, which exacerbated tensions as economic disparities increased and demographics changed.³ The inflow of Palestinian refugees after the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli conflicts significantly destabilized the political scene by the 1960s and 1970s. Internal tensions increased after the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was established in Lebanon, dividing the nation's divisions over their attitudes toward the PLO and its efforts against Israel.⁴ Israel's retaliatory strikes and the growing militarization of Palestinian factions in southern Lebanon produced a volatile atmosphere that was ideal for civil war.

1.2 THE ROLE OF OIL IN REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS

Oil has always played a significant role in Middle Eastern geopolitics, influencing the plans of both regional and international countries. Because they controlled a sizable amount of the world's oil reserves, the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) oil-producing nations had considerable economic and political clout by the 1970s. The Yom Kippur War-induced Arab oil embargo of 1973 highlighted the strategic significance of oil since it showed the might of Middle Eastern producers through OPEC's capacity to control international markets.⁵

In this regard, Lebanon—despite having no substantial oil reserves of its own—became a focal point in the larger regional power struggle. The nation's advantageous location along the Eastern Mediterranean makes it a vital oil pipeline route and a possible place for the projection of regional influence. The indirect role of Lebanon in the oil sector was highlighted by the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline), which carried Saudi oil

³ Salibi, K. (1988). *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. I.B. Tauris.

⁴ Khalidi, W. (1979). "The Palestinians and 1948: The Arab Case." *The Middle East Journal*, 33(4), 419-442.

⁵ Yergin, D. (1991). *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*. Free Press.

to the Zahrani terminal in Lebanon.⁶ Thus, authority over Lebanon was linked to more general regional factors, such as the safety of oil transportation routes and the containment of competing powers.

1.3 EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS AND OIL INTERESTS

Concerns about oil politics drove many of the regional and international powers to become heavily involved in the Lebanese Civil War. For example, Syria aimed to secure its western flank and obtain leverage in regional negotiations by establishing its grip over Lebanon. In order to protect its interests in the larger Arab-Israeli conflict and maintain peace in the oil-rich Gulf, Damascus likewise sought to stop Lebanon from becoming fragmented.⁷

Similar to this, Israel's intention to safeguard its northern borders and put an end to PLO activities played a role in its engagement in Lebanon, especially during the 1982 invasion. But Israel's activities also fit into its larger plan to undermine Arab unity and sabotage possible coalitions between allies and oil-producing nations.⁸ As part of its energy security strategy, the United States, one of Israel's most important allies, kept a sizable force in the area to safeguard its access to Gulf oil. In order to resist Soviet influence and maintain the stability of oil supplies, the United States supported some groups in Lebanon, such as the Christian-dominated Lebanese Forces.⁹

1.4 SECTARIAN DYNAMICS AND THE RESOURCE CURSE

The dynamics of the conflict were significantly shaped by the interaction between sectarianism and oil money. Rich from oil profits, Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait gave money to different Lebanese groups, frequently along sectarian lines. As competing factions got support from rival regional donors, this money deepened divisions inside Lebanon. For example, Iran's sponsorship of Shia organizations like Hezbollah, which became a significant factor in the later stages of the conflict, stood in stark contrast to Saudi Arabia's support for Sunni factions.¹⁰

Additionally, the influx of petrodollars into Lebanon has wider economic ramifications. While some groups profited from outside support, others were left out, which widened socioeconomic gaps and stoked animosity. This dynamic was similar to the "resource curse" phenomenon, which holds that money from oil leads to war, inequality, and corruption rather than progress.¹¹ In Lebanon's case, the war was prolonged and sectarian tensions were heightened by the indirect consequences of the region's oil wealth.

1.5 GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS AND THE COLD WAR CONTEXT

The Cold War, in which the US and the USSR were fighting for dominance in the Middle East, provided the setting for the Lebanese Civil War. Oil was crucial to this conflict because both countries wanted to control access to energy resources and keep their adversary from using them. As a major theater of the Arab-

⁶ Bliss, F. J. (1987). *Lebanon: The Turbulent History of a Divided Society*. Columbia University Press.

⁷ Seale, P. (1988). *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. University of California Press.

⁸ Makovsky, D. (1996). *Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord*. Westview Press.

⁹ Quandt, W. B. (1981). *Saudi Arabia in the 1980s: Foreign Policy, Security, and Oil*. Brookings Institution Press.

¹⁰ Norton, A. R. (2007). *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton University Press.

¹¹ Ross, M. L. (2001). "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics*, 53(3), 325-361.

Israeli conflict and a location of rivalry between the US and the USSR, Lebanon evolved as a stand-in for larger geopolitical conflicts.¹²

In order to oppose Soviet-backed organizations and maintain the stability of oil supplies, the United States adopted a policy of backing pro-Western governments and forces in Lebanon. This includes sending Marines to Beirut in 1982, supposedly as part of a multinational peacekeeping mission, and supporting the Phalangist militia. But the U.S. presence also represented larger worries about preserving the region's power balance and gaining access to Gulf oil.¹³

The Lebanese Civil War was a complex struggle that was influenced by both outsider interventions and domestic conflicts. Although socio-political issues and sectarianism were the main causes of the war, regional oil politics also played a significant role. Due to its advantageous location and the wider significance of Middle Eastern oil, Lebanon became a focus point for rival nations looking to further their objectives.

Global powers like the US and the USSR, as well as regional players like Syria, Israel, and the Gulf nations, were impacted by oil politics in their policies. While the geopolitical imperatives of ensuring oil supplies and transport routes drove the engagement of external players, the influx of petrodollars into Lebanon deepened sectarian tensions. Understanding the interplay between the Lebanese Civil War and regional oil politics provides valuable insights into the broader dynamics of conflict in the Middle East and underscores the enduring impact of resource geopolitics on regional stability.

THE INFLUENCE OF OIL WEALTH ON INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ACTORS

The Lebanese Civil War was an extensive, complex struggle in which external interventions deepened internal divides. These outside forces were greatly influenced by the enormous money generated by Middle Eastern oil profits. Faction funding, military incursions, and diplomatic endeavors were all influenced by oil politics. Under four main subtopics—financial backing for factions, oil-funded foreign military interventions, Petro-diplomacy, and the economic reliance of Lebanese elites on Gulf oil income—this chapter explores the significance of oil riches in the Lebanese Civil War.

2.1 FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM OIL-RICH COUNTRIES TO FACTIONS IN LEBANON

Oil-rich states actively supported local sides during the Lebanese Civil War, motivated by regional rivalries and sectarian affiliations. With its considerable oil riches, Saudi Arabia gave Sunni Muslim factions in Lebanon, including leaders like Rafic Hariri, significant financial support. Hariri became a political force during and after the conflict. Saudi Arabia provided financial support to Sunni political groups and militias, allowing them to oppose opposing groups and keep sway over the war. The foundation of this financial assistance was Saudi Arabia's overarching plan to thwart the growth of Iranian influence in the area.¹⁴

On the contrary, Iran became a major supporter of Hezbollah, the Shi'a political group and militia that rose to prominence in the Lebanese conflict. Through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran used its oil money to provide Hezbollah with weapons, military training, and financial support. With this backing,

¹² Gendzier, I. L. (1997). Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon and the Middle East, 1945-1958. Columbia University Press.

¹³ McFarlane, R. C. (1994). Special Trust. Cadell & Davies.

¹⁴ Hirst, D. (2010). Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East. Nation Books.

Hezbollah was able to solidify its position as a powerful political and military force, thus solidifying Iranian control in Lebanon.¹⁵ As each external sponsor sided with factions that suited their geopolitical objectives, the financial support from oil-rich powers not only strengthened these factions but also solidified sectarian differences.

2.2 THE ROLE OF OIL REVENUES IN FOREIGN MILITARY INTERVENTIONS

Additionally, oil wealth was crucial in supporting and funding foreign military incursions in Lebanon. All through the civil war, Syria, led by Hafez al-Assad, kept a sizable military presence in Lebanon. Although Syria's engagement was driven by both political and strategic objectives, Gulf powers, especially Saudi Arabia, provided crucial financial support. The Saudi government gave Syria financial assistance in the 1980s so that it could continue its military activities in Lebanon and boost its economy. Through this financial agreement, Syria was able to further its regional goals and establish itself as a significant power broker in Lebanon.¹⁶

Similarly, Christian militias in Lebanon, particularly those fighting Syrian-backed troops, received financial support from Iraq, another oil-rich state. Iraq and Syria's wider regional conflicts were mirrored in this dynamic, as both countries used oil profits to back their chosen Lebanese groups. As regional powers utilized their financial resources to influence the civil war's outcome, oil riches became a vital resource for maintaining proxy battles in Lebanon.

2.3 PETRO-DIPLOMACY IN LEBANON: MEDIATION AND ESCALATION

External engagement in the Lebanese Civil War was characterized by Petro-diplomacy, or the use of oil money as a political leverage weapon. Oil-rich nations utilized their financial might to organize ceasefires, mediate peace deals, or, on the other hand, escalate the fight by providing financing to rival groups. For example, Saudi Arabia was instrumental in mediating the Taif Agreement of 1989, which essentially put an end to the civil war. In order to organize the talks, offer financial incentives to the parties involved, and encourage a power-sharing solution that suited Saudi interests, the Kingdom made use of its oil resources. The Taif Agreement represented Saudi Arabia's intention to use financially supported diplomacy to stabilize Lebanon and limit Iranian influence.¹⁷

But peace was not always a result of Petro-diplomacy. Oil riches was used to finance arms purchases or support opposing factions at different times during the civil war in an effort to increase tensions. For example, in the early years of the conflict, Kuwait sent money to some Christian militias, and Libya supported extremist Palestinian groups in Lebanon with its oil profits. These acts illustrated how Petro-diplomacy has two sides: depending on the goals of outside parties, oil wealth might be used to either defuse or aggravate a crisis.

2.4 ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE OF LEBANESE ELITES ON GULF OIL WEALTH

Another important element that influenced the political choices made in Lebanon during the civil war was the elites' economic reliance on the Gulf's oil revenue. Many well-known Lebanese individuals had strong financial connections to the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, where they made investments in the rapidly

¹⁵ Norton, A. R. (2007). *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton University Press.

¹⁶ Kerr, M. H. (1996). *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and his Rivals, 1958-1970*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Makdisi, S. & Sadaka, R. (2005). "The Lebanese Civil War, 1975-1990." UNDP Human Development Report.

expanding banking, building, and service industries. These business ties established a network of reciprocal reliance that shaped Lebanon's political environment.

In this regard, Rafic Hariri became a prominent political figure in Lebanon after accumulating significant riches as a Saudi Arabian businessman. Because of his close relationship with the Saudi royal family, he was able to obtain significant financial support, which he utilized to build political support and finance rehabilitation initiatives. During his time as prime minister, Hariri's actions frequently reflected Saudi interests, such as backing Sunni political organizations and opposing Iranian and Syrian influence.¹⁸ In addition to escalating sectarian tensions, Lebanon's economic reliance on the Gulf's oil resources limited its capacity to conduct an autonomous foreign policy.

In addition, Gulf investments in Lebanon's banking and real estate industries produced a financial dependency that influenced the post-war economic recovery of the nation. As Lebanese banks and companies grew dependent on Gulf deposits and investments, this economic influence spread beyond individuals to institutions. The dependence on the oil wealth of the Gulf established a situation in which the goals of Gulf governments frequently shaped political and economic decisions in Lebanon, thereby solidifying outside influence in the nation's affairs.

The extent to which outside parties influenced the Lebanese Civil War with their financial resources is demonstrated by the significance that oil money played in the conflict. Oil-rich governments were crucial in determining the course of the war, from influencing economic elites and Petro-diplomacy to financing factions and financing military incursions. A complex web of relationships and rivalries was established by the interaction of exterior oil-driven interests with local sectarian dynamics, which prolonged the conflict and had a long-lasting effect on Lebanon's political and economic environment.

This analysis emphasizes how oil wealth has two sides: it can be a source of destabilization and a vehicle for empowerment. Oil profits exacerbated the very fissures that external actors aimed to heal, even as they made it possible for them to arbitrate peace agreements. The lasting effects of oil politics in Lebanon serve as a reminder of the significant impact that money from natural resources may have on the dynamics of power and conflict in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Although political, socioeconomic, and sectarian frameworks are most frequently used to evaluate the Lebanese Civil War, the impact of oil politics offers an important but little-known viewpoint. Despite not producing much oil, Lebanon had a strategically important location between its oil-rich neighbors and important international transit routes. Both regional and international superpowers were drawn to this geographic fact, which made the internal strife in Lebanon part of a larger competition for influence and energy. During the conflict, control over the provision of fuel in Lebanon became a potent weapon. In addition to upholding government inside their domains, political elites and militias utilized the availability of gasoline and heating oil to establish control, win allegiance, and quell dissent. The instability on the ground was exacerbated by this weaponization of electricity, which widened already-existing sectarian divisions and fueled humanitarian crises.

¹⁸ Traboulsi, F. (2007). *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Pluto Press.

Using Lebanon as a battlefield to further their own strategic goals, oil-funded regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria interfered on the outside to aid allied factions. The Cold War rivalry between the US and USSR, on the other hand, made matters more difficult. Both superpowers frequently extended the struggle in an effort to retain influence in the oil-rich Middle East.

Oil politics served as both a catalyst for violence and an impediment to peace in this situation. It helped explain the protracted and unresolved nature of the civil conflict by turning Lebanon into a geopolitical pawn in the regional energy game.

Understanding this aspect deepens our comprehension of the Lebanese Civil War and emphasizes the need of analyzing how strategic geography and natural resources function in contemporary conflicts. Future studies of Middle Eastern conflicts must take into consideration how local grievances and oil politics combine to create long-lasting instability.

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