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## **Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War**

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**Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War**

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The conflict-ridden modern history of the Middle East provides a fertile and as yet rather unexplored soil for memory studies. One of the most interesting cases in point is the memory of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-

90). Whereas other states with contested and traumatic events in the recent past keep the debate closed (e.g., Syria and the 1982 massacre in Hama),<sup>1</sup> the relatively dynamic public sphere in Lebanon has given room to a more unhindered development of a public dissemination and formation of a collective memory. Despite a strong inclination in state and society to bury the memory of the war, a public debate has slowly been emerging in the last five or six years. This article discusses the form of collective memory of the civil war and by implication examines the relationship between public and private forms of social memory.

The new focus on collective memory in social science, spawned in the late 1980s by the translation into English of Maurice Halbwachs's classic work *La mémoire collective* and by Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*, has been slow to provoke valuable work in Middle Eastern studies.<sup>2</sup> Two recent studies have shown how local memories in Tunisia and Jordan are formed according to family and tribe and often in diametric contradiction to the imagined nationalism of the nation-state.<sup>3</sup> In these two cases, the interlinking of the local memory, the memory of the land, with national memory is weak mainly because of unrepresentative Arab states. Nationalist imagination fails to grasp the dynamics of lived, experienced memory. It would seem that this lacuna between public, national memory, and private, local memory, is wider the more authoritarian the state in question. However, even in the most repressive system there must be an interaction between private and public forms of memory. State-sanctioned narratives are received and transformed in uneven (and unexplored) ways by the specific localities, just as the nationalist discourse must take note of the local memory, where this lets itself be known. Indeed—and this is a central argument of this article—*collective memory*, as the term is being widely used in social science today, can be broken down to a process of interaction between public and private memory. **[End Page 191]** Attention should therefore be directed toward linking theories of private and public spheres with the ories of collective memory.

## Dimensions of Amnesia

It took the Lebanese several years of collective shell shock before the first attempts to start a public debate about the war were made in the mid-1990s. Initially, the war was hardly even conceived as a finite period of time for the populace to relate to. There is general consensus that the Lebanese civil war began on April 13, 1975, but when exactly the war ended is a little harder to establish. The downfall of General Aoun and the subsequent seizure of East Beirut by the Syrian army in October 1990 signaled the end of large-scale fighting. However, the disarmament of the militias, the stabilization of the economy, and the restoration of the battered state institutions took years to achieve. As a consequence, many Lebanese felt that they were still living the war even though a peace had been declared.<sup>4</sup>

In the early years of recovery, in the confusion of the end and the immediate aftermath of the war, all primary efforts were focused on political and economic recovery, and ethical issues were given second priority. For the dazed Lebanese population it was the *mustaqbal*,<sup>5</sup> the future, that counted, not the past. Lebanon came out of the war with a number of political problems unresolved. Notably, Lebanon's confessional system, the consociational formula that stipulates that the "country's sects shall be equitably represented in public employment" and in the government, was left intact.<sup>6</sup> Despite slight amendments to the...

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1. In 1982 a resurrection of the Muslim Brotherhood with its center in Hama was defeated by the Baathist regime. An estimated twenty thousand people were killed and most of the old city of Hama destroyed.

2. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Pierre Nora, ed., *Lieux de mémoire* (*The Places of Memory*), 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1983–94).

3. Jocelyne Dakhlia, *Forgetting History: The Motifs and Contents of Collective Memory in Tunisia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

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