Displacement, return and reconciliation in Mount Lebanon

Aïda Kanafani-Zahar

During Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war between 600,000 and 800,000 people were displaced. Where displacement occurred as people sought to escape insecurity, especially in the areas demarcating east (Christian) and west (Muslim) Beirut, families made their own decisions to flee. But in many cases people were forcibly moved for confessional or political reasons as militias sought to systematically divide the country into confessional zones. This happened on a massive scale, and in some cases it was implemented through massacres: for example in 1976 at Karantîna, a camp inhabited by Palestinian refugees, Kurds and Lebanese; at Damour, a Christian village in Chouf district; and in a Palestinian refugee camp at Tell el-Za'tar. Massacres were perpetrated to propagate terror and succeeded in coalescing confessional groups territorially.

Israeli military invasions in March 1978 and June 1982 provoked the exodus of hundreds of thousands of people from south Lebanon to Beirut and its suburbs. In September 1983, the withdrawal of the Israeli army triggered the 'War of the Mountain' between the Christian Lebanese Forces, and the Druze forces of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and their allies. This led to the massacre of Druze and Christians, where perpetrators often lived in the same village as their victims. It also included the mass forced transfer of the Christian population, estimated at about 160,000 people in the Aley and Chouf districts alone. Houses belonging to both Christians and Druze were destroyed, burned or plundered; emblems of religious identity were devastated, places of worship destroyed, cemeteries desecrated, and fields and orchards demolished. Further violence was perpetrated on the property of Christians after they left.

The Taif Agreement of 1989 stipulated unity "of the territory, the people and the institutions". In a context where national territory, under militia authority, was fragmented on a confessional basis, in some areas with aspirations for secession, this was highly symbolic. In confirming the "Sovereignty of the Lebanese State over the totality of its territory", Taif granted all Lebanese the "right to reside in any part of [the] territory under the protection of the law" (Article I.H. in the first part) and the right "of the displaced Lebanese to return to the place from which they were displaced" (Article D in second part).

A ministry and a fund for the displaced were created in 1992. Their mandate is to ensure the return of all displaced people and to pay indemnities to them as applicable – although since 1994 return to the provinces of the south and of Nabatiyeh has been managed by the Council of South Lebanon.

Official returnee policy in Mount Lebanon

Mount Lebanon, a rural area in the centre of the country, is considered the cradle of the modern Lebanese state. The War of the Mountain represented a recurrence of violence as part of the civil war, after a long history of Christian-Druze conflict in the region.

After the war, the state sought to pacify and reconstruct the massacre-scarred region, and facilitate the return of Christian villagers. An event in September 1991 was to have a major influence on official returnee policy: seeking to avenge the killing of several family members, a Christian from the Druzo-Christian village of Ma'asir al-Chouf killed several Druze, including children. The political authorities

were concerned to avoid further cyclic, vindictive violence between villagers – a practice that still structures social relations in some regions. This convinced the Ministry of the Displaced (MD) to include 'reconciliation' in national returnee policy.

National returnee policy distinguished between two types of situation in Mount Lebanon. First, the return of displaced people to exclusively Christian villages situated in a Druzo-Christian region, which were not, according to the ministry, the theatre for massacres. Returns to these villages started in late 1992 without recourse to reconciliation. For example, in seven villages of the Harf region in Chouf district, inhabitants returned after re-establishing more or less formal relations with Druze in neighbouring villages, through committees set up to encourage Druze and Christian villagers to participate in each others' rites of passage, in particular funerals. Each village was also represented at the MD by its own committee. Meetings with officials – the minister, the director and technical experts – were aimed at establishing lists of Christian and Druze whose houses had been destroyed or damaged and who would receive indemnities. Druze who occupied Christians' houses because their own had been destroyed received evacuation indemnities. The ministry promulgated decrees of "return and collective evacuation".

The second category concerned Druzo-Christian villages in which massacres were perpetrated. Approximately twenty villages were specifically identified by the MD as "villages of reconciliation". Christian and Druze villagers were represented through committees reflecting their political and familial diversity. The process involved "the formation of a common committee constituted from the Ministry of the Displaced, the Fund of the Displaced and a representative of the committee of returnees [Christian] and a representative of the committee of residents [Druze]". Discussions around litigious issues – individual responsibilities during massacres, violations of property, indemnities – were to end with the signing of a reconciliation agreement, the terms of which effectively left the MD with responsibility for settling cases relating to violations of property. The signed agreement would exclude resort to courts, as it would come "with no conditions or suits". This posed a problem in cases where the intended beneficiaries did not receive payments specified in agreements. In the 1990s frictions between former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who had authority over the fund, and Walid Jumblatt, Minister of the Displaced, led to the suspension of payments.

Linking reconciliation to reconstruction of village infrastructure and public services (for instance roads, lights and water pipes) has posed a problem for those Druze who were not displaced. The MD contributes to reconstruction only after a reconciliation agreement has been reached. Ramzi (not his real name) from Abay, a village where reconciliation is not yet concluded, told the author in 2003: "It is as if we have to accept reconciliation in order to receive our rights. This takes the form of a pressure". His wife also deplored this situation: "If reconciliation is achieved on these grounds, it will be temporary. It must be based on fair foundations. Reconciling is not an exchange".

Return and reconciliation: communal versus individual

The logic of reconciliation for returnees in Lebanon was based on 'community equalisation', which denies distinction between aggressor and victim. Traditional reconciliation inspired by Arab customs is generally based on three key elements – all of which were absent from initiatives in Mount Lebanon: identification of the aggressor; acknowledgement of the wrong; and the aggressor's request for forgiveness from the victim's family or its representative.

The MD instead prioritised a communitarian logic. The withdrawal of (a very limited number of) legal complaints filed by families of victims at the time of the events was presented as a necessary step for reconciliation. According to former Minister Marwan Hamadé (2000–03), legal suits "perpetuate conflict" and could threaten the climate of concession.

> **We have to accept reconciliation in order to receive our rights … If reconciliation is achieved on these grounds, it will be temporary. It must be based on fair foundations. Reconciling is not an exchange**

Therefore the 'group' – in this case the Druze or Christian communities – rather than the individual, became the focus for reconciliation. Ministry officials did not distinguish between parties as perpetrators or victims of violence. Khalid Abd al-Samad, former director of the MD, said in an interview with the author on the occasion of the signing of the reconciliation agreement for the village of Majdlaya in 2000: "We all have committed errors. We must all recognise our errors, come back to ourselves and forgive one another". The consequence of this communitarian logic is to put individual responsibilities aside. This leaves no place for forgiveness, a fundamentally personal act. The indemnity paid by the state to victims' families is not therefore the result of the recognition of a wrong or of the victim by the person responsible.

Communitarian logic did not pervade all processes of return and reconciliation. National allegiance was also used to encourage villagers to reconcile – Christians to agree to return and Druze to accept their return. Khalid Abd al-Samad explained that "the great national decision" is one argument used to achieve this aim: "We say to the villagers, 'we are here to apply a national decision, we all carry this responsibility'".

Another policy linked reconciliation to pacification in "the superior interest of the state", as Khalid Abd al-Samad put it. Pacification constitutes the first clause of the reconciliation agreement for the village of Bmaryam of May 2002, which stipulates that the objective of reconciliation is to "permit all to find stability and unity in the village under the banner of civil peace". Khalid Abd al-Samad stated: "We cannot say that with this return to Majdlaya, we solved all contradictions, conflicts and problems. No. But we achieved what is in our opinion fundamental. We said: 'We have different points of view but within the frame of peace and peaceful dialogue. Violence is forbidden'". Policy has also referred to the need to enhance religious pluralism as a national institution and a pillar of the Constitution.

Conclusion

To ensure the safety of both Druze and Christian villagers, the MD adopted a form of reconciliation modified from traditional procedures for resolving the problem of revenge, in a way that embodied the political will for pacification, unity of territory and religious pluralism. But victims were largely excluded from MD discussions. Hamadé asserted that "their presence is not necessary. It is not a condition. It is easier to reach solutions without them. Sometimes families of victims play a positive role and sometimes negative, retarding reconciliation".

Even if the instituted process allowed no space for their memories and their testimony, victims nevertheless expressed a strong need to remember in order to, avoid

relapse, to learn from the past, and to research the reasons that led to the war and social disintegration. This need is clearly put forth in narratives of bereaved families collected in the Chouf and Aley area. As a child, Ramzi lost his father, mother and grandmother in the massacre that occurred in his village, Abay. He found it very difficult to put his wounds into words, but expressed that it was impossible to forget, and his profound hope that the war would not happen again. He projected his memory in a peaceful and secular future, the only future that he could envisage for his daughter and his son.

The major benefit of reconciliation in relation to displaced people is to neutralise cycles of vengeance and to make it possible for them to return. In practice, however, return is also conditioned by economic conditions and the rural exodus that long preceded Lebanon's war.

The major paradox of reconciliation in Mount Lebanon lies in the fact that it promotes national allegiance to Lebanon, while simultaneously elaborating a communitarian logic to the reconciliation process. Because post-war settlement was characterised by a blanket amnesty, reconciliation in Mount Lebanon followed this rationale even though traditional reconciliation processes do not. Reconciliation is local as far as the rules conceived by the MD are applied, with villages 'reconciled' on a case-by-case basis. Its local specificity, its logic of mediation and compensation, and the process itself have all proceeded from a stated objective of facilitating the return of the displaced and averting cycles of revenge. But ultimately, reconciliation for the displaced has been governed by power relationships at the national level.

Aïda Kanafani-Zahar is an anthropologist at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale at the Collège de France, Paris. Her research on contemporary Lebanon includes inter-religious dialogue, institutional secularisation, memories of the civil war, and reconciliation processes.