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**THE BATTLE OF ZAHLEH:
FROM ACTIVISM TO ONLINE-PASSIVISM IN THE
SOCIAL MEDIA AGE**

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly details the unfolding events of the Battle of Zahleh during the Lebanese Civil War between December 1980 and June 1981. Modestly equipped Christian armed dissidents – the Lebanese Forces (LF) – from in and around Zahleh fought against the omnipotent Syrian Armed Forces, otherwise known as the Arab Deterrent Force. Despite the imbalance in firepower, the resistance was nevertheless able to thwart attempted Syrian incursions. This paper examines by what communications and new media means the consummate opposition materialized in the Battle of Zahleh. Prior to the information age, new media at the time was analogue new media. This paper examines the effect of analogue new-media on opposition and dissidence, From a historical lens. In particular, by what means the LF used analogue new-media to mobilize their dissidence on ground to curb the omnipotence of the Syrian War machine. In my final argument, I examine through what medium the information age today, turned the LF dissident members of 1980 and 1981 from *past-offline-activists* into *present-online-passivists*.

Introduction

In this paper, I investigate the battle of Zahleh from three different lenses:

1. Historical and political context.
2. Collective action and political entrepreneurship through communication.

3. New media dissidence in both analogue and digital mode.

First, I provide a summarized overview of the unfolding events throughout the seven-month span of the Battle. In detail, I examine two separate stages: first, the initial setbacks that triggered the battle between December 1980 and March 1981, second, the conclusive battle between April and June 1981. I examine briefly Zahleh's strategic location, and how the Syrians tackled this geo-strategic location.

Second, on the communication level, I posit that for effective dissidence to materialize, two attributes are requisite: organized collective action and political entrepreneurship. A political broker, however, must link between the latter and the former for effective communication output; I will further expand on this point throughout my paper.

Third, I argue that social media perpetuates socio-historical events. In contrast to analogue new media, digital new media in the information age pick up particles of past dissident events and perpetuate their ideological cause, through the creation of online communities. To bolster my argument, I conducted an interview with an LF veteran and a participant in the Battle of Zahleh. Based on the findings of my interview, although the Battle of Zahleh took place three decades ago, I argue that today, social media turns former dissident members from *past-offline-activists* into *present-online-passivists*; The outcome is *slacktivism*. To that end, I will explain *Slacktivism* and then relate it to my central point.

Historical and Political Context

From December 1980 to June 1981, Zahleh endured various political and military setbacks. The opposing key players were on the one side, the Lebanese Forces (LF), an

armed right-wing Christian resistance group. The LF were aided by Zahlawi locals and members of the Internal Security Forces (ISF).¹ On the other side, the Syrian Armed Forces also know as the Arab Deterrent Force (ADF).² Demographically, Zahleh is one of the largest predominantly Christian towns in Lebanon.³ Adjacent to the town's outskirts, the Bekaa valley, spanning the length of the Syrian borders, was occupied by the Syrian Army Forces from May 1976.⁴ Given Zahleh's close proximity to the Bekaa Valley, the Syrian Army Forces feared a potential alliance between Israel and the LF in Zahleh.⁵ Considering the close proximity between Zahleh and the Damascus highway, this potential alliance would not only threaten the Syrian military presence in the Bekaa valley, but was regarded by Syrian officials as a national security threat to the Syrian Capital, Damascus.⁶ Consequently, as a clamp down strategy, the Syrian forces controlled major roads leading in and out of the city and fortified the entire Valley.⁷ Around December of 1980, tension increased between Zahlawi Lebanese Forces and Syrian backed leftist militants.⁸ As a result, firefights between the opposing militant groups broke out. On December 22, 1980, five Syrian soldiers were killed as they “ventured into the line of fire.”⁹ Consequently, the Syrian Forces shelled the city repeatedly to pressure Zahlawis to hand over the LF members who were responsible for

¹ Alain Menargues, *Les Secrets de la Guerre au Liban: du Coup d'Etat de Bachir Gémayel aux Massacres des Camps palestiniens* (Paris: Albin Michel 2004), 106.

² *Ibid.*, 106.

³ R.D Mclaurin, *The Battle of Zahle Technical memorandum 8-86* (Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD: U.S Army Human Engineering Laboratory 1986), 9.

⁴ “Syrian Occupation of Lebanon (1976-2005)” Lgic, accessed November 06, 2010, http://www.lgic.org/en/help_syria.php

⁵ Alain Menargues., 107.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸ R.D Mclaurin, 7.

⁹ R.D Mclaurin, 7.

the killing of the Syrian soldiers.¹⁰ The LF, however, disavowed and instead, dispatched additional armed elite fighters to Zahleh to defend the city from possible Syrian incursions.¹¹ From April to June 1981, a handful of LF elite members, aided by Zahlawis, confronted the Syrian war machine and defended the city from Syrian intrusion and potential invasion.¹²

Collective Action and Political Entrepreneurship through Communication

When *collective action* and *political entrepreneurship* interlock, effective dissidence comes into fruition. For the two phenomena, however, to inextricably build on each other, *mobilization* must come into play. To explain the latter, in his essay on the Lebanese Forces, Lewis, W. Snider argues:

The enduring political strength of the Lebanese Forces does not ultimately rest with the militia, but in their organizational structure, the effectiveness of their social program and their ability to mobilize the population for political action.¹³

Following the same line of reasoning, during the onslaughts of the Battle of Zahleh, the LF demonstrated a remarkable ability to mobilize the city's entire population – by consolidating a social communication network, in line with the LF's political ends. To explain this further, only 90 elite members from the *el-Wahadat el-Markaziyya* – Special LF Central Units – were dispatched to Zahleh from Beirut by Bachir Gemayel,

¹⁰Alain Menargues, 107.

¹¹ Ibid., 107

¹² Ibid., 161.

¹³ Lewis W. Snider, "The Lebanese Forces: Their Origins and Role in Lebanon's Politics" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Winter, 1984): 2.

the LF Chief Commander.¹⁴ Under Bachir's supervision, the few LF Central Units were able to mobilize the entire population of the city, a total of 2,500 to 3,000 civilians.¹⁵

Deepa Narayan argues: "all societies are built from *social groups* rather than individuals."¹⁶ The Central Units indexed the people of Zahleh into three social groups of age, gender and profession. The social groups were clustered apart and categorized, and tasks were assigned accordingly. For example, youngsters and elderlies filled-up sand bags; women made meals for the fighters; construction companies volunteered with their bulldozers to dig trenches for the LF; Zahleh's water plant staff flooded impasses with water to prevent Syrian tanks from passing through;¹⁷ metal and glass workshops, in and around Zahleh, built white fiber-glass pseudo igloos in the snow to camouflage Syrian artilleries in key mountain positions.¹⁸

Despite how consummate the collective production of Zahleh may seem, one more significant factor must come into play so that effective dissidence resonates on the ground, national and international level: political entrepreneurship or an agent of violence. According to Charles Tilly, political entrepreneurs or agents of violence comprise "the linking nodes for social network that forges the dissidence."¹⁹ To better understand collective (production) action, one must unravel the agent factor that steers and directs its course of actions. To bolster his defense strategy against the Syrian omnipotence, Bachir Gemayel was able to weave the collective production tools. In this way, he created a communication defense network, that echoed not only on the internal

¹⁴ Fouad Abou Nader about Zahle battle, You Tube Video, 1;37, posted by michel10452, April 05, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2eUT9bRVDA&feature=related>.

¹⁵ R.D Mclaurin., 3.

¹⁶ Deepa Narayan, "Bonds and Bridges: Social Capital and Poverty" *World Bank* (July 1999): 1.

¹⁷ R.D Mclaurin, 25.

¹⁸ Clovis el-Shouefaty, *Harb el-Rihanat el-Jadida: Ma'arek Sourya fi Loubnan - el-Jez' el-Tani* (Beirut: Self-published, 2010), 22.

¹⁹ Charles Tilly, *The politics of collective violence* (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34.

(ground level) but, on both the national and international level. Tilly posits that political entrepreneurs “wield significant influence over the presence, absence, form, and intensity of collective violence.”²⁰ Bachir, as an agent of violence was able to intensify the Tillyian interpretation of violence on all three levels.

On the ground level, Israel provided Bachir and the LF modest military aid. Most importantly, however, on the national level, Bachir’s shrewdness as an agent of violence was actualized by his ability to mobilize the Israeli Air Force. He mobilized the latter, making it in line with his political conviction, by persuading the Israeli PM, despite his overt reluctance at first, to directly engage the Syrians.²¹ At the height of the Syrian siege on Zahleh, the humanitarian conditions were so dire, that it was impossible to smuggle in one piece of bread inside the city.²² When Bachir dispatched his delegates to Israel to request military aid, he urged them to magnify the dire situation to extrapolate as much sympathy as possible from the Israelis. Bachir’s latent plan worked; Israeli prime minister at the time Menachem Begin, upon hearing from Bachir’s delegates, publicly announced: “ the dire conditions of the Christians in Lebanon is as analogous to that of the Jewish resistant groups during the uprising of Warsaw in 1943.”²³ Shortly thereafter, Begin gave the green light for air strikes against the Syrians; Israeli fighter jets shot down two Syrian helicopters and bombed Syrian key positions on the Ferzol hill, on the plains of Mount Sannine.²⁴ The French press described the air strikes as the first Israeli interference in a country where no Jewish life was threatened.²⁵ To evoke Israeli

²⁰ Charles Tilly, 34.

²¹ Alain Menargues, 136.

²² Clovis el-Shouefaty, 101.

²³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁴ Alain Menargues, 136.

²⁵ Quoted in Alain Menargues, 137.

sympathy, Bachir externalized the Zahleh siege and shelling of innocent civilians, prompting the Hebrew state to directly interfere.

On the international level, Bachir also externalized the onslaughts of the Syrian shelling, manipulating the international reaction through the press by magnifying the numbers of human lives perished from the siege and shelling.²⁶ Since Bachir spoke French fluently, he exploited the use of the Western language by personally touring around with the French press in Zahleh when the siege ended, drawing attention to the heavy damages caused by the shelling.²⁷ Consequently, upon seeing the damages inflicted on the city, the French government publicly denounced the Syrian shelling of Zahleh.²⁸

All told, Bachir was able to strategically weave together the three consummate factors leading to effective dissidence – mobilization, collective (production) action, and political entrepreneurship – combining them into one solid communication defense network. Through the latter, Bachir amplified dissidence on the internal ground level, and garnered sympathy on both the national and international level. In addition to his entrepreneurship, Bachir skillfully utilized media communication tools to further solidify his ground level opposition, which I will elucidate below.

Dissidence through (New) Communication Tools

Throughout the Battle, the LF utilized effective media communication across multiple levels –from reaping the communicational benefits of a conventional telephone

²⁶ Clovis el-Shouefaty, 101.

²⁷ To watch the footage see war of zahle lebanon 5, You Tube Video, 8:46, posted by mrziad123, November 13, 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yt4gr_hZtoc&feature=related

²⁸ Alain Menargues, 107.

cable line, to new media communication tools and innovations. In this passage, I examine the LF's eloquent use of communication on two levels: *conventional communication level* and *innovational communication level*.

On the conventional communication level, prior to dispatching the LF elite units to Zahleh, Bachir had to ponder establishing a communication line between the turmoiled city and the LF central command post in Beirut. Otherwise, without communication between front lines and military operation headquarters, a slight potential advantage for the LF would be inconceivable. Dr. Fouad Abou Nader, whom Bachir dispatched to Zahleh to assess the dire situation, reported back the following: the telephone cable line linking Zahleh to Beirut was still operating and was not yet located nor traced by Syrian intelligence.²⁹ Consequently, despite the mismatch in firepower, Bashir saw hope in the formation of a potential defense strategy that would eventually block Syrian intrusion to the city and protect the Christian stronghold of the East. To do so, the LF had to take advantage of the un-compromised telephone cable line and establish a direct line of communication between Zahleh and the FL's headquarters in Beirut. The military operation room was established in the basement of a protestant church in the city of Achrafiyeh in Beirut.³⁰ The communication room gathered thinkers, political analysts, and geography professors from across East Beirut's universities such as, the University of Saint Joseph. This enabled the LF to meticulously and safely craft strategies away from the battlefield from within their Eastern Beirut enclave. This gave the LF the advantage of time reduction, synchronizing between strategy and ground level in a swiftly manner. Consequently, time reduction enabled the LF to curb any potential

²⁹ Menargue, 108

³⁰ Ibid., 108.

Syrian advancement to the city. To that end, I will relate the salience of time reduction to the construct of new media in battle. Although it is indefinite to delineate what technology is, in the context of my paper, it is requisite to examine the construct of technology on the macro level. Brian Arthur posits that fundamentally, “technology executes a purpose.”³¹ Raymond Williams argues that technology sets the conditions for social change and progress.³² Since new-media emanate from technology, both are inextricably interlocked. For that reason, new media executes a process new-media also sets the conditions for social change and progress; the process of new media however is reductionist. New-media constantly reduces the time taken for the “purpose” to be performed. In the context of battlefields, the ability to execute a purpose on the ground level sets the conditions for the social change such as, determining victors and losers. ³³ Time turns the tides of the final battle to the favor of the one who uses it more sufficiently. The LF, were indeed able to reduce time and turn the tides of the final outcome to their favor. Since on the front lines, time is always a crucial factor, the communication process must be constantly reductionist.

On the innovational communication level, Sherki connotes that “new tools give life to new forms of action.”³⁴ In parallel, the innovative tools the LF used in Zahleh gave new

³¹ Brian W. Arthur, *The Nature of Technology: What it is and how it Evolves* (New York London: Free Press, 2011), 29.

³² Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 20.

³³ See Sherky, 172. In parallel, Sherky argues that communication in the battlefield is requisite in determining the final outcome. Sherky gave the example of the invasion of France during WWII. He argues that German troops easily invaded France not because they circumvented the Magillo front line and marched to France through Belgium, because the German tanks were equipped with radios, as opposed to their French counterparts. This enabled the German tanks, scattered across the bordering fields, to communicate with one another. To that end, radio enabled the Germans to penetrate the enemy line in unison and faster than the French could have time to react to such advancement.³³ Communication technology determined whether the nefarious Nazi war machine prevailed or not. Radio, by itself is not new-media communication, however, its implementation in a tank for the first time to reduce the time to execute a process; inventive ways to communicating in unison is new media.

³⁴ Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 106.

forms of action, communicating effective dissidence to the opponent. For example, booby-traps LF members made by inserting blasting powder inside light bulbs.³⁵ The light bulbs, exploded when electric current passed through them.³⁶ Although the new tools do not communicate visuals nor sound, they nevertheless communicate effective dissidence to the opposing side. To that end, I call the innovative mediums utilized during the Battle of Zahleh peculiar forms of communication tools. Following the same line of reasoning, Marshall McLuhan argues that “the electric light is a medium without a message unless its function is used to spell out some name...”³⁷ During the Battle of Zahleh, however, the function of some electric lights spelled no name but indicated *resistance* instead. The message – dissidence – appropriates the electric light bulb thus shifting its function from turning off and on.

Since the Battle of Zahleh took place three decades ago, I am investigating dissidence and new communication tools from a historical perspective. To that end, the peculiar forms of communication tools that emanated during the onsets were of analogue disposition. In the information age today, the dynamics between (new) communication tools and dissidence slightly shifted, which I will explore in my final paragraph.

Conclusion: From Offline Activists to Online Social Media *Passivists*

As a result of stupendous organization, and extensive budget allocation from regional powers, the Lebanese Forces’ military power grew exponentially over the years. Up to a point the LF military strength even outweighed that of the Lebanese Army. The

³⁵ R.D McLaurin, 25.

³⁶ Ibid., 25.

³⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), 8.

aforementioned growth in military power was terminated abruptly by 1991, however. The Taif Agreement, held among the Lebanese opposing factions in 1989 to end the Civil War, not only amended the constitution, but stipulated that all armed resistance in Lebanon transition to a political role.³⁸ Consequently, the LF handed their entire military arsenal to the Lebanese Army. As a result, a feeling of nostalgia and bitterness swept through most of the resistance fighters of the LF who fought in the Civil War. The reaction to military defunctness over the years since 1991 has been the following: contemplating heroism, longing for fighting prowess on the battlefields, nostalgia imbued with a right wing discourse. Contemplating the heroic heydays has recently shifted online. For example, to commemorate the martyrs who fell in battle, ex-LF members created a Facebook page entitled *Shouhada Ouwwet, Martyrs of the Forces*.³⁹ The page not only honors the LF martyrs but includes poignant images conveying the now defunct (LF) war machine of the yesteryear. Upon becoming a member of this online community, I posted a couple of comments under the images, waiting to see if they would instigate a reaction from other members. To my surprise, it did; one member was constantly commenting on my messages. Shortly thereafter, I found myself chatting with that member; his name is Joseph Khoueiry. In our initial online encounter I asked him about his current stance on LF recent policies in the parliament. Joseph, who was 16 when he fought in the Battle of Zahleh is now 46. When I asked him if he knows of any book that details the events of the Battle of Zahleh, surprisingly, he told me he could help me but he insisted that I call him. When I did, Joseph picked up the phone and called me *rafik*, comrade. It struck me at first, that Joseph's initial reaction was that all

³⁸ Rania Maktabi, "The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who Are the Lebanese?" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Nov., 1999): 220.

³⁹ Facebook page URL: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Chouhada-l-Ouwwet/446453105423?ref=ts>

members of this page must be either LF members or at least supporters of their right wing cause. This prompted me to enquire in what way the Facebook page contributes to the commemoration of the (LF). I was stupefied when Joseph told me that *allah ykhalinla hal Facebook tankammel masiretna*, God bless Facebook for it provides an opportunity to perpetuate our cause. In contrast to analogue new media, digital new media in the information age picks up historical particles of past dissident events and perpetuates their cause. Through the formation of online communities and chat groups, exchanges of oppositional beliefs ensue that emanates from a virtual platform of dissidence. When this happens, the former armed resistant groups shift from *past-offline-activists* to *present-online-passivists* thus *slacktivists*. Quoting Morozov is essential to understand the latter:

The derogatory epithet used for these activities is ‘slacktivism’, which refers to political activities that have no impact on real–life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel–good factor of the participants.⁴⁰

The new innovations of today, compared to older new media, are “causing colossal changes in the entire political, social, and aesthetic embodied experience.”⁴¹ New media [today] has shifted focus from object to process.⁴² This “process” however, in the information age is de-materialized. At the dissidence level, de-materialized political motives convert activism into slacktivism. Morozov relates “Slacktivism” to the Colding-Jorgensen experiment.⁴³ For that reason, he argues that “when communication costs are

⁴⁰ Quoted in Henrik Christenson, “Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by other Means?” *First Monday*, Vol. 16, Number 2 - 7 (February 2011) retrieved online.

⁴¹ Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, eds, 50.

⁴² Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, eds, 50.

⁴³ In 2009, a Danish psychologist called Colding Jorgensen, as (part of his research), he created a fictitious Facebook group. On the page, he announced that the Copenhagen city authorities will be demolishing the historical Storck fountain site. The following day, 125 Facebook members joined the Jorgensen’s page. Shortly thereafter, the number of fans grew at a staggering rate, reaching 27,500.

low, groups can easily spring into action.”⁴⁴ Clay Shirkey also touched on Slacktivism: “ridiculously easy group forming.”⁴⁵ It’s been 21 years now since the LF military have been defunct. The Christian socio-political rule is now significantly weakened by sectarianism within their ranks and battered by past intra-wars. The emergence of Hezbollah as the sole Lebanese armed resistance in the wake of the Israeli occupation further stifled the Christian right-wing ideology by associating it with Israel and reducing its once noble cause. To that end, in spite of the “no impact on the real life,” today, online LF resistant groups may seem to be content being part of the virtual platform of dissidence, as no offline or activist alternative appears on the horizon. The result is virtual dissidence reduced to a de-materialized opposition – an utter “aesthetic [virtual] embodied experience.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: the Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 180.

⁴⁵ Morozov, 180.

⁴⁶ Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, eds, 52.

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