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Micro-Level Motivations of Combatants in Inter-Communal Conflicts

A look into the case of
Jabal Mohsen and
Bab al-Tabbaneh

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**MICRO-LEVEL MOTIVATIONS OF COMBATANTS IN INTER-COMMUNAL CONFLICTS
A LOOK INTO THE CASE OF JABAL MOHSEN AND BAB AL-TABBANEH**

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ABSTRACT

Why do people fight in armed conflicts? This question has long captivated researchers, scholars, humanitarian organizations and policymakers looking for ways to end conflicts. In an attempt to answer it, Andréane Williams interviewed 13 former fighters who took part in the communal violence that has, for decades, plagued the Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen and the Sunni neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh in the northern city of Tripoli in Lebanon. She found that financial incentives, sectarian grievances and religious motivations as well as self-defense are important motivations. However, the findings also highlight the importance of the psychological functions of violence: the desire to gain respect from the community, to be seen like a man and thrill-seeking are important drivers.

KEYWORDS

Communal Violence, Civil War, Conflict, Sunni, Shia, Lebanon, Micro-level Determinants, Motivations, Grievances

Since the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), communal violence involving groups that define themselves by their differences of religion has plagued Lebanon. The northern city of Tripoli has been particularly hit by that kind of violence, which kept erupting throughout the decades that followed the conflict. More recently, between 2008 and 2014, the neighborhoods of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh in Tripoli have seen more than 20 rounds of clashes between Sunni and Shia communities, which have left hundreds of dead and wounded. The media has often portrayed the conflict as a sectarian spillover of the Syrian Civil War, turning the city's Sunni majority against the Alawite minority. While it is true that the conflict in Tripoli has increasingly been expressing itself in sectarian terms and that religious grievances have played a significant role in motivating people to take up arms, it is also rooted in political fragmentation and in the growing dissatisfaction with the state and the city's socioeconomic decline (Lefèvre, 2014). In some cases, economic hardship has even led men from these neighborhoods to take up arms in order to make a living. In order to develop long-lasting peace-building strategies, we should therefore further investigate what motivated the people who participated in these clashes, instead of simply looking at the violence between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen as the inevitable consequence of historical grievances and the spillover of regional conflicts between neighboring superpowers. This article draws on a dataset collected through in-depth interviews with 13 former male combatants that aimed to explore the combatants' personal motivations for taking up arms in the rounds of clashes that took place between 2008 and 2014 in Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh.

The Origins

The origins of the conflict go back to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). During this period, the two neighborhoods supported rival political factions. Local Sunnis supported Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in its struggle against the Syrian regime, while Jabal Mohsen's Alawites allied with the Syrian troops and supported their presence in Tripoli (Lefèvre, 2014). In December 1986, the Syrian military and its supporting militia of the Alawite Arab Democratic Party (ADP) (the main Alawite paramilitary group ruling Jabal Mohsen) conducted a large-scale massacre in the Sunni populated neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh. Hundreds of people were killed and injured. Because of the widespread presence of the Syrian regime in Lebanon until 2005, no credible investigation was ever carried out into the events, and victims were never granted reparation. Until this day, memories of this massacre continue to fuel grievances among the Sunnis of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Tripoli (Lefèvre, 2014). Today, the conflict between the two areas has morphed into a struggle between supporters and opponents of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. Tensions were first revived in 2005, with the assassination of then Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and again in 2008 with Hezbollah's seizure of large parts of West Beirut. The conflict intensified after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, as the majority of Sunnis living in deprived neighborhoods such as Bab al-Tabbaneh supported the Syrian rebellion, while Jabal Mohsen's ADP supported the Syrian regime. The Syrian crisis also deepened the political divide in Lebanon as Lebanese politicians, who were already split between pro-Saudi and pro-Iran and Syria groups, used Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen to send each other political messages.

Financial Incentives and Material Benefits

In the case of the conflict between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh, the lack of economic opportunities in time of peace and the financial opportunities that arise during armed conflicts create incentives for taking up arms. Ten out of the 13 combatants interviewed mentioned the opportunity for financial gains as one of their main motivations for taking part in the clashes. Financial opportunities took different forms for combatants and were almost all made possible thanks to funds coming from Lebanese politicians supporting one neighborhood/community or the other during the clashes, and from the Lebanese diaspora, mainly coming from Australia according to testimonies of Alawite fighters from Jabal Mohsen. This phenomenon highlights the importance of local elites in armed conflicts like civil wars and communal violence, who serve as intermediaries linking economic incentives at the micro (individual) level and ethnic cleavages at the macro level (Christia, 2008).

In Jabal Mohsen, most armed groups are under the direct control of the ADP, although various neighborhood commanders display some autonomy (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Some fighters also said they refused to associate with the ADP and fought on their own. In comparison, Bab al-Tabbaneh and the surrounding Sunni neighborhoods do not enjoy the same kind of centralized control. Instead, various armed groups operate under independent commanders and militia leaders, with varying ideologies and loyalties (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In its most basic aspect, financial opportunities in Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen took the form of monthly salaries or sporadic allowances in return for taking part in the clashes. The interviews allowed different levels of payments to be identified. Local warlords and militia leaders were generally funded and/or received weapons from Lebanese politicians who supported them and their community. According to testimonies of combatants from Jabal Mohsen, the ADP offered financial compensations usually ranging from 200,000 to 1,513,850 Lebanese pounds (LL) a month (130 to 1,000 USD) to higher ranking fighters such as group leaders. Lower ranking fighters were sometimes offered what they described as occasional and symbolic allowances to fight. They could also be paid to conduct specific actions. In Jabal Mohsen, for example, throwing a grenade could be remunerated 15,000 LL (10 USD) according to a community leader.

“The people who fought were the poor people. The people who had money didn’t take up arms. Every fighter was getting money from the Arab Democratic Party.” – Combatant from Jabal Mohsen

“Some people from the neighborhood got rich. You don’t see them in the street anymore. They bought fancy cars and apartments.” – Combatant from Jabal Mohsen

In addition to financial compensation, fighters also often received services and food aid from community and militia leaders. A member of a leading family from Bab al-Tabbaneh explained that his family supported combatants and their families by helping them to pay their rent, medical and school bills, while a fighter from Jabal Mohsen explained that he received cigarettes and food such as bread and vegetables. That same fighter also mentioned that many former combatants from Jabal Mohsen and their families continued to receive money from the ADP after the clashes stopped.

In some cases, economic payoffs pushed combatants to harm members of their own community, as financial opportunities also came in the form of looting. Several fighters in both Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh admitted having witnessed the looting of damaged stores and houses in their neighborhood by combatants from their own community. Another fighter admitted having been part of a small group of armed combatants who would pay visits to shop owners and harass them for money. The fighter mentioned that taking part in these operations was one of the reasons why he decided to participate in the clashes. According to a 2013 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, some gunmen from the Bab al-Tabbaneh also forced Alawite shop owners to pay protection money. In these cases, the prospect of private benefits in the form of material goods from looting acted as an incentive for participation.

A currently unemployed fighter from Bab al-Tabbaneh with a criminal record who claimed that he mainly fought for sectarian and religious beliefs admitted that he would forbid his children to fight in new clashes if they had a job and interesting life prospects. He also mentioned missing the clashes because the money *“coming from outside the neighborhood”* as well as the money he would sometimes make from selling his munitions during the clashes improved his living conditions. He added that if he had a job, he would not consider fighting again and would *“let others fight.”*

These examples illustrate how economic incentives in the form of legitimate work opportunities could discourage combatants from fighting by relegating ethnic or religious grievances to cleavages of second level importance (Christia, 2008). It also highlights how less marketable individuals with poor economic opportunities are more likely to be drowned in violence.

Sectarian Grievances and Religious Beliefs

In my interviews in Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh, historical grievances linked to the Lebanese Civil War and the Syrian occupation of Lebanon as well as religious and sectarian beliefs were among the most cited motivations for taking up arms. Sectarian grievances as well as religious and ideological motivations were considerably more prevalent in Bab al-Tabbaneh, where combatants often referred to the crimes committed by the Syrian forces (which to them represents the Alawite-led Syrian government) against the Sunnis during the Lebanese Civil War and the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. One fighter mentioned the hanging, during the 2008-2014 clashes, of flyers commemorating martyrs from the neighborhood as well as the 1986 massacre and the involvement of Jabal Mohsen in the killings in Bab al-Tabbaneh. Another said that the death of former Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 sparked memories of crimes committed by Syrian forces against the residents of Bab al-Tabbaneh during the Lebanese Civil War and the subsequent Syrian occupation of Lebanon.

“We were raised with the ideology that Alawites are the enemies and that they took part in the massacre of Bab al-Tabbaneh during the civil war. [...] Since the civil war, many people had been waiting for the clashes to resume (to get revenge).” – A combatant from Bab al-Tabbaneh

“Clashes are not about the people of Jabal Mohsen, but about the Syrian regime, which is represented through the Arab Democratic Party.” – A member of a leading family in Bab al-Tabbaneh.

In addition to grievances dating back from the Lebanese Civil War and the Syrian occupation, the perception of government bias among the Sunni community seems to be an important dimension of the sectarian aspect of the conflict between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh.

A community leader from Bab al-Tabbaneh mentioned the oppression of the Sunnis in Lebanon resulting from the growing influence of the Shia community in the country as a motivation for taking up arms. In Lebanon, the Lebanese Shia party Hezbollah, which is supported by the Syrian regime and Iran and is currently fighting alongside Bashar al-Assad in Syria, enjoys unparalleled influence. Over the years, the militia-turned political party has developed its own parallel institutions within Lebanon’s educational, social and economic sectors. This unequalled power fuels a Sunni-Shia divide in the country (Lefèvre, 2014).

“It’s a way to fight back against oppression and defend the Sunnis’ honor,” the community leader added.

Combatants in Bab al-Tabbaneh expressed significantly more religious motivations in comparison with combatants from Jabal Mohsen. This is undoubtedly linked to the rise of Sunni extremism in Lebanon, which can be attributed to several national and international factors. First, the past decade has witnessed a growing feeling of socioeconomic and political marginalization on the part of the country’s Sunni community. As a result, many Sunnis have decided to turn away from the Lebanese state and look for alternative sources of support and protection, which has allowed the political manipulation of the local population through clientelism. “Thus, when it comes to paying the bills, such as rent, medical expenses, or school fees, many inhabitants are left with two options: asking a political leader or joining a religious charity” (Lefèvre, 2014). Moreover, the rise of Sunni extremism in the Syrian Civil War has created new kinds of religious and security dynamics in Lebanon, with Syrian insurgents finding refuge in Tripoli and extremist groups such as the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) tapping into Bab al-Tabbaneh’s feeling of disenfranchisement to recruit new followers (Lefèvre, 2014).

One combatant from Bab al-Tabbaneh said that while he first looked at the conflict as one opposing his neighborhood to the Syrian regime (represented through Jabal Mohsen and the ADP), his views of the conflict evolved into a sectarian conflict opposing Sunnis and Alawites as he was exposed to fighters with more extreme religious views. He added that sheikhs (religious leaders) used prayers in local Sunni mosques to motivate people, especially the youth, to take up arms by claiming that the Sunni religion was “under attack” and by playing the prayer for Jihad through the mosques’ minarets¹. Another combatant who said he came from a very

¹ In Bab al-Tabbaneh, instead of broadcasting the usual call to prayer, they would or broadcast a prayer that was telling people they should do the Jihad)

religious and conservative family in Bab al-Tabbaneh admitted to having fought against the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen because he thought they were “kafr” (infidels).

“It [the fight] was about religion, not about getting something in return.” – A combatant from Bab al-Tabbaneh

In comparison, only one of the combatants from Jabal Mohsen interviewed mentioned defending his religion as a motivation for taking up arms. The grievances expressed by fighters from the Alawite neighborhood were mostly linked to the loss of community and family members during the clashes.

“When you see a lot of people getting injured and killed, even though many people are already fighting, you feel like it’s not enough,” explained a combatant from Jabal Mohsen, who joined the fight after his father was shot while fighting.

Self-Defense and Manipulation by Local Elites

Self-defense was recurrently cited by combatants as a motive for taking up arms. Defending their neighborhood against aggressions as well as defending their shops and their houses seemed to be some of the combatants' priority, especially in Jabal Mohsen.

One combatant from Jabal Mohsen said he bought himself a gun in self-defense against Bab al-Tabbaneh after the Hezbollah invaded West Beirut in May 2008 because *“rumors spread that there would be a big fight.”*

Another combatant from Jabal Mohsen said that direct death threats perpetrated by residents of Bab al-Tabbaneh over two-way radio transceiver (walkie talkies) at night pushed him to take up arms to defend his neighborhood.

“The ideology was to defend the area. There was no other agenda,” he said.

Testimonies from combatants from both neighborhoods also suggest a distrust towards the Lebanese state and its willingness to prevent the clashes from happening. Combatants on both sides claimed that the army could have stopped the clashes from the beginning instead of waiting until 2014 to implement the security plan. The Lebanese government's weak security response has also been observed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like HRW. In a 2013 report, the organization explained that official security operations had failed to stop the fighting or demilitarize affected neighborhoods, adding that law enforcement and security forces had made no sustained effort to disarm, arrest and prosecute the perpetrators of targeted attacks against the Alawite population in particular (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Lebanese army and authorities' inaction also raises the question of the potential role played by Lebanese political elites in the orchestration of the clashes. A Sunni combatant who said he fought against the Alawites because he believes they are infidels mentioned the involvement in the organization of the clashes of two opposing Lebanese intelligence agencies: the Internal

Security Forces' information branch called Far' al-Ma'lumat, which has ties to the country's Sunni community, and the Saudi-backed 14 March Alliance and the Army Intelligence Directorate called Moukhabarat-al Jaish, which is believed to be aligned with Damascus (IRIN News, 2012). According to him, in some cases, clashes would start after neighborhood leaders received a phone call from one of the two intelligence agencies asking them to start a round of clashes. The fighting would stop when the intelligence agencies placed a new call, asking to end the clashes. This information was corroborated by a journalist who covered the conflict.

A 2012 article published in the Lebanese newspaper *The Daily Star* also claimed that the Hezbollah supplied weapons to both Alawites and Sunnis in Tripoli, suggesting that its objective was to destabilize Lebanon – regardless of the winner – in order to draw attention away from the Syrian crisis (IRIN News, 2012). Similarly, a combatant related to a militia leader in Bab al-Tabbaneh claimed that clashes were sometimes provoked by the Syrian regime and its Lebanese proxy the ADP in order to distract from the situation in Syria. Finally, a resident of Jabal Mohsen who fought during the Lebanese Civil War but refused to participate in the 2008-2014 clashes pointed to the role of local elites in the organization of the clashes. He explained that the ADP told him he could be given weapons to start a round of clashes after a member of his family was shot by someone from Bab al-Tabbaneh during a wave of targeted attacks against Alawites in Tripoli. He claimed that the ADP tried to manipulate him into joining the clashes because of his influence in Jabal Mohsen and the many people from the neighborhood who would follow his lead. Most of the combatants who said they would not take part in new clashes explained that they realized they had been manipulated. “It was a big lie. Small people became big and big people became small. We lost our jobs, businesses and many young people died on both sides,” said a fighter from Jabal Mohsen.

Respect, Manhood and the Thrills: The Socio-Psychological Functions of Violence

In addition to material gains, sectarian grievances and self-defense, socio-psychological factors such as a search for recognition and respect as well as pride, manhood and thrill-seeking were recurrently cited motivations during the interviews. Although they were always coupled with greed and grievance-related motivations, these types of motivations seem to have played a key role in the younger combatants' decision to participate in the clashes.

In both Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh, young combatants not only expressed a strong sense of pride in having participated in the defense of their neighborhood, but also mentioned the importance of the status that fighting gave them within their community. A young fighter from Jabal Mohsen explained having formed a group of combatants who bought themselves uniforms to be recognized as fighters, highlighting the importance of being identified as a fighter and the desire of young combatants to redefine their status and identity within the community.

Several other fighters echoed this reality:

“The more you are shooting, the more they are clapping.” – A fighter from Jabal Mohsen

“If you don’t have weapons, you don’t have value in your community.” – A fighter from Jabal Mohsen

Combatants also often associated fighting with masculinity. A fighter from Jabal Mohsen said that combatants would try to rally men to the fight by shouting things such as: *“Those who have guns, come down to fight with us, don’t stay home like the women!”*

A few fighters in Tripoli admitted that some of them took up arms to impress girls or because it was their duty to fight as men. *“What should we have done? Stay home like a woman?”* two fighters asked. Signaling qualities such as physical strength, courage and leadership skills through displaying heroism or aggression towards members of out-groups, which have been identified as sexually-selected traits (Rusch, Leunissen & van Vugt, 2015), might have therefore acted as a motivation for younger combatants in Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh.

Several combatants also mentioned being perceived as “heroes” and as role models by their community. A combatant who mentioned that fighting made him feel happy and proud talked about the exhilaration he felt when he received encouragement from members of his community when he would come down from a rooftop where he had been fighting from.

“This pride would make you cross into Bab al-Tabbaneh and die for Jabal Mohsen,” he said.

“Many studies demonstrate that people who sacrifice for the group by engaging in costly altruistic activities do in fact achieve elevated social status, respect, and recognition as a result of their public selflessness” (McAndrew, 2016). Fighters also mentioned that being unarmed exposed them to bullying from members of their community, which suggests that violence was used by fighters to find self-worth and empowerment (Keen, 2002).

Finally, several fighters explained having taken part in the clashes for the thrills, which suggests that risk can be attractive instead of being a cost.

“Teenagers like chaos, whether they come from Jabal Mohsen or Bab al-Tabbaneh. They want to be part of it. They don’t really want to invade the other side, they just want to hold guns and shoot.” – A community leader in Jabal Mohsen

All thrill-seeking fighters interviewed started fighting in their teenage years. They also came from low socioeconomic classes, with very few accessible opportunities for adventures and excitement. Older fighters did not mention sensation-seeking as a motivation for their participation in the clashes. Since studies have shown that sensation-seeking can correlate with many risk-taking activities, participation in armed clashes could therefore be one of those accessible opportunities for young and impoverished men like the combatants in Tripoli (Nussio, 2017).

“The lack of work opportunities leads to unemployment. The only thing people can do to pass time and have fun is to fight. It was like a game. When there would be no fighting for

two weeks, they would be super bored and excited for a new round of clashes to start.” – A journalist who covered the clashes

“Fighting was fun. It was a new experience. It made me feel better, less bored.” – A fighter from Bab al-Tabbaneh

What Should We Take Away from These Findings?

These interviews show that people's motivations to take up arms can be more complex than they first appear and that the causes of a conflict can have deeper roots than what is portrayed in the media or by political elites. Like in the case of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh, underlying conditions such as poverty and a feeling of disenfranchisement can motivate people to participate in an armed conflict, even if this conflict expresses itself in sectarian terms. For this reason, tackling poverty issues as well as making sure that people are given opportunities and interesting life prospects is essential to prevent new clashes from happening in Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh. It would allow prevention of “bottom-up” dynamics where violence is embraced by “ordinary” people for specific short-term purposes driven by grievances linked to social and economic exclusion, fear, need or greed (Keen, 1998).

I also found, throughout my interviews, that the manipulation of combatants by local leaders and Lebanese political elites, which is often made possible thanks to poverty, played an essential role in the orchestration of the clashes. The conflict between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh is also characterized by a “top-down” form of economic violence where political leaders and entrepreneurs fuel and use violence to defend their interests, enrich themselves and send each other political messages. The country's political system is divided along religious lines and based on a system of patronage and clientelism. It harbors numerous ethnic and religious intercommunal tensions, which allows ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs to build upon these fears of insecurity and polarize society. Addressing this issue is complicated as it would require a complete reform of Lebanon's sectarian political system. However, recent protests in the country, where Lebanese from all social backgrounds, origins and religions came together to demand the removal of the country's political class, the end of sectarianism as well as social justice highlights the population's desire for change.

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