

# Lebanon's 'age of apology' for Civil War atrocities: A look at Assad Shaftari and Samir Geagea<sup>1</sup>

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***Abstract:** From 1975 to 1990, Lebanon experienced a civil war that devastated the country. Approximately 100,000 people died during the 15-year conflict, and thousands of others were left displaced, injured or missing. The end of the war did not lead to reconciliation between grieving parties, especially among the rival sectarian groups that had tormented one another. But in 2000, Lebanon entered into its own 'age of apology', a movement that had been widespread around the world in the 1990s but less prevalent in Lebanon until the new millennium. This article examines two of these apologies in detail, those of Assad Shaftari and Samir Geagea. Both men were prominent members of Lebanon's Christian community and their apologies led to a considerable amount of debate and controversy. By exploring Shaftari's and Geagea's prewar lives as well as the public response to their apologies, this article considers some of the ways Lebanon has sought to confront the violent legacy of the Civil War in the immediate postwar period.*

Both Assad Shaftari and Samir Geagea were leaders of Lebanon's Christian militias during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). They were also the highest-ranking members of the community to publicly apologise for their actions during the conflict. The context of their apologies, the events that led to them and the responses they garnered will form the basis of this article.

The Lebanese Civil War was much more than an interconfessional conflict for political domination. Along with Lebanon's main sectarian groups (which, put simply, were divided among the Muslim left and Christian

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<sup>1</sup> This article originally formed part of my MA thesis in History at the University of Melbourne (2016). The thesis was titled 'Feeling Sorry? An Examination of Apologies Given for Civil War Atrocities in Lebanon (1975–2014)'.

right), it involved various geopolitical players in the region and ‘a large number of internal and external state and non-state actors, notably the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organisation], Lebanon’s Palestinian population, Syria, Israel and, Iran’.<sup>2</sup> Foreign interference aside, the willingness and zeal with which many Lebanese citizens killed one another during the conflict reveals the deep ideological beliefs that were felt to be at stake.

The 1990 Taif Accord effectively ended the Lebanese Civil War and helped reconcile issues of Lebanon’s identity. Militias were to be disbanded and Lebanon was to be classified and viewed as Arab in identity—that is, more ideologically and culturally familiar to its Arab neighbours than the West. Additionally, any claims (predominately made by the Maronite Christian community) that the *true* Lebanese were descendants of Phoenicians were to be discredited. The 1991 General Amnesty Laws also prevented former militia members and leaders from being prosecuted for violent acts committed during the war. The amnesties were given without any preconditions: there was no information for an amnesty swap, which left questions regarding mass graves and missing persons unanswered. Instead, policies were created to allow former militia members to reintegrate into Lebanese society.<sup>3</sup> This allowed for a collective ‘state-sanctioned amnesia’ to occur in postwar Lebanon. Discussions concerning the war were to be avoided at all costs and became a taboo subject among Lebanon’s citizens.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time that Lebanon sought to forget the violence and trauma of the war, a new movement known as the ‘age of apology’, whereby governments and leaders from around the world began making efforts to atone for past atrocities, was in full swing. Karen Grainer, Louise Mullany and Sandra Harris have identified a number of significant apologies in the late twentieth century, including Bill Clinton’s apology for the US’s

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2 David C Gordon, *Lebanon: The Fragmented Nation* (London: Hoover Institution Press, 1980), 234; Farid El Khazen, ‘Ending Conflict in Wartime Lebanon: Sovereignty and Power, 1976–1988’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 40 (2004), 65: doi.org/10.1080/00263200412331301897; Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970–1985*, 2nd edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 9–10.

3 Dima de Clerck, ‘Ex-Militia Fighters in Post-War Lebanon’, *Accord Magazine* 24 (2012), 24–26, accessed at [www.c-r.org/downloads/Accord24\\_ExMilitiaFighters.pdf](http://www.c-r.org/downloads/Accord24_ExMilitiaFighters.pdf); Lynn Maalouf, Habib Nassar and Marieke Wierda, ‘Early Reflections on Local Perceptions, Legitimacy and Legacy of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon’, *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 5 (2007), 1070.

4 Oren Barak, “Don’t Mention the War?” The Politics of Remembrance and Forgetfulness in Postwar Lebanon’, *Middle East Journal* 61 (2007), 50–53: doi.org/10.3751/61.1.13; Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 71: doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511676598.

involvement in the slave trade, the British Queen's apology for the seizure of Maori land by the British Government and Tony Blair's apology for the British role in the Irish potato famine.<sup>5</sup> Australia's apology to the Stolen Generation is another recent example.

Between 2000 and 2008 several public apologies also occurred in Lebanon. Two came from former militia members and leaders—Assad Shaftari and Samir Geagea—and sought to make amends for the crimes they had committed during the Civil War. As discussed below, the apologies were not only deeply remorseful, but also politically strategic, bound up in contemporary Lebanese politics.

Shaftari's and Geagea's apologies provoked a wide range of responses in Lebanon, from debate and analysis to applause and condemnation. The debate and commentary that the apologies ignited also reveal an important change in the way many Lebanese were relating to their country's past: gone were the days of amnesia and silence—people were now remembering and publicly acknowledging the war and its aftermath. The fact that these men were (and in Geagea's case remain) members of Lebanon's Christian political elite is also significant: it demonstrates how powerful individuals were using public apologies to help maintain their status and legitimacy in postwar Lebanon.

Before examining the public responses to the two apologies, I will first provide an overview of Shaftari's and Geagea's prewar lives, as well as the actions undertaken by the pair during the Civil War period. I will then explore the two apologies in detail, along with the responses they ignited in the press. Thus, this article aims to trace *who* these men were, *what* they felt they had to apologise for and *how* their apologies were received by the media. It will also consider how the discourse surrounding the Civil War changed in Lebanon during the early 2000s.

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5 Karen Grainer, Louise Mullany and Sandra Harris, 'The Pragmatics of Political Apologies', *Discourse & Society* 17 (2006), 716.

## Assad Shaftari: The first to apologise

Assad Shaftari apologised to the Lebanese public on 10 August 2000. He released his apology as an open letter via *An-Nahar*—a newspaper sometimes regarded as Lebanon’s version of *The New York Times*.<sup>6</sup> It was, and still is, Lebanon’s best-selling newspaper. The paper is also known for its controversial commentary, especially concerning Syrian involvement in Lebanese politics. For these reasons, it is little wonder why *An-Nahar* was chosen by Shaftari to circulate his statement of remorse.<sup>7</sup> Concise and straightforward, the apology outlined Shaftari’s regrets of having caused, either directly or indirectly, the deaths of Lebanese citizens and for the hatred he had expressed towards Lebanon’s Muslim population:

This is something I have wanted to do for a long time, for more than ten years in fact. I couldn’t pluck up enough courage, as I was afraid of being treated as mad or naïve. Now I’d like to apologise to all those people I executed or who were my victims, whether they were aware of it or not, or whether I knew or didn’t know them. No matter whether these acts were committed personally or by proxy.<sup>8</sup>

Shaftari acknowledged the tense political climate Lebanon had experienced after the Civil War years and, in explaining his long hesitation over apologising, recognised the continuing struggle that was occurring in Lebanon—a struggle between remembering and forgetting. Moreover, although the apology was designed to highlight Shaftari’s regret, it also included a statement of forgiveness to his former enemies who had also committed crimes during the Civil War period:

I’d like to say that I’ve long since forgiven those who personally harmed me or my family and friends, directly or indirectly, during the ‘dirty’ civil war.<sup>9</sup>

The apology ended with the hope that ‘souls will be cleansed of hatred, grudges, and past sorrows, thus bringing about a genuine reconciliation of ourselves before we seek reconciliation with others’.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Michael Young, ‘The Politics of Saying “I’m Sorry”’, *Daily Star*, 21 February 2000, accessed at [www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2000/Feb-21/104715-the-politics-of-saying-im-sorry.ashx](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2000/Feb-21/104715-the-politics-of-saying-im-sorry.ashx).

7 Charles Glass, ‘The Lord of No Man’s Land: A Guided Tour through Lebanon’s Ceaseless War’, *Harper’s Magazine*, 1 March 2007, accessed at [www.charlesglass.net/the-lord-of-no-mans-land-a-guided-tour-through-lebanons-cessless-war/](http://www.charlesglass.net/the-lord-of-no-mans-land-a-guided-tour-through-lebanons-cessless-war/).

8 Rachel McCarthy, ‘After the Lebanese Civil War, An Apology’, *The Story*, 26 September 2013, accessed at [www.thestory.org/stories/2013-09/after-lebanese-civil-war-apology](http://www.thestory.org/stories/2013-09/after-lebanese-civil-war-apology).

9 McCarthy, ‘After the Lebanese Civil War, An Apology’.

10 McCarthy, ‘After the Lebanese Civil War, An Apology’.

In many ways, it is remarkable that such a man should have been responsible for this letter of apology. Born into a French-speaking home in Beirut's Christian suburb of Gemmayze, Shaftari's recollections of his upbringing reveal a sheltered childhood. He lived in a 'sterilised virtual reality' where his experiences and acquaintances were moulded by what was considered acceptable for a young Christian man of the time.<sup>11</sup> Interaction with Lebanon's Muslim population was limited and anti-Islam sentiments were widespread.<sup>12</sup> In one interview, Shaftari commented on his family's racism towards Lebanon's Muslim population, recalling that they discussed 'bad things in general and the fact that we [Christians] were better than them [Muslims]'.<sup>13</sup>

In an interview with Australian radio presenter Rachel Kohn, Shaftari spoke further about the circumstances of his childhood:

I was brought up in the Christian suburbs, and I got my education in a Christian school, then at the Jesuit University, also Christian. This is where I started meeting some Muslims, but these Muslims were Christianised. They were nice people, they had our culture, of course, and they were quite different from those I didn't know, which were on the other side, meaning those Muslims we didn't know. I only knew the Muslims who were with me at school or at the University, who were more Christianised, if you like, and more acceptable by my society or my environment.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that conversion constituted civilisation, that Muslims needed to behave like Christians before they could be considered pleasant and civilised, was a prevailing view held by many Christian Lebanese at this time. In order for Muslims to be 'acceptable', they had to possess traits that Christians could relate to. The historian Jumana Bayeh has observed that the reluctance of Lebanese Christians to embrace their Muslim counterparts stemmed from a perpetual fear that Muslims 'pose a threat to their existence'.<sup>15</sup> Lebanon had to exist as a Christian safe haven in order

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11 Ryan Lucas, 'In Lebanon, a War Apology Remains a Rare Light', *Times of Israel*, 7 November 2013, accessed at [www.timesofisrael.com/in-lebanon-a-war-apology-remains-a-rare-light/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/in-lebanon-a-war-apology-remains-a-rare-light/); Rachel Kohn, 'What Does It Take to Be Friends?' *ABC News*, 27 April 2013, accessed at [www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/spiritofthings/what-does-it-take-to-be-friends/3540710#transcript](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/spiritofthings/what-does-it-take-to-be-friends/3540710#transcript).

12 Lucas, 'In Lebanon, a War Apology Remains a Rare Light'; Kohn, 'What Does It Take to Be Friends?'

13 Lucas, 'In Lebanon, a War Apology Remains a Rare Light'.

14 Kohn, 'What Does It Take to Be Friends?'

15 Jumana Bayeh, *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 82.

to ensure Christian survival in the region; it was not beneficial for them to align themselves with Muslims—to do so would risk being marginalised from their own communities.<sup>16</sup>

It is from this upbringing that Shaftari developed his patriotic and conservative political affiliations. He was educated to believe that Lebanon should be a Christian and pro-Western state.<sup>17</sup> Lebanon's political troubles were his chance to display his patriotism and defend his homeland. Shaftari joined the Phalange Party (Lebanon's key Christian-right party) in 1974, a year before the Lebanese Civil War began.<sup>18</sup> He was a fourth-year engineering student at the time. After receiving artillery and infantry training, he joined the Phalange telecommunications unit and would eventually work his way to second-in-command of the Christian intelligence unit, serving as a deputy to Elie Hobeika, later known for his role in the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre.<sup>19</sup> 'My task was to decide the fate of all those rounded up at checkpoints', remembered Shaftari, 'whether someone should be spared, exchanged, or killed. By now a human being was little more than a product to me'.<sup>20</sup>

Shaftari completed these tasks ruthlessly and saw it as his Christian duty to do so. But he did not only commit acts of violence towards others, he also became a target himself. In December 1986, Shaftari narrowly escaped an assassination attempt when his car came under attack by rocket fire. Fifty gunmen were thought to have taken part in the attack.<sup>21</sup> Although the perpetrators were not found, many assumed that Shaftari was attacked by his fellow Christians due to his advocacy of the 1985 Tripartite Accord, an agreement that called for a greater Syrian presence in Lebanon in order to help curb further sectarian violence. Shaftari became a target due to his promotion of the agreement and eventually had to relocate from Beirut to the Christian suburb of Zahle to escape the intra-Christian squabbles.<sup>22</sup>

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16 Bayeh, *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora*, 83.

17 Bayeh, *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora*, 83.

18 Lucas, 'In Lebanon, a War Apology Remains a Rare Light'.

19 Lucas, 'In Lebanon, a War Apology Remains a Rare Light'.

20 McCathy, 'After the Lebanese Civil War, An Apology'.

21 'A Christian Leader Survives Ambush in Lebanon', *New York Times*, 1 January 1986, accessed at [www.nytimes.com/1986/01/01/world/a-christian-leader-survives-ambush-in-lebanon.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/01/world/a-christian-leader-survives-ambush-in-lebanon.html).

22 Lucas, 'In Lebanon, a War Apology Remains a Rare Light'; Taku Osoegawa, *Syria and Lebanon: International Relations and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 84.

It was during Shaftari's time in Zahle (1985 to the mid-1990s)—a predominantly Christian town located in Lebanon's Bekka Valley—that he transformed from warlord to advocate.<sup>23</sup> Shaftari experienced major opposition when he moved with his family as the town inhabitants, like many other Maronite Christians, disapproved of his participation in the Tripartite Agreement.<sup>24</sup>

Shaftari went on to chronicle his experiences during a discussion about the Civil War in Beirut. The discussion was organised by Nada Sehnaoui, an artist who, in 2008, installed 600 toilet seats in downtown Beirut in memory of the 15-year-long conflict. The toilet seats symbolised a time when people used to hide in their bathrooms in order to escape bombings and snipers.<sup>25</sup>

At the opening of the installation, Shaftari was invited to discuss his Civil War experiences. In his words: 'We were rejected by the community and my wife said she felt what it was like to be Palestinian for the first time in her life'.<sup>26</sup> Shaftari went on to describe how his wife, Mary, felt the gaze of hatred on her, similar to that which Palestinians (and other Muslims) felt from Christian militias. Looking for a way to escape from the hatred, Shaftari's wife stumbled upon a group named Moral Rearmament (now called Initiatives of Change). Initiatives of Change is a non-government organisation (NGO) that aims to foster moral change through spiritual growth.<sup>27</sup> Members state that 'an honest look at one's own motives and behavior is often the start of personal transformation'.<sup>28</sup> Mary eventually began attending meetings and went on to encourage her husband to attend.

23 Osoegawa, *Syria and Lebanon*, 84.

24 Osoegawa, *Syria and Lebanon*, 84.

25 See Nada Sehnaoui's website for details regarding her exhibition: Nada Sehnaoui, 'Haven't 15 Years of Hiding in the Toilets Been Enough?', *Nada Sehnaoui*, accessed at [www.nadasehnaoui.com/installations7.html](http://www.nadasehnaoui.com/installations7.html).

26 Sehnaoui, 'Haven't 15 Years of Hiding in the Toilets Been Enough?'

27 Sehnaoui has also included a link to Shaftari's testimony on her YouTube page. See 'Haven't Fifteen Years of Hiding under Toilet Seats Been Enough?', YouTube video, 34:44, posted by 'Nada Sehnaoui', 10 April 2013, accessed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuB9hXl3zFo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuB9hXl3zFo).

28 This statement was located under the 'Approach' section of the organisation's website: 'Approach', *Initiatives of Change*, accessed at [au.iofc.org/approach](http://au.iofc.org/approach).

My wife went to a few meetings and she was the one who encouraged me to go with her, saying these are good people. When I asked her what they talk about she said they talk about peace and change. I felt there must be a catch to it. I asked her to see who was their leader and who they were getting funding from.<sup>29</sup>

Shaftari was suspicious of the group's motives. In his eyes, the idea of promoting peace in Lebanon was impossible due to the brutal civil conflict. He began attending meetings to try and grasp the organisation's ideas. Gradually, members started asking Shaftari questions regarding his reflections on the past and, in a moment akin to an epiphany, he had a sudden realisation that he was 'killing in the name of a religion that preached love and only love. Christianity does not preach anything else'.<sup>30</sup> Shaftari expanded on the role religion played in his transformation when he spoke with Rachel Kohn. When asked what made him apologise for his actions during the Civil War, Shaftari replied: 'Mainly putting God back again, the real God, my real Christianity back again into practice'.<sup>31</sup>

According to Shaftari, it was his reformed faith that helped him apologise. His apology was a form of atonement for his sins, a way of absolving himself from his past. It was also a way to make him become a true Christian. If Christianity was a religion of love, what kind of love had he preached? What kind of tolerance had he shown?

Shaftari's apology would provoke a wide range of responses from the public. On the one hand there were threats against Shaftari and his family from Christians (predominantly Maronite) who did not appreciate him apologising for his role in the conflict. To apologise was not only equivalent to stating that the Christians' actions were wrong, but it suggested that they were in some way to *blame* for the conflict. Indeed, a vast majority of the Maronite community still sees Shaftari as a traitor, a paranoid and weak man who 'turned against his own people'.<sup>32</sup> The threats that have continued since Shaftari's apology have been so serious that his son has repeatedly requested that his father stop his work due to the torment he receives from his peers. Shaftari has not given specific details about the threats made against him and his family so it is not exactly clear what form they have taken or who has made them.

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29 Sehnaoui, [Video] 'Haven't 15 Years of Toilet Seats Been Enough?'; Sonja Hegasy, 'Boukhari and Shaftari: Memory Confessions of two Arab Perpetrators', *Working Papers* 12 (2014), 11.

30 Kohn, 'What Does It Take to Be Friends?'

31 Kohn, 'What Does It Take to Be Friends?'

32 Hegasy, 'Boukhari and Shaftari', 9.

Shaftari's wife (who first introduced him to the Initiatives of Change organisation) has also criticised her husband for continually apologising for, and discussing, the past. In fact, Shaftari has become a *persona non grata*, and his son is facing the consequences of his father's actions by being ostracised from his friends and community.<sup>33</sup> Notably, Shaftari's son appears to be concerned about how his *Christian* friends perceive him, rather than standing alongside his father in promoting interreligious tolerance.

Shaftari's apology has also been discussed on Lebanese television programs with commentators such as Charles Jabbour criticising him for his actions. Jabbour was disappointed with Shaftari for not using his apology to attract people towards what he felt are important political causes.

You give an apology once, not twice. If you give an apology, the other side must accept it. It is an injustice to the people you are representing if you keep apologising and people do not accept it. You cannot apologise without looking to the future. If Shaftari wants to prevent another war from occurring, then he should align himself with people that seek to rid Lebanon of armed militias and that are seeking to unite against Hezbollah.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond criticising Shaftari for his lack of involvement in modern Lebanese politics, Jabbour condemned him for suggesting that Christian militias acted with brute force rather than in self-defence.

Michael Young, a *Daily Star* columnist, praised Shaftari for his apology, but warned that 'a legion of Shaftaris could drag Lebanon down irreparably'.<sup>35</sup> Digging deep into Lebanon's old wounds could unleash feelings and beliefs that would be irreconcilable and only lead to further conflict in the future; some things are best left alone.

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33 Shaftari and his wife chronicled their experiences at a press conference for the Film Layali Bala Noom in 2012. It was at the conference where Shaftari's wife would defend her husband's actions. The film's YouTube page includes a video of the conference in two parts. For part 1, see 'Conference Press Part 1', YouTube video, 21:33, posted by 'Layalibalanoom', 24 October 2013, accessed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFk0uKtXxvM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFk0uKtXxvM); for part 2, see 'Conference Press Part 2', YouTube video, 27:05, posted by 'Layalibalanoom', 24 October 2013, accessed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxR2qoztlyY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxR2qoztlyY).

34 From a performance televised by MTV News Lebanon on Bi Mawdouiyeh.

35 Young, 'The Politics of Saying "I'm Sorry"'.

Families and friends seeking to locate Lebanon's missing persons have also criticised Shaftari. Still an active member of the Maronite community, Shaftari has not provided substantial information regarding the whereabouts of suspected mass graves and he has been accused of protecting his fellow Christian militia leaders.<sup>36</sup> Shaftari has stated that he does not wish to disclose any information until a witness protection program is established to ensure his safety. 'Personally, I have a lot of information that I won't disclose before such a mechanism is created', said Shaftari in 2010.<sup>37</sup> These are all issues that have fuelled criticism.

Yet there has also been support for the apology. Shaftari claims that several of his fellow Christians (whom he does not name) have approached him stating that they too regret the things they did during the war, claiming that 'We cannot say them [apologies] the way you did. And you are speaking something that we would like to say, but we cannot'.<sup>38</sup> Shaftari also claims that many in Lebanon's Muslim community have been supportive of his apology:

I felt that they were eager a long time ago to have a good Christian fellow citizen. And they were not able to have him because we were too fanatic.<sup>39</sup>

Once again, Shaftari does not provide specific names of those members of the Muslim community who have praised him, making it difficult to decipher the actual impact of his words in Lebanon. There are outspoken Lebanese citizens who vocally support Shaftari, but they are mainly members of Lebanon's intelligentsia.

Some have seen Shaftari as a source of inspiration and he has been invited by artists, NGOs and filmmakers to take part in their exhibitions and discussions. His participation in Nada Sehnaoui's 2008 exhibition is an example of this, as is his participation in a film *Layali Bala Nom* (which translates to *Sleepless Nights* from Arabic). The film chronicles the interaction between Shaftari and a woman named Maryam Saiidi, the mother of a missing communist fighter who disappeared in 1982, and explores whether forgiveness and redemption are possible in Lebanon

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36 Sophie Chamas, 'The Other "Other": Reflections on Intra-Arab Cinema', *Al Jazeera*, 29 January 2013, accessed at [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/2013128144515648702.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/2013128144515648702.html).

37 Wassim Mroueh, 'Families of War-Time Missing Urge Action', *Daily Star*, 13 April 2010, accessed at [www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2010/Apr-13/58101-families-of-war-time-missing-urge-action.ashx](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2010/Apr-13/58101-families-of-war-time-missing-urge-action.ashx).

38 Kohn, 'What Does It Take to Be Friends?'

39 Lucas, 'In Lebanon, a War Apology Remains a Rare Light'.

after the war.<sup>40</sup> Shaftari's participation in these public events and forums has allowed him to establish new platforms to voice his regret and seek atonement for his sins.

Hence, Shaftari's apology has allowed him transform his faith, once the justification for his violence, into the force behind his advocacy for reconciliation and interreligious peace. Shaftari's seemingly unending requiem for the lives he destroyed even suggests a need to reformulate his identity from ruthless killer to a 'true' Christian who preaches love and tolerance. Although he cannot change the past, Shaftari can compose a narrative of his experience that allows him to be at peace with himself and his God, inspiring others along the way. In his words: 'We really feel that we can help at least one soul to change, and this might be enough to create a chain of change'.<sup>41</sup> This desire for personal growth is something that resonated with another well-known Lebanese politician, Samir Geagea.

## Samir Geagea: The unlikely apologist

Like Shaftari, Samir Geagea inspires both admiration and contempt. For some, Geagea is a Christian hero, a man whose ruthlessness during the war was a demonstration of his deep desire to cleanse Lebanon of evil. To others, Geagea is a war criminal, a symbol of Lebanon's dark and troubled past, as well as its inability to move forward as a unified nation. Notably, Geagea was the only principal warlord to be jailed for his crimes and the only key politician to apologise for his role in the Civil War. Other notable militia leaders (such as Amin Gemayal, Michel Aoun and Walid Jumblatt) have refrained from apologising, and have not been subjected to such intense scrutiny as Geagea. Controversy seems to stalk the notorious politician, who has continued to be a prevalent figure in Lebanon's political scene for over 30 years.

Like Shaftari, Samir Geagea was raised in a Christian suburb of Beirut called Ain el-Rummanah, his family originating from Bsharri (a town located in Northern Lebanon). Geagea eventually went on to study

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40 Maryam Saiidi is a representative of the large number of families who are yet to discover the whereabouts of their missing loved ones. She confronts Shaftari in the film. The film was released in 2012 and was written and produced by Nizar Hassan.

41 Kohn, 'What Does It Take to Be Friends?'

medicine at the University of Beirut, but his studies were cut short when he joined the Phalange Party in 1975, the year the Lebanese Civil War began.<sup>42</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s, Geagea rose through the ranks of the Christian forces and became a trusted lieutenant to its commander, Bashir Gemayel (the notoriously violent leader of the Phalange militia).<sup>43</sup> By the mid-1980s, Geagea had been anointed as leader of the Lebanese Forces militia, an offshoot of the Phalange.<sup>44</sup> Over the 15-year period of the Civil War, Geagea garnered a reputation for his 'no-holds-barred killing'.<sup>45</sup> For example, it was Geagea who was responsible for commanding the brutal Ehden Massacre where Tony Frangieh (the son of Christian rival, Suleiman Frangieh) and his family were executed at the hands of the Lebanese Forces.<sup>46</sup> Geagea also orchestrated a coup against his once ally, Elie Hobeika (Assad Shaftari's superior), after the Tripartite Agreement of 1986, and fought a gruesome battle with Michel Aoun after the latter refused to accept the terms of Lebanon's Taif Agreement.<sup>47</sup> Geagea has also been associated with some of Lebanon's most notorious Civil War-era atrocities, including the 1987 bombing of a military helicopter that killed the pro-Syrian prime minister Rashid Karami and the slaying of Danny Chamoun, a prominent Christian politician and militia leader. Geagea's past was tumultuous and violent, and unlike the other militia leaders, he would not escape it so easily.

Although Lebanon's amnesty laws protected warlords and militia leaders from prosecution for crimes committed during the Civil War, Geagea was held accountable for his crimes during the conflict. Postwar Lebanon saw a strong Syrian presence in the country and Geagea consequently became a target because of his anti-Syrian sentiments. The political scientist Joseph A Kechichian reports on how Syrian operatives, who had been 'under

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42 This information is provided by Samir Geagea's website, see [www.samirgeagea.info](http://www.samirgeagea.info).

43 Joseph A Kechichian, 'Is Samir Geagea the Next President of Lebanon?', *Gulfnews*, 4 April 2014, accessed at [gulfnews.com/news/mena/lebanon/is-samir-geagea-the-next-president-of-lebanon-1.1314397](http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/lebanon/is-samir-geagea-the-next-president-of-lebanon-1.1314397); Borzou Daragahi, 'An Ex-Warlord's Act of Contrition', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 2008, accessed at [articles.latimes.com/2008/dec/15/world/fg-warlord15](http://articles.latimes.com/2008/dec/15/world/fg-warlord15).

44 Hussain Abdul-Hussain, 'Lebanon's Samir Geagea: A Maverick', *Huffington Post*, 6 September 2010, accessed at [www.huffingtonpost.com/hussain-abdullhussain/lebanons-samir-geagea-a-m\\_b\\_530976.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hussain-abdullhussain/lebanons-samir-geagea-a-m_b_530976.html).

45 Daragahi, 'An Ex-Warlord's Act of Contrition'.

46 Kechichian, 'Is Samir Geagea the Next President of Lebanon?'.

47 Mordechai Nisan, *Politics and War in Lebanon: Unravelling the Enigma* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 81.

Geagea's attack during the Civil War years' would eventually 'accuse Geagea of authorizing the February 27, 1994 bombing at the Church of Sayyidet Al Najat (Our Lady of Deliverance)'.<sup>48</sup> Nine worshippers were killed and dozens were left injured after the attack. Facing pressure from Syria, Lebanese authorities arrested Geagea on 21 April 1994.

Although he was later acquitted for the bombing of Sayyidet Al Najat, Geagea received four life sentences for murder. Geagea's involvement in the suspected murders of Rashid Karami and Dany Chamoun were used as examples of his brutality during his trial. Geagea was imprisoned in solitary confinement for 11 years. His cell was located at the Lebanese Ministry of Defence in Yarze and only family members were permitted to visit him. No political discussions were permitted during their meetings.<sup>49</sup>

Following the death of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, thousands marched in the streets of Beirut to protest against the Syrian presence in Lebanon. These protests arose because of the suspicion that Syria had orchestrated the murder of Hariri, who had been a vocal opponent of Syrian interference in Lebanon's affairs. The Syrian army eventually withdraw from Lebanon in 2005—the entire anti-Syrian movement is known as the Cedar Revolution and is the political event that preceded Geagea's re-entry into Lebanese society.<sup>50</sup>

Alongside calling for Syria to leave Lebanon, protesters began demanding Geagea's release. The protests were also supported and attended by Geagea's former enemies. For example, speaking on behalf of the left-wing Progressive Socialist Party, Akram Chehayeb called for the release of Geagea, describing it as a national necessity. 'Releasing Geagea is important for the whole country because it will complete national reconciliation, and reassert the Lebanese people's will to hold on to their freedom and coexistence'.<sup>51</sup> These calls were heard and the Lebanese Parliament pardoned Geagea and released him from prison in July 2005.<sup>52</sup> Upon his release, Geagea's wife, Strida Geagea, made the following statement:

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48 Kechichian, 'Is Samir Geagea the Next President of Lebanon?'

49 Kechichian, 'Is Samir Geagea the Next President of Lebanon?'

50 Rory McCarthy, 'Lebanon's Cedar Revolution Withers', *Guardian*, 22 October 2005, accessed at [www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/22/syria.lebanon](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/22/syria.lebanon).

51 Majdoline Hatoum, 'Thousands Call for Geagea's Release', *Daily Star*, 5 May 2005, accessed at [www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2005/May-05/5275-thousands-call-for-geageas-release.ashx](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2005/May-05/5275-thousands-call-for-geageas-release.ashx).

52 Kechichian, 'Is Samir Geagea the Next President of Lebanon?'

‘This national unanimity that happened today indicates the Lebanese people’s will to turn the page of the war once and for all and to head toward the future’.<sup>53</sup>

Geagea’s release was viewed by his supporters, and some of his former enemies, as being a crucial step in Lebanon’s path towards reconciliation. His supporters described him as a ‘Nelson Mandela–like character’, a man who had been *wrongfully* imprisoned and deserved justice.<sup>54</sup>

Shortly after his release from prison, Geagea returned to Lebanese politics and joined Lebanon’s March 14 Alliance, so named after those who instigated the Cedar Revolution, and demanded the end of Syrian political interference in Lebanon in 2005.<sup>55</sup> This political faction has united former Civil War enemies, namely former left-leaning members of the Phalange Party and the right-wing Kataeb party. The Alliance has grown to become Lebanon’s leading opposition against Hezbollah, and Geagea has become a key spokesperson and even a candidate for the country’s presidency.<sup>56</sup>

The former warlord also proclaims to be a leading advocate of peace and democracy, a position that has not been easy for many Lebanese to accept.<sup>57</sup> In 2005, members of Lebanon’s Shia and Maronite communities threw rocks and sticks at one another when the former decided to protest against Geagea’s release.<sup>58</sup> Many in the Shia community continually protested against the amnesty. For them, Geagea was a war criminal whose militia had killed thousands.<sup>59</sup> While some saw his release as a sign that Lebanon was moving on from its past, others refused to accept Geagea’s return into Lebanese society and have maintained a level of scepticism

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53 ‘Beirut Clashes Follow Geagea Amnesty’, *Al Jazeera*, 18 July 2005, accessed at [www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/07/2008410134835681483.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/07/2008410134835681483.html).

54 Daragahi, ‘An Ex-Warlord’s Act of Contrition’.

55 Hussein Dakroub, ‘Rival Camps Blamed for Political, Sectarian Rifts’, *Daily Star*, 13 March 2015, accessed at [www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Mar-13/290617-rival-camps-blamed-for-political-sectarian-rifts.ashx](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Mar-13/290617-rival-camps-blamed-for-political-sectarian-rifts.ashx).

56 Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, ‘Even without a President, Lebanon Seen Surviving Turmoil for Now’, *Yahoo News*, 2 November 2014, accessed at [news.yahoo.com/even-without-president-lebanon-seen-surviving-turmoil-now-122005503.html](http://news.yahoo.com/even-without-president-lebanon-seen-surviving-turmoil-now-122005503.html); ‘Mideast Conflicts Target Freedom Seekers, Not Christians: Geagea’, *Daily Star*, 30 May 2015, accessed at [www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Mar-30/292645-mideast-conflicts-target-freedom-seekers-not-christians-geagea.ashx](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Mar-30/292645-mideast-conflicts-target-freedom-seekers-not-christians-geagea.ashx).

57 Mohammad I Aslam, ‘Samir Geagea, the Last Relic of a Dirty War’, *International Policy Digest*, 29 September 2011, accessed at [www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2011/08/29/samir-geagea-the-last-relic-of-a-dirty-war/](http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2011/08/29/samir-geagea-the-last-relic-of-a-dirty-war/).

58 ‘Beirut Clashes Follow Geagea Amnesty’.

59 Nada Bakri, ‘Christians Struggle to Preserve Balance of Power’, *New York Times*, 9 November 2006, accessed at [www.nytimes.com/2006/11/09/world/middleeast/09lebanon.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/09/world/middleeast/09lebanon.html).

and mistrust. It is worth noting that Geagea has chosen to remain as head of the Lebanese Forces—one of the most violent of Lebanon's militias during the Civil War period.<sup>60</sup>

Geagea eventually acknowledged the suspicion that surrounded him. In September 2008, Geagea attended a memorial ceremony for Lebanese Forces members who died in the conflict. It was here, before an audience of thousands, that he apologised for the role his militia had played in the Lebanese Civil War:

I fully apologise for all the mistakes that we committed when we were carrying out our national duties during past civil war years [...] I ask God to forgive, and so I ask the people whom we hurt in the past. I want to tell those who are exploiting our past mistakes to stop doing so because only God can judge us.<sup>61</sup>

He went on to recognise the importance of Christian unity:

I call on the Christians who are against the Lebanese Forces or against me personally, to put Lebanon's interests ahead of personal interests [...] We can only save Lebanon when the people of Lebanon as a whole, and Christians in particular, unite over the historic principles of Christians in Lebanon.<sup>62</sup>

Although Geagea refers to the Lebanese Forces in his apology, it was presented as a personal statement of regret. And considering Geagea's former actions as a militia leader, his apology is significant.

Geagea attributes his transformation to a process of 'auto-psychoanalysis' that he undertook while in prison. During his 11 years in solitary confinement, Geagea 'devoured philosophy, psychology and religion, twice rereading the Koran and devouring translated works of mystic theologians'.<sup>63</sup> 'It's not as easy as it seems', said Geagea. 'This needs fasting all the time. It needs concentration. It needs meditation. Of course, it needs silence, and I had the silence because I was solitary'.<sup>64</sup> Geagea's new

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60 Daragahi, 'An Ex-Warlord's Act of Contrition'.

61 Hussein Abdullah, 'Geagea Apologises for LF's Wartime "Mistakes"', *Daily Star*, 22 September 2008, accessed at [www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/Sep-22/50570-geagea-apologizes-for-lfs-wartime-mistakes.ashx](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/Sep-22/50570-geagea-apologizes-for-lfs-wartime-mistakes.ashx).

62 Abdullah, 'Geagea Apologises for LF's Wartime "Mistakes"'.

63 Daragahi, 'An Ex-Warlord's Act of Contrition'.

64 Daragahi, 'An Ex-Warlord's Act of Contrition'.

knowledge was apparently the catalyst for his transition from warlord to peacemaker. In an interview with *Asharq al-Awsat*, Geagea expanded on why he felt that apologising was important:

Because we want to lay the foundations for a sincere, serious, and responsible policy toward the people. During the war there were decisions that were taken along the days—my days and the days of others—which were not correct; in fact, they were wrong [...] We ought to apologise for the negligence, mistakes, and things we committed, which were not proper, regardless of the behavior of others.<sup>65</sup>

Geagea recognised that mistakes had been made and that he had approved decisions that were ‘not correct’. Furthermore, when asked why he chose to apologise at the particular time he did, he gave the following response:

On a number of occasions, I talked about this issue, whether in media interviews or press interviews. However, I have noticed that not many people have ‘picked up’ the idea that was in the midst of other issues on which the light was more focused. Therefore, after four or five months of thinking, I decided to take this initiative within the context of a public occasion when all eyes would be focused on this speech, and in the presence of all media organs. I did not find any better occasion that [sic] the memorial mass of the martyrs of the Lebanese Forces, which is an annual occasion we have never stopped except under difficult and overwhelming circumstances. Thus, I set aside a special part for this.<sup>66</sup>

Geagea recognised the importance of making his apology heard which is why, as he claims, he waited for a public platform to express his remorse. But the decision to deliver his apology on the day he did raises several questions: Why did he choose to apologise on a day dedicated to martyrs of his militia? Surely if he were apologising to those touched by his violence, he would not have chosen such a controversial day?

The timing of Geagea’s apology and his subsequent comments raise suspicions regarding his motives. Like Shaftari, he has remained reluctant to offer details regarding the specific activities he orchestrated during the Civil War. Instead, he has tried to emphasise how *some* of his actions were necessary to save civilian lives. When asked again to list his crimes by *Daily Star* journalist Michael Young, he merely stated, ‘I will leave

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65 ‘Q and A with Lebanese Forces Chief, Samir Geagea’, *Asharq al-Awsat*, 8 October 2008, accessed at [eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/features/q-a-with-lebanese-forces-chief-samir-geagea](http://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/features/q-a-with-lebanese-forces-chief-samir-geagea).

66 ‘Q and A with Lebanese Forces Chief, Samir Geagea’.

that to history'.<sup>67</sup> Geagea has also claimed that he was simply carrying out his 'duties' in defence of Christianity and portrays himself as being a 'martyr of sorts', even going so far as to build a replica of his prison cell in his home.<sup>68</sup> In Young's view, 'he has sought to exploit his experiences for political reasons, to create a permanent exhibition highlighting his ordeal'.<sup>69</sup>

Geagea's apology and re-assimilation into Lebanon's political life has been compared to Shafiq. But there have been some who refuse to allow Geagea to forget his crimes and who reject his apology. *New York Times* journalist Borzou Daragahi argues that while Muslim rivals acknowledge Geagea's apology as an important speech, they are frustrated by the way Geagea continues to practice divisive politics, 'emphasizing Christian grievances and suffering, that could drag the country back into war'.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Geagea has made a concerted effort to preach for *Christian* causes and grievances. Unlike Shafiq, Geagea has not sought, at least not in public, to imagine himself in the position of his former Muslim foes.<sup>71</sup>

Geagea's efforts to highlight Christian grievances has not protected him entirely from criticisms within his own community. Former prime minister Omar Karami, whose brother died at the hands of a bomb supposedly planted by Geagea, described him as a 'murderer and criminal'.<sup>72</sup> 'Geagea's apology would do us no good as it will not bring back my slain brother', he said. 'We did not ask Geagea to apologise [...] We have always raised the slogan: we will not forgive and we will not forget'.<sup>73</sup> Karami also went on to say that the apology 'proved that Geagea is a killer, criminal and liar because he previously announced that the Syrian regime was responsible for all the crimes'.<sup>74</sup> Geagea has never confessed to killing Karami's brother; hence, Karami views the apology as an admission of guilt rather than

67 Daragahi, 'An Ex-Warlord's Act of Contrition'.

68 Daragahi, 'An Ex-Warlord's Act of Contrition'.

69 Michael Young, 'Samir Geagea and Guilt by Manipulation', *Daily Star*, 1 May 2014, accessed at [www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2014/May-01/254994-samir-geagea-and-guilt-by-manipulation.ashx](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2014/May-01/254994-samir-geagea-and-guilt-by-manipulation.ashx).

70 Daragahi, 'An Ex-Warlord's Act of Contrition'.

71 Young, 'Samir Geagea and Guilt by Manipulation'.

72 Young, 'Samir Geagea and Guilt by Manipulation'.

73 Young, 'Samir Geagea and Guilt by Manipulation'.

74 'Karami: Geagea's Apology Means Nothing, He Remains a Murderer and Criminal', *NOW Media*, 10 October 2008, accessed at [now.mmedia.me/lb/en/archive/karami\\_geageas\\_apology\\_means\\_nothing\\_he\\_remains\\_a\\_murderer\\_and\\_criminal](http://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/archive/karami_geageas_apology_means_nothing_he_remains_a_murderer_and_criminal).

a statement of regret. Karami would go on to accuse Geagea for using the apology to manipulate public opinion for electoral purposes—the ‘honorable’ people of Lebanon would not believe Geagea and his lies.<sup>75</sup>

Samir Frangieh offered a similar response, stating: ‘I am not in a hurry to offer him [Geagea] gifts or clear his slate’.<sup>76</sup> Due to the hatred still felt towards Geagea by many of his former foes, his political ambitions have also continuously been questioned and criticised.<sup>77</sup> Despite his unflinching commentary on Geagea’s actions, Young refutes these criticisms:

No one in the post-war political class is entitled to rebuke Geagea on the basis of high national principle. The postwar system was and is many things, but it certainly is not in even the remotest way principled.<sup>78</sup>

A frustrated Young also puts the question as to why ‘the single former militia leader who has actually spent time in prison, who has apologised for his actions’ is being ‘held up as a distillation of all the evils of the civil war?’<sup>79</sup> Why has Geagea come to be known as the personification of evil when his former colleagues and opposition have been exempt from such fierce criticism?

These criticisms and explanations regarding Geagea’s motives show just how complicated the issue of Civil War remembrance remains in Lebanon, especially when trying to understand the motives behind a significant act such as a public apology. Both apologies continue to be entangled in deeply personal and political realities.

Compared to Shaftari, the political motivations underpinning Geagea’s apology can be a little more easily identified. Geagea is a former warlord looking for political credibility in Lebanon.<sup>80</sup> His identity must be reconfigured in order for his current political objectives to flourish.<sup>81</sup> Yet, the wording and timing of Geagea’s apology helped foster a sense of doubt and illegitimacy. The decision to apologise on a day of remembrance for Lebanese Forces’ soldiers and his failure to offer specific details regarding the crimes he committed have not helped his cause. Yet Geagea publicly

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75 ‘Karami: Geagea’s Apology Means Nothing, He Remains a Murderer and Criminal’.

76 Karami Frangieh, ‘Question Value of Geagea’s Apology’, *Daily Star*, 22 October 2008.

77 ‘Rebuking Samir Geagea’, *NOW Media*, 25 October 2008, accessed at [now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/rebuking\\_samir\\_geagea1](http://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/rebuking_samir_geagea1) (site discontinued).

78 Young, ‘Samir Geagea and Guilt by Manipulation’.

79 Young, ‘Samir Geagea and Guilt by Manipulation’.

80 Young, ‘Samir Geagea and Guilt by Manipulation’; ‘Rebuking Samir Geagea’.

81 ‘Rebuking Samir Geagea’.

acknowledging his past wrongdoings is remarkable, revealing a powerful disruption of the silence that has otherwise surrounded the postwar lives of former Civil War leaders. The debate and discussions this apology ignited were considerable in amnesia-prone Lebanon.

## Conclusion

Both Assad Shaftari's and Samir Geagea's apologies ignited debate concerning Lebanon's Civil War era. They were not cast aside by Lebanese society, but acknowledged by the public, media outlets and government officials. Moreover, alongside Shaftari and Geagea, the PLO has also subsequently apologised for their participation in the Lebanese Civil War. Indeed, throughout the 2000s there were several instances where the war was discussed and public expressions of regret were offered by organisations and individuals.

Such instances reveal how Lebanon has begun moving away from the Civil War amnesia of the 1990s. But while these apologies are significant, many questions concerning the war remain unanswered, including the status of the country's 17,000 missing persons. Indeed, the Civil War period still remains a taboo topic among many Lebanese communities and the divisions that spurred the conflict have not been wholly reconciled.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, while these apologies do not demonstrate a complete transformation of Lebanon's views of the past, they are nonetheless significant in understanding the changing legacy and memorialisation of the Civil War.

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82 Changiz M Varzi, 'A Legacy of War in Beirut's Unknown Mass Graves', *Al Jazeera*, 31 December 2016, accessed at [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/11/legacy-war-lebanon-unknown-mass-graves-161102121218559.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/11/legacy-war-lebanon-unknown-mass-graves-161102121218559.html).

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