

Reviving the Left in Postwar Lebanon:

A Political History of *Al-Nahar's* Cultural Supplement *Al-Mulhaq*

INTRODUCTION

On March 14, 1992, the Lebanese newspaper *al-Nahar* resumed the publication of its cultural supplement *al-Mulhaq* after an eighteen-year hiatus. The Civil War had ended when Lebanese deputies approved the agreement negotiated in the Saudi city of Taif in 1989, and following an operation launched by the Syrian military on October 13, 1990 to topple General Michel Aoun,¹ the last political figure to reject the newly-formed government.

The two events marked the beginning of the nineties, a period of reconstruction and relative security in Lebanon, punctuated by a few security breaches and Israeli attacks, particularly in 1993 and 1996. The relative quiet on the security came along the placement of Lebanon under Syrian tutelage. The Syrian army retained its presence throughout Lebanese territories until 2005, when it withdrew following the demonstrations that erupted upon the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.²

This study charts the political history of *al-Mulhaq*, the cultural supplement of *al-Nahar* newspaper. As it revisits *al-Mulhaq's* transformations from 1992 to 2008, when writer and novelist Elias Khoury³ was editor-in-chief, the study examines a history that goes beyond *al-Mulhaq* itself and chronicles the obstacles and contradictions that accompanied the attempts to revive the Lebanese Left in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Before diving into *al-Mulhaq's* experience, three caveats:

First, this study does not claim to recount the only possible political history of the journal. Second, although *al-Mulhaq* made room for dissenting opinions, even among its

¹ Michel Aoun assumed the presidency of a military government when presidential elections were not held in 1988. He rejected the agreement to end the civil war approved by Lebanese parliamentarians in the Saudi city of Taif. When the Syrian army stormed the Baabda Presidential Palace and other Aoun strongholds, Aoun sought refuge in the French embassy and was then exiled to France. He returned to Lebanon after the withdrawal of the Syrian army in 2005.

² Rafik Hariri was prime minister of Lebanon between 1992 and 1998, and then between 2000 and 2004. He was assassinated in Beirut on February 14, 2005.

³ Elias Khoury is a Lebanese novelist and journalist. He left *al-Safir* newspaper in 1992 for *al-Nahar*, where he led the relaunch of the cultural supplement.

columnists, signaling its strength and influence, this study is mainly concerned with *al-Mulhaq*'s general orientation and its subsequent transformations, as articulated in its editorials and features, as well as the political and cultural battles it fought, as a means to trace the editorial line that connected them. Finally, no matter how enticing it is to write the political history of *al-Mulhaq*, the journal's experience was far richer than what a narrower focus on its political positions and transformations may reveal. As such, other aspects of *al-Mulhaq* are broached here only to trace their link with its political history.

POLITICAL OVERVIEW

After the Civil War ended, Lebanon remained under Syrian tutelage for fifteen years, although the Taif Agreement had stipulated the "redeployment" of Syrian forces two years after the ratification of the agreement.⁴ The Syrian regime held sway over Lebanon's foreign policy, as the peace process was launched at the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference following the second Gulf War. The Syrian regime also controlled Lebanon's domestic politics.

During the 1990s, Lebanon experienced two parallel paths led by Syria:

On the one hand, Rafik Hariri was given free rein to launch his economic project of rebuilding downtown Beirut, after property had been confiscated under eminent domain by Solidere, the real estate corporation. Hariri implemented a package of neoliberal reforms, through which he secured enormous loans, under the pretext of restoring Beirut's regional commercial role, and preparing it for the challenges of imminent peace with Israel.⁵

Most former militia leaders supported Hariri. They formed the majority of the ruling elite, after a General Amnesty Law⁶ was issued, allowing them to swap their fatigues with suits. And so, militia leaders became the pillars of the new political regime, relying on the leadership they have strengthened within their sects and the support they have

⁴ Text of the Taif Agreement (in Arabic): <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/LebaneseSystem/Documents/TaiifAgreementn.pdf>

Text of the Taif Agreement (in English):
https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_taiif_agreement_english_version_.pdf

⁵ After the second Gulf War, the US administration launched the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in October 1991.

⁶ Text of the General Amnesty Law (in Arabic): <http://www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/LawView.aspx?opt=view&LawID=185080>

garnered from the Syrian regime. On the other side of the political spectrum, Syria continued to support military resistance in south Lebanon, after restricting it to the operations of Hezbollah. This meant that, among Lebanese parties, only Hezbollah was allowed to retain its weapons. Meanwhile, Syria oversaw the restructuring of all Lebanese armed forces, namely the military and security apparatus.

The rise of Hariri and Hezbollah coincided with the toppling of the most powerful Christian leaders after the Taif Agreement reduced the privileges that Christian sects had acquired in state institutions. While General Michel Aoun and former President Amin Gemayel were exiled, the Lebanese Forces party was dissolved and its leader Samir Geagea imprisoned after he had been accused of masterminding the explosion at the Church of Our Lady of Deliverance in 1994—from which the judiciary later exonerated him. But the acquittal did not lead to his release from incarceration as he was subsequently charged for other war crimes.

PRESS OVERVIEW

In the early 1990s, the Lebanese press seemed saddled with the effects of the war. The freedom it had always extolled was gradually curtailed, and more red lines were drawn, lines that could not be crossed for security or financial reasons.

The Lebanese press slouched professionally as many journalists migrated, mainly to Gulf newspapers to escape the war and its professional and economic constraints. Many of those who remained “calcified” in their positions, unable to consider journalism outside the logic of warfare. Likewise, the dominance of security-related news as well as official party activities over newspaper headlines weakened the press’s diversity and creativity, which further alienated it from its readers.

Amid a general reluctance to deeply restructure newspapers, many outlets found a way out of the crisis by issuing supplements or adding thematic pages. Such editorial policies diversified newspaper content and attracted a younger generation of journalists. It also managed to break through political and professional red lines without infringing on the newspaper's general editorial line.

Al-Nahar, the leading Lebanese newspaper at the time, showcased its innovation and diversity in the publication of supplements such as *Huquq al-Nas* (People’s rights) that tackled everything concerning citizenship; *Nahar al-Shabab* (al-Nahar for youth) covered youth and students’ affairs and represented a trend in support of General Michel

Aoun within the newspaper; *Dalil al-Nahar* provided a guide to cinema and television; in addition to *al-Mulhaq*, the cultural supplement that reappeared after having been suspended at the beginning of the Civil War.

"WE BEGIN AGAIN"

In his first editorial, Elias Khoury defines the line of his new journalistic venture. He situates *al-Mulhaq* against the Taif Agreement that “constrains dreams”⁷ of a democratic non-sectarian state; against the Madrid Peace conference that would not allow “slaves to be more than slaves;”⁸ and against the “punctured memory”⁹ that was imposed on the city of Beirut.

In subsequent editorials, Khoury develops these three positions that became the pillars of *al-Mulhaq*'s politics. He situates the opposition to the peace agreement within the context of firm attachment to non-sectarian democracy. This democratic orientation, which Khoury calls “our main cause,” does not fall under the global post-Soviet trend that saw liberal democracy as the only issue worth fighting for. On the contrary, the desired Lebanese democracy is tied to standing up to the emerging world order. As he situates Lebanese politics in its wider Arab political context, Khoury considers the curtailment of democratic spaces in Lebanon as “an integral part of the establishment of the new world order in the region. The new world order, which began with the destruction of Iraq, will not take root until it has crushed the Palestinians and rendered Lebanon meaningless.”¹⁰

In addition to its democratic and anti-imperialist stance, *al-Mulhaq* was the most outspoken media platform opposing the Beirut reconstruction project. It based its criticism of the project on arguments pertaining to culture, namely to memory and architecture, rather than on a class-based critique of the economic policies adopted in the aftermath of the war—even though the bulldozer of amnesia is the same bulldozer that “has turned the children of war into the poor of peace.”¹¹

⁷ Elias Khoury, “The Question of Freedom,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 14, 1992.

⁸ Elias Khoury, “The Question of Freedom.”

⁹ Elias Khoury, “The Question of Freedom.”

¹⁰ Elias Khoury, “Assassinating Politics,” *Al-Mulhaq*, April 18, 1998.

¹¹ Elias Khoury, “Assassinating Politics.”

This was not an easy task. Many Lebanese intellectuals on the Left were bitterly disappointed by their militant experience. They had witnessed the disintegration of the class discourse as the conflict quickly turned into a sectarian war, in which their leftist parties were not without fault. Additionally, some intellectuals on the Left had begun to question the modernist project itself after the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979, while others had abandoned anti-colonialism in the aftermath of the *Naksa* in 1967.

Despite this collective sense of disenchantment, *al-Mulhaq* saw the end of the Civil War as a fitting moment to launch a new Left. Khoury resorted to a literary device to overcome the contradictions within the political foundations of *al-Mulhaq*, calling for abandoning any “congruence” between what is real and what is possible, between real Beirut and imagined Beirut. Khoury states: “We Begin Again”—without specifying whom “we” stood for—and went on to announce the beginning of his journalistic journey:

Once again, we shall be alone.

A sea, a city akin to a wrecked ship, and a journey to a destination unknown... We tell the ship that we will sail, where it sails. We tell her that we shall remain its faithful sailors despite the despair, bitterness and disappointment. On this journey, we only have our freedom, our screams, and our love.¹²

The new beginning was restricted, however, to leftist issues as they had been known in Lebanon before and during the war and was not concerned with the gender¹³ and sexuality¹⁴ discourse. With a few exceptions, male writers dominated *al-Mulhaq*, the focus of which remained on secularism, democracy, social justice, and anti-Israel.

A FLEETING CLASS MOMENT

In May 1992, or less than two months since the relaunch of *al-Mulhaq*, popular protests broke out across Lebanon against the collapse of the Lebanese currency. *Al-Mulhaq* commented on images of these demonstrations, saying that the hungry have taken to the

¹² Elias Khoury, “The Question of Freedom,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 14, 1992.

¹³ In one of his editorials, the Editor in Chief of *al-Mulhaq*, Elias Khoury, scoffed at “Gender studies that have invaded the cultural scenes in the Arab world, thanks to US funding”. See Elias Khoury, “Three Generals and a Woman”, *Al-Mulhaq*, January 30, 1999.

¹⁴ *Al-Mulhaq* had to wait more than six years after its publication to broach the issue of homosexuality in Lebanon by reporting on an investigation conducted by the French newspaper *Libération*. See “Homosexuals from Lebanon in *Libération*”. *Al-Mulhaq*, August 1, 1998.

streets to herald the revolution of the poor, before enthusiastically asserting that Lebanon's poor from North to South were proclaiming "the end of the sectarian war."¹⁵

The hastily declared victory of "class" over "sect" seemed to revive the dream of the Left that shattered by the Civil War when "muddied sectarianism"—as the leftist narrative went—triumphed over the class drivers of the war.

This class discourse, however, was quickly revised in the week following the protests. Optimism persisted about "the unity of the people" that represented "hunger for the revolution that was not achieved during the sectarian war."¹⁶ But the revolution was no longer confined to class, it had surpassed it towards the realm of "establishing a new homeland."¹⁷

Less than a month into the protests, optimism also faded about popular unity. The May 6 protests now expressed "anger and helplessness at once."¹⁸ A question arose that would occupy *al-Mulhaq* for a long time: How to build a Lebanese opposition? Which groups would handle this founding project? What leftist discourse would form the spine of such an opposition?

The events of May 6 provided an eloquent lesson about the difficulty of restoring an inclusive class discourse on the ruins of the Left's experience of the war. They also revealed that the currency collapse was largely the result of speculation aimed at toppling Omar Karami's government, paving the way for the arrival of the Lebanese-Saudi businessman Rafik Hariri at the helm of government, framed as the haloed savior from the financial collapse.

The discourse about class was therefore discarded in favor of a discourse that confronted Hariri's reconstruction project by upholding the notion of "memory" facing the allegorical "bulldozer." This discourse seemed more fitting for a literary supplement,

¹⁵ "May 6: The Hunger Revolution," *Al-Mulhaq*, May 9, 1992.

¹⁶ Elias Khoury, "The Hunger for Revolution," *Al-Mulhaq*, May 16, 1992.

¹⁷ *Al-Mulhaq* made room for criticism that opposed its general orientation. Facing such enthusiasm for a new revolution, some of *al-Mulhaq's* writers expressed their apprehension about the masses resorting to violence and rioting, and about the discourse praising revolution when there was a need to return to politics. See for example Abbas Baydoun, "Politics not revolution," *Al-Mulhaq*, May 16, 1992.

¹⁸ Elias Khoury, "Establishing the Opposition," *Al-Mulhaq*, May 30, 1992.

and the political battle took on a more intellectual trait, even if it could not be completely divorced from the economic consequences of the reconstruction project itself.

RISE OF THE DISCOURSE OF MEMORY

Al-Mulhaq had launched the battle for memory from the very beginning, even before Hariri ascended to power. It adopted “An Alternative Vision for the Reconstruction of Beirut,”¹⁹ and welcomed activists who advocated for a city center that preserves the city’s social fabric and constitutes a meeting place for all Lebanese. Engineers and architects decried the handover of downtown Beirut to a real estate corporation with broad sweeping powers that expropriated lands and rebuilt the center to suit the needs of international corporations at the expense of the city’s memory.

Alongside its criticism of the reconstruction project, *al-Mulhaq* became a platform that defended iconic monuments, such as the St. George Hotel, the Barakat Building, the Red House, and the governmental Serail. *Al-Mulhaq* considered their restoration, demolition, or neglect as yet another chapter of the bulldozer’s war on the city. And it was a war in every sense of the word, as Elias Khoury portrays it in an editorial that describes the scene at Martyrs’ Square, Beirut’s main square:

The roar of the bulldozers covers the faint whine rising from the stones blown apart by dynamite. The building buckles like a man shot in the spine, it bends over itself before collapsing loudly into the surrounding emptiness. Then comes a buzzing silence. Dust rises, covering faces and hands. The bulldozer straddles the rubble, and the soft moaning of things begins as they die.²⁰

This foundational editorial abounded with expressions and metaphors that deliberately likened reconstruction to war: “The war ends with war, or what is akin to war,”²¹ “the bulldozer of peace succeeds the bulldozer of war.”²² The scene of the city’s buildings collapsing is understood as another image for the Civil War’s fallen victims, and the reconstruction project is intended to appear in its true form, as a project of total annihilation, waging a wider war on collective memory.

¹⁹ “An Alternative Vision for the Reconstruction of Beirut,” *Al-Mulhaq*, May 2, 1992

²⁰ Elias Khoury, “The Bulldozers of Memory and the Ruins of the Future,” *Al-Mulhaq*, May 2, 1992.

²¹ Khoury, “The Bulldozers of Memory and the Ruins of the Future.”

²² Khoury, “The Bulldozers of Memory and the Ruins of the Future.”

It is important to highlight the global context in which the Lebanese discourse of memory developed in the early 1990s—the era that marked the end of the Cold War when conflict resolution prevailed based on concepts of transitional justice, memory, and reconciliation. Adapting the then-fashionable concept to a specifically Lebanese discourse, *al-Mulhaq* situated the reconstruction project within the context of “the new world order sweeping into Beirut on the back of a bulldozer.”²³

Al-Mulhaq managed to hit three birds with one stone: It revitalized the leftist discourse with a new concept that neither delves into the context of the Civil War, nor into the complex relationship between sect and class; it attracted new audiences to this discourse from outside the ranks of the Left; and it tied the criticism of the neoliberal project to anti-imperialism, as it had done when it predicated the democratic project on the imperative of confronting the new world order.²⁴

Elias Khoury does not underestimate the importance of the economic question, which he dissects as follows:

A private corporation “lawfully” seized downtown Beirut and cleared the way for a single economic activity, real estate speculation, within a neoliberal vision that opens the door wide for capital, imposing speculation and direct profitability as the only law.²⁵

Except that Khoury upended the traditional Marxist discourse: class was the result of the fundamental condition that allowed it, namely the war on memory. The issue, according to Khoury, goes beyond the economic dimension of what can be described as class war. Rather, it is deeply rooted in the war on collective memory that enforced amnesia. Amnesia, in turn, imposed a General Amnesty Law on militia leaders who partnered with the Oligarchs, an alliance that led to the economic tragedy that impoverished the Lebanese and evicted them from their own city.

MEMORY AND THE WAR

The discourse of collective memory sought to impose itself not only as a discourse critical of the neoliberal project, but also of the entire coalition, on which the “civil

²³ Khoury, “The Bulldozers of Memory and the Ruins of the Future.”

²⁴ See “We Begin Again” section above.

²⁵ Elias Khoury, “Memory Wars,” *Al-Mulhaq*, January 25, 1997.

peace” regime was based. However, approaching the reconstruction project as a new war to be waged, dispensed *al-Mulhaq* from the task of revisiting or criticizing the Left’s legacy during the Civil War. And so, *al-Mulhaq* quickly moved from the end of one war to the beginning of another.

Al-Mulhaq’s beginnings did not necessarily point to such a path. In its first edition after it was relaunched, *al-Mulhaq’s* featured five “militant-poets” who had moved from the barricades of war to those of poetry.²⁶ Previous members of different political parties, the poets told stories that not only revolved around fear, but they also shed light on personal, non-ideological coincidence that led them to join their militias. They recounted the atrocities and disappointments they experienced, which reached the point of sheer absurdity. One unforgettable scene was about two brothers, who after finding themselves in the middle of a conflict between two warring factions of the same party, ended up firing at one another.²⁷

But as the war on the reconstruction project progressed, the critique of the Civil War faded into the background. It was ultimately relegated to a special issue based on interviews entitled “How Do We Write the History of the Lebanese War?” The war became an academic concern and the task of writing it was relegated to historians. Whereas the combatants’ narratives had a cathartic affect, the official leftist narrative about the war remained fit for fresh consumption.²⁸

Perhaps the best illustration of this discrepancy is *al-Mulhaq’s* attachment to the preludes of the war, to its dreams and principles, before probing its outcomes—as though the consequences of the war were completely separate from what it originally harbored. This was eloquently expressed by Roger Assaf, pioneer of the *Hakawati* theater in Lebanon, and by Elias Khoury, each in his own way, and later together in a joint play.

Assaf refuses to reduce the war to militias and sects. He defends the resilience of militants, and declined to denounce or disavow the war:

I do not want to amputate my memory.

²⁶ Yehia Jaber, “Young Poets and War Memories: From the Barricades of War to the Barricades of Poetry,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 14, 1992.

²⁷ Jaber, “Young Poets and War Memories: From the Barricades of War to the Barricades of Poetry.”

²⁸ A few critical articles broke through *al-Mulhaq’s* general trend. See for example Abbas Baydoun, “Feast of Regret,” *Al-Mulhaq*, November 20, 1992

I will never forget the barricades. On them, I stood and dreamed of freedom.
I will never forget Palestine and the Fedayeen. In their camps, I came of age and
in their shadow, I found myself.

I will never forget Beirut. I experienced its ordeals and steadfastness and
witnessed its suffering and execution.

Today, I refuse to let images of parties, militias, and sects negate the truth of the
people who fought and struggled, those who remained steadfast and were
martyred, those who dreamed and believed, those who hoped and ached.

I will not accept that the true creed that drove us be obscured or eclipsed by the
sectarian confusion that subjugated our country, corrupted our words, and
disfigured our faith.

Today, it is easy to denounce the war. But the war was the cradle we were given. I
will not repudiate it. I will not deny the ideas and knowledge it harbored. But I
was never an advocate of this war and I will not be among its profiteers.²⁹

In his editorial “In Defense of the War,”³⁰ Khoury offers a political translation of what
Assaf had conveyed through personal feelings. Like the playwright, Khoury refuses to
disown or lament the war. He defends the war as a struggle between the Right and the
Left, fought in defense of their respective political and social projects. For Khoury, it was
more critical to identify the moment when, or the reason for which, the war shifted from
a noble political struggle to sectarian carnage:

Why and how were the two Lebanese factions, the Lebanese Front and the
National Movement, defeated? How did they fracture and splinter after the
defeat, in 1976 and 1982, into a myriad of groups and creeds, which brought the
war into the streets, within sects, and to people’s doorsteps?³¹

In 1993, on the fiftieth anniversary of Lebanese independence, Assaf and Khoury
collaborated on writing and directing a play entitled *The Memoirs of Ayyub*. The play was
staged at the Theater of Beirut, where Khoury was artistic director and which operated
as *al-Mulhaq*’s sister institution in the nineties.

The Memoirs of Ayyub fused the left-wing narrative of the war with the discourse of
memory. It brought together two narratives of Beirut: The first, spoke of Beirut that
faced the Israeli invasion, the city whose experience was embodied by the protagonist

²⁹ Roger Assaf, “Against Forgetting,” *Al-Mulhaq*, May 16, 1992.

³⁰ Elias Khoury, “In Defense of the War,” *Al-Mulhaq*, April 14, 2000.

³¹ Khoury, “In Defense of the War.”

Ayyub, who had participated in in the 1948 battles in Palestine. The second narrative was about Beirut, the city reeling under the weight of the bulldozer and the tragedies of the Civil War embodied by women, namely the mothers of those who were kidnapped (during the second phase of the war?).

As such, the discourse of memory made it possible to avoid any revision of the Left's past legacy. Indeed, this was the case of leftist figures seeking a new role in the postwar phase. In an investigative report on the Lebanese Left led by Bilal Khbeiz, editors observe that the leftist figures whom they interviewed were unanimous about the need to evade any future conflict. They also note that leftist militants did not link the renunciation of violence to any revision of the theoretical underpinning that led to the war. The agenda of the Lebanese National Movement, based on which the Left fought the war in the 1970s, remained valid for those militants in the postwar era.³²

The discourse of memory also made it possible to focus criticism on the reconstruction project, while overlooking the other aspect of Syria's agenda in Lebanon, namely the Islamic Resistance led by Hezbollah. This is because proponents of the discourse were reluctant to revisit their war experience, particularly the role of the National Resistance in the internal conflict, something most leftists often discounted when narrating their experience.³³ This is what Ayyub did in Roger Assaf's play, when he recounted his memoirs as an embodiment of the dream of the city and its resistance from 1948 up until 1982, which stood in stark opposition to the nightmares triggered by sectarian wars and reconstruction.

It was, therefore, unsurprising that the war generation was rather perplexed by such a discourse of memory. What this generation actually remembered was the war itself, not Beirut. One of the "militant poets" expressed his bewilderment and refused the cleansing trend of the discourse of memory: "Before the story of the bulldozer, there was the story of the tank. Let's tell the story from the very beginning."³⁴

³² Bilal Khbeiz, Jana Nasrallah, and Fadi Toufeili, "The Left in Lebanon: Does it Merit its Title?" *Al-Mulhaq*, October 10, 1998.

³³ Khbeiz, Nasrallah, and Toufeili, "The Left in Lebanon: Does it Merit its Title?"

³⁴ Youssef Bazzi, "From the Theater of Beirut to the Beirut Stage: Al-Raml Prison and Castles of Sand," *Al-Mulhaq*, April 8, 1995.

Although *al-Mulhaq* was certainly not responsible for creating the war narrative of the Lebanese Left,³⁵ it had no qualms adopting and promoting it. Thus, the Israeli invasion of 1982 was set as a dividing line between two phases: The first phase was the noble war, heinous sectarian massacres notwithstanding, while the second was the phase of sectarian militias that mutated the war into killing sprees without a cause.

GOOD AND EVIL

Not only does the year 1982 draw the boundary between the two phases of the war, but in *al-Mulhaq*'s left-wing narrative, it also connects the Israeli invasion of Beirut to postwar reconstruction; the Israeli invasion to the war on memory; the memory discourse to the anticolonial discourse. The "bulldozer" becomes Israel's partner in the destruction of Beirut, a partnership that crystallized when bulldozers owned by a Rafik Hariri's corporation began demolishing buildings in downtown Beirut in 1982. They were tasked with removing rubble from the city center in preparation for a "suspicious" reconstruction project that had already been in the works:

Fall 1982. Beirut is still reeling from the nightmare of the Israeli siege, and bulldozers demolish the Abu Nasr, gold, and fish markets.

April 1996. Israeli air force, aided by warships and artillery, pounds the South.

Operation Grapes of Wrath brings on massacres, mass exodus, and death.

Meanwhile, bulldozers demolish ten traditional buildings in the neighborhoods of Wadi Abu Jamil and Zokak al-Blat.³⁶

Not only does the discourse of memory converge with anticolonial or anti-imperialist discourses, but it also carries within its folds the secular democratic discourse advocated by the Lebanese Left. Just as Khoury portrays downtown buildings falling like human beings, moaning, writhing, and agonizing under the assault of the bulldozer, he depicts the buildings as symbols of the pluralistic, secular democratic dream in the face of the new towers and skyscrapers erected by Solidere, testifying to the coalition of militiamen and oligarchs:

Only buildings that collapsed like cardboard witnessed the dream of a city that sought in its war a new democratic and secular beginning, for a Lebanese society torn apart by sects, fealties, and division. The buildings were the last guardians

³⁵ See for example Samir Kassir, *The Lebanese War: From National Division to Regional Conflict 1975-1982*, Beirut, Dar al-Nahar, 2007.

³⁶ "The Ruins of the Red House and the Massacre of Heritage," *Al-Mulhaq*, May 11, 1996.

of the city's pluralism after tanks had trampled the bodies of those who tried to defend it.³⁷

Emerging from the binaries of collective memory/the bulldozer, the left/the right, the binary of good and evil is now complete. As they advocate for memory, the secular democrats, confront Israel, sectarian fealties, and the bulldozer.³⁸

POLITICAL AGENTS

Al-Mulhaq prioritized establishing a political opposition, led by the broader discourse of memory, one that opposes economic policies and carries within its folds a secular, democratic discourse. But which forces would carry through such a project after the war?

There was, of course, the bloc known as the Left, which included labor unions, the Lebanese Communist Party, and left-leaning groups at its flanks. But there were also two forces that *al-Mulhaq* hoped to mobilize: Intellectuals and students.

1. INTELLECTUALS

If the discourse of memory was in harmony with the global post-Cold War climate, *al-Mulhaq's* insistence on the vanguardist role of intellectuals in public affairs went against the trend. Nevertheless, it formed an essential part of *al-Mulhaq's* identity and the political action that the journal called for in Lebanon, and later, in Syria. In *al-Mulhaq's* vision, intellectuals are the "conscience" in times of political void, and "instigators" in times of surrender to the powers that be.

Al-Mulhaq did not overlook theses that advanced the end of intellectuals. On the contrary, it published the dialogue between Régis Debray and Jean Ziegler that would later become a book,³⁹ eloquently referring to the delusions of intellectuals in its chosen title: "We Are Not the Salt of the Earth." But Elias Khoury rejects such views on the intellectuals' role, emphasizing the differences between the West and the Third World, where intellectuals are still waging a war in defense of freedom and justice in their countries:

³⁷ Khoury, "Memory Wars."

³⁸ For more on the discourse of memory, see: Khaled Saghie, "1990s Beirut: *Al-Mulhaq*, Memory and the Defeat," *E-flux Journal* #97, February 2019.

³⁹ Jean Ziegler and Régis Debray, *Il s'agit de ne pas se rendre*, trans. Bassam Hajjar and Renée Hayek, Beirut, Arab Cultural Center, 1995.

The media's marketing of ideas, such as the end of intellectuals, the emergence of expert-intellectuals, the proliferation of cultural apparatuses that buy off the silence of intellectuals by purchasing their "free" research, or the insistence that intellectuals worship the god of the market, are not incidental phenomena. Rather, they are a multi-limbed octopus that cripples the enlightening role of culture, forcing it to adopt a kind of complacency akin to treason. The distinction between intellectuals and dogs stems from a solid examination of the struggle waged by culture in the postcolonial Third World, over the notions of justice and freedom.⁴⁰

In line with this view of intellectuals, the first half of the nineties saw an abundance of statements by intellectuals articulating a will for postwar "state-building", emphasizing the fight against corruption, respect for the law, and the right of the families of those who disappeared during the Civil War to determine the fate of their loved ones—in addition to the discourse of memory brought forth by intellectuals such as architects, playwrights, and writers. These statements did not merely uphold general principles, rather they intervened at specific political junctures. At the end of 1995, intellectuals issued a statement rejecting the constitutional amendment extending President Elias Hraoui's term, when it became clear that the political forces opposing this extension were unable to stop it. The intellectuals' battle in defense of freedom began as the cultural field defended itself against censorship imposed on books and different works of art, which would later extend to the surveillance of postal services and the prosecution of artists.

Al-Mulhaq's first encounter with censorship began when Samir Habshi's film *The Tornado* was banned in early 1993. The ban was later commuted to the deletion of many scenes, in which war violence carried sectarian undertones.

The ruling class that came into power after the end of the war was still weak, and the 1992 elections, which saw a massive popular boycott, did not grant it the legitimacy it needed. It had not yet set red lines in discussing the war, and its various landmarks and narratives. Religious authorities exploited this vulnerability more than once, in an attempt to impose their point of view.

Abdo Wazen's poetry collection *Hadiqat al-Hawas (Garden of the Senses)* was banned "for its explicit pornographic depiction of sexual acts" (1993). Two years later, the books

⁴⁰ Elias Khoury, "Intellectuals and Dogs," *Al-Mulhaq*, March 4, 2000.

of the Libyan Islamic researcher Sadeq al-Naihoum were also banned (1995). Al-Naihoum was known in Beirut for his writings in *al-Naqid*, a magazine published by Riad al-Rayyes press, which had also published al-Naihoum's banned books. Nearly a year later, the public prosecutor at the Court of Appeals in Beirut sued artist Marcel Khalife for singing the poem "*Oh Father, I am Joseph*" by poet Mahmoud Darwish (1996), charging him with "insulting religious observances by setting a verse of Surat Yusuf from the Holy Koran to music."

Elias Khoury often delivered speeches at solidarity conferences held by intellectuals and, at times, hosted such conferences in the Theater of Beirut, which he directed. The language of *al-Mulhaq* was thus interspersed with the language of those statements and meetings, which added to the influence of the publication. The day after al-Naihoum's books were banned, Khoury wondered why the publishing houses from which the books were confiscated did not file a lawsuit against censors.⁴¹ The same issue listed the intellectuals' recommendations after a meeting at the Theater of Beirut, which included "filing a lawsuit before the Lebanese judiciary in order to annul the decrees that ban books."⁴² Less than two months later, Riad al-Rayyes press did indeed "sue the Lebanese state—represented by the Ministry of Interior and the General Directorate of General Security—before the State Council to annul the General Security's decision to confiscate three books written by the late Sadeq al-Naihoum, and stop its implementation."⁴³

Resorting to the judiciary not only testifies to the influence of *al-Mulhaq's*, but it also indicates that confidence in state institutions was not totally lost, especially that the political regime at the time was not yet fully formed nor completely subordinate to security or religious authorities. Prime Minister Rafik Hariri intervened, for instance, to suspend, albeit temporarily, Marcel Khalife's case. In the case of Wazen's *Garden of the Senses*, the Syndicate of Writers issued a notable statement calling on

our friends, the Ministers of Culture, of the Interior, of Information, and of Labor, as well as other intellectuals who are members of Parliament—especially those affiliated with the Lebanese Syndicate of Writers—to work toward annulling the unjust ruling. May they recall that before they became ministers and parliamentarians, they were in the ranks of intellectuals committed to liberties.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Elias Khoury, "No To Censorship," *Al-Mulhaq*, January 21, 1995.

⁴² "Intellectuals Say No to Censorship," *Al-Mulhaq*, January 21, 1995.

⁴³ "Al-Naihoum Confiscated: A Case for the State Council," *Al-Mulhaq*, March 18, 1995.

⁴⁴ "Garden of the Senses: Censorship and Repression in Lebanon," *Al-Mulhaq*, July 17, 1993.

This call reflects a strong belief in the power of an autonomous force known as “intellectuals,” whose members exhibit this quality, regardless of their positioning vis a vis power. They are a force that can be entrusted to bring about change. Indeed, “the policy of the systematic assault on freedom in Lebanon will be faced with the determination of Lebanese intellectuals to confront, reject, and stop it,”⁴⁵ since intellectuals are the custodians of the city, of its role and its memory. Khoury asks: “Has the time come to eliminate this position and reduce Beirut to a mere assortment of buildings and a financial market, devoid of freedom, among the myriad cities enveloped in darkness and sinking in a sea of silence?”⁴⁶ As for the meeting held in solidarity with *The Garden of the Senses*, it considered the ban “harmful to the image of Beirut, which was and will remain a city of freedom and a cultural laboratory for creative ideas and experiments.”⁴⁷

This wager on intellectuals also represents hope that the fledgling state would not settle on the path it took after the Taif Agreement. Indeed, the responsibility for bans and censorship was not placed in the hands of the system as a whole. Instead, discussions tackled the legality of bans and their mechanisms, who had the right to censor, and the faltering state-building project. The Theater of Beirut meeting was still able to call for “the amendment of legislation related to the censorship of books, by transferring this right of censorship from the hands of General Security to independent judicial authorities.”⁴⁸ But such wagers would later evaporate.

2. STUDENTS

Commenting on a student-led sit-in and candlelight vigil against the destruction of a building in Wadi Abu Jamil in downtown Beirut, Elias Khoury writes:

Lebanese life will not return if students do not return. Students who dream of something more than a job in banks, corporations, or restaurants. Students who dream, who resist, and who refuse to be prisoners of the past, the family, the sect, and the clan. Students, like they have always done, shall rise and topple this rotten feast. And students shall return. Yesterday they took their first guarded

⁴⁵ “Garden of the Senses: Censorship and Repression in Lebanon,” *Al-Mulhaq*, July 17, 1993.

⁴⁶ Elias Khoury, “No to Censorship,” *Al-Mulhaq*, July 17, 1993.

⁴⁷ “Garden of the Senses: Censorship and Repression in Lebanon,” *Al-Mulhaq*, July 17, 1993.

⁴⁸ “Garden of the Senses: Censorship and Repression in Lebanon,” *Al-Mulhaq*, July 17, 1993.

steps toward the demolished building and tomorrow they will occupy the streets and squares, and raise the fists of freedom.⁴⁹

Although Khoury was aware of the small number of students at the sit-in, he was overly optimistic about them, and many writers and newspapers shared his feelings. Not only were students, by mere virtue of being students, considered as a category outside of “the past, the family, the sect and the clan,” but the memory of the student movement active before the Civil War still tickled the imagination of those who sought change. Even before any effective student movement could emerge after the war, *al-Mulhaq* was adamant on reviving it.

During its first year, and over the course of two issues, *al-Mulhaq* tackled the history of the student movement in Lebanon, focusing on its beginnings, trajectory, and its most important actions. It also included interviews with some of its notable figures.⁵⁰ The special issues reflected the contradiction inherent in the optimism of reviving the student movement in Lebanon. On one hand, there was the experience of the sixties and early seventies, when the movement united—despite the political and ideological differences of its members—around union demands, the democratization of education in general, and the Lebanese University in particular. On the other hand, there was the Civil War experience that not only led to the splintering of the Lebanese University and the dissolution of the National Union of Lebanese University Students but also saw the participation of the movement’s figures in the war and their transformation into leaders of parties and militias:

Not only was the student movement annihilated, but its leaders and cadres were also transformed into tools of war. More dangerously, main figures of the movement associated themselves with non-Lebanese forces, especially those who collaborated with the Israeli enemy. These developments marred the history of the student movement, and led people to believe that the movement was not serious to begin with: Those who become sectarian overnight after having been secular, democratic, scientific, historical materialists, or liberals were never serious about their original struggle.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Elias Khoury, “Light the Candles and Fill the Streets,” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 14, 1996.

⁵⁰ Ibrahim Haidar, “The Student Movement in Lebanon,” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 27, 1993 and March 6, 1993.

⁵¹ See Paul Shaoul's testimony in the second part of the report by Ibrahim Haidar, “The Student Movement in Lebanon (2): What Do Leaders of the Student Movement in the Seventies Think?” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 6, 1993.

Such transformations were not limited to a few individuals. Except for a few independent platforms, notably “Harakat al-Wa’i” (The consciousness movement), the student movement had mainly included party-affiliated student groups that participated in the Civil War with great enthusiasm, unaffected by the democratic, non-sectarian character of the movement they belonged to. But we do not seek to evaluate student movements here, rather to focus on *al-Mulhaq*’s wager to revive a student movement with “secular democracy” as a core that would inevitably re-emerge among student ranks.

The student movement only emerged in early 1998. When it finally did, it was not in the shape of a large “student movement” buttressed by political parties, but rather in the form of activities launched by emerging student organizations in private universities, upholding values such as independence and a general understanding of leftwing politics aiming at enhancing political participation. Around that time, this movement focused on issues that pertain to liberties.

Al-Mulhaq was not the only platform that waxed lyrical about these movements,⁵² but neither did it shy away from publishing content critical of students.⁵³ A quick look at *al-Mulhaq*’s headlines such as “The Students Are Back,”⁵⁴ “The Student Movement: Taking Part in Reinventing Lebanon,”⁵⁵ and “When Will the Sun of Universities Rise,”⁵⁶ reveals the importance of the wager placed on these small groups which were no more than “independent gatherings at the margin of the student movement.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, they were still considered “indicative in practice, and not only in theory, of the possible re-emergence of an independent democratic student movement.”⁵⁸

⁵² See for example the Issues pages in *al-Nahar*, on January 27, 1998 and February 10, 1998.

⁵³ See for example Mohammad Hussein Shamseddine, “The Student Movement: Taking Part in Reinventing Lebanon,” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 28, 1998.

⁵⁴ *Al-Mulhaq* cover, February 2, 1998.

⁵⁵ Mohammad Hussein Shamseddine, “The Student Movement: Taking Part in Reinventing Lebanon,” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 28, 1998.

⁵⁶ Jana Nasrallah, “When Will the Sun of Universities Rise?” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 28, 1998.

⁵⁷ Bilal Khbeiz, “The Student Movement: Narrowing the Gaps Between Discordant Slogans,” *Al-Mulhaq*, January 17, 1998.

⁵⁸ Khbeiz, “The Student Movement: Narrowing the Gaps Between Discordant Slogans.”

Calling on students to mobilize as substitute political actors was perhaps the clearest indication that the revival of the Left and the establishment of an opposition movement had reached a dead end:

As it sought to resist the continuation of war, Lebanese society presented a set of proposals and practices in the form of statements by intellectuals, the petition calling for the resumption of municipal elections, among other positions that attempted to break the ban on public demonstrations and to stop political deterioration manifested in the divisions within the Labor Union and the elimination of the independent democratic wing within the Association of the Lebanese University Professors. But the horizon was clouded by the language of the Civil War. The students' spontaneous movement offered a real alternative: non-sectarian groups, comprising young people who survived the war in shelters... groups who were looking for their own identity, approaching politics from its only bright door... leftist groups that had overcome the crisis of the Lebanese Left through action and practice...⁵⁹

THE BULLDOZER AND THE STEAMROLLER

The constitutional amendment that extended President Elias Hraoui's term in October 1995 was an important milestone. Having a term extended through an exceptional amendment of the constitution has been the dream of almost every president since independence, but only came true for Bechara El-Khoury, the first president of the republic—although he was quickly toppled by popular demonstrations and did not complete his second term. Furthermore, most political forces at the time opposed his term extension. When the moment of truth came for Elias Hraoui, however, he secured 110 out of 128 votes in parliament. And, so the extension was passed.

The extension consolidated emergent trends of the Taif republic, which were no longer stumbling blocks of state-building, but had become the core of the state itself: First, power in Lebanon is not shaped by Lebanese political struggle alone—Final decisions are made outside the country; Second, the struggle against the post-Taif regime is not tied to specific policies, rather it is a struggle over the concept of state and the preservation of the constitution.; And third, there is no effective opposition, neither from within the system, nor from outside it:

⁵⁹ Elias Khoury, "Arnoun: So Ends the War," *Al-Mulhaq*, March 6, 1999.

What is glaringly missing is an opposition from within the regime. Otherwise, the opposition is only led today by General Michel Aoun in his Parisian exile. Also missing is the Left, which is almost completely absent from the political arena. The opposition of dissenting intellectuals pointed to this political vacuum, but did not fill the gap it had left.⁶⁰

The extension of Hraoui's presidency, initially opposed by Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, revealed the limits of the power of allegorical bulldozer. It also exposed the limit of the opposition founded on the discourse of memory vis-à-vis the bulldozer. This political incident did not alter *al-Mulhaq's* general orientation, but it did lead it to escalate the rhetoric defending democracy, for which the 1996 parliamentary elections represented an additional incentive. And so, the battle evolved into a two-pronged battle against the "bulldozer" and the "steamroller," the latter referring to electoral lists representing major political coalitions, which limited the possibility of other candidates breaking through.

Given the limited role of opposition factions outside the regime (including the Left, unions, intellectuals, and students), *al-Mulhaq* began pushing for the establishment of an opposition comprising members from within the regime itself. While the voices of those who opposed the Syrian regime in Lebanon remained muted, political figures at the core of the regime, such as Najah Wakim, Salim al-Hoss, and Nassib Lahoud, began to grace the covers of *al-Mulhaq* as they fought off the allegorical steamroller.⁶¹

In addition to these independent parliamentary figures, discussions began in *al-Mulhaq* about exiled opposition leaders, namely Michel Aoun. There were also discussions about the incarceration of Samir Geagea, highlighting his health condition and the fact that he was, alone, paying the price of the war.⁶² Even Hezbollah was considered a potential candidate for the role of opposition at the time, had it not chosen to establish an electoral alliance with the Amal Movement.

Although the 1992 elections were the first elections held after the war, they witnessed a massive boycott campaign, mainly in Christian areas, and by political players who had yet to strengthen their positions. It was not until the 1996 elections that the post-Taif regime was normalized. Therefore, control of the 1996 parliament, preceded as it was by

⁶⁰ Elias Khoury, "The Intellectuals, the Seats and the Extension," *Al-Mulhaq*, October 14, 1995.

⁶¹ See for example *Al-Mulhaq's* cover: Najah Wakim, Nassib Lahoud, Habib Sadek: Horizons of Democracy, March 2, 1996.

⁶² In the second half of 1996, *Al-Mulhaq* published two editorials about Samir Geagea.

the extension of the president's term, indicated a consolidation of power. Meanwhile the question about the opposition remained: "The lords of money and war have painted their vision of Lebanon's future with the bulldozer and the steamroller. What will the opposition offer?"⁶³

In reality, the opposition that *al-Mulhaq* had envisioned, one that was based on an alliance of the Left with the Aounist movement and independent figures, did not materialize at the time. Rather, by 1998, the crisis in the opposition discourse only intensified. This was not due to the victory of the bulldozer, as Hariri's project had lost its luster after its economic fault-lines had started appearing at least two years earlier. Neither was this due to the power of the steamroller, as the political leadership was blindsided by the rise of a newcomer into the fray. The newcomer was none other than the security apparatus allied with the Syrian regime.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

As Hariri's economic project faltered, the defenders of the discourse of memory vis-à-vis the bulldozer did not represent an effective opposition. Neither did the unions, which suffered multiple blows throughout the 1990s. The security apparatus closely linked to the Syrian regime stepped in and presented itself as Hariri's "heir." As the date set for presidential elections approached, an order came once again from the Syrian presidential palace, this time more clearly and crudely. And once again it was contrary to the will of most political forces.

Army Commander Emile Lahoud was elected president, and Major General Jamil al-Sayyed, who became Director-General of General Security, was the strongman in a new era that promised to alter radically economic policies after Hariri was removed from power and replaced by Prime Minister Salim al-Hoss.

Elias Khoury did not wait for Lahoud to come into power before announcing the end of an era. He did it earlier, nearly five years after he had launched the battle for memory. Following threats to evacuate a fishing harbor in Beirut, Khoury contemplates the scene of bewildered fishermen, not only to mourn the battle for memory but also to admit defeat in the face of the bulldozer and the steamroller:

We tried to say things obliquely...

⁶³ Elias Khoury, "The Steamroller and the Bulldozer," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 14, 1996.

We did not say that greedy warlords and kingpins of oil and money in times of war have turned into sharks that prey on everything in times of peace. Instead, we spoke of architecture, we defended the heritage, we talked about culture. We said “*haram*, it is not permissible”, as if we were students in a Catholic school, not knowing what to say in the face of thugs pelting us with stones. We were like intellectuals, trying to create cultural consciousness in the middle of a wild jungle. And so, we reaped memory for the sake of memory, while sharks took over the city.⁶⁴

The security agencies came into power from the ruins of this defeat, and with them came a period of anticipation and confusion. *Al-Mulhaq* was slow to determine its political orientation with the emergence of three fronts: On the first, it sought vengeance against the allegorical bulldozer that had seduced many intellectuals, leftists and opposition figures, including some whom *al-Mulhaq* had promoted and published such as the economist and writer George Corm, who was appointed Minister of Finance in Salim al-Hoss’ government; On the second front, *al-Mulhaq* was apprehensive of the security apparatus that could bare its fangs at any moment; Finally, a new opposition emerged from the core of the regime led by Rafik Hariri and Walid Jumblatt. As such, *al-Mulhaq* could not get itself to collaborate with such an opposition that did embody, as it became clear, the alliance of the bulldozer and the steamroller.

Ziad Majed, one of *al-Mulhaq*’s left-wing writers, speaks of this ambivalence in an article entitled “Impossible Loyalty and Difficult Opposition,”⁶⁵ synthesizing the journal’s position at the time. Majed enumerates what he calls “the blunders of the regime” that increase one’s sense of “oppression, disappointment and confusion day after day.”⁶⁶ Such blunders included the new prime minister’s announcement that his problem with Hariri was not the mismanagement of funds and corruption—effectively closing the door on any serious reform of Hariri’s economic policies. Although Majed calls the new opposition formed by Hariri and his allies “brazen,” he warns, as if peering into the future, that “this opposition may eventually be welcome, if the government continues to make mistakes.”⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Majed points to the confusion of the democratic forces he is counting on for change:

⁶⁴ Elias Khoury, “Homesickness, Nostalgia, and Other Names,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 15, 1997.

⁶⁵ Ziad Majed, “Impossible Loyalty and Difficult Opposition,” *Al-Mulhaq*, May 8, 1999.

⁶⁶ Majed, “Impossible Loyalty and Difficult Opposition.”

⁶⁷ Majed, “Impossible Loyalty and Difficult Opposition.”

Criticism is considerably harsher on the allies, because the disappointment over their performance is deeper and more painful... Opposing a “black regime” is easier than dealing with a “gray regime,” some of whose members we sympathize with. And so, we swallow the bitter pill and wait. But swallowing the bitter pill will not work. Either we find an alternative to Hariri’s economic policies, or we go back to our original position of opposition and as far away as possible from the trenches of those who were the real cause of the crisis, namely the new opposition.⁶⁸

The disappointment with the regime is, thus, evident, but Majed does not demonize it as compared to its predecessor, for the new regime comprises “allies” whose faults are nothing but blunders and slips. Cooperating with the new opposition/old regime is thus impossible, but also moving away from the current regime is conditional on its ability to overturn the policies of the previous one.

By mid-1999, excuses could no longer mitigate the extent of that failure. And the more the pretense of change was exposed, the more the grip of the security apparatus was felt. *Al-Mulhaq* was left to fumble its way toward the opposition, and to reconcile its new position with its previous opposition to the Hariri project.

Under an eloquent headline that reconciles positions—“Lest Informants Make Us Forget the Era of Money and Ostentation!”⁶⁹—*al-Mulhaq* criticized security agencies, which resorted to tactic of issuing threatening statements falsely attributed to ministerial sources, without the prior knowledge of the prime minister or his cabinet:

Are informants unintentionally normalizing the previous era and its symbols, or are they aware of it? Do they intend to suspend or marginalize political and constitutional life because they are unable to formulate an alternative project to Harirism...?⁷⁰

A short month later, these questions were answered confirming the disappointment with the new regime:

⁶⁸ Majed, “Impossible Loyalty and Difficult Opposition.”

⁶⁹ Marwan al-Assi, “Lest Informants Make Us Forget the Era of Money and Ostentation,” *Al-Mulhaq*, June 19, 1999.

⁷⁰ Al-Assi, “Lest Informants Make Us Forget the Era of Money and Ostentation.”

Al-Hoss's government has not addressed basic economic options, nor has it drawn a different social or cultural line for itself. "Cultural Harirism" is overrunning everything... Nothing remains of reform, but a somber face that paralyzes the administration, aborts change and continues its work in a semblance of accountability, which has us wondering about fate and chance in this blatant disregard of sins and errors.⁷¹

As the decade of the nineties ended, it was clear that *al-Mulhaq's* dissenting discourse had to readjust its priorities, lest it becomes accomplice to the crimes of the new regime. The critique of Harirism did not disappear from *al-Mulhaq*, but became primarily linked to the battle for democracy.⁷² The discourse of freedom and democracy that first emerged in 1996 became the dominant one in the face of the security apparatus, at the expense of the erasure of memory by the lords of war and money:

The dissenting discourse threatens to become a cover for the continuing destruction of political life by hollowing it out from the inside. The issue requires a firm position from the cultural democratic movement that led the opposition in the Hariri era. This stand must be taken before it is too late—that is before Lebanese society finds itself captive of a reality that only leads to silence and surrender.⁷³

FREEDOM AND THE SECURITY APPARTUS

The battle for liberties took on various dimensions with the emergence of Major General Jamil al-Sayyed, Director-General of General Security, a key player on the political and security scenes. *Al-Mulhaq* played a major role in framing the battle against censorship as part of the broader political battle against the expanding role of security in Lebanese political life.

In 1999 alone, the case against Marcel Khalife was suddenly reopened, General Security issued a decision to censor half the scenes of Randa Shahhal's film *Civilized*, while a tableau of a Maurice Béjart ballet was banned from the Baalbeck International Festival. At the time, Béjart sent a message to his Beirut audience, in which he writes:

⁷¹ Elias Khoury, "Under Democracy," *Al-Mulhaq*, July 17, 1999.

⁷² See for example Mohammed Abi Samra, "Celebrating the Lebanese-Syrian University: The Symbolic Revenge on Lebanon," *Al-Mulhaq*, August 28, 1999. Also, Elias Khoury, "The Ottoman scent," *Al-Mulhaq*, October 2, 1999.

⁷³ Elias Khoury, "They 'Reward' Fuad Nuaim," *Al-Mulhaq*, July 31, 1999.

The “Umm Kulthum Ballet,” which was created several years ago, and was performed all over the world, including in Egypt, will be presented here (in Beirut) with imposed amendments that have distorted it. I regret that a country like Lebanon, for which I have great respect and love, will not be able to see the ballet in its original form. I prefer that this segment (Umm Kulthum Ballet) be replaced by another work.”⁷⁴

Following the release of Béjart’s statement, Alexander Najjar, an advisor to the Minister of Culture, explained the circumstances surrounding the issue of the Umm Kulthum tableau in Béjart’s show. Najjar writes that “two observers from General Security saw the show, and one of them noted during one scene of the tableau that when the voice of Umm Kulthum is heard singing ‘Allah’, bare-breasted dancers perform stylized prayers.”⁷⁵ According to Najjar, there is no report banning the tableau, but rather a warning from General Security, “fearing possible repercussions.”⁷⁶

This led *al-Mulhaq* to publish a full report on censorship and the restriction of freedom of speech. In addition to listing the details of Béjart’s, among other cases, the report revealed two new censorship measures implemented by General Security. The first was to monitor imported book manuscripts before delivering them to publishing houses. The latter had to pledge not to distribute the books without the prior approval of relevant authorities. The second measure was to subject every copy of cultural periodicals to censorship.⁷⁷ In addition to these two measures, General Security also began to censor books shipped by mail.⁷⁸ Elias Khoury deduced that these steps aim to “make it clear to those who have yet to understand, that the hand of the censor reaches everyone... no one is shielded,”⁷⁹ concluding with the question: “Is Lebanese culture like Joseph, as he was handed to the wolf? And who is the wolf?”⁸⁰

⁷⁴ “Letter from Maurice Béjart to the Beirut public,” *Al-Mulhaq*, November 13, 1999.

⁷⁵ “Related as heard!,” *Al-Mulhaq*, November 13, 1999.

⁷⁶ “Related as heard!”

⁷⁷ Elias Khoury, “Find the Wolf Before He Devours Lebanon,” *Al-Mulhaq*, November 13, 1999.

⁷⁸ Fadi Tueni, “General Security Between Law and Public Funds,” *Al-Mulhaq*, November 20, 1999.

⁷⁹ Khoury, “Find the wolf before he devours Lebanon.”

⁸⁰ Khoury, “Find the wolf before he devours Lebanon.”

Khoury's question was answered by Samir Kassir in the same special issue.⁸¹ Kassir "outed" Jamil al-Sayyed, the Director of General Security, whom few dared to hold responsible for the acts of repression.⁸² Kassir maintains that the fight is not against "the wolf," nor "the censor," nor "the censorship apparatus," and not even against "General Security," but rather against a specific person with a name:

Major General al-Sayyed is asked ... to explain what impels this censorship to infringe not only on public freedom, but also on individual and commercial freedom by inspecting mail parcels when they contain a book or a recorded tape. He is asked to justify, if he can, the resulting affront to the country, whether it's tarnishing what remains of Lebanon's reputation in the world or obstructing the industries of culture, media, and advertising that are the most important resources of the national economy.⁸³

In fact, censoring the film *Civilized* was an illustration of the General Security's behavior to come. On October 21, 1999, newspapers published two statements: In the first, director Randa Shahhal, expressed her surprise at the decision of the General Security's audiovisual media censorship bureau, and the second came from the aforementioned bureau itself, illustrating the clout of the General Security over newspapers. It became clear that the censorship bureau had learned about Shahhal's statement in the press before it was out and had compelled the newspapers to publish the two statements on the same day. To make things worse, the censorship apparatus made it a point to include in its statement the slurs that appear in the film verbatim as a means to justify deleting the scenes. Most newspapers ended up omitting the insults from the General Security's statement, thus censoring the censors.⁸⁴

The major cultural scandal, however, occurred the following year when demands were made to alter terms referring to Judaism in "Song of Solomon," which was also to be performed at the Festival of Baalbeck. The circumstances of this request for modifications reveal the political climate in the country and situate cultural censorship within the broader political context.

⁸¹ Samir Kassir was a Lebanese historian and journalist. He was the author of a weekly editorial in *al-Nahar* and several articles in *Al-Mulhaq*. He played an active role in the "Independence Uprising" following the assassination of Rafik Hariri, and was assassinated in June 2005.

⁸² Later, in March 2001, General Security confiscated Samir Kassir's passport at the Beirut airport after his return from a trip to Jordan.

⁸³ Samir Kassir, "A Legal Notice," *Al-Mulhaq*, November 13, 1999.

⁸⁴ Mohamed Soueid, "Lebanese Cinema in the Hands of Censorship," *Al-Mulhaq*, November 30, 1999.

In July 2000, the International Festival of Baalbeck put on an artistic performance based on the biblical text of the "Song of Solomon," adapted by poet Ounsi al-Hajj, to music composed by Zad Moutaka. Following the show, four parliament members from Baalbeck-Hermel, including the Defense Minister, issued a statement disparaging the work. A high-ranking Syrian security official intervened to mediate between the parliamentarians and the Festival of Baalbeck committee. The mediation ended with an agreement to remove some words: The name of King Solomon was deleted and replaced with the phrase "King of Kings," after long deliberations at the Syrian security official's headquarters, where several alternative names for King Solomon were rejected. Likewise, the biblical city of Jerusalem, Urshalim, was replaced with the word "national," and of course, the word "Israel" was completely removed from the phrase "the mighty men of Israel."

But even this mediation was in vain. The four MPs, who represented the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, insisted that the work was offensive. To their minds, phrases such as "Behold! Solomon's litter, around which sixty mighty men of the mighty of Israel... From the dread of the night, King Solomon made himself a palanquin of the wood of Lebanon," contradict the sacrifices carried out by the Baalbeck-Hermel region for the country and its national triumphs. One of the representatives issued a statement saying: "Sneaking around the Festival to publish texts of the Torah will not tarnish the flame of victory."⁸⁵

No stronger evidence could be given of the intensifying climate of repression and its connection to the dominant political discourse than the comment of Zad Moutaka, the composer of the work: "The Song of Solomon has only increased my awareness of the extent of the historical damage that the Land of Israel had inflicted on Lebanon, especially in this canticle that speaks of Lebanon as a paradise and a land of honey, while Solomon stands among the forces of evil surrounded by the mighty men of Israel."⁸⁶

In fact, Moutaka's comment coincided with the intellectuals' decreasing ability to stand up to the machine of repression, either out of fear, as was the case with Moutaka, or because their position were essentially in line with that of the authorities. Theater director and actress Nidal al-Ashkar, for example, set out to defend Moutaka's work from censorship, arguing that the "Song of Solomon" was a treasure of Syrian heritage

⁸⁵ Elias Khoury, "The Songs of Baalbek and the Scarecrow of Repression," *Al-Mulhaq*, July 15, 2000.

⁸⁶ Khoury, "The Songs of Baalbek and the Scarecrow of Repression."

that was “seized by the Jews.”⁸⁷ When Marcel Khalife’s case was reopened in 1999, the artist was only acquitted after he refuted what was attributed to him. Khalife claimed that he read the poem “Oh, Father! I am Joseph” around the time of the Qana massacre, so he felt it suited the cause and the context of the South. He adds that he “was not aware when he composed this song, that it included part of a verse from the Holy Koran and did not intend to set a Koranic text to music, and his work was not meant to transgress the Islamic religion.”⁸⁸

Al-Mulhaq did not hesitate to criticize the intellectuals’ positions. Mohammed Abi Samra believed that Khalife, in his self-defense, was no different from the Mufti who condemned him. To Abi Samra’s mind, Khalife used the allegory of Joseph as a symbol of the Arab cause without, however, daring to distance himself from the song’s religious implications.

Abu Samra did not fail to notice that such rhetoric allows Khalife’s defenders to “ignore Hezbollah’s fundamentalism and repression for the mere fact that the party resists the Zionist enemy and its patriotism is recognized.”⁸⁹ All this points to the consensus of Lebanese groups, Abi Samra adds, “whether voluntarily or not, they display loyalty to Syrian regional power.”⁹⁰

CORPORATIONS AND BARRACKS

While these examples point to the significant expansion of the security apparatus’ suppression of artistic and cultural expression, the events of August 7 shined a direct spotlight on political repression, when hundreds of activists from the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces were arrested within the space of a few hours. This came in response to the “Mount Lebanon Reconciliation that had taken place a few days earlier, when Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir visited the Chouf and Aley, where Druze militias had committed massacres against Christians in the 1980s. The security apparatus saw in the reconciliation between Christians and Druze the beginning of a

⁸⁷ Khoury, “The Songs of Baalbek and the Scarecrow of Repression.”

⁸⁸ Alexandre Najjar, “Marcel Khalife’s Case Is a Victory for Justice,” *Al-Mulhaq*, December 31, 1999.

⁸⁹ Abi Samra, “Crowd cultures and allegiance politics.”

⁹⁰ Abi Samra, “Crowd cultures and allegiance politics.”

broader alliance between Walid Jumblatt⁹¹ and the “Christian opposition” against Syrian tutelage.

This landmark event elicited a most violent attack against the security apparatus. In an editorial that spanned an entire page, *al-Mulhaq* described the August 7 repression as a “failed coup”:

Here comes the black night of security agencies trying to impose their darkness on the country. Agencies armed with apparatuses; experienced agencies behind the apparatus; tapping calls; while other agencies plunder state resources and push society to its nadir.⁹²

But the “coup” could not conceal the paradoxes of this period that witnessed Hariri's return to power after the 2000 elections. In the same issue, Elias Khoury writes about the contradiction between two factions in power: As the first pursues impoverishment policies while claiming to defend public freedom, the second exercises repression while claiming to defend the poor.⁹³ Khoury dubbed this contradiction “the struggle between corporations and barracks.”⁹⁴

Yet again, and akin to the battle against the “steamroller,” which had represented the evils of the civil war, the security apparatus now occupies the same position of projecting the civil war onto the present. The leftist discourse, in its new democratic garb, absolves itself from its bygone positions: “The war is our memory, that is, our past. And the past has no right to occupy neither the present nor the future. This short Lebanese episode [the events of August 7] was a sample of the past attempting to occupy the present, to annihilate it.”⁹⁵

Al-Mulhaq resolved, therefore, to stand up to the new ruling regime that was formed when Emile Lahoud assumed the presidency. Not only did *al-Mulhaq* spearhead the fight against censorship in the Lebanese cultural scene, but it also raised questions about the fate of democracy in Lebanon.

⁹¹ Leader of the Druze community in Lebanon, and head of the Progressive Socialist Party. In 1983, he fought the Mountain War against the Lebanese Forces, which led to the displacement of Christians from mountain villages.

⁹² “The failed coup,” *Al-Mulhaq*, August 11, 2001.

⁹³ Elias Khoury, “Freedom or the Death of Society,” *Al-Mulhaq*, August 11, 2001.

⁹⁴ Elias Khoury, “Short Lebanese Film,” *Al-Mulhaq*, August 25, 2001.

⁹⁵ Elias Khoury, “Short Lebanese Film.”

It was clear, however, that the opposition constituted of intellectuals, students, trade unions and the Left, whose establishment *al-Mulhaq* had called for since its re-launch in the early 1990s, was no longer a viable opposition at this stage. Instead, *al-Mulhaq* introduced a two-pronged opposition: a Christian opposition that was critical of the “Syrian occupation” of Lebanon, and a left-wing opposition that increasingly prioritized democracy. In this, *al-Mulhaq* pre-empted the establishment of the Qornet Shehwan Gathering (which included Christian opposition figures) and later, the Democratic Forum (established by the independent leftist leader Habib Sadek). *Al-Mulhaq* was a pioneer in calling for the convergence of these two currents when it unified the battle against corporations and barracks.

At this Christian-leftist junction, *al-Mulhaq* offered a platform to Aounists, who were still active in universities and in the streets albeit without a complete political identity. Bilal Khbeiz notes that their broad discourse regarding sovereignty was able “to withstand ten years of oppression,”⁹⁶ concluding that “this points to the truthfulness of their slogans, and the falseness of the discourse of brotherhood and solidarity [with the Syrian regime] as promoted by the post-Taif regime.”⁹⁷

When movement leader Youssef al-Andari defined Aounism, he distinguished between Israeli occupation and Syrian presence, and stressed that his movement was not sectarian:

The Aoun phenomenon has two aspects: the political and the national. The political is concerned with the establishment of a state characterized by institutions that operate on a national rather than on a sectarian basis. The national aspect relates to a certain level of sovereignty that we must not fall beneath, which is national and inclusive. It rejects Israeli occupation and Syrian military presence, as well as Syrian hegemony and all non-Lebanese influences in Lebanon.⁹⁸

Kamal Yaziji, Aounist leader at the time, reassured *al-Mulhaq* in an interview that the right-wing is a minority within the Aounist movement, adding that “there are many leftists in the movement who loudly profess their views. They admire Aoun because he

⁹⁶ Bilal Khbeiz, “Heroes of the Last War and the First Peace,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 27, 1999.

⁹⁷ Khbeiz, “Heroes of the Last War and the First Peace.”

⁹⁸ Youssef al-Andari, “Were It Not for the Global Situation, Lahoud Would Not Have Won Popular Support,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 27, 1999.

represents a revolutionary phenomenon.”⁹⁹ The movement’s offices in Paris also did not hesitate to declare that “the best model for Lebanon is the secular system.”¹⁰⁰

But the Aounists, who would reappear in the *al-Mulhaq* at later dates,¹⁰¹ did not bring about the rapprochement between the two oppositions. Rather, they raised again difficult questions about the Lebanese system and its future outside of left-wing sensibilities. It was as though the dominance of the left within the discourse of dissent in Lebanon since the collapse of the Chehabist experiment has become an impediment to the formation of an effective opposition.

In 1992, a group of engineers and architects issued a statement titled, “An Alternative Vision for Beirut’s Reconstruction,” which would become a foundational text for the discourse of memory that *al-Mulhaq* upheld over the years. However important the first statement, the 1999 “Manifesto to Renew the Meaning of Lebanon”¹⁰² and the ensuing debates in *al-Mulhaq* signaled the beginning of a new phase.

In contrast to the secular/sectarian binary on which the Left had historically based its discourse, the new manifesto set off by reconciling between citizenship and pluralism, or between two fundamental trends expressed by those seeking a way out of the Lebanese system in crisis. The first was a legal-constitutional-civil trend that upheld the rule of law and state institutions, sidelining the power of sects, in turn, relegated to the realm of backwardness that trigger civil wars. The second trend acknowledged the rights of sects and the need to uphold a new charter for coexistence among them, without which the state cannot exist.¹⁰³

The significance of the manifesto did not only lie in its attempt to reconcile the two trends, but also in its presentation of the crisis. The first trend that the manifesto discussed, and that *al-Mulhaq* had been part of, expressed a position that “appeals to a number of forces within non-sectarian parties, unions, and professional formations, as

⁹⁹ Kamal Yaziji, “Aoun Heralds Change and Revolution, and That Is Why I Admire Him,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 27, 1999.

¹⁰⁰ The Free Patriotic Movement offices in Paris, *Al-Mulhaq*, March 27, 1999.

¹⁰¹ See for example the testimonies of arrested Aounist students: “The Hostages of False Freedom,” *Al-Mulhaq*, May 13, 2000.

¹⁰² “Manifesto to Renew the Meaning of Lebanon,” *Al-Mulhaq*, May 15, 1999.

¹⁰³ “Manifesto to Renew the Meaning of Lebanon.”

well as some cultural and youth circles.”¹⁰⁴ The second trend went beyond the specific Lebanese case to express a fundamental global trend, “especially in societies searching for new a unifying foundational discourse, in light of ongoing discussions on the issue of identity.”¹⁰⁵

As discussions of the manifesto paved the way for new alliances, Elias Khoury penned editorials that were increasingly marginal, not setting the editorial line of *al-Mulhaq*. Although the editorial conceded that during the era of the Left and the National Movement, secularists upheld “a militant discourse set within a quasi-sectarian framework—that is, they invoked sectarianism in order to abolish it,”¹⁰⁶ the writer wonders:

Why not start from the wounds of war, and establish a historic secular bloc that separates religion from the state, one that sets clear boundaries between faith-based and sectarian affiliations? Is a secular bloc impossible? Is the country a mere temporary arrangement? Was history deceiving us when it alluded to us that we could make it?¹⁰⁷

These questions were the last exhale before laying down arms, and putting the secular discourse to rest alongside the discourse of memory, to make way for the rise of the democratic discourse in the face of Lahoud’s security apparatus, Hariri’s money, and Syria’s tutelage.

THE RINGMASTER

After the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, the opposition to Syrian tutelage intensified. But this opposition, with its Leftist and Christian factions, faced a dilemma: Its discourse about sectarian reconciliation was unable to provide an inclusive national umbrella. Shakib Qurtbawi, an Aounist lawyer, synthesized the problem prior to the 2000 parliamentary elections:

What is lacking is the link between people who want change at the general national level. For example, I am from the Baabda area, and I might support a candidate calling for change, and there might be a candidate similar to him in

¹⁰⁴ “Manifesto to Renew the Meaning of Lebanon.”

¹⁰⁵ “Manifesto to Renew the Meaning of Lebanon.”

¹⁰⁶ Elias Khoury, “History’s Deception,” *Al-Mulhaq*, May 29, 1999.

¹⁰⁷ Khoury, “History’s Deception.”

Akkar, but I don't feel that anything links these two candidates at the national level.¹⁰⁸

A "link" will only be found with the outcome of the 2000 elections, and even then, at a steep cost. Walid Jumblatt, who, less than two years prior, was considered part of the "brazen opposition" linked to the deteriorating situation, waged an electoral battle against the security apparatus under the slogan of reforming Lebanese-Syrian relations. His battle gave political meaning to the elections, which otherwise would have been confined to the Lahoud-Hariri fight.

Following Jumblatt's electoral success, *al-Mulhaq* celebrated what it called "the victory of the opposition over the apparatus," picking up on the magnetism of Jumblatt's move. Jumblatt's bloc gave opposition MPs, who had achieved individual victories, a different meaning to their win, not to mention how it prioritized Lebanese-Syrian relations over the battle between Lahoud's regime and Hariri.¹⁰⁹

No sooner had the new parliament convened that *al-Mulhaq* consecrated Walid Jumblatt as "ringmaster" and called on the Christian and leftist oppositions to join him in the struggle for democratic independence:

The observer cannot help but perceive a link between Walid Jumblatt's new proposal and the democratic views expressed in cultural, youth and circles calling for change in Lebanon, which had been pushed out of politics since the Taif Agreement when the lords of war and money seized power.¹¹⁰

Al-Mulhaq consecrated Jumblatt as leader of the promised opposition. His victory provided *Al-Mulhaq* with a life line as it struggled between its opposition to Hariri and its opposition to the apparatus, unable, as it was, to situate itself politically on either side. Soon after, Jumblatt launched a third political space, emerging from the call for the redeployment of the Syrian army in Lebanon and the reform of Lebanese-Syrian relations.

¹⁰⁸ "The Election Conference Cries Out to Break the Fear," *Al-Mulhaq*, August 12, 2000. Qurtbawi's words came during a conference whose selection of participants was indicative: Qurtbawi himself (Aounist), Samir Frangieh (independent Christian opposition), Faruq Dahruj (the Communist Party), and Habib Sadek (independent left-wing opposition). The conference's title heralded the next battle: "Do not Surrender to the Sultans of Money, Media, Apparatuses, and Invisible Hands."

¹⁰⁹ Bilal Khbeiz, "Victory of the Opposition Over the Apparatus: The Tables Are Turned on Syria," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 2, 2000.

¹¹⁰ Elias Khoury, "Ringmaster," *Al-Mulhaq*, November 11, 2000.

Al-Mulhaq had always known where to locate its political battles, indeed, but it was over as a professional and intellectual experiment.¹¹¹ The new political positioning was far removed from the cultural, artistic, and social toolkit that had shaped *al-Mulhaq's* identity for a whole decade, without, however, succeeding in forging a new set of tools. As such, *al-Mulhaq's* was transformed into a space for articles, seminar reports, and dossiers. Gone were the social investigative reports excavating the country's margins for an emerging postwar identity. Meanwhile, the Theater of Beirut closed its doors, ending its cultural partnership with *al-Mulhaq*. And while *al-Mulhaq* attempted to reinvigorate itself by invoking contemporary art¹¹² at times and postmodernism¹¹³ at others, it did not succeed in restoring *al-Mulhaq's* experience of the 1990s as an integrated cultural and political project.

TUTELAGE

Not only were *al-Mulhaq's* writers boldly confronting the security apparatus at the height of its hegemony, but the journal was also an important ally in raising voices against Syrian tutelage. Elias Khoury argues that confronting Harirism since the early 1990s was essentially confronting the adopted instrument of Syrian tutelage,¹¹⁴ except that this reading attempts to retroactively project future developments onto the past. While it is true that the journal carried important voices opposing Syrian rule in Lebanon, these sorts of challenges remained on the margins of *al-Mulhaq's* general editorial line, which was mainly concerned with reviving the Left based on the discourse of memory, and which was more aligned with the traditional Left in that fighting Syrian tutelage was not even an item on its agenda.

The shocking extension of President Elias Hraoui's term and the emboldened security apparatus (along with rumors circulating that army commander Emile Lahoud would be imposed by Hafez al-Assad as president) were two significant events that made *al-Mulhaq's* left-wing writers increasingly inclined to prioritize the democratic discourse.

¹¹¹ Elias Khoury acknowledged that the trajectory ended early, without specifying the reasons. Interview with the author.

¹¹² Bilal Khbeiz played a key role in linking *al-Mulhaq* with contemporary artists who rose to prominence in Beirut in the 1990s.

¹¹³ After his experience with the Theater of Beirut, Elias Khoury moved to the "September Festival". The journal celebrated the festival's first performances, declaring: "Postmodernism Knocks at Beirut's Doors," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 4, 1999.

¹¹⁴ Elias Khoury. Interview with the author.

Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 expanded the political forces' margin of maneuver to break free of the Syrian hold, but the first seeds of the battle had been sown in the page of *al-Mulhaq's* at least two years earlier. *Al-Mulhaq* was quick to identify the interconnection between the battle for Syrian democracy and Lebanese independence (which would later become the title of Samir Kassir's book). Kassir's articles were not only limited to criticizing Lebanese-Syrian relations, but they extended to cover political liberties within Syria itself. *Al-Mulhaq* would later become a platform through which Syrian dissidents expressed ideas that were forbidden in Syrian newspapers.

The term "tutelage" (*al-wisaya*) first appeared in *al-Mulhaq's* pages in the opening issue of 1998, the year that saw the election of Emile Lahoud as president of the republic. The article entitled "Breaking Free from Tutelage" may not have made *al-Mulhaq's* cover had it not been linked to an interview with former Foreign Minister Fouad Boutros, an independent figure who had steered away from daily politics and enjoyed the respect of opposing forces. The interview, which revisited Boutros's political history on the occasion of the publication of his new book, contained only a few lines on Syrian tutelage that called for "internal cohesion among the Lebanese people" in order to change the manner of dealing with Syria, "otherwise, it would be difficult to break free from tutelage."¹¹⁵ By choosing this headline, *al-Mulhaq* marked the start of its new battle.

This period coincided with changes in *al-Mulhaq's* editorial team. Appointed editor-in-chief, the poet Akl Awit had a clear role in attracting writers from the Christian opposition to Syrian presence in Lebanon. Samir Frangieh's name first appeared in 1997 in *al-Mulhaq's* pages,¹¹⁶ but he would later become a regular columnist who focused on Lebanese-Syrian relations. Other names also made an appearance, such as Archbishop Youssef Beshara,¹¹⁷ who would become the founder of the Qornet Shehwan Gathering that brought together notable Christian figures opposed to the Syrian presence in the country.

These writers not only voiced their criticism of Syrian tutelage, but they also expressed different views on handling the regime crisis in Lebanon. They sought a different democracy than the secular version long advocated for by the Left, which dominated *al-Mulhaq's* discourse in its early years. In his first article for *al-Mulhaq*, Frangieh wrote

¹¹⁵ Bilal Khbeiz and Elias Khoury, "Fouad Boutros: In Order to Break Free from Tutelage: Lebanon Exists Because It Is Different From the Others," *Al-Mulhaq*, January 3, 1998.

¹¹⁶ Samir Frangieh, "The State's Concept of National Fusion Paves the Way for a New Civil Conflict," *Al-Mulhaq*, May 10, 1997.

¹¹⁷ Youssef Beshara, "This Is What Civil Society Christians Are Yearning for," *Al-Mulhaq*, March 7, 1998.

about consensual democracy and argued that the state should not adopt a system that overpowers society, but rather one that is compatible with its nature. He considered that the balanced representation of sects in government would reassure all sects.¹¹⁸

Criticism of Syrian control over Lebanon first came in the shape of objections to Syria's confusion regarding the possibility of Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon,¹¹⁹ and objections to what was coined as the "coupling" of the Syrian-Lebanese policies during peace negotiations with Israel. The coupling that Lebanon had officially agreed to was perceived to go against Lebanese interests.¹²⁰ However, it was the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon that paved the way for real criticism of Syria's role in Lebanon. Hardly a week after Israel withdrew, Samir Frangieh writes: "And now, let us reform Lebanese-Syrian relations."¹²¹ Frangieh believed that this moment was a historic opportunity to end Lebanon's role as an "battlefield," and that reforming its relationship with Syria would strengthen, rather than weaken the latter's position as it negotiated with Israel.¹²²

This approach received strong support from Maronite Bishops in a statement issued in Bkerke on September 20, 2000. Known as the Plea of Bkerke, the statement called for the redeployment of the Syrian army in preparation for its withdrawal from Lebanon. *Al-Mulhaq* undertook to defend this decisive statement: Mohammed Abi Samra mocked the reactions of Syria's allies in Lebanon. He argued that the allies of the Syrian regime saw no options for the Lebanese people but to remain under Syrian rule or to align with Israeli plans, always brandishing the security option against proponents of Lebanese autonomy.¹²³

Samir Frangieh provides a more comprehensive defense of the Plea of Bkerke, by refuting all criticism and reiterating the connection between democracy in Syria and Lebanese independence:

¹¹⁸ Frangieh, "The State's Concept of National Fusion Paves the Way for a New Civil Conflict."

¹¹⁹ See for example Mohammed Abi Samra, "Official Lebanon: The Perpetual Fear of Israel's Withdrawal," *Al-Mulhaq*, December 11, 1999.

¹²⁰ See for example Samir Kassir, "The Concept of Coupling the Syrian-Lebanese Tracks: Fishing in Troubled Waters," *Al-Mulhaq*, December 4, 1999, and Elias Houry, "Under Peace," *Al-Mulhaq*, July 24, 1999.

¹²¹ Samir Frangieh, "And Now, to Correct Lebanese-Syrian Relations," *Al-Mulhaq*, June 3, 2000.

¹²² Frangieh, "And Now, to Correct Lebanese-Syrian Relations."

¹²³ Mohammed Abi Samra, "The Community of the Weak Responds to the Bishops' Statement," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 30, 2000.

There is polarization in Syria akin to that of Lebanon, between an old line and a new one. Today, Syrian leadership has one of two choices: Either adhere to the status quo and reject internal reforms that would allow Syria to enter the modern era and secure the conditions for its development, or engage in the process of reforming and developing the system to enable it to face future challenges.¹²⁴

The Plea of Bkerke's was not a lone voice. It was soon followed by the founding of the Qornet Shehwan Gathering on April 30, 2001, and the Democratic Forum headed by Habib Sadek on May 16, 2001. It was as though the convergence of the Christian and left-wing oppositions that *al-Mulhaq* had called for had finally crystallized. This allowed Samir Frangieh to draw a direct link between Walid Jumblatt's comments before the parliamentary elections and the statement of the Democratic Forum, via Bkerke and Qornet Shehwan, declaring: "The Lebanese spring has finally begun!"¹²⁵

DAMASCUS SPRING

On June 10, 2000, nearly two weeks after Israel withdrew from Lebanon, Hafez al-Assad died and his son, Bashar, "inherited" the presidency of the Syrian Republic. *Al-Mulhaq* took the opportunity to tackle the topic of democracy in Syria, with a group of Syrian intellectuals and most notably former political prisoner Riad al-Turk, the first secretary-general of the Syrian Communist Party's politburo who had spent seventeen years in solitary confinement.

Al-Turk appeared on *al-Mulhaq*'s pages nearly two months after his release from prison on May 20, 1998. The interview¹²⁶ with al-Turk did not tackle politics, and yet, the mere featuring of al-Turk's pictures was a political statement in and by itself. Twelve days after Bashar al-Assad became president, *al-Mulhaq* published an article by al-Turk, in which he rejected the "farce" of the inherited presidency in Syria's "kingdom of silence."¹²⁷ *Al-Mulhaq* also re-published the letter that the Syrian intellectual Antoun

¹²⁴ Samir Frangieh, "Who Is Plotting Against Syria: Those Who Call for Dialogue or Those Who Cling to the Language of Betrayal," *Al-Mulhaq*, November 18, 2000.

¹²⁵ Samir Frangieh, "The Lebanese Spring Has Finally Begun," *Al-Mulhaq*, May 19, 2001.

¹²⁶ Saleh Diab, "Riad Al-Turk Talks to *Al-Mulhaq* About His Prison Experience: I Would Kill Time so That It Wouldn't Kill Me," *Al-Mulhaq*, July 25, 1998.

¹²⁷ Riad Al-Turk, "Syria Cannot Remain a Kingdom of Silence," *Al-Mulhaq*, July 22, 2000.

Makdissi had sent to Bashar al-Assad after the latter he assumed the presidency, a letter that led to Makdissi's dismissal from his position at the Syrian Ministry of Culture.¹²⁸

However, *al-Mulhaq's* most significant contribution to Syrian issues was its exclusive publication of a statement signed by ninety-nine Syrian intellectuals, who called for the suspension of the state of emergency in Syria; general amnesty for political detainees; the establishment of the rule of law; and the restoration of public liberties.¹²⁹

Responding to the new president's attempts to pass as a reformist, the statement argued that reform was primarily political:

Any reform, be it economic, institutional, or legal, will not achieve reassurance and stability in the country unless it extends to the anticipated political reform.¹³⁰

Even more noteworthy than the bold statement, was the way *al-Mulhaq* articulated it, which recalled the wager the journal had placed on the role of intellectuals in Lebanon. Indeed, *al-Mulhaq* saw in the statement the declaration "that the true intellectual is the conscience of society, and that change begins with intellectual courage and moral integrity."¹³¹

Tales of Syrian prisons and detainees appeared in succession in *al-Mulhaq's* pages,¹³² and images and articles about Riad al-Turk, who was arrested again in September 2001, became a permanent feature of the journal. His article titled "The Kingdom of Silence" was celebrated as the spark that launched what was dubbed the "Damascus Spring."¹³³ But that spring was short-lived, brought to a halt by a brutal government crackdown. *Al-Mulhaq* mourned the end of the Damascus Spring with a question adorning its cover: "Has the Damascus Spring Ended?" And once more, *al-Mulhaq* defends its conviction about the role of intellectuals:

¹²⁸ Antoun Makdissi, "From Parish to Citizenship," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 9, 2000.

¹²⁹ "Statement of the 99," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 30, 2000.

¹³⁰ "Statement of the 99."

¹³¹ "Statement of the 99."

¹³² See for example Mohammad Ali Atassi, "Mezze Prison: The Whole Story," *Al-Mulhaq*, December 9, 2000.

¹³³ Mohammad Ali Atassi, "Conscience in the Prison Cell," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 8, 2001.

Perhaps the most accurate criticism of the Damascus Spring is that it was unable to turn into a movement of popular protest, like those led by intellectuals in the former Soviet bloc against oppressive regimes in their countries. In truth, this criticism ignores the fact that the mission of the "Damascus Spring" was radically different. Indeed, in the Arab Levant, it is imperative that a cultural-symbolic revolution precede any political action.¹³⁴

Nearly twenty years after the end of the Damascus Spring, Elias Khoury reaffirms that he truly believed in the ability of intellectuals to spark change in Syria. "I believed it because I wanted to believe it," says Khoury.¹³⁵

NO TO WAR, NO TO DICTATORSHIP

The repercussions of September 11 and the US haphazard deployment of the "counter-terrorism" discourse created a kind of "truce" that eclipsed the battle against Syrian tutelage, which did not disappear completely from *al-Mulhaq*. The journal's editorials steered away from Lebanese politics, a trend that grew in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war. The growing possibilities of an American war in the region coincided with the retreat of the Lebanese opposition when Walid Jumblatt announced that he would side with Syria in any war launched by the United States. Jumblatt withdrew from the ranks of the opposition after the Maronite International Congress organized in Los Angeles in late 2002, which appeared to be colluding with American interests. Elias Khoury mourned the great void left by Jumblatt's withdrawal from the opposition as well as the opposition's "extremist" stances:

Building a national independence front is now a thing of the past. The climate created by the signing of the "Democratic Forum" agreement and the alliance between the Democratic Left, the Socialist Party and the Qornet Shehwan Gathering is gone and vanished.¹³⁶

With the retreat of the Lebanese opposition, other fissures began to emerge between leftist factions in Lebanon, which had been divided into an anti-imperialist wing and a democratic wing. The first wing prioritized resisting US pressure and the invasion of Iraq, even if this led to siding with the Syrian or Iraqi regime. The second wing clung to its vision of democracy, even if this "intersected with US interests."

¹³⁴ Elias Khoury, "The Necessities of Spring," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 1, 2002.

¹³⁵ Elias Khoury. Interview with the author.

¹³⁶ Elias Khoury, "On the Opposition," *Al-Mulhaq*, January 12, 2003.

Amid this schism, *al-Mulhaq* reflected the tragedy of the left-wing democratic position, which refused to abandon its anti-imperialism at a time when American empire invaded Iraq to allegedly spread democracy in the new Middle East. Unsurprisingly, the tragedy of this position was best articulated by Yassin Hajj Saleh, the Syrian intellectual who had been a veteran political prisoner. Away from cynicism or arrogance, Yassin Hajj Saleh admitted that a third option is tragic because “the viable political position is ethically incorrect, and the correct position is neither political nor viable,”¹³⁷ making any attempt to overcome the division between the political and the ethical a tragic mission.

Elias Khoury refused to acknowledge the tragedy of the moment. Instead, he adopted the slogan “No to War, No to Dictatorship” during the invasion of Iraq, in a display of intellectual and leftist pride that refuses to concede to the harsh reality. He declares that “neither the US, nor dictators are options. We have to choose either between the two forces or freedom and independence in the Arab Levant.”¹³⁸

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, *al-Mulhaq* seemed in a more comfortable position to bring back its anti-imperialist agenda. Harking back to its stance against both dictators and freedom heralded by tanks, *al-Mulhaq* called on Iraqi and Arab intellectuals not to avert their attention from “the great danger threatening our Arab region, turning it once again into a land of partition, future plans and nominal peace.”¹³⁹

Khoury's stance contrasted with another view that appeared in *al-Mulhaq*, which sought to profit from the international situation post-September 11 to make a trade-off with the Syrian regime.¹⁴⁰ The trade-off assumed that the agreement reached with the Syrian regime after the Lebanese Civil War was over and that the time was ripe to reach a new agreement given the current international climate and the twofold problem faced by the political class Syria had installed in Lebanon, as a result of its economic failure and the international war on terror.

In this spirit, Samir Frangieh proposed a settlement founded on the redeployment of Syrian forces in Lebanon in preparation for their withdrawal. He also called for the release of political prisoners, the reactivation of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council as

¹³⁷ Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, “The Tragedy of the Third Option,” *Al-Mulhaq*, April 6, 2003.

¹³⁸ Elias Khoury, “Against War,” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 9, 2003.

¹³⁹ “The Toppling of the Statue and the Collapse of Democracy,” *Al-Mulhaq*, April 23, 2003.

¹⁴⁰ Samir Frangieh, “Lebanese-Syrian Relations: Is a Settlement Possible?,” *Al-Mulhaq*, December 15, 2001.

the sole political institution coordinating policies between the two countries, and freeing capital movement between Lebanon and Syria. However, Frangieh found nothing to offer in exchange for all the concessions he asked of the Syrian regime, except that the Lebanese would avoid repeating the past by betting on the West “to confront Syria, which today is wedged into a corner after the Americans forced it to choose its camp.”¹⁴¹

Frangieh’s trade-off did not convince the Syrian regime. Khoury later admitted that Frangieh’s stance was politically vacuous.¹⁴² Nothing remained of that polarizing moment except the tragic position in which many Lebanese and Arab intellectuals found themselves.

THE HISTORICAL BLOC

Syria’s decision to extend the term of President Emile Lahoud and to impose him on Lebanon despite the objection of most political forces may have been the moment that drove *al-Mulhaq* and the opposition away from their politically vacuous ethical position. The Syrian regime’s invocation of international developments to force the constitutional amendment extending Lahoud’s term led *al-Mulhaq* to overlook its anti-imperialist considerations. Even Elias Khoury expressed his frustration with this rhetoric on repeat since 1967, rhetoric that claimed to thwart the goals of Empire by destroying Arab regimes.¹⁴³

The UN Security Council issued Resolution 1559¹⁴⁴—the height of US pressure on the Syrian regime and Hezbollah—a few hours before the constitution was amended. Yet, this pressure this did not lead to the revival of anti-imperialist zeal. On the contrary, ten days after the resolution was adopted, *al-Mulhaq*’s was titled “The End of the Second Republic.”¹⁴⁵ Samir Frangieh’s piece of the same title called for the building of a “historic bloc” to save the country after the end of the Second Republic had been declared on September 3, 2004.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Frangieh, “Lebanese-Syrian Relations: Is a Settlement Possible?”

¹⁴² Elias Khoury. Interview with author.

¹⁴³ Elias Khoury, “The Presidential Melodrama,” *Al-Mulhaq*, September 5, 2004.

¹⁴⁴ Resolution 1559 adopted on September 2, 2004 calls for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, the disbanding and disarmament of all militias, and the holding of the Lebanese presidential elections conducted according to Lebanese constitutional rules without any foreign interference or influence.

¹⁴⁵ Report: “End of the Second Republic,” *Al-Mulhaq*, September 12, 2004.

¹⁴⁶ Samir Frangieh, “End of the Second Republic,” *Al-Mulhaq*, September 12, 2004.

As if anticipating tragedies to come, Frangieh stressed the need for dialogue with the Syrian regime and its Lebanese allies, including Hezbollah. “We want the end of the Second Republic,” Frangieh said, “to be a quiet one.”¹⁴⁷

If Frangieh was preoccupied with dialogue, Elias Khoury was concerned with reconciling the Left with the idea of joining the “historical bloc” that Frangieh had discussed. He noted that the structure that had elapsed was nothing more than the “alliance of former warlords and neoliberal oil capital with the security apparatus, under tight Syrian patronage.”¹⁴⁸

Al-Mulhaq’s stance against Hariri’s economic policies, warlords, and the security apparatus was understood by now, but the Left still needed to be reconciled with the independence turn. To this end, Khoury situated the “battle for Lebanon’s freedom” and the birth of the new independent front at the heart of the confrontation with “the blind battle led by the United States, in alliance with Israel, to expel Arabs from history.”¹⁴⁹ To Khoury’s mind, independence meant the renewal of the Arab nationalist values, whereas escaping tyranny meant the renewal of Arab enlightenment values. As such, the defense of the constitution, the republic, and democracy became an agenda of nationalism and enlightenment in the face of imperialism.¹⁵⁰

A month after *al-Mulhaq* theorized the independent democratic Left, General Assembly of the Democratic Left Movement,¹⁵¹ of which Khoury was a founding member, was convened for the first time. It would later be part of the forces that participated in the 2005 “Independence Uprising” triggered by the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

One day before Hariri was assassinated, Khoury was completing the conceptual toolkit for the Left’s role in the battle for independence from Syrian tutelage,¹⁵² by demonstrating that:

¹⁴⁷ Frangieh, “End of the Second Republic.”

¹⁴⁸ Elias Khoury, “The Comedy of Errors and the Honor List,” *Al-Mulhaq*, September 12, 2004.

¹⁴⁹ Khoury, “The Comedy of Errors and the Honor List.”

¹⁵⁰ Khoury, “The Comedy of Errors and the Honor List.”

¹⁵¹ The movement included former leaders of the Lebanese Communist Party Nadim Abdel Samad and Elias Atallah, as well as independent left-wing writers such as Elias Khoury and Samir Kassir.

¹⁵² Elias Khoury, “The Question and the Issue,” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 13, 2005.

1. Syrian tutelage was essentially part of a Syrian-American agreement that shattered the Lebanese National Movement at the start of the Lebanese war
2. Ending Syrian tutelage is equivalent to resisting colonialism. The experience of Iraq teaches us that “the condition required to defend the homeland is freedom and democracy” and “collapsing the interior and enslaving it are prerequisites for new colonial forces to successfully impose their humiliating ways”¹⁵³
3. Secular forces have a fundamental role to play in resisting tutelage, so that “change does not become part of sectarian hell.”¹⁵⁴

THE NEW RENAISSANCE

Al-Mulhaq joined in the Independence Uprising with excessive optimism. After Hariri’s assassination, *al-Mulhaq* focused on political issues and dedicated its editorials to mass mobilization. Elias Khoury writes: “Today the long-awaited nation is emerging, and the people are united from north to south around one slogan, one goal, and one issue.”¹⁵⁵ In one of his editorials, Khoury considers that he was writing in the first person plural, we, which represents “all the Lebanese people, who want an independent, sovereign, liberated country, free from all external shackles.”¹⁵⁶

The impact of the Lebanese uprising on the Arab world was equally marked by optimism. “The democratic revolution in Lebanon opens up the Arab horizon, which has been shut down by military coups, and whose spirit of revival has been quashed and killed.”¹⁵⁷ Just as the first Arab renaissance was based on fighting tyranny, a third revival would emerge to resist it:

Soon, the skeptics and those who doubt the Arabism of the uprising will realize that the Lebanese people, through their uprising, provide a great service to the Arab world. They are doing so because they are paving the way to salvation from

¹⁵³ Khoury, “The Question and the Issue.”

¹⁵⁴ Elias Khoury, “The Question and the Issue.”

¹⁵⁵ Elias Khoury, “The Popular Revolution of 2005: Second Independence First,” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 21, 2005.

¹⁵⁶ “The People of Independence: Wounded Volcanoes,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 6, 2005

¹⁵⁷ Khoury, “The Popular Revolution of 2005: Second Independence First.”

military coups and bringing back the Arab cause to the center as a way to defend freedom and justice.¹⁵⁸

Tying the Independence Uprising to a new renaissance was not a mere rhetorical gesture. In fact, *al-Mulhaq* argued that many of its writers, including Lebanese and Syrian intellectuals, are central to the renaissance genealogy. This was evident in Elias Khoury's eulogy for Samir Kassir:

His writings represented a continuation of those renaissance figures struggling against tyranny and occupation and called for Enlightenment. That is why he was Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese. He carried within him concerns shared by all Arabs, and sowed them anew in an inclusive and democratic Lebanese patriotism.¹⁵⁹

Even in the face of successive assassinations that it bravely confronted, *al-Mulhaq's* optimism or creed in the enlightenment role played by three forces: Beirut, its intellectuals, and the Lebanese Left along with it all secularists and democrats:

Finally, while it is true that secularists and leftists do not constitute a significant political force in Lebanon or the Arab Levant, these three forces [Beirut, intellectuals and the left] together possess symbolic power capable of moving mountains.¹⁶⁰

Faith in the energy of these three forces withstood the fear triggered by assassinations. It even surpasses it by advancing that the assassinations targeted leftist figures of "the uprising". When George Hawi, former Secretary-General of the Communist Party, was assassinated and before the number of assassinations increased, Elias Khoury likened assassinations to those that targeted left-wing intellectuals in the 1980s. At the time, the goal was to stop the Left from mobilizing against Israeli occupation, today's eliminations intended to remove the Left from the battle for independence.¹⁶¹

THE SPECTER OF WAR

¹⁵⁸ Elias Khoury, "The People of Independence: Wounded Volcanoes," *Al-Mulhaq*, March 6, 2005

¹⁵⁹ Elias Khoury, "The Meaning of the Crime," *Al-Mulhaq*, June 12, 2005.

¹⁶⁰ Elias Khoury, "The Meaning of the Crime."

¹⁶¹ Elias Khoury, "They Are Killing Us, Comrades," *Al-Mulhaq*, June 26, 2005.

After the March 14 demonstration, which brought hundreds of thousands of people in Martyrs' Square to demand the withdrawal of the Syrian army, a bust of Hafez al-Assad graced the cover of *al-Mulhaq* with the headline: "The Last Days of the Regime?"¹⁶² Elias Khoury declared: "Now we can finally say that the Lebanese Civil War is over."¹⁶³

But this optimism, which ignored the elephant in the room—namely Hezbollah and the schism between the masses of the March 8 and March 14 demonstrators—did not spread to all of *al-Mulhaq*'s writers. After Hezbollah mobilized hundreds of thousands of its supporters to downtown Beirut on March 8, Bilal Khbeiz was concerned by ability of the two Lebanese political camps to mobilize such large numbers of people. To his mind, mass mobilization signaled that both crowds sensed impending danger. "The country is actually two countries," he writes, "which agree on almost nothing," adding that:

It pains me to see a massive demonstration in support of (Hezbollah's) resistance, which celebrates the liberation while driving a large part of the Lebanese people to silence, as though liberation threatens them. Likewise, it pains me that the liberators experience the withdrawal of the Syrian army as an indication of their defeat by their compatriots.¹⁶⁴

Soon after, the specter of the Civil War returned to haunt *al-Mulhaq*. After celebrating the masses in the squares, the defeat tyranny, and after preaching a third revival, came the assassinations, the repercussions of the 2006 July war and the March 8 pro-Hizballah opposition's prolonged sit-in in downtown Beirut. In less than a month after the specter of the Civil War returned, *al-Mulhaq* headlines declared war on war: as "Lest Blind History Repeats Itself"¹⁶⁵ and "No to War!"¹⁶⁶

During his last days at *al-Mulhaq*, Bilal Khbeiz looked back at the nineties, as if guessing that the experiment had come full circle. Khbeiz, who had narrated his story as a fighter in the Civil War in *al-Mulhaq*'s first issue, was surprised to see how the generation of the nineties, who had cried over the ruins of postwar Beirut, had gone back to engage enthusiastically in one of the two fronts of a "cold civil war" that split the country into

¹⁶² Report "The Last Days of the Regime?," *Al-Mulhaq*, March 20, 2005.

¹⁶³ Elias Khoury, "Great Monday," *Al-Mulhaq*, March 20, 2005.

¹⁶⁴ Bilal Khbeiz, "All of Us, For Our Country," *Al-Mulhaq*, March 13, 2005.

¹⁶⁵ "So That Blind History Not Repeat Itself!," *Al-Mulhaq*, December 3, 2006.

¹⁶⁶ "No to War!" *Al-Mulhaq*, December 17, 2006.

“people who are agents of Iran and Syria and people who are agents of America and France.”¹⁶⁷

Weeping and sobbing over the ruins of downtown Beirut was a general trait of the new generation. The hope for a prosperous future spread among them like wildfire, to such an extent that we, who had spent most of our youth making war and dreaming of victory, felt that we were this war’s only losers.¹⁶⁸

Khbeiz, whose writings remained forever haunted by the experience of the Civil War, and who did not partake in the country’s sharp polarization, was banned from writing political pieces for *al-Mulhaq* after having published an article about the city of Tel Aviv. This incident ultimately led to his expulsion from *al-Nahar*.¹⁶⁹ First, Khbeiz left *al-Mulhaq*, then he was compelled to leave Lebanon, following threats and a fabricated campaign falsely accusing him of writing for the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*.

HEZBOLLAH

Al-Mulhaq’s was critical of Hezbollah at several junctures. But the journal generally wagered that the party would play a role in opposing the Taif regime for several reasons: Hezbollah did not take part in sharing the spoils of war or in the corruption of the reconstruction projects of the 1990s. Furthermore, it did not have a tangible role in domestic politics, which had become under Syrian control. Finally, *al-Mulhaq* banked on the rivalry between Hezbollah and the pro-Hariri, pro-Syrian Amal Movement. All these reasons were compounded on the fact that the party had played a considerable role in leading the resistance against Israeli occupation in South Lebanon all until Israel withdrew its forces from the South in 2000.

Paradoxically, the event of the Israeli withdrawal that crowned the journey of the “(Islamic) Resistance Party” was also the reason it adopted overt political roles. After the so-called “demonstration of the axes,”¹⁷⁰ and the speech of Hezbollah’s secretary-general

¹⁶⁷ Bilal Khbeiz, “On the Critique of Past and Current Wars,” *Al-Mulhaq*, April 22, 2007.

¹⁶⁸ Bilal Khbeiz, “On the Critique of Past and Current Wars.”

¹⁶⁹ Bilal Khbeiz, “A City of Brimming with Western Modernities: Tel Aviv, the Pilgrimage of the Exiles,” *Al-Mulhaq*, April 27, 2007.

¹⁷⁰ Supporters of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon organized a demonstration in which they carried axes. This came in response to the popular reception of Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir after his return from a visit to South America, which was understood as support for the patriarch’s call for the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon.

on Ashura 2001, which constituted the party's first foray into Lebanese political life, there were voices in *al-Mulhaq* who, from the outset, had refused to distinguish between Hezbollah's resistance in the south and domestic politics.

Mohammed Abi Samra saw in Nasrallah's speech an assertion that "his party would always be ready to operate as a major reserve force in the service of the Syrian administration."¹⁷¹ He then went on to compare operations that Hezbollah had started to carry out inside Shebaa Farms to the operations of Palestinian military organizations in Southern Lebanon, which had contributed to the start of the country's civil wars.¹⁷²

To Abi Samra's mind, blindly ignoring the role of Palestinian guerilla resistance in the 1970s Civil War drove people to "elevate" Hezbollah above the fray of domestic politics. Bilal Khbeiz, on the other hand, blamed liberals' and leftists' view of the country as merely constituted by sects without, however, examining the inner workings of each sectarian block:

There is an assumption that Hezbollah's actions in the South and in some suburbs are disconnected from domestic Lebanese affairs, and that whatever action taking place on that level and within it is unrelated to anything other than the needs of the conflict with the Israeli enemy and has no internal implications.¹⁷³

Khbeiz's observation paved the way for the publication of numerous articles by a new generation of writers who began addressing the climate in Hezbollah's strongholds.¹⁷⁴ It was as though Hezbollah's entry into direct political discourse finally opened everyone's eyes to its existence as a political body with social influence.

The critique of Hezbollah went beyond its performance in Lebanon, to cover its view of the conflict between Israel and Palestinians during the Second Intifada. *Al-Mulhaq*, who has always shed light on the Palestine cause, foresaw the harm that suicide operations

¹⁷¹ Mohammed Abi Samra, "From Shebaa Farms to Beirut's Cold Weapon Carnivals: Trading Authoritarianism for Blind Obedience," *Al-Mulhaq*, April 28, 2001.

¹⁷² Mohammed Abi Samra, "From Shebaa Farms to Beirut's Cold Weapon Carnivals: Trading Authoritarianism for Blind Obedience."

¹⁷³ Bilal Khbeiz, "Why Are People Restless About Lebanon's Independence?" *Al-Mulhaq*, April 14, 2001.

¹⁷⁴ See for example Fidel Sbaity, "The Rumbling Resistance Society in Liberated Villages," *Al-Mulhaq*, April 21, 2001.

would bestow on the image of the Intifada, the integrity of the Palestinian cause, and the world's sympathy for it. A significant portion of Arab public opinion supported the operations, while Nasrallah gave them his blessing, arguing that there are no civilians in Israeli society; only invaders and occupiers. *Al-Mulhaq*, took a different stance relying on its credibility among Palestinians to warn against these operations:

The notion propounding that every Israeli citizen is responsible for and complicit with the crimes of their government and therefore should be fought and killed if possible, is only akin to the slogan of “Throwing the Jews Into the Sea”—which Israelis have put to good use in order to strengthen their internal cohesion and win their media war against the Arabs.¹⁷⁵

Although Hezbollah had failed those who believed in it when it both allied itself with the Amal Movement in the elections and defended Syrian tutelage, its criticism largely remained at the margins of *al-Mulhaq*. Even Rafik Hariri's assassination and the Independence Uprising that ensued did not alter this exceptionalist view toward Hezbollah. Views ranged between calling for the need to embrace so that it participate in the “greater mission for independence.”¹⁷⁶ Other writers reassured themselves that Hezbollah would not use its power to destabilize internal balances because that would harm it first.¹⁷⁷ But there were also writers who called on Hezbollah not to waste the opportunity to “reinvest the capital accumulated following the Liberation of the South from Israeli occupation in a new Arab renaissance project.”¹⁷⁸ Finally, others were convinced that Hezbollah wanted to join the Independence Uprising but was under pressure by the ruling security-political regime.¹⁷⁹

Even one of the fiercest opponent of the Syrian regime described Nasrallah's March 8 speech entitled “Thank you Syria,” as “generally prudent, responsible and political *par excellence*.”¹⁸⁰ As for disagreements with the Secretary-General, especially concerning

¹⁷⁵ Mohammad Ali Atassi, “In Order That Suicide Bombers of the Region Read,” *Al-Mulhaq*, December 22, 2001.

¹⁷⁶ “The Popular Revolution of 2005: Second Independence First,” *Al-Mulhaq*, February 21, 2005.

¹⁷⁷ Mohammad Hasan Al-Amin, “Hezbollah and the Shia: Creating national consensus,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 6, 2005.

¹⁷⁸ Elias Khoury, “Great Monday,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 20, 2005.

¹⁷⁹ Report: “The Path to the Lebanese Spring,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 27, 2005.

¹⁸⁰ Subhi Hadidi, “The Sayyed's Mistake... A Thousand Fold,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 13 2005.

his stance on the Syrian regime, the author considers these stances as indicative of the tragic wisdom of Nasrallah and his sense of obligation.¹⁸¹

Al-Mulhaq's appreciation for Hezbollah's resistance and sacrifices deepened the rift with many proponents of the March 14 alliance. *Al-Mulhaq* praised the party's "heroic steadfastness in the South"¹⁸² during the July war—even if this praise was tempered by an invitation to a national dialogue to discuss the fate of the Islamic Resistance. However, subsequent political developments proved that the time to distinguish between the Resistance and domestic politics is far gone. In turn, *al-Mulhaq* warned of a political coup led by the "alliance of Hezbollah, Aoun, Lahoud, and gangs supporting Syrian hegemony" to add Lebanon to the Iranian axis.¹⁸³ It accused the Islamic Resistance of sabotaging the delicate sectarian balance by placing decisions of war and peace exclusively in the hands of the Resistance that hones a clear sectarian identity.¹⁸⁴ It blamed Hezbollah of misusing the outcomes of the war, giving victory the taste of defeat.¹⁸⁵

All this took place before the events of May 7, 2008, when Hezbollah's weapons were aimed at the Lebanese interior under the pretext of "defending its weapons." At that point, *al-Mulhaq* brought the curtain down on the end of a political phase, declaring "The Victory of Defeat."¹⁸⁶

CONCLUSION

Elias Khoury began his trajectory in *al-Mulhaq* by musing about Lebanese secularists and leftists and their role in building a viable opposition to the postwar regime. Fifteen years later, the same question returned:

What happened to the thousands of secularists, democrats, and leftists who flocked to Freedom Square, but who, following the assassination of Samir Kassir

¹⁸¹ Hadidi, "The Sayyed's Mistake... A Thousand Fold."

¹⁸² Elias Khoury, "Two Lessons from the War," *Al-Mulhaq*, September 10, 2006.

¹⁸³ Elias Khoury, "Square of pain," *Al-Mulhaq*, October 1, 2006.

¹⁸⁴ Elias Khoury, "The adventure and the gamble," *Al-Mulhaq*, February 18, 2007.

¹⁸⁵ Elias Khoury, "July 12," *Al-Mulhaq*, July 15, 2007.

¹⁸⁶ "A Victory that Resembles Defeat," *Al-Mulhaq*, May 18, 2008.

and during his modest and touching funeral, felt endangered and yet, did not take it upon themselves to create an alternative.¹⁸⁷

This time, the question did not arise from the rubble of the Civil War but from the self-criticism of the March 14 trajectory.¹⁸⁸ As if fifteen years were not enough to change the question or elicit an answer. What Khoury wrote before the 2009 parliamentary elections could have been written before the 1992 or 1996 elections, as he reiterated that “the nation could only be built based on a secular democratic project,” and that the time has come “for Lebanese left-wing thought to crystallize, and depart from its lethargy and dependency.”¹⁸⁹ The only difference was that “Independence” was now part of the left-wing project that *al-Mulhaq* had dreamed of since its re-launch in 1992.¹⁹⁰

It was not long before Elias Khoury left *al-Nahar* newspaper. He was made redundant due the newspaper’s austerity measures. In his ultimate article, Elias Khoury reverted to the first-person plural “we,” with which he began his journey at *al-Mulhaq*. “We go on and we don’t look back,”¹⁹¹ he said. Beirut was akin to “a shipwreck”¹⁹², except that this time, the sailors all jumped ship or were swallowed up by the sea.

¹⁸⁷ Elias Khoury, “The Wall,” *Al-Mulhaq*, December 30, 2007.

¹⁸⁸ The criticism targeted the sectarian structure of the March 14 leadership, which distinguished it from the “March 14 Dream.” The democratic left was also late to join that sectarian leadership. See for example Elias Khoury, “The Wall,” *Al-Mulhaq*, December 30, 2007.

¹⁸⁹ Elias Khoury, “The Left in the Electoral Desert,” *Al-Mulhaq*, May 3, 2009.

¹⁹⁰ Elias Khoury, “The Left in the Electoral Desert.”

¹⁹¹ Elias Khoury, “The last article,” *Al-Mulhaq*, October 4, 2009.

¹⁹² Elias Khoury, “The Question of Freedom,” *Al-Mulhaq*, March 14, 1992.