To what extent did the National Pact of 1943 cause the Lebanese Civil War?

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History

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Abstract:

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) was one of the most gruesome wars in recent history; however, there has been a debate within the historical community concerning the primary cause of the war. Some believe that the political foundation of Lebanon laid out in the National Pact of 1943 was the war's primary factor, while others downplay the role the National Pact had in the causation of the civil war. To assess the truth behind this theory, this essay will examine the following question: **To what extent did the National Pact of 1943 cause the Lebanese Civil War?**

To answer the question posed, this paper will analyze the National Pact of 1943 in and of itself as well as its relation to other proposed factors of the war including the following: social stratification, an identity crisis, population changes, the emergence of the state of Israel, the arrival of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and Syrian politics. This will allow for a full analysis of the impact the National Pact had on the cause of the Lebanese Civil War.

After an extensive analysis of the National Pact and its relation to other supposed factors, it can be concluded that the National Pact of 1943, to a large extent, caused the Lebanese Civil War. The investigation found that the National Pact played a large role in developing the other factors of the war. While the National Pact may have been an acceptable way to reduce the amount of tension between ethnic groups in Lebanon during 1943, it failed to create a sustainable political structure that accounted for fluctuations in demographics or was secure from the exploitation of foreign governments. Lebanon was destined for a civil war with the inception of the National Pact of 1943.

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Introduction:

In September of 1920, the League of Nations granted France the mandate of Lebanon. Lebanese political leaders rarely had to settle disputes on their own because "[France] helped them to organize their state" in accordance to French interests.[1] On November 26, 1941, Lebanon declared their independence and became a sovereign nation. With this new found independence came political responsibility. No longer could France serve as the dominant figure when it came to making political decisions.

In an attempt to organize Lebanon, an agreement was made between high-ranking Lebanese officials that laid out the Lebanese political system. This agreement became known as the National Pact of 1943. After the creation of the National Pact, tension within Lebanon between different political sects rapidly increased until all hell broke loose on April 13, 1975 when unidentified gunmen, presumably Palestinians, opened fire on a church in a Christian area of Beirut. Four people were killed, including two Maronite Phalangists, a Christian political sect in Lebanon. In response, Phalangists massacred thirty Palestinians on a bus. The tension and conflict between political groups rose exponentially after these events. These two incidents are often regarded as the beginning to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).

Although the war was incredibly violent, a debate regarding the cause of the war has raged on within the historical community. Historians such as Itamar Rabinovich and Michael Hudson believe that the foundation of the country in the National Pact is to blame, while others such as Fuad Faris and Robert Fisk hold the notion that the war was mainly a result of economic disparity and the emergence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In this

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[1] Kamal S. Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, (Berkeley: University of California Press , 1990), 34.

investigation will answer the following question: **To what extent did the National Pact of 1943 cause the Lebanese Civil War?** With civil strife occurring in many countries today, it would be foolish not to discover the causation of one of the bloodiest wars in recent history. Understanding the symptoms of this war will enable humanity to perceive these symptoms in modern countries; hence, measures to prevent war can be carried out.

War is rarely caused by one issue, but rather many. To ensure the thoroughness of this investigation, I will analyze the contributing factors to the war that are widely accepted by many historians and determine if the National Pact is intertwined with each individual factor. The individual factors have been grouped as internal and external factors for organizational purposes. The following factors will be subjected to my analysis: social stratification, an identity crisis, population changes, the emergence of the state of Israel, the arrival of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and Syrian politics.

The National Pact of 1943:

To fully grasp the relation of the National Pact to other factors of the war, a general knowledge of the agreement is required. As Lebanese leaders began to lay down the foundation of their newly independent state, a major complication arose. The Maronite Christians, a dominant ethnic group in Lebanon, did not believe Muslims should be granted the same amount of political control because they believed "Muslims were naturally susceptible to the strong influence of their co-religionists in other Arab countries".[2] They believed that this influence would drive Muslim political leaders to push for Lebanon's integration into a large Arab state, which was an idea that many Muslims actually supported. The Muslims obviously wanted at least equal political control; therefore, they rejected the idea that they should not receive as much

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[2] Ibid., 36.

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political control as the Maronite Christians. This disagreement required a compromise and this compromise took the form of the National Pact of 1943. The National Pact of 1943 "was a verbal agreement concluded in October 1943 between the Maronite president of newly independent Lebanon, Bechara al-Khoury, and Sunni prime minister, Riyad al-Solh".[3] The National Pact had five main provisions:

1. "Lebanon was completely independent and sovereign republic, unattached to any other state."[4]

2. "Lebanon has an Arab face, its language is Arabic, and it is part of the Arab world, but it has particular characteristics. Despite its Arab identity, it should maintain its cultural and spiritual ties with Western civilization since those ties contributed to Lebanon's enviable degree of progress."[5]

3. "Having secured recognition of its independent status within its present borders, Lebanon should cooperate with all Arab states and become a member of the Arab community. In its relations with the Arab countries, Lebanon should not side with one party against the other."[6]

4. "Government posts should be distributed equitably among the recognized sects. However, in recruitment for technical posts, expertise rather than sectarian affiliation should be taken into consideration."[7]

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[3] Latif Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 1998), 24.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 24-25.
[6] Ibid., 25.
[7] Ibid., 25.

The fourth point demanded that the "legistlative, judiciary, and army posts were to be distibuted among the two main faiths according to a ratio of six Christians to five Muslims."[8] Christians were given the majority of political power because a census taken in 1932 illustrated that the Christians were the most populous ethnic group in Lebanon.[9] Under the National Pact the "presidency of Lebanon was allocated to the Maronite sect, the Speaker of the House of Representatives was a Shiite Muslim, and the prime ministership went to the Sunni Muslims; the rest of the sects would share the ministerial portfolios according to their numerical strength."[10] This system of government in which political power is divided among ethnic groups is known as confessionalism.

At the time, the National Pact satisfied Christians and Muslims alike. The Christians were ensured that Lebanon would not succumb to a larger Arab state and the Muslims were ensured that Lebanon was indeed an Arab state. Both sides also agreed that power was allocated properly. The foundation of Lebanon was set; however, discontent quickly ensued with the agreement.

Internal Factors:

The National Pact influenced the social stratification within Lebanon. As mentioned earlier, the Christians were given the most government power under the National Pact; hence, they practically had control of the economy.[11] This idea is supported by another study that revealed that "seventeen of twenty-five large industries were Christian owned and that Christians were dominant in many other industries."[12] A national income study performed in 1975 demonstrated

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[8] Ibid., 25.
[9] Andrew Rigby, "Lebanon: Patterns of Confessional Politics," *Parliamentary Affairs*, 53, no. 1 (2000): 170.
[10] Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward*, 77.
[11] Fuad Faris, "The civil war in Lebanon," *Race and Class*, 18, no. 2 (1976): 176,
[12] Ibid.

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that only "61 percent of Christians earned an annual income of less than L[£]6,000, while 82 percent of the Shiite, 79 percent of the Sunnis, and 69 percent of the Druzes earned less than that."[13] The disparity in financial success among these ethnic groups led to inequalities in the quality of life between the presented groups. These differences would be stresses in speeches given by many Muslim leaders such as Musa Sad`r who called for more equality.

Economic success enabled Christian families to send their children to school. A study performed in the mid-1970s found that "thirty-one percent of Shiite men and 70 percent of Shiite women were illiterate, compared to 13 percent of Christian men and 20 percent of Christian women".[14] That same study also revealed that "four times as many Christians as Muslims (8 percent, compared to 2 percent) held university degrees".[15] Being educated allowed Christians to attain higher paying jobs than their uneducated Muslim counterparts. Education practically ensured Christian dominance over Muslims in regards to careers.

With Christians dominating the Lebanese markets, Muslims felt as if the economic system was unfair. They were stuck in a sort of underdog status to the Christians. The outcry of the Shia Muslims in the early 1970s makes this evident.

Due to the increasingly violent conflict in southern Lebanon, an area holding a large Shia Muslim population, many Shia Muslims began settling in the slum areas of Beirut known as the "Belt of Misery."[16] The city primarily consisted of Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims, "both beneficiaries of the extraordinary wealth that flowed into Beirut."[17] The migration of Shia Muslims from southern Lebanon to Beirut led to a significant shift in the demographic makeup

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[13] Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward*, 77.
[14] Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward*, 56.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Rigby, "Lebanon: Patterns of Confessional Politics", 173.
[17] Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation*, (Nation Books, 2002), 68.

of the city as Shia Muslims now constituted a majority of the city's population. After living in squalor for years, the Shia Muslims, recognizing their newly acquired majority, demanded that they be given more political power.[18] More power in the government would enable the Shia Muslims to pass reforms that would assist fellow Shia Muslims. Protests against the government were led by Shia Muslim leader Musa Sad`r. Sad`r began giving speeches in an attempt to rally fellow Shia Muslims against a state he believed was oppressing them. In one speech he told fellow Shia Muslims "if our demands are not met, we will set about taking them by force: if this country is not given, it must be taken."[19] The rigid structure of the political system could not account for this change in Shia opinion; hence, tension within Lebanon increased significantly. Based upon my research, I have concluded that the National Pact of 1943 had huge implications upon the social stratification within Lebanon.

The National Pact of 1943 created a sort of identity crisis for Lebanon. As mentioned earlier, the National Pact provided that Lebanon was to have an "Arab face", yet the ties to the West were not to be severed. In external affairs no one side could be taken without causing disruption within Lebanon; hence, this agreement could only work so long as Christian-Muslim relations outside of Lebanon were sound, however that was not the case after the Arab-Israeli Crisis.

The Arab-Israeli conflict that began in 1948 was of interest to both Christians and Muslims. Other Arabic countries called upon Lebanon to join them in the fight against Israel, but the Christian Lebanese leaders were reluctant to do so since they had good relations with the

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[18] Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985*, (Cornell University Press, 1985), 38-39.
[19] Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985*, 38-39.

Jews who led Israel.[20] Eventually Lebanon succumbed to the pressures of its neighbors and

fought a brief stint against Israel; however diplomatic relations between the two countries

remained secure.[21] After disengaging from combat against Israel in 1949, Lebanon regained its

neutral stance the National Pact called for, but remaining neutral did not fulfill the wishes of

Muslims and Christians alike. The country had neither an Arab identity nor Western identity to

base its decisions around. The inability for Lebanon to remain neutral at that time foreshadowed

that the National Pact would not suffice in the near future when Arab-Israeli relations would

further deteriorate.

The first major attempt at establishing an identity came in 1958. President Chamoun

attempted to alter the constitution in order to give himself an additional term. A civil war broke

out and soon thereafter President Chamoun broke yet another provision made by the National

Pact: he called upon the assistance of the West.[22] In doing so he attempted to establish a

Western identity for Lebanon. This act was seen as being an attack upon the country's Arab

identity that was ever so precious to the country's Muslim population. Marines landed on the

beaches of Beirut, established order, and then left. President Chamoun abandoned his wish to

seek a second consecutive term and the National Pact's formula lived on.[23] This failure to

establish an identity for Lebanon would foreshadow the failure of future attempts to create a

unifying Lebanese identity.

The Lebanese Muslims, frustrated by their governments attempt to rob them of their Arab

identity, were seeking to establish an over-encompassing Arab identity for Lebanon; hence, they

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[20] Ibid., 104-105.
[21] Ibid., 105.
[22] Joseph Chamie, "The Lebanese Civil War: An Investigation into the Causes," *World Affairs*, 139, no. 3 (1976): 173.
[23] Ibid., 174.

sought to join the United Arab Republic (UAR). The UAR was formed in 1958. It was a joint

coalition between Egypt and Syria that was based upon the idea of pan-Arabism, the idea that the

nations of Arabia should come together as one entity.[24] Joining the UAR would have solidified

Lebanon's status as an Arab state, however the UAR opposed any sort of Western intervention in

Arab affairs[25]; therefore, Lebanon would be forced to abandon its Christian identity. With

Lebanon being ruled by primarily Christians, it comes as no surprise that Lebanon never joined

the UAR.

The identity crisis and conflict of interests between Lebanese Muslim and Lebanese

Christian would be further exacerbated by the population changes Lebanon experienced since the

census of 1932 was performed. As stated earlier, the National Pacts facets were based off of a

census taken in 1932. At the time Christians were the majority, however "higher emigration

rates among the Christians and higher birth rates among the Muslims, especially the Shias",

helped institute a Muslim majority.[26] The Muslim population was further increased after an

influx of some 200,000 Palestinians sought refuge in Lebanon.[27] No official census has been

taken since 1932, however estimates made in 1975 illustrate that the Muslims held a clear

majority, constituting 60% of the nation.[28] With the demographic change in Lebanon came

Muslim dissatisfaction with the ratio oriented National Pact and increased tension within

Lebanon.

Muslim discontent with the National Pact's assigned ratios became evident during a

meeting in which Lebanese leaders were seeking to reform the governmental system laid out by

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[24] Ibid., 173.
[25] Amitav Acharya, and Barry Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*, (Routledge, 2010), 189.
[26] Zakaria Mohti, "The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990): Causes and Costs of Conflict" (2010): 19.
[27] Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward*, 43.
[28] Mohti, "The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990): Causes and Costs of Conflict", 19.

the National Pact. Although reluctant to give up their majority power in the government,

Christian leaders offered their Muslim counterparts an equal share in governmental power;

however, the Muslim leaders declined the proposal as it was "'insufficiently fundamental',

meaning they wanted majority, not equality."[29] Being the majority, the Muslim population was

finally prepared to assume a principal control of Lebanon; however, the Christians were not

eager to relinquish their grip on the Lebanese political system. This conflict of interests between

Muslims and Christians on the issue of the National Pacts guidelines established the primary

combatants in the war: the progressivists and the traditionalists. The progressivists, mostly

Muslims, desired to modify the political system created under the National Pact, while the

traditionalists, mostly Christians, sought to retain the political system created under the National

Pact.[30]

As the population differences between the different sects of Lebanon changed, so did the

popular opinion on a wide variety of issues; however, the popular demand was not often met as

the National Pacts governmental organizational system did not account for population change. A

majority of the population's interests were not being met because the minority religious sects of

Lebanon had the greatest control of the government; furthermore, the government was making

many decisions that were at least partially related to religion, such as the choice to abandon the

fight against Israel, a fight that many believe to have a religious context.

The National Pact played a large role in internally creating the conditions necessary for

an armed conflict. The governmental system the Pact established did not allow for future

popular demand to be met due to the Pact's inflexibility when it came to political representation;

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[29] Edgar O'Ballance , *Civil War in Lebanon*, *1975-92*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 34.
[30] Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon*, 1970-1985, 44-45.

hence, different ethnic and religious sects were destined to be unjustly placed in inferior positions: "The pact was an elite arrangement that never successfully transformed into a social contract involving the masses".[31] The hopelessness felt by many Muslims caused by the National Pact's provisions set the stage for a civil war, however the external challenges Lebanon faced, enabled to occur due to the flaws of the National Pact, played a significant role in catalyzing the situation.

External Factors:

The creation of the state of Israel indirectly affected Lebanon. With the Zionists move into Israel came the exit of the Palestinians. As mentioned above, around 200,000 Palestinian refugees migrated to Lebanon and the demographic change would prove to be problematic for the Lebanese people; however, it was the ideology behind the creation of Israel that would prove to be a problem for Lebanon. Israel was founded to be a solely Jewish state due to the belief that Jews needed a "national home".[32] The Zionists evidently felt that they could not coexist with the peoples of other nations; hence, they required a Jewish state. This concept is in direct conflict with the National Pact of 1943. The Pact stressed the coexistence of different religious sects within a multicultural nation; however "the creation of ethnically homogenous Israel negated the idea of coexistence between ethnic groups".[33] Israel served as a model for a modern day religious state within Arabia, which is something that many Lebanese Christians and Lebanese Muslims would have liked Lebanon to become. Due to evidence suggesting that a religious state could be founded, passionate Lebanese citizens may have been inspired to establish Lebanon as a religious state. The problem being was that there were two dominant religious groups in

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[31] Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward*, 85.
[32] United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine, "Palestine." 1949. Accessed September 1, 2012.
[33] Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward*, 85.

Lebanon and neither was getting support from the United Nations. While the National Pact did not have any influence upon the establishment of the Israeli state, its flaws were brought to the forefront as a result of the establishment of Israel. The National Pact did not suit the Lebanese people's interest to remain neutral; hence, its inflexibility was revealed yet again.

The emergence of the PLO within Lebanon was a major cause for the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. The Palestinian refugees that journeyed to Lebanon significantly altered Lebanese demographics, but also brought with them the "PLO infrastructure".[34] After being forced out of Jordan, the Palestinians set up their headquarters from within Lebanon.[35] It appears as if the PLO had much public support within Lebanon prior to the beginning of the civil war as the "independent daily Al-Nahar published an opinion poll that reported that 85 per cent of the Lebanese sampled favored wholeheartedly or with some reservation Palestinian commando operations in general".[36] While many Muslims in Lebanon supported the PLO, many Lebanese Christians were fearful of them. This mentality is reflected by their referring to the Palestinians as a "virus" and the fact that their militias were "arming themselves rapidly, smuggling in M16 rifles, Czech M58 rifles and other small arms they could fire, and spending their evenings in arms drill."[37] [38] Under the guidelines set by the National Pact of 1943, the Lebanese government could not side with the PLO or against them; therefore, Lebanon could not defend itself without risking a Civil War. The Pact situated Lebanon in a paradox. If they attacked the PLO, they risked a Muslim uprising; however, they risked a Christian uprising and Israeli invasion if they sided with the PLO. Yet again the inability of the Pact to flex with public opinion destined Lebanon for conflict.

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[34] Ibid., 43.
[35] Michael Hudson, "The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War," *Middle East Journal*, 32, no. 3 (1978): 265.
[36] Ibid., 264.
[37] Hudson, "The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War", 265.
[38] Ibid., 276.

With the government forced to remain stagnant on the issue, the PLO was able to gain strength within Lebanon and strike Israel from across the border.[39] The Israelis took exception to these attacks and began to practice absolutely brutal revenge attacks. For example, "when Palestinian rocket fire and a mine explosion had killed two civilians and two soldiers, the Israelis shelled the town of Hasbaya, killing 48 people and wounding another 45".[40] According to the Lebanese government, "in the 44 major Israeli attacks into Lebanon between mid-1968 and mid-1974, approximately 880 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians had been killed".[41]

These repeated, retaliatory actions must have been demoralizing to Lebanese people of all sorts. What good is a government that does not protect its people? Evidently many Lebanese began to ask that same question as organized militias became more prominent. John Entelis found that the Kata'ib militia had around 36,000 members in 1964. By 1971, the militia boasted 65,000 members and had "many more thousands of supporters ready to per-form whatever political or paramilitary duties might be required".[42] The spike in the population of militia members demonstrates that the population was losing faith in the central government's ability to protect them and their families.

The National Pacts declaration that Lebanon was to remain neutral in Arab affairs served as a catalyst in itself for the PLO situation, which was a catalyst for the overall civil war that broke out. I agree with Michael Hudson in that the Lebanese Civil War would not have been as chaotic or even happened at all if the Lebanese "succeeded in building a political com-munity with a system of government widely felt to be legitimate and with some positive consensus as to

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[39] Chamie, The Lebanese Civil War: An Investigation into the Causes, 183.
[40] Fisk, *Pity the Nation*, 74.
[41] Hudson, "The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War", 267.
[42] Ibid., 265.

Lebanon's role in the region".[43] That National Pact did not allow for the government to take a side, so it experienced the brunt of the attacks of both the PLO and Israel.

Syria took advantage of the flawed National Pact that Lebanon was based off of. Syria was a major proprietor of pan-Arabism, thus it did not support the creation of Israel. Lebanon was in a very militarily strategic position during the Arab-Israeli conflict. "Lebanon could be used militarily by Israel to outflank Syria's defenses or by Syria to open a new front against Israel"; hence, it was in Syria's best interest to gain a foothold in Lebanon.[44] Because Syria did not wish to upset pro-Israeli countries such as the United States, Syria launched a proxy war against Israel, using Lebanon as the proxy state. Michael Hudson claims that Syria "began pouring in enormous amounts of financial and material aid to the Palestinians through long established channels".[45] This proxy war became obvious when the Lebanese government attempted to eliminate the PLO.   President Franjiyyeh of Lebanon was unable to attack the PLO with full force in part because Syria "threatened to intervene."[46] Threats were made to stir the Muslims within Lebanon and Syria warned that cooperation would lead to Syria closing its borders to Lebanon. This would have had severe economic implications on Lebanon considering that Syria was one of the largest importers of Lebanese goods.[47] Losing a market in Syria would have led to a further decline in Lebanon's already fragile economic state.

Not only did Syria take advantage of the economic situation in Lebanon, but they took advantage of the religious sect frustrations caused by the National Pact. As mentioned earlier, the Pact established how military positions would be allocated to different religious sects; hence,

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[43] Hudson, "The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War", 262.
[44] Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985*, 36.
[45] Hudson, The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War, 268.
[46] Mohti, The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990): Causes and Costs of Conflict, 25.
[47] Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985*, 37.

the national army was in such a way that the "officer corps was dominated by Maronites but its rank and file were mainly Muslim Shias."[48] Syria could meddle in Lebanese affairs uncontested by the government because the base of the army, the primarily Muslim infantry, supported the same actions the primarily Sunni Muslim Syria was attempting to achieve. Although the Syrian attitude towards the PLO eventually changed after some "economic liberalization" reforms were enacted, it did not change before the civil war broke out.[49]

The external factors exploited the fragile Lebanese political system for their own gain. In abusing the flaws of the National Pact, these external factors spurred conflict to the point where Lebanon was an anarchic, chaotic bloodbath. While the National Pact served as a way to unite Lebanon in 1943, it helped open up the floodgates for foreign interference in what should have been strictly Lebanese affairs.

Conclusion:

Based upon the research conducted, it can be concluded that the National Pact of 1943 played a significantly large role in causing the Lebanese Civil War. Although the National Pact was a satisfactory way to unite the multi-cultural nation in 1943, it was predestined to fail due to its obstinate nature. The internal factors that caused the war were a direct result of the National Pacts failings as an organizational system on which the Lebanese could build their newly independent country around, while the external factors were primarily caused by the exploitation of the shortcomings the National Pact possessed. Under the National Pact, Lebanon was destined for a civil war of some sort; however, the war would not have occurred as quickly or been as violent had external forces remained out of Lebanon.

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[48] Mohti, The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990): Causes and Costs of Conflict, 25.
[49] Faris, The civil war in Lebanon, 179.

A situation in which an ethnic minority ruling elite governed a vast ethnic majority has been proven numerous times to be a key ingredient for a Civil War. The same situation was present in South Africa during the 20th century, where a white ruling elite reigned over a predominantly black society. Like the Maronites of Lebanon, the whites of South Africa wished "to keep a majority of the population politically subjugated"; subsequently, an extremely violent conflict ensued, similar to the conflict that occurred within Lebanon.[50] In situations similar to the ones in Lebanon and South Africa, inhabitants lose their sense of nationalism, a key component in nation building, and replace it with a strong pride in one's religious or ethnic sect in an attempt to establish some sort of community. A nation whose population loses its sense of nationalism is a nation that is destined for collapse.

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[50] Mohti, The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990): Causes and Costs of Conflict, 40-41.

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