

Martyrs' Memorials in Modern Lebanon: Representing the National via the Ethno-Religious

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A [cartoon](#) of bewildered United States soldiers trying to understand divisions in Lebanon shows us the great religious and ethno-religious diversity that is present there. Officially, there are eighteen religions in Lebanon, but a good part of this number consists of Christians—Egyptian Orthodox, Lebanese Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and more. In addition to the Christians there are the Sunni, the Shi'ites, and the Druze. A typical map of Lebanon using colors to indicate the territories of each group gives the impression that recognizable zones exist; however, they do not.

The term “ethno-religious” has more to do with what holidays an individual celebrates, what foods he eats, and which people he marries, rather than with precisely who the individual believes God is, as the term “religious” by itself would suggest. This practical usage of the label “ethno-religious” is illustrated by the fact that there is no civil authority to marry people in Lebanon, only religious authorities, and most Lebanese ethno-religious groups are endogamous.

The first case study this talk, a martyrs' memorial in Cana, should be seen in this ethno-religious context. The village of Qana (Cana) had, before the Civil War, 8,000 residents, consisting of 15 percent Christian (Greek Orthodox) and 85 percent Muslim (Shi'ite). However, after the civil war the Christian population shrank to 3 percent, for Christians had disproportionately evacuated. Nonetheless, it remains an important pilgrimage site for Christians. (Two villages in Israel also claim that the wedding miracle happened in their villages.) Rock carvings in this part of Lebanon seem to be Christian; they are very faded. There are also some paintings, which are also faded. Cana is a poor town with intermittent electricity, poor social services, and so on.

The political background for the town's memorial is rooted in an infamous Israeli bombing of a UN refuge in 1996. Cana is located in what was the Israeli Controlled Areas (ICA) of Lebanon (1978–2000). Palestinians were using South Lebanon as a base for liberation activity, and Israeli soldiers invaded Lebanon to gain access to these Palestinians, in the process killing some Lebanese citizens. Lebanon responded to the attack on their citizens at a state level. The United Nations then created a buffer zone, which was not very successful. One of the United Nations bases was in Cana. This was one of sixteen bases distributed around that zone. The mandate lasted from 1978 to 2000, but the United Nations still operates a base there.

On April 18, 1996, the Israeli Operation “Grapes of Wrath” took place. The Israeli army decided that only a massive assault on Lebanon would wipe out all the guerillas. This didn't work. In the shelling of Cana, one hundred six Lebanese people were killed, in the United Nations refuge where they had hoped to be safe. This event transformed the Arab world. The Lebanese history books call it the “Massacre of Cana”: images of the

massacre appeared on every Arab news network, and a national funeral was held in Tyre on April 27. The event was utilized by Osama bin Laden as a means of disgracing the United States, and the lead pilot of September 11 wrote his martyr's pledge two days after Cana.

Why exactly these people died is still a mystery. What was the Israeli army trying to do? We will never know. Nobody cared, in the end, why Cana had been shelled: people only stared at the pictures. One woman in the massacre was Christian, and the rest were Shi'ites. The celebration developed a special meaning: it was thought to symbolize Muslims and Christians shedding blood side by side for Lebanon. A monument was constructed (*figure 1*) and this very obscure town became the center of Lebanon. The cemetery memorial occurred in 1996, and every April 18 became a national holiday and a day of mourning.



Figure 1

At the memorial place, a cedar tree stained with red paint is a central feature of the monument. There are mass graves; the bodies were in terrible shape. Among the Arabic inscriptions are poems, slogans, and a text describing Cana as a place where Jesus and Mohammed meet to mourn together. The text has three poetic stanzas. The first has Jesus coming to Cana, becoming upset, and going to a mosque to pray. The second has Mohammed coming to Cana, becoming upset, and ringing the church bells.

The memorial reflected the joint Christian and Muslim nature of ethno-religious and national identity in Lebanon. When it was built, the memorial proved a draw for Muslims as well as modern Christian pilgrims to Cana, and was good for the economy and for garnering international attention.

This is not the first joint memorial in Lebanon to Christian and Muslim martyrs, however. Lebanon's "First Martyrs Memorial," by Yussef Hoayek, was inaugurated in downtown Beirut in 1930, under French mandate rule. Two women are depicted on this memorial, one veiled and one not, with a cedar tree and a funerary urn (*figure 2*). This is in Beirut's

Martyrs Square, which in the 1930s was ringed by cafés, palm trees, and strolling greens—a French-created urban space. Beirut is the largest city in Lebanon.



Figure 2

On May 6, 1916, during World War I, the Turks fought with the Germans against the French and the British. Meanwhile, Arab nationalists were fighting against the Ottoman rulers. While fighting British and French, the Ottomans captured the fourteen Arab nationalists and executed them publicly, in Beirut's downtown Unity Square (Place des Canons). These "traitors" were Sunni, Shiite, Maronite, and Greek Orthodox, and they became martyrs for independence, because of their religious affiliation. There were more Muslims than Christians in this execution. This is the foundational national monument in Lebanon. It was set up when the French were there, so Lebanon wasn't independent at the time of the dedication. The Yussuf Hoayek statue, which was French, was taken down in 1948, two years after the French left, and another statue was erected there in 1960 by an Italian. It is a memorial to the same martyrs; in it, a heroic female Liberty raises a torch with one arm, and has her other arm around a muscular man (*figure 3*).



Figure 3

In 2005 a huge car bomb was detonated, killing Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. This was part of a string of assassinations. Hariri was buried in Beirut, in a grave placed right next to the martyrs' statue, rather than in his family plot in Sidon. He became the lost son, and is commemorated on a stamp showing his face next to the Italian statue and the crescent and the cross. The message became: "He died for Muslim/Christian coexistence." He was coopted. Art rewrites history.

The take-home messages from this examination of art and identity are several. First, ethno-religious differences can produce national identity.

Second, public art can be used as a political tool creating an idea of Muslim-Christian parity which does not correspond to a political reality. Maronite Christians have traditionally been the most powerful group in Lebanon, but now Sunni and Shia groups are more dominant. There was no parity, and there is no parity now, but the power has shifted.

A third and related point has to do with unity in a diverse place. Sacrifice and martyrdom provides the glue to hold the nation together. Art generates a usable idea of multi-ethno-religious nationhood.

Summary by Timothy Doran