

Causes Of Civil War In Lebanon, 1970-1975

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“Realism paints a rather grim picture of world politics,” writes John Mearsheimer, a father of realist theory. “The international system is portrayed as a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other.”¹ With all these *external* threats to power, security, and sovereignty—on top of the war’s economic, political, and human costs—why would a state ever go to war with itself? IR scholars have long tried to answer this question. In some cases,² scholars may justify applying explanations for *interstate* war to a civil dispute. These include the bargaining model of war,³ which holds that war ensues when states fail to settle within a mutually agreeable bargaining range. Information failure, commitment problems, and issue indivisibilities narrow this range, making war the *attractive* option over negotiation.⁴ Another explanation for interstate war that, in some cases, could apply to civil wars is the Steps-to-War theory. This theory holds war to be increasingly likely as territorial disputes cause buildups of alliances, which in turn yield arms races, etcetera. With each new condition, the prospects of war rise.⁵

Others derive a distinct set of criteria for *civil* wars. Conventional wisdom holds that three factors help to explain the onset of civil war.⁶ First, the end of the Cold War brought with it a tide of intrastate conflict. Second, greater ethnic or religious diversity makes a country more prone to civil war. Third, internal politics and regime type is important for predicting civil war. More specifically, autocracies are more prone to civil wars than democracies, as are nations in which ethnoreligious diversity is codified into state discrimination. Fearon and Laitin, with a statistical analysis of 127 civil wars, find these three pieces of conventional wisdom unable to explain why civil wars break out. The better predictors, they find, are “conditions that favor insurgency;” *opportunity* rather than *grievance*. They test several conditions, concluding that the prime conditions for conflict are central state weakness, rough terrain, and large populations.

In this paper, I consider these factors to explain the onset of civil war in Lebanon in April 1975. I look especially at the prewar period of 1970-1975, beginning with the year of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) relocation to south Lebanon from Jordan. This came after the failed 1970 insurgency against the Hashemite crown, known by the Palestinians as Black September. The question of this paper is only the civil war's onset and the factors which contributed to it. There is great, relevant literature related to the persistence of conflict, the 1982 Israeli incursion into Lebanon, the Ta'if Agreement and the eventual 1990 resolution to the civil war,⁷ Hizb'allah's exemption from disarmament, etcetera; each topic of this panoply deserves attention in its own right that cannot be given in this paper. Overall, I find that the factors that best explain Lebanon's outbreak into civil war in April 1975 are those which illustrate the weakness of Lebanon's central government in maintaining control over its southern region.

The birth of modern Lebanon from a French mandate in the 1920s did not end Lebanon's struggle with multi-sectarianism.⁸ Despite a French-written constitution adopted in 1926, "the newly forming Lebanese political structure had to take account of the social structure of the region and it had to be amended several times to adapt to the diverse population."⁹ The result, an unwritten but sacrosanct National Pact of 1943, established a *confessional* system, privileging minorities and dividing power among the three largest sects. The President would be a Maronite Christian; the next-most-important, the Premier, would be a Sunni; the least powerful, the Speaker of the House, would be a Shi'a.¹⁰ This arrangement held for three decades, but shifting demographics (an influx of Sunni Palestinians into south Lebanon) and ideologies (a surge of Shi'a activism inspired by Musa al-Sadr) put the "complex and delicate" National Pact at risk.¹¹

This existing precariousness teetered even more fatally in September 1970. After being

decisively defeated by Jordan's King Hussein, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was expelled from Jordan and established a new home alongside an existing landscape of refugee camps in south Lebanon.¹² As this demographic, ideological, and leadership change dug roots in an already-fragile Lebanese society, tensions led to tit-for-tat attacks between Palestinian guerrillas, Maronite (*Kata'eb* or *Phalange*) locals, the Lebanese army, and other factions. On April 13, 1975, an altercation between a *Kata'eb* leader and PLO militants on a bus in Beirut's Ayn al-Rummaneh district turned violent, transforming political tensions into a full-scale civil war.¹³

What factors can explain this violent downturn that swallowed Lebanon until 1990? A rationalist argument may say that as an undemocratic guerrilla group, the PLO's costs of war were not high enough to avert violent confrontation. But far more than audience costs factor into a rebel group's move to war.¹⁴ Steps-to-War theory may provide a more complete (but still insufficient) explanation. Starting as a territorial dispute—the refugee camps in south Lebanon—the tensions between Christians, Sunnis, and Shi'a shifted the balance of power, demanding new alliances and inviting war. However, this is not enough to explain why Lebanon fell into civil war. Territory was an underlying motive of the 1970 clash with Jordan, and Jordan had more support from Israel and the U.S. than did Lebanon, and *still* avoided civil war.¹⁵ Conventional wisdom¹⁶ ostensibly answers this question, but it too falls short. Lebanon is clearly host to great ethno-religious diversity which often breeds hostility (see Figure 1).¹⁷ Demographic evaluations of Lebanon are difficult: the last official census was taken in 1932. Nonetheless, a rereading of this data by Rania Maktabi shows Lebanon as an “extreme case” of ethnic grievance, where “this [Muslim] majority has been manifest and explicit since the creation of modern Lebanon, [therefore] there was no demographic rationale for Christian political dominance.”¹⁸ A deeply sectarian

population and a parlous balance of power based on state discrimination does not negatively correlate with civil war onset, but neither do they fully explain war. Indeed, Fearon and Laitin find that “such broad factors are too common to distinguish the cases where civil war breaks out.”¹⁹

Fearon and Laitin focus on “conditions that favor insurgency.”²⁰ Each of the factors they test show that tensions escalate to civil war when central governments are too weak to thwart insurgency. This, not alliances,²¹ is the difference between Jordan’s victory in 1970 and Lebanon’s spiral into civil war in 1975 against the same rival, the PLO. Part of this weakness is due to the tenuous setup of the National Pact, forcing Christians and Muslims to share decision-making. In Jordan, anti-Palestinian sentiment pervaded, allowing a resolved crackdown by the Hashemite army.²² Another factor of state weakness is rough terrain. Fearon and Laitin note that “what matters is whether active rebels can hide from government forces.” Figure 2 shows Mt. Lebanon’s dominating topography, shielding guerrilla fighters and curbing conventional armies’ ability.

The final disadvantage for the Lebanese government was self-inflicted. Consistent with Fearon and Laitin’s thesis that insulation from government forces’ control is what allows civil wars to occur, local knowledge and primacy is a must for rebel groups. In 1969, Lebanese authorities granted the PLO jurisdiction over refugee camps in south Lebanon.²³ According to a leaked text of this “top secret” Cairo agreement in the Lebanese daily *al-Nahar*, the PLO would administer “Local Palestinian Committees [...] in refugee camps to look after the interests of Palestinian residents of the camps,”²⁴ rupturing the “tight control of the Lebanese military intelligence” over these camps.²⁵ The Cairo agreement changed Lebanon from a nation torn with ethnic division to a nation facing civil war. While many countries have the ethnoreligious diversity, territorial disputes, and struggle for power that the relocation of the PLO to Lebanon in 1970

effected, ceding administrative authority to the PLO was the turning point at which the PLO began to be enough of a strain on the Lebanese state to foster an environment for insurgency.

As Latif Abul-Husn writes, “the mushrooming of Palestinian power in Lebanon [...] eroded the credibility of Lebanon’s political, economic, and military institutions.”²⁶ Indeed, the Palestinian-Lebanese dynamic outweighs the statistics Fearon and Laitin proxy for state strength. While Lebanon’s GDP per capita exceeded peer countries in the early 1970s (and was growing), government apparatuses remained unable to stand up to the growing PLO. Moreover, Lebanon’s economic fortunes did not denote state strength—government services represented only 7% of GDP.²⁷ Further, the (relatively) unpopulous Lebanon was overwhelmed by the PLO and Palestinian refugees, enough that in 2008, the PLO formally apologized to Lebanon for “the Palestinian demographic, political, and military presence in Lebanon [that had] burdened this friendly nation in excess of Lebanon’s duties and capacities.”²⁸ Simply, the PLO overran Lebanon, discrediting the state’s ability to control its territory and straining a pool of limited resources.

Thus, the arrival of the Palestinian Liberation Organization was the tipping point that brought civil war *not on account of political or ethnic reasons*, but rather because its arrival weakened Lebanon so much that the state could no longer defend against the looming threat of civil war. As a result of the Cairo agreement, “the Lebanese state, army, and political system seemed increasingly incapable of dealing with the challenges posed by the Palestine Liberation Organization and domestic opposition groups.”²⁹ It turned the presence of the PLO in Lebanon from a matter of ethnoreligious diversity to a challenge to the strength of the central government, which Beirut was ill-prepared to win. Under these conditions of weakness, insurgency was allowed to foster until the entire nation was dragged into a civil war that would last fifteen years.

Notes

- ¹ John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions" (*International Security* 19.3, 1994) 9.
- ² Cases where seemingly intrastate disputes are heavily under the influence of external forces or the use of proxies are good candidates to be considered under the explanations for interstate war.
- ³ The bargaining model of war is most significantly laid out by Fearon (1995).
- ⁴ James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War" (*International Organization* 49.3, 1995) 379-414.
- ⁵ Paul D. Senese and John A. Vasquez, "Assessing the Steps to War" (*British Journal of Political Science* 35.4, 2005) 607-33.
- ⁶ "Conventional wisdom" here refers to the most common explanations for civil wars as determined by Fearon and Laitin (2003).
- ⁷ Although Walter (1997) finds that civil wars rarely end in negotiated settlement, the Lebanese Civil War ended with the signing of the Ta'if Agreement in 1990. However, it took three times longer than the median civil war considered by Fearon and Laitin (2003) to reach this agreement.
- ⁸ Helena Cobban, *The Making of Modern Lebanon* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).
- ⁹ Sarah Gattou, "Political Identities and the Failure of National Solutions in Lebanon" (Georgetown, 2010) 16.
- ¹⁰ Bernard Haykel, "The Transformation of Shi'i Traditions," Princeton University, 4 Nov. 2014.
- ¹¹ Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1985) 39.
- ¹² Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organization: People, Power, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge 1984).
- ¹³ B. J. Odeh, *Lebanon, Dynamics of Conflict: A Modern Political History* (London: Zed, 1985).
- ¹⁴ For example, insurgent groups such as the PLO must also consider limited access to financial resources and the availability safe havens from military and legal attack.
- ¹⁵ Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007) 530.
- ¹⁶ For obvious chronological reasons this consideration excludes the claim that the world saw an increase in civil wars as a result of the end of the Cold War.
- ¹⁷ Michael C. Hudson, "The Ethnoreligious Dimension of the Lebanese Civil War," (*Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 1.3, 1978) 34-45.
- ¹⁸ Rania Maktabi, "The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who Are the Lebanese?" (*British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 26.2, 1999) 240.
- ¹⁹ Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," 76.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ²¹ Ziv Rubinovitz, "Blue and White 'Black September': Israel's Role in the Jordan Crisis of 1970," (*The International History Review* 32.4, 2010) 687-706.
- ²² Kamal S. Salibi, *Cross Roads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958-1976* (Delmar, NY: Caravan, 1976) 53.

²³ Hussein Sirriyyeh, "The Palestinian Armed Presence in Lebanon Since 1967" in *Essays on the Crisis in Lebanon*, ed. Roger Owen (London: Ithaca, 1976) 79.

²⁴ Walīd Khaddūrī and Walid Kazzīha, "Unofficial Text of the Cairo Agreement between the Lebanese Authorities and Palestinian Commando Organizations," in *International Documents on Palestine, 1969* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1972) 804.

²⁵ Cobban, *The Making of Modern Lebanon*, 110.

²⁶ Latif Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998) 44.

²⁷ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development of the World Bank, *Current Economic Position and Prospects of Lebanon*, Rep. no. 670a-LE (1975) 4.

²⁸ Abbas Zaki, "Apology to Lebanon on Behalf of the Palestinian People, 7 January 2008 (excerpts)" (*Journal of Palestine Studies* 37.4, 2008) 163-64.

²⁹ Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985*, 63.

Appendix

Figure 1. Map of major ethnic groups in Lebanon. Reprinted from Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985*.

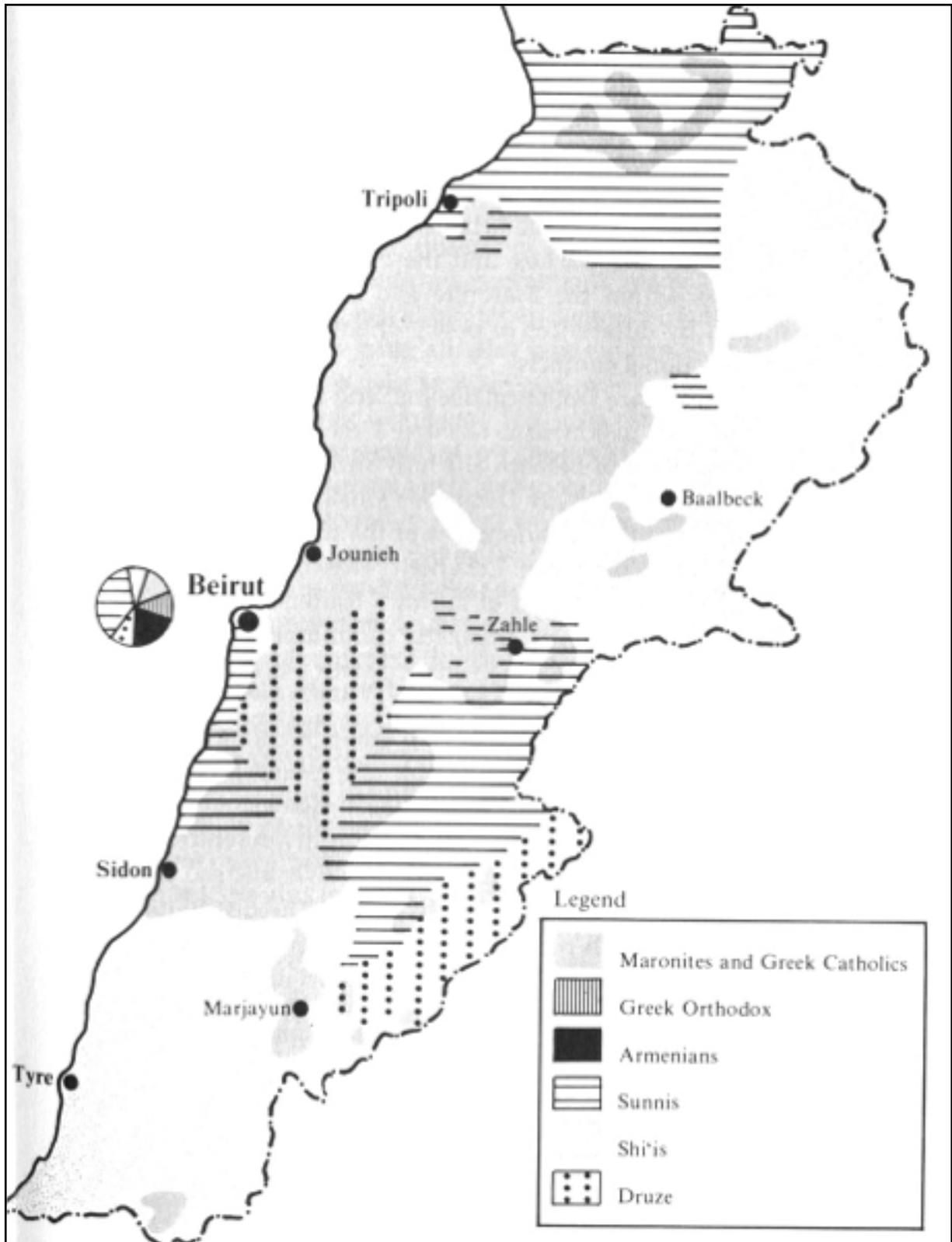
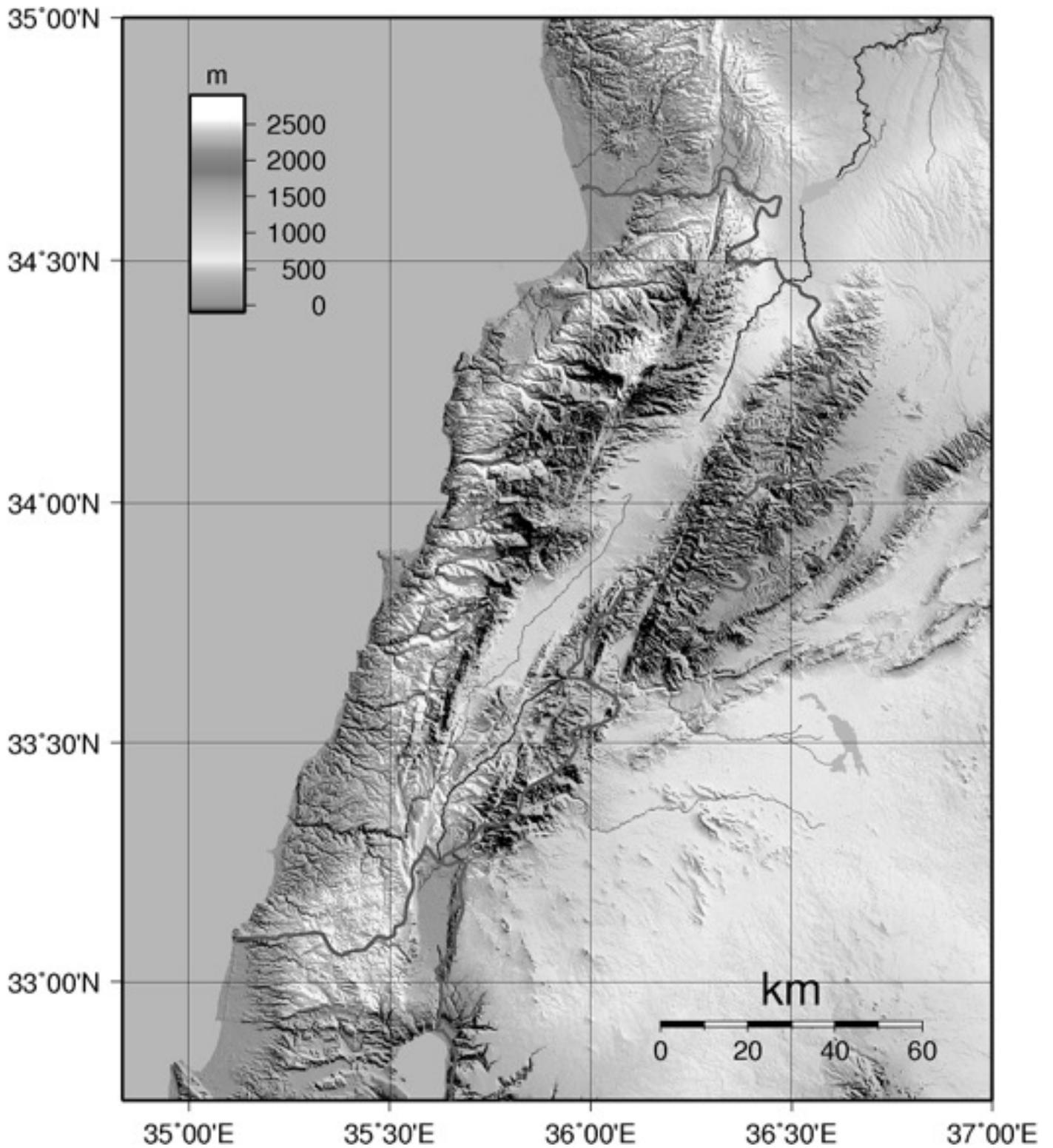


Figure 2. Public domain topographical map of Lebanon created with GMT from SRTM data by Wikipedia user Sadalmelik.



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