

# The Inherited Wars

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By [Myrna Ayad](#) June 17, 2016



In May 2012, I interviewed Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmaoui at Dar Bistro & Café, a magnet for Beirut’s bohemian intelligentsia, and the artist’s former home and studio. We walked to Hamra, one of the city’s cultural and commercial hubs, continuing our conversation on postwar Lebanon amidst the graffiti and traffic. At one point, Rechmaoui asked matter-of-factly: “Who said the Civil War ended?” His question continues to resonate.

In their work, Rechmaoui and his peers—who include Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, and Rabih Mroué—tackle the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) in a conceptual mode. These artists, born in the 1960s, witnessed the conflict unfold and struggled to understand its whys and wherefores. When the war began, they had already come of age. The generation born a decade later, at the war’s start, also confronts the subject, but does so in a different, less conceptual style. These young artists have a less direct experience of war,

but the subject still permeates their work, which is confrontational, visceral, and charged. Why should this be?

Rayanne Tabet, for example, who was born in 1983, makes work concerned with unearthing half-concealed histories and narratives; he made *Cyprus* (2015), a wooden boat that his father had rented decades ago in the hope of fleeing Lebanon with his family at the onset of war. Oussama Baalbaki (b. 1978), meanwhile, produces quiet, often black-and-white self-portraits and landscapes that address subtle anomalies, though some of his distinctly wistful paintings also image bombed-out cars and buses.

French art historian Daniel Arass refers to the generation born after the Second World War as encompassing a *mémoire sans souvenir*—a memory without remembrance. This group essentially *inherited* the memory of the wars. Having watched their parents build new lives, their parents' past became the present. “[Late Lebanese Prime Minister] Rafik Hariri wanted to wipe everything and throw away memories,” says artist Ayman Baalbaki. “Me and my generation need to talk about the wars a lot more. I haven’t talked about the wars *enough*.”

Born in 1975, Baalbaki’s first portrait was of a guerrilla fighter. Best known for rendering war-torn Beirut buildings in thick, throbbing impasto, he went on to paint more guerillas, roadblocks, and a host of iconic Lebanese buildings including the notorious sniper outpost, Burj El Murr—all of which are still presences in everyday life in Lebanon. More recently, Baalbaki has painted bombed Middle East Airlines planes. While he begins with a characteristically Lebanese subject, this is soon transformed into something more universal, a grand metaphor for the complex ramifications of violence.

Similarly, Omar Fakhoury (b. 1979) addresses “the unfinished business” of the Lebanese wars. He seeks, in his words, to “archive the present,” one example being his *Self-Defense* series, which sees him paint roadblocks, checkpoints, and barrels. For Fakhoury, these objects are both rooted in

the past and bound into the future, not least because they still punctuate Lebanon's roads. "We called it the 'Lebanese Civil War,' a title for something that happened 15 years ago, but what about its continuation?" asks Fakhoury, who has, for the past two years, been researching political monuments in Lebanon and how their shapes and meanings change with the times. "In every corner of this country, there is evidence of a conflict that is ongoing."

For Alfred Tarazi (b. 1980), an attempt to understand the present has led to an investigation into the impact of the Second World War on his family. Tarazi's maternal grandfather was an Italian engineer sent to Lebanon to work on railroads and schools. He was, says Tarazi, "part of a larger colonial project." Dressed as a veiled woman, the artist's paternal great-grandfather fled Damascus in 1860 as Christians were being killed. "Today, the same things are happening," he says. "You need to go back to 1860 to understand. Past wars have so much to do with the present situation."

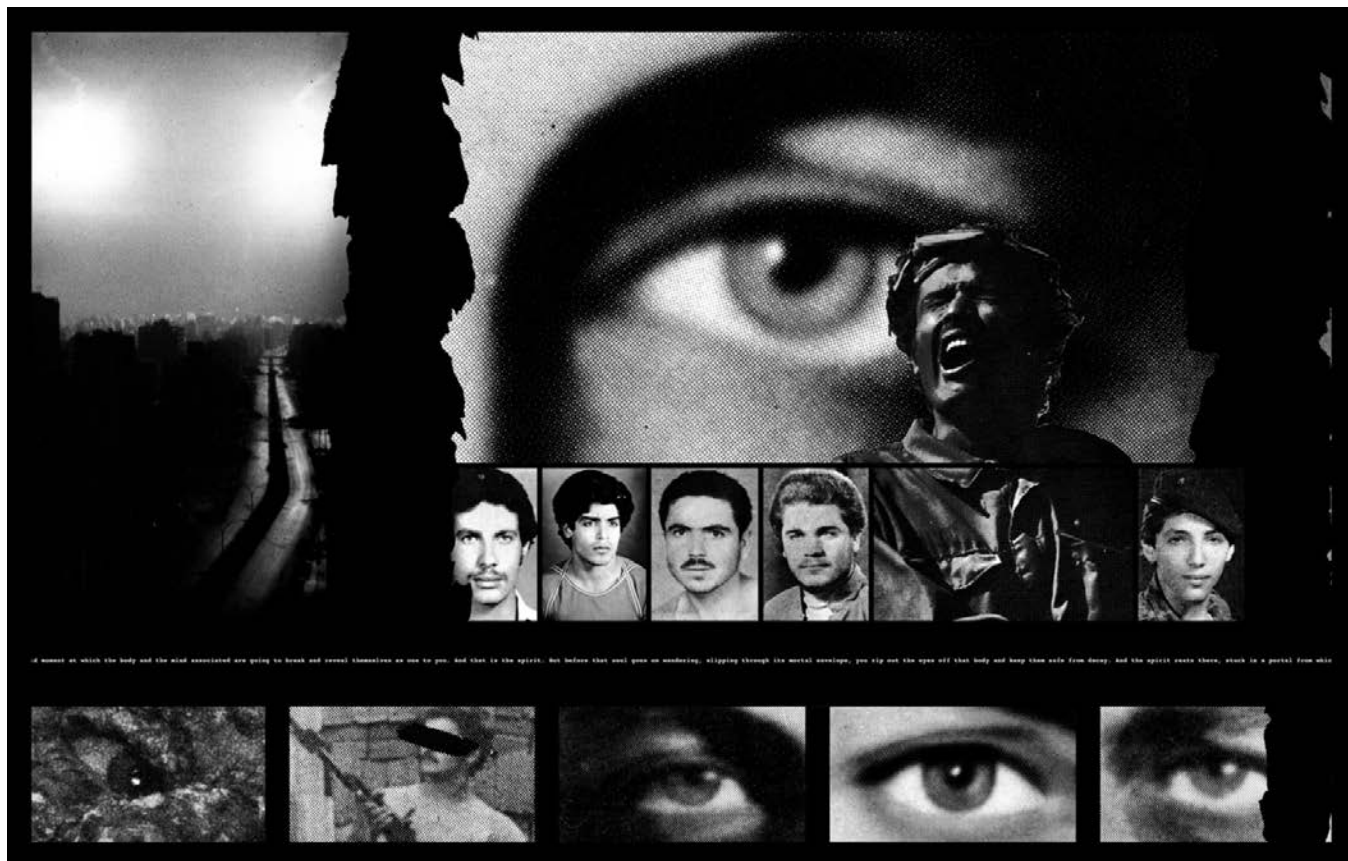
The idea of a civil war with blurred boundaries, lacking a tangible 'start' or 'stop,' isn't new. In his book, *The Second World War*, British historian Antony Beever argues: "Europe did not stumble into war on 1 September 1939. Some historians talk of a 'thirty years' war from 1914 to 1945, with the First World War as the 'original catastrophe.' Others maintain that the 'long war,' which began with the Bolshevik coup d'état of 1917, continued as a 'European Civil War' until 1945, or even lasted until the fall of Communism in 1989 . . . Arguments on the subject can go round and round, but the Second World War was clearly an amalgamation of conflicts." So too have the Lebanon wars formed an "amalgamation of conflicts," the roots, events, and consequences of which unite this younger generation of artists. They scratch at war's unhealed wound in search of a bigger picture.

In Lebanon today, the threat of war is omnipresent. Tarazi believes that this ticking time bomb may explode "because most people don't know their history well." His panorama works, rolls of collaged and painted paper that

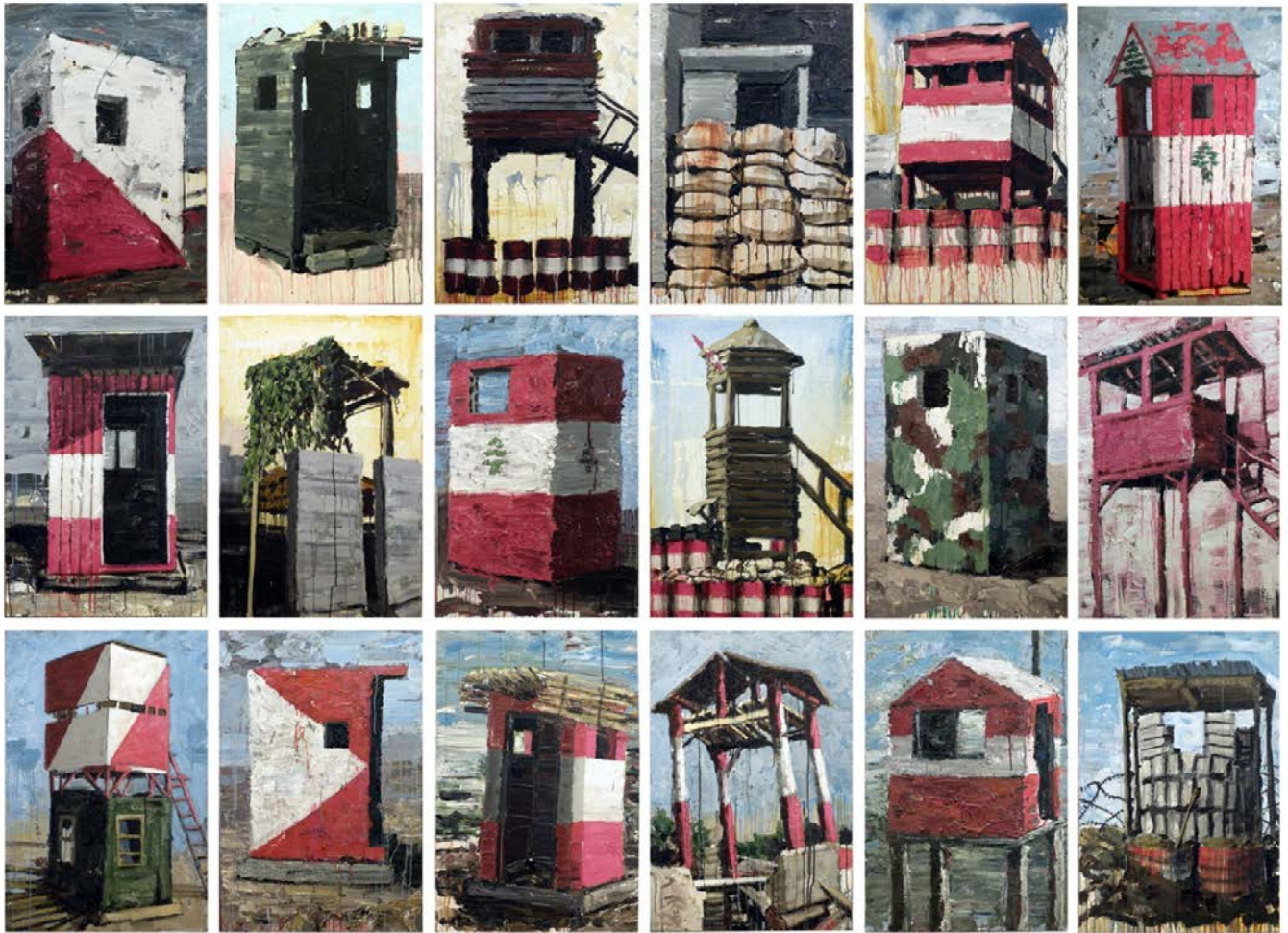
viewers can rotate, are telling in this regard; in one example, members of the Lebanese Forces are pictured on the right while those of the Amal Movement appear on the left. Turn the dial and one recreates a history that has come to pass and also one that never happened. Regressing for sake of progress is what many contemporary Lebanese artists do. While a war may end officially, its ramifications persist, and are generally far-reaching. Artists who have grown up with this hangover of war are witnesses, and conflict remains part of their verbal and visual lexicons.















Installation view: artist's former studio, Hamra, Beirut, Lebanon. Left: Ayman Baalbaki, *Al Mulatham*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Right: *Untitled* (from *Tammouz*), 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Photo: Myrna Ayad

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