

A tale of two countries: Understanding the complex Syrian and Lebanese conflicts

More homes destroyed: The site of an explosion that happened in Idlib, Syria, on Monday, injuring at least 80 people. | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

Understanding the complex history of the twin conflict zones of Syria and Lebanon is a work in progress. A number of books deepen our understanding of this conflict. Syrian history over the last seven years can be best understood when seen in continuity from the Lebanese civil war; in turn, the Lebanese civil war can be explained better by going back to World War I when the French returned to Syria after the Treaty of Versailles and established Greater Lebanon.

One book that I have repeatedly consulted in this regard is *The War for Lebanon: 1970-1983* by Itamar Rabinovich. It is an excellent account of the first fully televised civil war of our times and captures the various phases of the conflict, starting with the U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1958 and the setting up of the principal base of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in Beirut in 1972. No civil war begins with a single move and the Lebanese civil war, which was partially driven by Syria's unwillingness to surrender its sovereign rights to other regional powers, lasted for 15 years and set the template in the region. Today, while Lebanon remains on tenterhooks on account of the ongoing Syrian civil war, one needs to look at both Syria and Lebanon as two acts of a single play.

Despite the years that have passed since its publication, Thomas L. Friedman's *From Beirut to Jerusalem* remains a book of lasting importance and helps us understand the complex power play in a region that is shaped by religious and sectarian divide and the decisions and actions of ruthless politicians, and which attracts a lot of international intrigue. Friedman introduces readers to the state of play in the region in the early 1980s when Beirut was divided, Israel was waging wars against Lebanon and the PLO, and Syria was cracking down on the Sunni radicals who would gather strength decades later and challenge the government of the then President Hafez al-Assad's son and successor, Bashar al-Assad.

Many Arab authors have written about the conflict, but some of the best insights have come from fiction writers. Among them is Emily Nasrallah, who passed away in March this year. The human cost of the conflict in Lebanon and Syria is unsparingly conveyed in her short story, "What happened to Zeeko".

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