INTRODUCTION

You can't have any power in Lebanon, whether military or political, if you don't profit from drugs.

U.S. drug enforcement officer, Nicosia[1]

ALTHOUGH JUST A TINY SLIVER OF A COUNTRY, Lebanon is recognized worldwide not only for its rich cultural heritage and thriving diaspora but also for its tragic destiny. Before the Balkan wars brought the terrors of political collapse and mass murder to the doorstep of Western Europe, Lebanon provided a frightening illustration of how quickly modern civilization can descend into barbarism. Once an envied Arab model of democracy, pluralism, and affluence, Lebanon plunged seemingly overnight into civil war in 1975. It shocked the world with images of raw savagery and senseless destruction. When hostilities finally ended in 1990, the country had suffered $25 billion in damages, the emigration of more than half a million people, and the deaths of about 150,000 out of about 3.5 million inhabitants.[2] That would be equal, proportionately, to more than twelve million dead in the United States.

Lebanon did not suffer alone. Its civil war became a de facto regional conflict that sucked in neighboring Israel and Syria, along with Iraq, Iran, and Libya; the United States and France; and even the Soviet Union. It also became a demoralizing object lesson for the United States, in the wake of the Vietnam debacle, of a superpower's impotence in the face of determined local adversaries.

Long before the onset of civil war, however, Lebanon was already a leading contributor to another source of international conflict: the "war on drugs." Decades ago it became one of the world's major exporters of opiates and hashish to international markets. In the process it was corrupted by the trade as much as it profited.

In 1948 an American diplomat in Beirut commented on the "alarming" increase in hashish production from marijuana fields that were visibly spreading along one of the country's northern highways. Citing evidence that "persons in the President's entourage are prominent in this traffic," he reported that "it would take a minor revolution to break up the gang which is now operating in the Lebanese hashish market."[3]

In 1954 the commissioner of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) declared in a letter to Lebanon's ambassador that "the illicit narcotic traffic in the United States is, in a large measure, being supplied by Lebanese narcotic traffickers." An accompanying memorandum stated with even greater force: "Beirut is probably the greatest single transit port in the international traffic in narcotics. . . . Certain of the largest traffickers are so influential politically, and certain highly placed officials so deeply involved in the narcotic traffic, that *one might well state that the Lebanese Government is in the narcotic business*."[4]

In October 1960 another FBN agent reported that Lebanon was unique for its size as a "focal country in the international illicit traffic for all three categories of narcotics"—opiates, hashish, and cocaine.[5] The same day that he wrote from Beirut, narcotics agents in New York City arrested a Guatemalan diplomat and confiscated one hundred kilos of pure, white heroin, one of the largest seizures in history. The ambassador had smuggled hundreds of pounds of morphine base from Lebanon to France, where underworld chemists refined it into heroin worth more than $12 million at wholesale. The case was one of the biggest made against what would come to be popularly called "the French Connection." The seizure forced U.S. authorities to dramatically revise upward their estimates of the size of the international heroin traffic. Beirut's drug lords, they now figured, were exporting one hundred kilos of heroin precursor *every month*.[6]

Ten years later, in June 1970, Attorney General John Mitchell announced that federal agents had just pulled off the largest nationwide narcotics raid in history, arresting 135 suspects in ten major cities across the country. The ring was allegedly responsible for an astonishing 30 percent of the heroin and 75 percent of the cocaine sold at wholesale in the United States. Although the cocaine hailed from the Andes, this book will show for the first time that much of the heroin came from labs in Lebanon.[7]

Americans who preferred to "trip" on softer drugs in the 1960s and 1970s could buy domestic or Mexican marijuana on almost any street corner. But for the highest quality, most powerful high, no "weed" could match Lebanese hashish. Young wanderers began traveling the "hippie trail" to Lebanon in search of

its famed product—all too often landing in jail. Meanwhile, multi*ton* seizures of Lebanon's potent hashish on the Eastern Seaboard became routine testimony to the staggering size of this transoceanic trade.

By 1990 Lebanon found itself at the center of politically explosive allegations that its Syrian occupiers had turned the fertile Bekaa Valley into a giant drug production zone, piling up profits for corrupt rulers in Damascus while exporting "narco-terrorism" to the West. The truth, as we will see, is that both Israel and Syria took advantage of their enclaves in Lebanon to privilege traffickers who cooperated with their respective intelligence services.

Though never as notorious as Colombia in the era of the Medellin "cartel" or Mexico today with its bloody drug wars, Lebanon fostered crime and corruption on a scale grand enough to qualify it as one of the modern era's first true "narco-states." Although the term has more shock value than analytical rigor, it accurately suggests the extent to which the drug trade permeated Lebanon's economy and engaged its political rulers, economic elites, and peasant farmers. As we will see, more than a few presidents, prime ministers, members of parliament, judges, police chiefs, and bankers were implicated in this enormously profitable but illicit enterprise.

After 1975, with the onset of civil war and the breakdown of state institutions, Lebanon arguably declined from a narco-state to a "failed state." While this term, too, is subject to the usual academic debate,[8] it broadly applied to Lebanon from 1975 to 1990:

> What is central to a failed state is that the state apparatus is unable to uphold an effective monopoly of violence over its whole territory, lacks an effective judicial system to guard the rule of law and promulgate judgments that are internationally regarded as legitimate and sound . . . and cannot prevent various forms of transnational economic crime or the use of its territory for the perpetration of violence (politically motivated or otherwise) against other states in the international system.[9]

The collapse of state authority in Lebanon only strengthened the hold of drugs on the country's shrinking economy and on competing political and military forces. Exports of hashish and heroin sustained not only the rural population but rival militia organizations that had to raise millions of dollars to finance weapons purchases and bloated payrolls.

During this period authorities on the international drug trade described Lebanon as a "prime example where terrorist factions take advantage of the

drug traffic to obtain the necessary logistics to carry out their activities" in the furtherance of "civil war and transnational terrorism," to quote John Warner, chief of the Drug Enforcement Administration's International Programs Staff.[10] Lebanon represented the leading edge of what another senior DEA official in 1985 called "a major change in the historical pattern of drug trafficking" from a focus on profits to the involvement of "rural insurgents, urban terrorists, liberation movements, arms traffickers, left and right wing political groups and high-level officials . . . to finance political objectives." He added, ominously, "This expanding use of drug trafficking for political purposes has already had an effect on, and could have far-reaching implications for, drug law enforcement worldwide and U.S. foreign policy."[11]

Considering the importance of the drug trade to modern Lebanon's tragic history, and the importance in turn of Lebanon to the rise of the international drug trade in the post–World War II era, the story of its deep entanglement with narcotics has received remarkably little systematic attention by historians or other scholars.[12] Major histories of twentieth-century drug trafficking barely mention Lebanon at all.[13] The one published book on the country's drug economy, by a Lebanese agronomist, offers surprisingly little detail on the history or politics of trafficking.[14] The case of Lebanon earned chapter-length consideration in a pioneering but highly politicized account of "narco-terrorism," defined by the author as "the use of drug trafficking to advance the objectives of certain governments and terrorist organizations."[15] A handful of penetrating scholarly essays have used Lebanon to illuminate the connection between drugs, militia, and civil war, but they are short and thematic rather than richly detailed.[16]

As a contributor to the academic and journalistic literature on drug trafficking in various other parts of the world, I hope to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge of this overlooked subject, with a focus on the years 1950 to 1990. I write this study with humility, since I am not a scholar of Lebanese history and can read Arabic and Hebrew sources only in translation. Nonetheless, by pulling together a large body of untapped material, I hope to illuminate the intersection of crime, politics, and war in Lebanon and motivate others to shine further light on it.

Finding and assessing sources involving criminality and corruption can be difficult and treacherous. I have drawn extensively from archives of formerly secret U.S. government files, supplemented by interviews with retired narcotics agents. Published government reports and academic histories of Lebanon

offered valuable nuggets. I also combed through a large number of contemporary accounts from brave and enterprising reporters, published in more than eighty news outlets in more than a dozen countries. Not surprisingly, given the unique challenge of reporting on the underground economy in the midst of a vicious conflict, these accounts leave holes and may contain errors. Taken together, however, they paint a striking picture of the extraordinary contribution of drug profits to fueling the engines of Lebanon's civil war.

Needless to say, all accounts of the drug trade must be examined skeptically. "Lebanon was always awash in rumors and intrigue, so it was very hard to filter out fact from fiction," one former U.S. drug agent cautioned me. "There were so many competing elements who would disparage each other, floating rumors and disinformation."[17] Skepticism is also warranted toward estimates of the magnitude of the traffic, a matter I discuss in the appendix.

Due caution is especially wise given the extreme political passions that drugs arouse. Drug charges have the power not merely to stain individual reputations but, in the modern era, to justify wars. In December 1989 the United States launched Operation Just Cause to overthrow the regime of Gen. Manuel Noriega in Panama, citing his affiliations with drug traffickers as a rationale. Not long thereafter, partisans of Israel compared Syria's leaders to Noriega, calling on Washington to take similar "decisive action" against the allegedly drug-tainted rulers of Damascus.[18] In view of these stakes I have tried, however imperfectly, to acknowledge ambiguities in the evidence and to treat one-sided indictments critically.

DIVIDED WE FALL

Although Lebanon's flourishing drug trade provided essential resources to sustain and inflame the civil war, and even triggered flash points contributing to the outbreak of full-scale violence in 1975, the major causes of the conflict lay elsewhere. Those causes resist simple explanation, but most experts agree they centered on long-standing, unresolved tensions between Lebanon's disparate confessional groups and sects, which were aggravated by the polarizing Arab-Israeli conflict and compounded by the destructive interference of Cold War superpowers and their proxies:

> The sources of Lebanon's conflict can also be seen in more political terms, not as a rivalry between confessional communities, but as a competition over the reform of state institutions. This competition was waged between a diverse set

> of political groups divided between a traditional and patrimonial ruling class and competing modernist left-wing and right-wing ideological parties. These actors appealed in their mobilisation strategies both to political platforms and to the diverse and overlapping ethnic and cultural affiliations of Lebanon's population. The Lebanese civil war originated from the concurrence of this competition with a security crisis induced by Palestinian guerrilla groups. When war broke out in 1975, state authority fragmented and diverse militant parties and local defence groups replaced state security agencies.[19]

Still other scholars have traced the fault lines in Lebanese politics to the psychological fragility of a society based on minority groups, each insecure of its position after the end of Ottoman and French rule. Insecurity in turn bred a sense of victimization and even paranoia. "Long before the war began," argues Mounir Elkhamri, "the Lebanese were enmeshed in a political and psychological 'economy of scarcity' which left everyone feeling both vulnerable and opportunistic, and thus prone to aggressiveness."[20]

Lebanon was a unique half-Christian, half-Muslim enclave carved out of the remains of the Ottoman Empire. Within the region known as Greater Syria, Christians were a small minority. They consisted mainly of Greek Orthodox living in Beirut and Catholic Maronites who occupied fortified villages on Mount Lebanon. As far back as 1861 the Maronites sought the protection of Christian Europe, convincing France to intervene on their side in a dispute with members of the Druze, a monotheistic religious sect indigenous to the region. As a result, the Maronites won a degree of local autonomy. After World War I, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Maronites again appealed to France; the Clemenceau government, having imposed a protectorate over Syria under a mandate from the League of Nations, carved out Greater Lebanon. Its enlarged borders, including the mostly Shiite Bekaa Valley, encompassed an all-too-slight Christian majority—enough to aggrieve Muslims, who had long enjoyed majority status under the Ottomans, but not enough to alleviate Christian apprehensions about becoming outnumbered. Under French administration, Maronites dominated local government, the army, the courts, and licensed businesses. They enjoyed access to the best schools, including French language instruction that was essential for political, social, or business advancement.[21] "Of all the Christian communities in the country," notes Walid Khalidi, the Maronites were "the most conscious of their group identity, the best organized politically and militarily, and the most articulate and militant."[22]

France finally granted Lebanon its independence in November 1943. Preparing for that day, Christian and Muslim leaders hammered out an agreement called the National Pact, a power-sharing arrangement along confessional lines. It divided the spoils of government based on the country's last official census in 1932, which gave the Christians a slight edge in population. Under the pact, Christians claimed the country's powerful presidency, which had veto power over legislation, the power to appoint the prime minister, and the right to preside over a council of ministers. Sunni Muslims had a lock on the prime minister's office. The speaker of parliament was reserved for a Shiite Muslim. Within the parliament, or Chamber of Deputies, Christians were to outnumber Muslims and Druze six to five. Just as important, Lebanon's army, the final arbiter of political power, was always commanded by a Christian general, as was the powerful head of military intelligence (Deuxième Bureau).

The National Pact attempted to preserve social peace by giving each of the country's major confessional groups a say in governance, while reassuring the Christians of their local privileges and security in a region of Muslims. Originally a symbol of mutual compromise, it ultimately became a major source of popular grievances. At bottom it signified not a healthy spirit of collaboration but the deep and lingering distrust between Lebanon's various groups. It continuously reinforced each individual's sense of belonging to a sect or religious community first and a country second. Its rigid formula, unresponsive to the country's political and demographic evolution, froze political inequalities into place. As a result, Lebanon's "constrained democracy" offered few good political avenues for challenging glaring economic and social inequities.[23]

Last but not least, the pact tended to perpetuate the status quo of pervasive clientelism and corruption in Lebanese political and social relations. These ills were fed by personal loyalties to family, clan, and village that outweighed loyalty to the state or nation. The system sustained a privileged class of political bosses, many of them from powerful landowning families, known as the *zuama*. As these elites competed for power, wealth, and status, their ability to command the loyalty of entire communities generated social strife and helped to keep the country fragmented.[24]

REGIONAL CONFLICTS

Aggravating Lebanon's internal tensions were a series of regional political and military storms that battered Lebanon like a small buoy in a large and violent ocean. Lebanon was still in its infancy as an independent state when Jewish

nationalists defeated Arab armies and created the state of Israel. More than one hundred thousand Palestinian refugees fled north to Lebanon, where they settled—supposedly only temporarily—in United Nations–sponsored refugee camps. Native Lebanese felt torn between sympathy for their fellow Arab victims, resentment at the sheer number and growing influence of these foreigners, and disagreement over the proper course of relations with Israel.

Regional Arab nationalism and Cold War proxy rivalries also widened Lebanon's political divisions. In 1956 Israel, France, and Great Britain seized the Suez Canal, making Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser an instant hero to Arab nationalists, including many Lebanese Muslims. Fear of pan-Arab radicalism gripped conservative monarchies in the region and their American and British patrons, who formed a regional working group in Beirut to combat the perceived new threat.[25] Within Lebanon the Americans found an ally in President Camille Chamoun, a French-educated former diplomat and strong defender of Christian privilege, who conspicuously supported Western intervention against Nasser.[26] With Chamoun's backing, the CIA poured cash into the June 1957 Lebanese parliamentary elections to back pro-Western candidates against Nasserite rivals. Unfortunately, the heavy-handed intervention cost many traditional Muslim leaders their seats, provoking cries of outrage. Meanwhile, a bungled coup attempt in Damascus by the CIA and British intelligence prompted Syria first to invite teams of Russian advisers and then to accept a federal union with Egypt—the United Arab Republic—which alarmed both Lebanese Christian leaders and the Eisenhower administration.[27]

Lebanon's religious fault lines began slipping conspicuously. Emboldened Muslims rioted in the spring of 1958 when an antigovernment newspaper editor was murdered and rumors circulated that President Chamoun planned to amend the Constitution to run for a second term. In July pro-Soviet Iraqi army officers seized power in Baghdad and murdered the royal family. Terrified that he would become the next victim of Arab radicalism, Chamoun declared a state of emergency. President Eisenhower acted quickly to reaffirm the relevance of U.S. power in the oil-rich region and "see that the Persian Gulf area stays within the Western orbit," as he put it to the British prime minister. Eisenhower ordered the Sixth Fleet offshore and landed fourteen thousand marines in Beirut. Under occupation the Chamber of Deputies elected the respected army commander Fuad Chehab, a moderate reformer, to replace Chamoun as president in September. Calm returned as popular fears of a Chamoun dictatorship dissipated. The marines soon withdrew without a fight. But as former CIA officer

Victor Marchetti noted, "What had been perhaps the most stable state in the Middle East was on the road to total polarization and eventual disintegration."[28]

Ironically, while Western intervention on behalf of Lebanon's Maronite leadership had helped trigger the crisis, it was the Maronites who emerged feeling especially insecure. President Chehab, himself a Maronite, disturbed hardcore co-religionists by appointing large numbers of Muslims to a government of reconciliation. Christian leaders were keenly aware of the demographic tide favoring Muslims and the political tide seemingly favoring Nasserism. "Long-term trends in Lebanon clearly favor some increase in Moslem influence and greater identification with Arab nationalism in general," noted a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Lebanon in 1960. Although the assessment did not predict a serious attempt by Lebanon's Muslims either to unite with the UAR or to suppress "pro-West or Christian elements," it cited

> considerable apprehension, not only among Christians, that the next parliament will be dominated by Moslem extremists bent on destroying the delicate balance of the confessional system. Many Christian politicians fear that UAR influence and money, chiefly originating in Syria, will be used to bring this about, with the aim of controlling Lebanon if not actually absorbing it. They insist that strong Western support is needed to enable their forces to rally and to counter the trend.[29]

Chehab and his successor, Charles Helou, ran relatively technocratic governments that presided over rising prosperity. Relying heavily on the military intelligence service, the Deuxième Bureau, they undercut the power of traditional political bosses. Under their leadership, and with the help of a regional petroleum boom, Beirut strengthened its position as the Arab world's financial center and a major trading hub. Their administrations brought roads, schools, and electric power to long-neglected Shiite villages for the first time.[30] Had reforms continued and the wider region remained calm, Lebanon might have healed or at least coped with many of its social divisions.

Unfortunately, the Six Day War of 1967 shattered any such prospects. In addition to inflaming the passions of many Arabs, the fighting and its aftermath galvanized Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to escalate their guerrilla raids and terror attacks against Israel. Israel, in turn, launched devastating reprisal raids that exposed the impotence of Lebanon's military.

Responding to Israeli pressure, the Lebanese government attempted to crack down on Palestinian commandos. The army skirmished with Palestinians throughout much of 1969, antagonizing many Lebanese Muslims without

decisive results. That November, in Cairo, Al Fatah leader Yasir Arafat reached an agreement with the Lebanese army, calling off the fighting, and supposedly reining in the guerrillas, but giving the Palestinians substantial autonomy over their camps in southern Lebanon. Many Christians, including Pierre Gemayel, Maronite leader of the Phalange (Kataeb) Party, bitterly opposed the agreement. As Palestinian raids and Israeli reprisals continued, animosity grew between the Christians, who favored using the army to crack down on the unwelcome Palestinians, and Lebanese Muslims, who sympathized with their cause.

This destabilizing influence of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute on Lebanese politics and society deepened after the expulsion of Palestinian militants from Jordan in late 1970, following their failed attempt to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy. The arrivals of thousands of new guerrillas swelled Palestinian numbers in Lebanon to about four hundred thousand. Many radicals felt no obligation to abide by the Cairo Accord. They arrogantly challenged the Christian-led Lebanese army, kept southern Lebanon in turmoil, and drove a further wedge between fearful Christians and Muslims. The government of Suleiman Franjieh (1970–76), a corrupt and relatively unsophisticated Maronite strongman, proved woefully inadequate to the growing challenge.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

Compounding these political divisions were social grievances born of great disparities of wealth and development. An American visitor in 1950 remarked, "There are only two classes of people in Beirut, the very rich and the very poor, no middle-class."[31] In 1965 former president Chehab told the Beirut newspaper *Le Soir* in his first public statement after leaving office, "18 percent of the population control 60 percent of the national income; the remaining 82 percent of the population own only 40 percent of the income. So, is it logical to expect the rising generations—the generations of high education, the transistor era and the era of television and other information media—to keep quiet about this unfair distribution of wealth?"[32] The inequality was particularly notable between groups; Lebanese Christians, for example, on average earned 58 percent more than the country's Shiites.[33]

Decadent rich who played alongside abject poverty made these inequalities all the more glaring. "Beirut's sweet life," one journalist observed in 1971,

> seems to be getting sweeter all the time. In an area increasingly turning to puritanical revolutionary regimes, Beirut remains the last of the Middle East fleshpots,

> frivolous and rollicking. . . . In Beirut, men have made fortunes bringing in arms through the free port, indifferent as to whether they end up in the hands of royalists or revolutionaries, Palestinians or Israelis. In Beirut, too, men prosper by importing blondes from Europe who are agreeable—for a pretty penny indeed—to spend three to six months as concubines for oil-wealthy desert sheiks. . . . In Beirut, the Saudi prince doffs his desert robes and dons his well-cut suit from Saville Row, and his wife sheds her long black veil for the latest Parisian fashions.[34]

Only a few miles from Beirut's luxury high-rise apartments and world-class restaurants, however, were squalid Shiite slums and Palestinian refugee camps. Druze villages without power or telephone service lay only an hour's drive from the country's sophisticated international financial and trade center.[35] Such divisions encouraged identity politics, based either on shared grievances or shared fear of losing privileges. Affluent Christians could not help but be alarmed at the specter of huge numbers of poor Muslims living in Beirut's "misery belt," absorbing the radical doctrines espoused by Palestinian activists.

The start of the civil war itself is typically dated by historians to April 1975, when a bloody clash between Christian militia and Palestinian commandos unleashed an orgy of violence that soon engulfed all groups in the country. The war is frequently characterized as having three major phases: 1975–77, which saw fierce fighting in Beirut leading to the city's division between Christian and Muslim sectors across the "green line"; 1978–82, a period of escalated fighting, involving both Syrian and Israeli forces, culminating in Israel's massive invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 and the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon; and 1983–90, during which Israel sponsored a Christian-led army in the South, the Shiite Hezbollah emerged as a radical force, and Syria tightened its control over major parts of the country, ultimately wielding its power to enforce an imperfect political accord.

Unlike many civil wars, spawned by an ambitious insurgent group's effort to radically change or overthrow the state, Lebanon's had a peculiarly defensive character—fueled by group distrust that morphed into hatred and threw the country back into a Hobbesian state of nature. In the ensuing melee there were no hard-and-fast rules. Temporary alliances formed across confessional or sectarian lines, while murderous rivalries among presumed allies claimed numerous victims. As we will see, one of the few shared interests that encouraged intergroup cooperation during the long conflict was the same drug trade that financed the violence.

STATE FAILURE AND CIVIL WAR

Lebanon's plight became an ugly universal metaphor for grotesque communal violence and terror. As William Harris notes, the French dictionary *Larousse* in 1991 may have been the first reference work to define the word *Lebanonization* ("Libanisation") to mean the "process of fragmentation of a state, as a result of confrontation between diverse communities."[36] Its only parallel was the term *Balkanization* to describe the divided and warring communities in southern Europe.

Lebanon's agonies, like those of the Balkans, aroused renewed interest after 9/11, with the recognition that weak and failed states could become breeding grounds for international terrorism, transnational crime, and other threats to order and security.[37] Policy makers and scholars have also become increasingly aware of the reverse—the growing power of criminal organizations to corrupt state institutions and subvert the rule of law. The result may be weakened states, the rise of criminal "shadow states," and at the extreme, state failure and unchecked violence.[38]

I hope with this study of Lebanon to accelerate the nascent investigations of these connections. As Peter Andreas has complained, "The criminalized dimensions of intrastate conflicts . . . tend to be neglected, underexplored, or treated too narrowly and one-dimensionally by students of world politics. . . . More broadly, Security Scholars have traditionally shied away from examining the 'covert world.' . . . Smugglers, arms traffickers, and quasi-private criminal combatants are typically not treated as central players. This is strikingly apparent by the virtual absence of these actors from the pages of the leading international relations and security journals."[39]

I also aim to shed light on the causes of civil war and state failure. Case studies of state failure—or, as Lebanon's example is sometimes termed, state collapse—typically identify several common syndromes that afflict societies in its aftermath: the tendency of people to seek protection in familiar kin, ethnic, linguistic, or confessional groups once the wider bonds of social trust have been shattered; the growth of militia, paramilitary groups, and even foreign military forces to fill the vacuum left by the demise of state security forces; the creation of "quasi-states" as these new armed groups organize and defend territories within the former state; and—most relevant to this study—the emergence of "war economies," based on predation, smuggling, and other criminal activities, to support their ongoing military enterprise.[40] As we will see, Lebanon exemplified all of these characteristics during its civil war.

Civil conflict is, of course, both a potential cause and a frequent consequence of state failure. One influential and provocative school of economists has argued that social and political grievances typically assumed to be the causes of civil wars are usually smokescreens for baser motives—greed, for short. In particular these analysts highlight competition over rents from valuable primary commodities—such as oil, blood diamonds, or timber—as motivating such conflicts.

Lebanon's civil war provides plenty of grist for a test of this thesis. As we will see, the verdict is mixed. But the drug trade did weaken the legitimacy of state institutions and contributed to intergroup conflict before the outbreak of civil war. Once the war began, Lebanon's illicit "war economy" both enabled and helped motivate a prolongation of the country's deadly conflict. The proceeds of the country's drug trade, estimated at up to a billion dollars a year, provided militia leaders with the resources to pay their fighters a regular salary and arm them with the best weapons—assault rifles, armored vehicles, rocket-propelled grenades, and artillery—that money could buy on the gray and black markets. In time the competition over drug profits became a key driver of positional battles between rival armies that jockeyed for control over routes and ports through which drugs were transported.