

## FORMER PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATIONS AS A PROXY FOR CIVIL DEFENSE: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND LEBANON

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**Abstract:** Lebanon and Bosnia and Herzegovina share many commonalities involving sectarian and inter-ethnic strife, power-sharing agreement and the multitude of former and current paramilitary and revolutionary organizations. In the greater political view, the roles of paramilitary organizations are often controversial and problematic; however, during the times of civil-emergency, they often fill the niche of the missing first-responders. In Lebanon, a fragmented country, mired in an economic turmoil with occasional outbursts of sectarian violence, the emergency response and assistance are severely curtailed, which was evident in the sluggish response to the Beirut Port Explosion. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country mired in the continuous power-struggle among the nationalistic parties, the emergency response is inefficient and fragmented. This paper examines the unique role of former revolutionary organizations in Beirut which have taken the form of de-facto civic organizations and formed the backbone of emergency response, clean-up, and aid distribution. The study outlines several examples where the former revolutionary organizations mobilized and utilized their command authority, hierarchy, and community roles to provide an effective and sustainable emergency response. In Bosnia, the study outlines the cases of community-based organization under the vestiges of the old general communal self-protection. The results indicate that the lessons-learned from the years of civil-strife in Lebanon and vestiges of communal-defence in Bosnia have contributed to the relief distribution, cooperation across the sectarian/ethnic lines and coordination with external NGOs and state actors. Given the magnitude of the recent events (explosions and natural disasters), the role of civic organizations and their strategic approach to emergency response is instrumental to limiting further loss of life and deterioration of the overall security situation.

**Keywords:** Emergency response, Civic Organization, Civil Defence, Communal Defence, Bosnia, Lebanon

### Introduction

This study is comparing Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which share many similarities in the post-conflict, political, security and emergency-response arena mired in a

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complex power-sharing arena. The principal idea is to understand the methods and means which can be mobilized to provide a functional and effective emergency response. The current “consociate” governance model employed in both countries is less than adequate from the point of an integrated emergency response. In Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the ruling elites tend to exploit the public sector as a resource for providing favours, employment, or other benefits to their connections, who are usually from the same sect/ethnic group/party which results in the bloated, ineffective, and corrupt public sector (Yaqoobi, 2022). At the outbreak of major natural or industrial disasters, like the Beirut Port explosion (August 2020), the floods (2014 and 2019) and wildfires (2013, 2017 and 2021) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the structural failures of the public emergency-response sector came due (Smailbegovic & Korajlic, 2021).

## Background

In the immediate wake of the collapse of the Lebanese state, including the division of the Lebanese Armed Forces along the sectarian lines at the onset of the Lebanese conflict in 1975, many of the current Lebanese paramilitary forces came into existence. The principal reason for the organization was to fill the security power-vacuum as various communities took means and measures to protect themselves. The militias were closely associated with various political forces which sought to control the communal leadership and expand territorial which translated to a greater control over the fragmented political system (Jalil, 2021).

Former Yugoslavia, always living in the shadow of a possible European conflagration and Soviet/Warsaw-pact invasion during the 1960’s and 1970’s had employed the concept of general preparedness called *general (total) national defence and communal self-protection*. This concept had instituted a heavy reliance on the local communities to consider and implement all possible scenarios related to the hostilities, as well as response during the times of national emergencies and natural calamities (Nikezić & Đorđević, 1986). Some of these basic building-blocks have been integrated into the present-day emergency-preparedness and crisis-response scenarios, particularly in Serbia-Montenegro-Kosovo-Northern Macedonia and to extent Bosnia-Herzegovina, where certain provisos of the former state’s (Yugoslavia) emergency planning remain ingrained in the present-day organization, particularly in the civil defence sector (Smailbegovic & al., 2021). The principal idea that was drilled-and-planned for was that in the case of a major calamity, the local communities would have an underlying structure and means to organize themselves and present an organizational-unit that could be expanded, replicated or overprinted onto a larger whole – in a way mimicking the way the Tito’s partisan organization liberated the territory during WW2 (Leary, 1995).

## Disaster emergency problems

The Beirut blast which occurred on August 4, 2020, heavily damaged 50,000 residential houses, along with 178 schools and 9 hospitals, including a children’s specialized hospital (Al-Hajj, et al., 2021). The event immediately overwhelmed the ability of Beirut hospitals, emergency medical services (EMS) agencies, first responder agencies, and other responding agencies to stage any type of effective response. The blast also upended all emergency communications, including the crucial communication between hospitals, rescuers and EMS, especially since the hospitals within a 5-mile radius from the explosion site were

affected at the same time (El Sayed, 2020). Three major hospitals (Karantina Hospital, St. George Hospital University Medical Centre and Wardyeh Hospital) were completely obliterated by the blast resulting in the total loss of capacity. Remaining hospitals in the metropolitan area sustained partial damage and were expected to take up the stream of casualties. To add to the problem, the bulk of the national stock of medications was also compromised by the blast resulting in the loss of 17 containers of medical supplies, which were located near the ground-zero of the blast (World Health Organization, 2020).

Various calls for assistance, from the government but also from non-governmental entities helped scale up the emergency response with the required search-and-rescue, field aid stations and personnel with adequate skills and equipment arriving within hours to Lebanon and launching operations as early as the evening of the explosion. The incident command structure, developed with considerable cost and effort through the U.S. programs for Lebanese Armed Forces (Souaiby, 2017) allowed for responding agencies to integrate into a response framework with clearly delineated roles and responsibilities. A major challenge the government agencies faced in the response were in relation to the private sector and the community response with several NGOs asking the international community to bypass the government agencies because of concerns for corruption and the deep political influence of the certain non-state actors (El Sayed, 2020). The reported "challenge" was only the tip of the iceberg because many of the Beirut's districts have already self-organized and set up parallel relief efforts mainly along sectarian lines, following the chain-of-command already existing from the 17<sup>th</sup> October protests more commonly known as the 17 October Revolution. This Revolution saw a unique mix of interethnic support for a changing of the old guard. In many instances, lifetime politicians, and a revamping of the way politics operate in The Lebanese Republic. During the ongoing protests a series of new non-profits organizations sprang into existence with heavy funding from Lebanese elite in addition to the diaspora. These grassroots NGOs quickly gained popular notoriety and support through heavy social media presence and well-organized leadership backed by ample donations and physical goods. In some cases, these budding NGOs gained thousands of followers that would both contribute and receive equipment, food, and transportation for the ongoing protests. Predetermined distribution hubs, rally points and full-scale kitchens along with supplies and treatment for injured participants became normal daily work for these organizations. Organization through leadership, collaboration with other NGOs, critical supply chain management, and alternative means of communication were created and honed through roughly 9.5 months of revolutionary protest. It is also important to note that many of these organizations find roots in parties formed after the previous Cedar Revolution which was the outgrowth of militia-based wartime structure and chain of command.

Bosnia-Herzegovina faced several considerable natural disasters that have significantly tested and in places disrupted cobbled up emergency response sector. The floods of May 10-14, 2014 have caused considerable damage and destruction from the torrential rainfall delivering three months of rain in under 72 hours. The event is considered the region's worst flood in more than 120 years of record-keeping. More than 40 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina was thought to be in some level of flooding. The floodwater destroyed nearly 100,000 structures and homes, killed thousands of livestock animals, and exposed or moved many landmines that were emplaced during the 90's conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The disaster response took an unprecedented engagement of local, regional, and state-wide

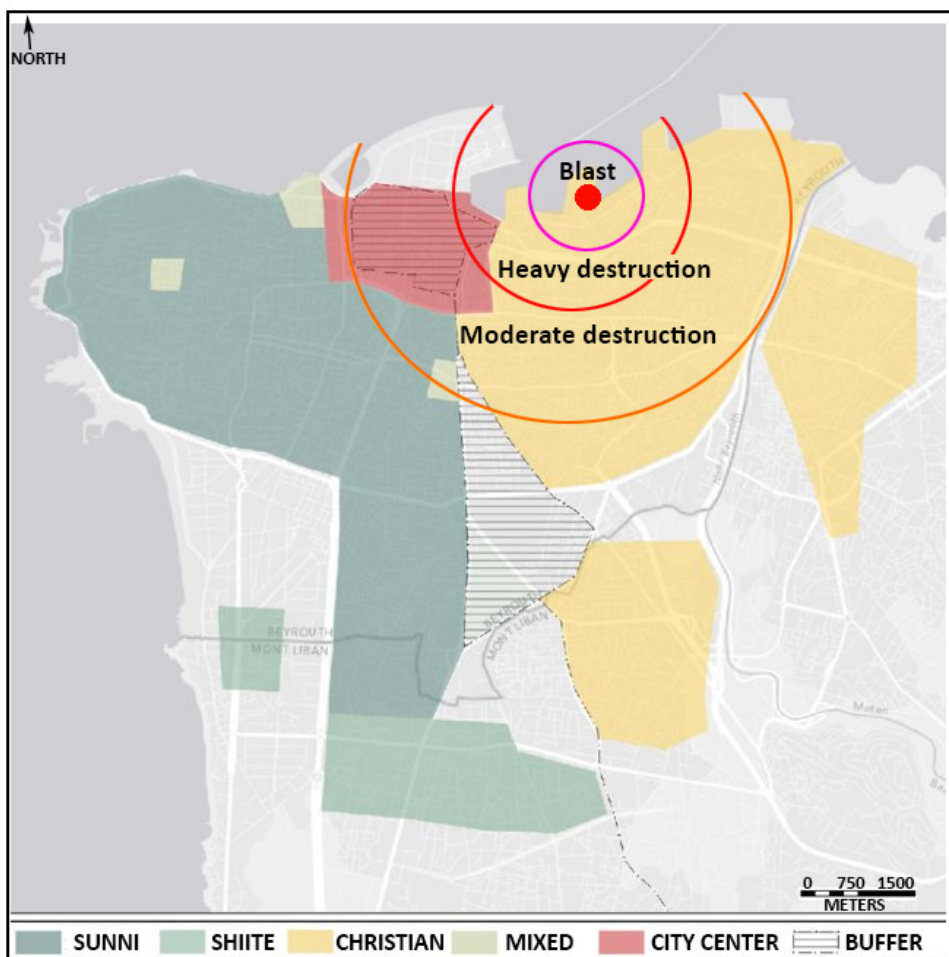
assets to provide immediate response, evacuation, and mitigation afterwards (Huseinbasic, 2014).

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, a “de-facto” internally-divided country for much of its modern existence, the floods have marked a first instance of direct cooperation between the communities across the main administrative regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The entities of Bosnia-Herzegovina: Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH), Republic of Srpska (RS) and District of Brcko (DB), instituted after the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, have certain emergency-response bodies, assets and procedures, majority of them modelled after the former Yugoslav system. The emergency services operate in a consociate fashion, alongside, with very little interoperability, coordination, and cooperation. The flood of 2014 changed that for an instant, at least unofficially, in the affected communities, where the communities have organized along the vestiges of the old communal-defence mechanism provisos and across the administrative lines.

Both of these examples outline that the local-driven approach, para-military in nature and inherited from the days of the conflict established its own, often faster and more-effective emergency response function than that of the government. Part of the reason is grounded in the effectiveness and cumbersomeness of the power-shared apparatus that even in the cases of emergency, cannot overcome its “confederate” upbringing.

### **Disaster response mechanisms**

There are currently 4 main paramilitary organizations operating in Lebanon, all of which have their respective areas of control in the City of Beirut in addition to their wider sphere of influence across Lebanon and which have derived their stature and influence since the Lebanese Civil War (Rowayheb, 2006). The four main actors that dominate much of the political and administrative nexus are the Shi’ite organization Hezbollah, the Sunni Future Movement, the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and the Maronite Christian Church, which is associated with several religious-political organizations and are at times on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Smaller organizations such as the Shi’ite Amal or Hope Movement and several other Christian and Sunni parties that alight with the larger more influential ones. The organizations, which have started as the militias, did not only provide strong-arm for the various factions of Lebanon but were also providers of basic-level public services during the period where the central government was unable to do so. Even in the re-constituted Lebanese Republic, the organizations considerable some level of public-administration, particularly the better funded and state-sponsored organizations like the Hezbollah and maintain their networks of loyalists from cabinet ministers, over street-level bureaucrats, to religious charity workers and even asphalt company employees (Akar, 2018).

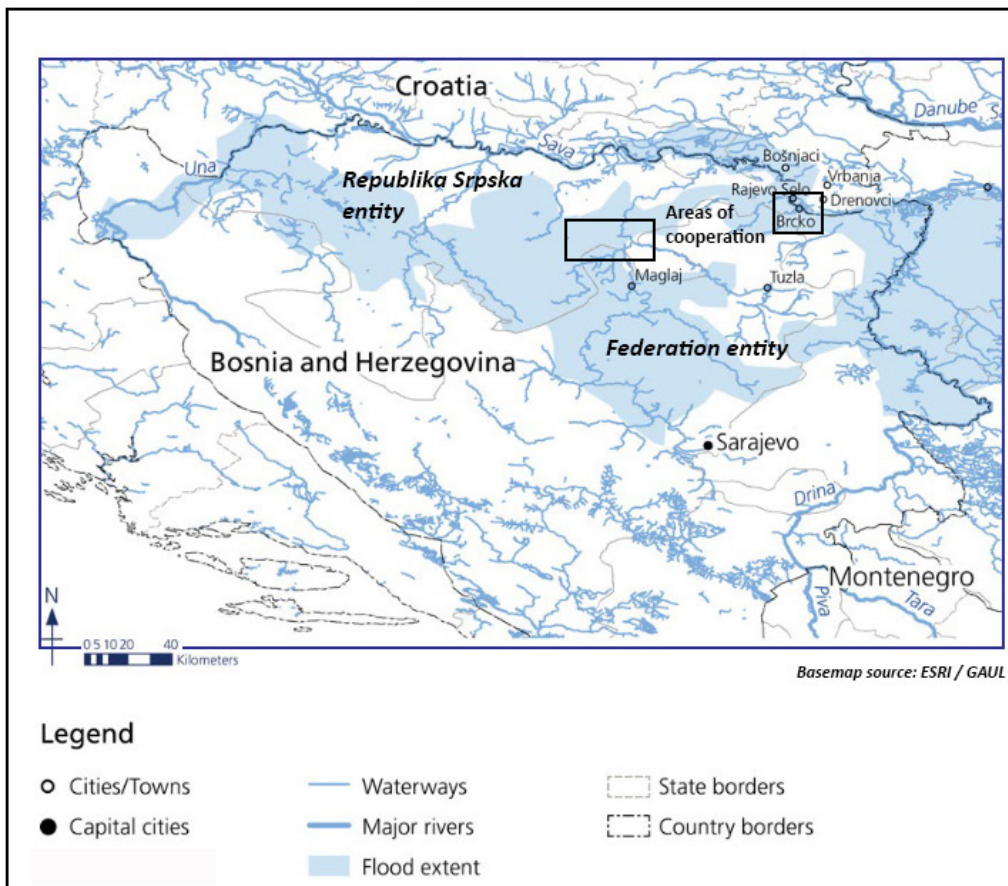


**Figure 1** – Map of the blast damage superposed on the sectarian zone map of Beirut, modified from (Chami, 2013) and supplanted with blast information derived from (Al-Hajj, et al., 2021)

Because the explosion knocked out much of Beirut’s critical infrastructure including emergency aid, many of the neighbourhoods were left to their own devices. Many of Lebanon’s current politicians and administrator are former warlords from the 1975-1990 civil war who stayed in power thanks to a blanket amnesty and unquestioning party loyalty. The power base that propelled them to power is still closely linked to the war-time militias and their rank-and-file organization (Rowayheb, 2006). The militias of Lebanon have never fully de-mobilized and can be turned-on at the moment’s notice to “assist” in urban planning or visit violence against the potential opponents; in that regard the war-time militias essentially function as the enforcement branch of urban politics in Beirut and Lebanon (Fregonese, 2019). Hence, when the disaster struck, well established networks of organized local non-profits organizations already mobilized for revolutionary support, backed in some instances by the same major financiers and organizers of the militias became an effective force multiplier. Unencumbered by the pretexts of administrative burden and budgetary constraints, these NGO have activated their personnel and effectively used it to administer recovery efforts throughout the city. It

must not be overlooked the dedicated and heroic actions of the civil defence and Lebanese Armed forces who lacked capacity and resources yet still provided everything that they could possibly muster to save lives and do their duty.

Unlike Lebanon, Bosnia and Herzegovina did not have a developed militia-culture and after the war, the ethnic-dominated military forces (Bosnia-Herzegovina Army, Army of the Serb Republic and the Croatian Defence Council forces) have morphed into the joint Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina and civil administration. Many of the paramilitary forces have disbanded, except for a few that tend to exist because of other geopolitical interests (i.e., Night Wolves, Wagner, Chetnik movements) but play no role in the disaster or emergency response functions (Mironova & Zawadewicz, 2018). There are certain intentions to militarize the civil defence organizations, particularly in the Republika Srpska administrative entity (Lovic, 2021), but in general, the emergency response follows the earlier blueprint inherited from the Yugoslav system (Smailbegovic & al., 2021).



**Figure 2** – The flood of 2014 map with the areas of cross-entity cooperation highlighted. Base map modified from (Zurich Insurance Company, 2015).

When an emergency arises, the fragmented and largely divided emergency response of Bosnia-Herzegovina system is sluggish to respond leaving many local areas (municipalities) scrambling to provide relief until (and if) the aid arrives. Particularly if the national-level

assets need to be mobilized (i.e., helicopters), the decision to deploy them must be unanimous from the collective heads of state and, as demonstrated during the wildfire season of 2021, sometimes blocked as a result of political obstructions and grand-standing (Intelli News, 2021). A similar situation occurred during the epic floods of 2014, when the national assets were absent and the local municipalities reverted to the remnants of the territorial-defence concept and ad-hoc mobilized available resources to evacuate the populace, establish lines of communication and mitigate potential biosecurity risks (Smailbegović, et al., 2018). It was the first occurrence of cross-entity cooperation in Bosnia-Herzegovina since the war, indicating that there are residual (and inertial) effects of the previous territorial-defence system which have kicked in when the current plans and directives fell apart. Unfortunately, the institutional and popular memory of the communal-defence is fading with the generational and demographic shift in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Western Balkans (Jukic-Mujkic, 2022).

### Concluding remarks

A brief overview of emergency response(s) in the post-conflict societies of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Lebanon suggests that an alternate, parallel rudimentary emergency response exists and organizes along the command structures of the former paramilitary organizations or paramilitary doctrines as administered in their contemporary forms. The system activates on a grass-roots level and has certain semblance of order within chaos, especially when the national-level institutions are sluggish or lack capacity to mobilize. Given that both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Lebanon are hostages to the governance of the war-elite that tend to provide minimum amount of service required in order to maintain the decades-long status quo, it is logical that the populace will revert to the para-institutional memory that helped them through the challenges of war-time years. Lebanon's militia culture is efficient in a way that it remains in the state of perpetual low-intensity conflict, while in Bosnia, the constant drum-beat of the "new war" is keeping alive some of the elements of Yugoslav era territorial defence doctrine. Both of these are less-than-ideal solutions for an emergency preparedness and a response, but can be utilized as a valuable boots-on-the ground assets, especially for the international community that aim to provide targeted help.

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*Criminal Justice Issues Journal of Criminal Justice and Security Year XVIII, Issue 5-6, pp. 329-336.*

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