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Fascism and the Middle East: A Case Study of Al-Kata'ib  
in Lebanon

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Since the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fascism has permeated into almost every corner of the world. From Mussolini in Europe and Emperor Hirohito in Japan, to the Brazilian Integralists and the Black Zionist movement, the rise of liberalism and globalization has led to the adoption of fascist ideas in virtually all human societies. However, there is one notable region that the wave of fascism has left relatively unscathed: The Middle East. Popular fascist movements have been largely non-existent throughout the recent history of the Middle East, despite the region's problems with authoritarianism and anti-Semitism. Since the end of World War II, most Middle Eastern states have been dictatorships, ranging from personalistic regimes to religious theocracies, yet none have been definitively fascist. Despite the lack of an environment conducive to fascism, certain parts of the Middle East have witnessed fascist movements rise, take power, and commit acts of atrocious violence. The introduction of liberalism and the destabilization of the political order in Lebanon during the 1970s led pre-existing nationalist organizations to explode into violent fascist movements, specifically the Maronite Catholic Kata'ib Party, also known as the Phalange.

Before exploring why, and how, Kata'ib was fascist, one must examine the reasons for fascism's absence from the Middle East. There are two influential factors that have most likely inhibited the development of Middle Eastern fascist movements since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The pervasiveness of religious fundamentalism in the region and the subsequent lack of liberalism. For centuries, the Middle East has been dominated by a strongly affective, totalitarian ideology: Religious fundamentalism. From the death of Muhammad in 632 C.E. to the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1919, the Middle East was governed by a series of theocratic Islamic dynasties that prevented the establishment of dissenting political groups under their rule. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, movements like Pan-Arabism and socialism

began to gain traction in the Middle East. However, religious fundamentalism refused to disappear, and the totalitarian political ideology re-surfaced in popularity starting in the 1970s, most strongly emblemized by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and still holds immense power in the region today.

The dominance of religious fundamentalism over the Middle East has influenced an additional factor contributing to the absence of fascism from the region: The rejection of liberalism. According to Roger Griffin, combatting liberalism is a necessary part of fascism's development.<sup>1</sup> Fascist movements view themselves as modern alternatives to liberalism, which is seen by fascists as a decadent system of governance that has directly contributed to the downfall of their specific mythical nation. Thus, without the specter of liberalism, fascist movements have difficulty being truly fascist. This indicates that the lack of liberalism caused by the prevalence of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East has likely influenced fascism's inability to retain a strong foothold in the region. Accordingly, when rare waves of liberalism have spread across the Middle East, significant fascist movements have followed in its wake, sometimes leading to massive human suffering, as was the case with the rise of Kata'ib.

In order to understand how the fascist Kata'ib was able to thrive in the Middle East, one must study the ideology and structure of this organization. The name "al-Kata'ib" is the Arabic term for Falange (phalanx), a reference to the fascist Falangists of Spain and Portugal, who, like the majority of Kata'ib's members, were both Catholic and deeply nationalist.<sup>2</sup> Kata'ib's connection to fascist Europe is not solely limited to the name; the party itself was inspired by European fascists. In 1936, Pierre Gemayel, a prominent Lebanese Maronite, travelled to Nazi Germany to watch the Berlin Olympics. During the games, Gemayel was enthralled by the

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<sup>1</sup> Griffin, Roger. *The Nature of Fascism*. pp. 47

<sup>2</sup> Entelis, John P. "Structural Change and Organizational Development in the Lebanese Kata'ib Party." pp. 325

discipline and aesthetics of the Nazi Party, especially the organization's fusion of order and nationalism. In later writings describing his experiences in Berlin, Gemayel wrote "I was struck with admiration. We orientals are, by nature, an unruly and individualistic people. In Germany I witnessed the perfect conduct of a whole, unified nation."<sup>3</sup> Before returning to Lebanon, Gemayel travelled to Czechoslovakia, where he was similarly fascinated by the Sokol movement, which had been established to promote both sports and national consciousness. Upon his return to Lebanon, Gemayel founded Kata'ib with these organizations in mind.<sup>4</sup>

In collaboration with several other Lebanese Christians, Gemayel formed Kata'ib in late 1936 as a paramilitary youth organization, using the European fascists as a blueprint for the group's structure and aesthetics. Since Lebanon in the 1930s was under French control, Gemayel intended for Kata'ib to serve as a source of militant opposition to the French mandate, as well as the creeping influence of the Syrian nationalist organization, PPS, which held widespread support within Lebanon. By engaging in an armed struggle against both the French and Syrians, Kata'ib started to gain considerable respect from the native Lebanese, increasing its ranks from 300 in late 1936 to 39,000 in 1943.<sup>5</sup> This enormous increase in support for militant Lebanese nationalism was instrumental in bringing about Lebanon's independence from France on November 22, 1943. Due to the organization's effectiveness during the independence movement, Kata'ib played a major role in the establishment of the new Lebanese state. This authority was most prevalent in the creation of the national pact, which mandated that Lebanon's president and commander of the armed forces, as well as a majority of the legislature, always be Christian, thus enshrining permanent and disproportionate Maronite control of the Lebanese government.<sup>6</sup> In the

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<sup>3</sup> Entelis, John P. "Structural Change..." pp. 326

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Entelis, John P. "Structural Change..." pp. 328

<sup>6</sup> Stoakes, Frank. "The Civil War in Lebanon." pp. 8

years after Lebanon's independence, Kata'ib utilized the political clout that the predominately Christian organization gained from the National Pact and the prowess of its paramilitary aspects to formally establish itself as a political party. Despite this shift away from militancy, the Kata'ib party remained strongly fascist, retaining its paramilitary wing, Nazi-inspired aesthetics, and desire for majority Maronite government.

Although the structure of Kata'ib was primarily European, the organization's unique ideology was mostly Lebanese. From the beginning, Kata'ib's ideology was centered around the paligenetic concept of Phoenicianism. This form of Lebanese nationalism maintained that the modern Lebanese people were descendant from the ancient sea-faring civilization of Phoenicia, and were thus distinctly not Arab.<sup>7</sup> Adherents to this idea, like Kata'ib, claimed that the only influence the Arab world had on Lebanon was the Arabic language, and, after thousands of years, the culture and demographics of Lebanon had remained firmly Phoenician. This concept became Kata'ib's desired foundation for the newly independent Lebanese nation-state. The Phalangists sought to essentially reestablish Phoenicia in modern Lebanon, allowing only ethnic Lebanese to participate in the state.<sup>8</sup> This attempted recreation of a mythic national identity was a truly fascist aspect of Kata'ib, and would later play a role in the organization's existence as legitimately fascist.

Alone, the structure and ideology of Kata'ib was not enough for the organization to enter the realm of fascism. The lack of liberalism and prevalence of religious fundamentalism within the Middle East prevented the Phalangists from progressing beyond the status of "fascistic." The Maronites enjoyed massive political power in the decades following independence, and the only other groups to hold political authority were also considered by Kata'ib to be Lebanese. Non-

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<sup>7</sup> Kaufman, Asher. "Phoenicianism: The Formation of an Identity in Lebanon in 1920." pp. 174

<sup>8</sup> Entelis, John P. "Structural Change..." pp. 335

Lebanese residents simply held no power, therefore Kata'ib had no decadent, liberal political system against which to rebel.<sup>9</sup> In fact, though the organization held noticeably fascist characteristics, Kata'ib became a relatively stabilizing force in Lebanon after 1943, advocating for democracy and equality of all Lebanese, including Muslims.<sup>10</sup> However, since the only factor holding Kata'ib back from descending into fascism was the lack of Middle Eastern liberalism, these non-fascist aspects of the Phalangist organization were quickly expunged once calls for liberalism entered Lebanon.

Although Kata'ib did not become fully fascist until 1975, the forces that would eventually stimulate this transition arose in the late 1960s. At the culmination of the 1967 Six Day War between Israel and surrounding Arab states, the Israeli military seized control of the formerly Jordanian controlled West Bank, forcing the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), a West Bank-based Palestinian nationalist group, and its leader Yasser Arafat to flee deeper within the borders of Jordan. After this event, the PLO became a major liability for the Jordanian government, as the group began establishing autonomous areas of Palestinian control and even conducted several attempted assassinations of Jordan's monarch, King Hussein. Finally, on September 17, 1970, King Hussein authorized the initiation of an internal military conflict that would later be known as Aylul al-Aswad, or Black September.<sup>11</sup> Beginning with the shelling of PLO-controlled territories, Jordanian forces eventually drove the PLO and its fighters out of the Kingdom, and directly into Lebanon. This influx of prominent Palestinian political figures into Lebanon would ultimately serve as the driving force of liberalism, and thus fascism, within the Lebanese nation.

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<sup>9</sup> Stoakes, Frank. "The Civil War in Lebanon." pp. 8-9

<sup>10</sup> Entelis, John P. "Structural Change..." pp. 327

<sup>11</sup> Hagerdal, Nils. "Ethnic Cleansing as Military Strategy: Lessons From Lebanon, 1975-1990." pp. 18

One must note that, prior to Black September, there was already a significant Palestinian population living in Lebanon, primarily in refugee camps in the Southern region of the country. In 1950, over 200,000 Palestinians were known to reside in Lebanon, with that number only increasing after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.<sup>12</sup> While Kata'ib did not see Palestinians refugees as worthy of joining the Lebanese nation, or even approve of their existence in Lebanon, the Phalangists did not consider this group to be a threat to the political control of the Maronites. The refugees were not given any political power, and the commonly held belief at the time was that, once the West Bank was relinquished by Israel or the Jewish state was destroyed, all of the Palestinians would leave Lebanon. Unfortunately for Lebanese nationalists like Kata'ib, neither of these situations came to fruition, and the Palestinian population only increased as time progressed. By the time Black September began in Jordan, significant sectarian tensions were already building within Lebanese society, which would continue to grow more severe with the arrival of the PLO.

Once in Lebanon, the PLO immediately started establishing the same zones of autonomous control that had existed in Jordan, setting in motion the destabilization of Lebanon's political order and increasing calls for the liberalization of the Lebanese government. Palestinian refugee camps became hotbeds of recruitment for the PLO, and the rising local power of Fatah, Yasser Arafat's faction of the PLO, led to Southern Lebanon attaining the nickname "Fatahland."<sup>13</sup> By 1975, the PLO controlled almost all of Southern Lebanon, including the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon, even commanding large swaths of Beirut, the Lebanese capital. Such pockets of Palestinian political control within the borders of Lebanon began to destabilize the political environment that the National Pact created and Kata'ib facilitated. Suddenly, the

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<sup>12</sup> Entelis, John P. "Structural Change..." pp. 335

<sup>13</sup> "Israeli Forces May Police 'fatahland.'" *Jewish Telegraph Agency*

great Lebanese nation envisioned by Kata'ib was threatened by an internal enemy, an existential problem that began to ignite the pre-existing fascism within the Phalangist organization.

Kata'ib's final transformation into fascism was driven purely by liberalism. As the Palestinian leadership gained more and more political authority, a Lebanese amalgamation of leftists, Arab nationalists, and even Islamic fundamentalists began to express solidarity to the Palestinians.<sup>14</sup> This odd coalition called for the integration of Palestinians into the government, and although they disagreed on whether the state should be secular or Islamic, the group fundamentally opposed Kata'ib's idea of an illiberal Lebanese nation-state based upon the principles of the National Pact, Phoenicianism, and Catholicism. These calls for the liberalization of the distinctly Lebanese nation-state threatened the core of Kata'ib's beliefs. Not only was a foreign enemy seizing geo-political power within Lebanese territory, but a sizeable movement of ethnic Lebanese were demanding that this group of non-Lebanese be incorporated into the government, a move that would shatter the Phoenician utopia envisioned by the Phalangists. This liberal threat to Kata'ib and its mission effectively plunged the organization into violent, revolutionary fascism.

Starting in April of 1975, the actions of Kata'ib, especially the party's paramilitary forces, became extremely violent, xenophobic, and fascist, stimulating the breakout of the infamous Lebanese civil war. Boasting that the "sovereignty and honor of Lebanon will be saved by [Kata'ib's] own militia,"<sup>15</sup> the party called upon all Lebanese Christians to protect their brethren from the nation's enemies, a group that began to include Lebanese Muslims, due to their general support for the Palestinians. These incitements to violence led to numerous acts of ethnic cleansing committed by Phalangists and associated militias, usually against Palestinian Muslims,

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<sup>14</sup> Entelis, John P. "Structural Change..." pp. 336

<sup>15</sup> "Lebanese Fascists Attack Palestinians." *MERIP Reports*



ultimately displacing about half of all Muslims living in Christian-controlled territory. A single Phalangist attack on the Palestinian Muslim slum of Karantina in Beirut left approximately 1,500 civilians dead.<sup>16</sup> These atrocious actions and statements by Kata'ib during this conflict demonstrated a clear and dramatic shift away from the somewhat democratic beliefs that the organization held during the 1950s and 60s; Kata'ib now wanted to cleanse Lebanon of all non-Lebanese residents.

The singular most explicit event that displayed Kata'ib's descent into violent fascism was the group's association with the infamous Sabra and Shatila massacre. On the night of September 16, 1982, a Phalangist militia tied to Kata'ib entered the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in West Beirut. The following three days saw the rape, murder, and dismemberment of at least 800 civilians, with some reports claiming the death toll to be as high as 3,500. Almost all of the dead were women, children, and elderly men.<sup>17</sup> Such an inhuman act of violence shocked the international community and drew global condemnations. Though there was no single reason provided by the belligerents for the massacre, it was clear that most of the killers showed little remorse for their actions and fully ascribed to the xenophobic rhetoric espoused by Kata'ib. This event, in addition to the entirety of the Lebanese civil war, showed the world that fascism was not only possible in the Middle East, but that Middle Eastern fascists could be devastatingly destructive, just like the fascists of Europe.

Following the Sabra and Shatila massacre, Kata'ib lost an enormous amount of support both internationally and domestically. With this loss of support, Kata'ib's power massively declined, and the organization eventually fell apart once Syria invaded Lebanon in an attempt to halt the violence. In 1990, president Amine Gemayel, the wartime leader of Kata'ib and son of

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<sup>16</sup> Hagerdal, Nils. "Ethnic Cleansing as Military Strategy" pp. 3

<sup>17</sup> Anziska, Seth. "A Preventable Massacre."

Pierre Gemayel, was exiled to France, officially ending Kata'ib's long reign over Lebanon and fifteen-year stint as a fully fascist organization.<sup>18</sup> Since 2000, Kata'ib has slowly reemerged into the Lebanese political scene, shedding most of its fascist characteristics and now claiming to be a Christian Democratic party.<sup>19</sup> However, the meteoric rise of Hezbollah, a powerful Shiite fundamentalist militia, has prevented Kata'ib from regaining even a fraction of the nationalist party's former political authority, and there are no indications that this current situation will change anytime soon.

Though it is certainly accurate to refer to Kata'ib as a formerly fascist organization, one must note that Kata'ib never adopted the "generic" fascism seen in Italy or Germany in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As previously mentioned, Kata'ib existed as a nationalist party with fascistic characteristics for much of its existence, eventually becoming truly fascist during the mid-1970s. However, even during the Lebanese civil war, Kata'ib's violently fascist ideology and actions were noticeably different from those of the Nazis or the Italian fascists. The most distinct difference between these generic fascists and Kata'ib was the organization's inseparable connection with Christianity. A core tenant of generic fascism is the "sacralization of politics," a process through which politics become religious, in a manner distinct from traditional religious institutions.<sup>20</sup> This phenomenon results in politics, as an entity, transforming into the mythic center of social existence, the sole determinate of good and bad. In such a situation, all other organized religions are either sidelined or outright destroyed. This phenomenon did not occur in within Kata'ib.

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<sup>18</sup> Moossavi, Ali. "The History of the Phalange Party."

<sup>19</sup> "About Us." *Kataeb Online*

<sup>20</sup> Gentile, Emilio, and Robert Mallett. "The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism." pp. 22

As indicated by its name, Kata'ib was a fundamentally Falangist organization, largely influenced by Francoist Spain and Portugal under Salazar. As such, Christianity, specifically Catholicism, took on a major role in the ideology of Kata'ib.<sup>21</sup> The non-religious aspects of Kata'ib's ideology were never sacralized; the organization continually maintained its inherent connection with Catholicism. During the civil war, members of Kata'ib insisted that only Maronites could be considered members of the Phoenician-based Lebanese nation. Due to this reliance of Catholicism, the Lebanese nation itself was not seen as divine.

Fascism is difficult to properly define, and very few movements since the end of World War II have resembled the same generic fascism of Italy or Germany. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the fascistic characteristics of different leaders or groups around the world, regardless of whether or not they encompass all of the necessary tenants of generic fascism. Although Kata'ib during the Lebanese civil war lacked several aspects of Italian or German fascism, the organization was still deeply xenophobic, violently authoritarian, and emphasized a need for Phoenician palingenesis, condemning the Phalangists to forever retain the title of true fascists.

The Middle East is not a region that is conducive to fascism. The political, social, and economic conditions of the region have made the existence of true fascism extremely difficult. Specifically, the distinct lack of liberalism and the prevalence of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East limit the effectiveness and durability of locally occurring fascist movements. Nonetheless, fascism has thrived in the Middle East. With an inherently fascistic structure and ideology, Kata'ib utilized the encroachment of liberalism into Lebanon as an avenue to true fascism, leading to a catastrophic civil war and the death of thousands of civilians. Although

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<sup>21</sup> Moossavi, Ali. "The History of the Phalange Party."

Kata'ib's base of support was eventually crushed and overshadowed by that of religious fundamentalism, the dangers of Middle Eastern fascism must be remembered. Fascist movements have been scarce in the region, but as the Middle East undergoes waves of liberalization, like the Arab Spring, the conditions necessary for fascism could arise once again.

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