

Participants agreed that whatever the "true" reality of Lebanese society, Lebanon's rigid political organization contained the seeds of instability that contributed to the outbreak of hostilities and the protraction of the conflict, namely, its sectarian quotas, its inability to allow for peaceful change within the system,¹⁴ and its tendency to promote identification with the sect rather than with the state. These factors, along with regional inequalities inside the country and a weak government, left Lebanon wide open to factional exploitation by outside powers, and dragged it into the centre of various regional conflicts. The high level of internal dissatisfaction, in combination with historical links between Lebanon's communal groups and outside powers, caused many of the sectarian and political groupings to look for foreign sponsors to assist them in their struggle with domestic groups. The result was a proliferation of sub-state foreign policies that embroiled outside powers in Lebanon's domestic turmoil, and entangled Lebanon in wider regional conflicts.

Regional Strains

Participants agreed that the weaknesses of Lebanon's internal political structures made the country extremely vulnerable to external influences. The Palestinians' impact on Lebanon has been particularly acute because of the many refugees resident in the country (currently estimated at four hundred thousand). As one participant remarked: "Lebanon, one of the smallest Arab countries, received the largest number of Palestinian refugees. This great influx would have created difficulties for any state, but was especially problematic for Lebanon because of its sectarian-based political system."¹⁵

Ziad Hafez noted that the 1975 crisis was preceded by the 1974 regional crisis that resulted in Arab recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians. At this time, PLO headquarters were in

¹⁴ In 1975, some of the factions saw war as the only way to change an "unfair" political system that could not accommodate change from within.

¹⁵ The majority of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are Sunni Muslim and, as such, would have upset the "balance" of the Lebanese political system had they been granted citizenship status.