5 Socio-economic grievances

'When you go fight, you don't care about the money': Financial incentives for fighting

The context of enquiry that was, at the time of the field research, most affected by poverty and economic hardship was Tripoli in North Lebanon. The city's poverty is striking and obvious to anyone visiting. Perhaps less so in the port region and city centre, but the more one moves up the city towards Syria street, the denser the neighbourhoods, the more chaotic and the dirtier the streets, the more modest the way people are clothed, and the more damaged the buildings. In a way, the Bab-el-Tabbaneh and Jabal-Mohsen districts reminded me of Sarajevo, which I visited twice between 2015 and 2022. In both places, the vestiges of the war are still prominently visible in the buildings there, in the form of bullet holes in the facades or torn-down buildings. Although life seems to have gone on, these marks on the city's faces feel like wounds that have never fully healed. They make a painful past seem very near.

It is unsurprising to find that most references to immediate socio-economic grievances were made by interviewees in Tripoli, more specifically in Bab-el-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen. A theme that runs through all narratives is the enormous economic hardship that the people in this area of Tripoli are suffering from. One of the first encounters I had when I arrived in Bab-el-Tabbaneh was with Rakan and one of the first things he said was how difficult it was to get married and feel like a grown-up man, because of the difficulties of finding stable employment and earning a salary that would allow him to support a family.

While socioeconomic grievances are widespread across the world and especially in developing countries, they usually do not lead to protests and violence. There are different ways in which socio-economic grievances may be linked to mobilisations for the Syrian conflict, the most intuitive of which is that fighting may help make ends meet. Many of the interviewees in Tripoli, such as Waad, who fought alongside the Syrian army, do in fact talk about a direct link between poverty, unemployment and joining the fighting

> Nobody who participated in the fighting was happy. But at the same time, this life, nobody likes it. Anyone will tell you, if I was working, I would

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> not be carrying this weapon. Under these circumstances, you're obliged to participate!
>
> (Waad, Lebanon)

Similarly, Abdeljaleel, a Palestinian living in the refugee camp Nahr-el-Bared near Tripoli, ascribes a central role to the socio-economic marginalisation of Palestinians in Lebanon in the success various groups have had in recruiting fighters from Palestinian refugee camps for their causes. Even before Jabhat-al-Nusra and Daesh existed, in 2007, the Palestinian Fatah came to dominate Nahr-el-Bared, to the point where clashes with the Lebanese Armed Forces erupted which lasted for several months. He explains that

> with all the pressures and hatred building up inside a person that is living in the camp, it should come to no one's surprise that an organisation which offers a project and money will be able to attract people like me. I am conscious and able to choose better options, because I don't trust any of these armed factions.
>
> (Abdeljaleel, Tripoli)

Participating in fighting may therefore clearly present immediate economic incentives. However, the link between material gains or support and a willingness to engage in combat may sometimes be more subtle, as Nassim explains

> Politicians were employing people, giving you 100 USD per week maybe, for anything you may need. But when they wanted you to throw a grenade, you wouldn't say no, of course. […] Some people were defending their neighbourhood, they were resisting. Others were fighting because of personal interests, they would make money out of the fighting, they would go down to the port, the nice places, to extort people.
>
> (Nassim, Bab-el-Tabbaneh, Tripoli)

Nassim points to the heterogeneity of the motivations of fighters. Beyond that, however, the dialectic between economic incentives and authentic political engagement was frequently brought up by interviewees more generally. There seemed to be a visible tension between the noble character of fighting for a just cause and the fact of being financially rewarded for doing so. There is a perception that one's credibility as a fighter for a particular cause is jeopardised if one is perceived to be mainly driven by material interests. This transpired through interviewees' frequent insistence that financial incentives were a secondary driver of engagement at best. Most interviewees stress that although there was a minority that joined the fighting primarily for personal material gains, everyone was also motivated by a desire to defend the oppressed and fight for what they considered as a just cause. Bashar, a young man from Jabal Mohsen, who fought in Syria several times, says, regarding the salary

> [The salary] is like 40,000 LBP per month. It's nothing. The hezb [Hezbollah] gives you 400 to 500 USD. That's better. But when you go there, you don't care about the money anyway, you go there to die as a martyr.
>
> (Bashar, Jabal Mohsen, Tripoli)

In a less straightforward manner, feelings of economic marginalisation and neglect or of blocked access to resources lead to frustration and grudge towards the state. This may lay the foundations for a growing disconnect from conventional social norms imposed by the state. Naseem explains this as follows

> But, to make it short, all this is happening because of poverty. I don't want you to give me money or pay me my hospital bills. I want you to guarantee me a job, where I can earn my own money. I want to sweat for this. But if there is no work. I can't do anything, not even get treated. Of course, I start hating the state.
>
> (Naseem, Jabal Mohsen, Tripoli)

Also, the socio-economic grievances, which often interact with political grievances, have not disappeared but continue to be present for the residents of the neighbourhood, even though the fighting has ceased for several years. In fact, violence is expected by several interviewees to erupt again, if the underlying drivers of frustration don't change

> In order to find solutions without violence, you need a government that stands with you. We need a just country. We need justice. We need a country that takes care of its citizens, work, electricity, health, medication. What else? Education! That's the most important thing. My son is still in first grade. I don't have the means to put him in a private school and have to keep him a public school. I went there several times and the teacher just puts her feet on the table, coming to spend time there. She gets her salary anyway, she doesn't care.
>
> (Mansour, Lebanon)

The lack of access to proper education and the failure of the school system also shows in the fact that hardly anyone among my interviewees made it past the fourth or fifth grade of primary school. For most of them, going to work was more reasonable at some point, because they felt they weren't learning anything at school anyway.

All of the interviewees in Tripoli were fighting at the level of foot soldiers. Hardly any of them ever thought of becoming rich through fighting. For the majority, the financial compensation seemed to be a way of connecting a purpose and a perceived duty to the expectations put on them to provide for their families. On the other hand, in some ways, the economic hardships also provide a convenient justification for fighting. Thereby, the precarious socio-economic situation can be used as a means to diminish personal responsibility and put the blame on institutional

actors. Some also actively used the fighting to engage in various forms of exploitation and extortion. Zakaria from Bab-el-Tabbaneh, talked openly about the fact that he was forcing people to pay him 'protection money' during the fighting

> I was working in an organisation, and my employer was very good to me. I would behave as I wanted, work fewer hours, and they had an office just for me, I had my laptop and was playing games on it. The employer was very good to me but I wasn't good to him. And he stuck to me all the time. Throughout the years, even in prison. But after prison he couldn't get me employed anymore. Every week I would get 300'000, for his protection. Why was he paying? Because he had many shops, and he was afraid I could hurt him. I was bad to him. I would come on Saturday and ask for my money and if he didn't have it immediately, I would put a grenade on his table. And I threatened him until he gave me the money.
>
> (Zakaria, Tripoli)

Zakaria was, according to his own and other interviewees' accounts, one of the main members of a powerful gang under the lead of Osama Mansour, that formed during the later stages of the JM–BT conflict and pledged allegiance to Daesh. The group was the main reason for the Lebanese army's raid on Bab-el-Tabbaneh in September 2014. During the interview, he was very open about his harmful and exploitative activities during the fighting. This may be linked to the fact that he seemed to enjoy special privileges such as an ID card associated with Hezbollah that he inherited from his father. I noted in my fieldnotes that he appeared like a battle-hardened gangster and that it was very difficult for me to reach a level of depth, for he remained in a rather excited and boastful state throughout. However, his transparent narrative sheds light on the fact that criminal activities may develop and flourish under the label of righteous grievance-based and even religiously inspired mobilisation.

'Instead of building prisons, build factories': The impact of the WOT

Many of the socio-economic grievances preceded the interviewees' engagement in fighting. However, economic hardships did not diminish after their involvement. On the contrary, in the wake of the War on Terror, socio-economic difficulties are very common for individuals who are effectively engaged in fighting or who are in some way linked to terrorism and political violence. Again, the Lebanese context presents a case in point, given the hyper-repression put in place by the Lebanese state. Throughout the interviews, a recurring theme is the criminal record and the way it makes any employment impossible. Interviewees from Bab-el-Tabbaneh agree that a criminal record makes it impossible for them to find work. No one with a criminal record has been able to find stable employment, because employers want to avoid having anything to do with someone accused of or sentenced for terrorism-related offences

> Whenever I go for a job, they look at the criminal record and say: what is this?! killing, kidnapping! [shows me a picture of it]: joining a terrorist organisation, fighting the army, injuring army personnel, carrying military weapons.
>
> (Zakaria, Tripoli)

> I was finally happy to be working again. Things were good. And then the employer came and asked for the criminal record. And I told him please don't. But he insisted. So, I said goodbye.
>
> (Aamer, Tripoli)

Interviewees in Tripoli point out what they see as wrong priorities set by the government. Instead of helping them reintegrate into society, the state ostracises and marginalises them. Nassim praises the director of an NGO that helped him get at least temporary employment for doing what the government fails to do

> She [the director] is a role model. She is doing what an entire state has failed to do. They come and imprison you for your Facebook pictures, or the people who are defending themselves. Until now they are observing us. I think to myself: Instead of building prisons, build factories. At least people will work! That's what she did.
>
> (Nassim, Lebanon)

A particularly astonishing practice makes it complicated to find work even for individuals who are eventually acquitted, sometimes after years of pre-trial detention: Even when individuals are acquitted by the court, they keep their criminal record. The record simply indicates that they were *accused* and not sentenced. This is enough to shy potential employers away and to earn them harassment at checkpoints. Two of the interviewees, Atif and Abdelaziz, both formerly engaged in the security forces, confirmed that this was the case for them. Atif was detained for three years because someone accused him of plotting a coup against the Lebanese Armed Forces. Abdelaziz was arrested on suspicions of plotting a terrorist attack on an army tank and detained for five years. After their acquittal, both were of course unable to return to the security forces. At the time of the interview, they were both working in poorly paying temporary jobs. For the residents of Jabal Mohsen, the difficulty to find work is also an important factor in maintaining their socio-economic marginalisation. However, it seems that they rarely have a criminal record that indicates that they participated in the fighting. This results from the differential criminalisation discussed below, where terrorism is mainly associated with Salafi-jihadist groups and not with Alawite groups affiliated with the Syrian regime.

For Palestinians, the terrorism-label works similarly. On the one hand, this is tied to a general association between Sunni Islam and terrorism. On the other hand, and specifically in the Lebanese context, the crackdown on Palestinians resulted from the clashes between Fatah and the Lebanese army in the Nahr-el-Bared

refugee camp near Tripoli in 2007. Abdeljaleel, a resident of Nahr-el-Bared, explained that after 2007, Palestinian men were sweepingly suspected of aiding or being sympathetic to Fatah. He was arrested for ten days because of accusations of his being linked to Fatah and a bank robbery. He was later arrested for posts on Facebook that were critical of the government and the security forces. All Palestinians interviewed in Lebanon agree that, since 2007, the checkpoints around the refugee camps have become stricter and more humiliating, and job opportunities for Palestinians have become extremely rare. During my fieldwork in the summer of 2019, protests erupted in various Palestinian refugee camps and outside them after the government announced that work permits for Palestinians would be adjusted to cover fewer sectors and professions (Al-Arian, 2019).

Beyond the Lebanese context, these forms of economic hardship, which can be seen as the financial cost of engaging in specific forms of political violence, can be found as well. In the Canadian context, for instance, Kevin an anarchist militant and defender of the Palestinian cause is struggling to find a conventional job after several encounters with the criminal justice system. Although never clearly associated with a terrorist organisation, he suffers economically from engaging in violence against the state. Similarly, Salim, a Palestinian refugee in Montreal continues to be denied asylum because of his former activities in the Palestinian resistance movement. In that fragile legal status, he has a hard time finding a proper occupation, let alone save money to send to his family which he left behind in Palestine.

Suspicions, accusations or convictions in relation to terrorist offences are also making life difficult for individuals in Switzerland. Christoph, a police officer charged with the observation of convict Sami after his release from prison, states, with a mix of frustration and understanding, that ‘it is absolutely clear that nobody wants to have a terrorist in their workplace, not even in their town. When you say terrorism, all doors shut’ (Christoph, Switzerland). As a result of his conviction, Sami was refused asylum in Switzerland and ordered to leave the country. Given the heightened risk of being exposed to torture in his home country, should he return as a convicted terrorist, he is stuck in Switzerland. He would like to work in order to build a normal life, as he says repeatedly

> I am fed up with taking money from the state. I feel like a beggar when I go to the municipality to get my pocket money. If only I could work and depend on myself only. Start a life like a normal person. Even if I can live just 50% of the life of a normal person, I would be happy.
>
> (Sami, Switzerland)

Not convicted for any offence, but still associated with terrorism, Karwan suffers from his legal condition. The Swiss secretariat for migration refused his asylum claim based on an appraisal by the Swiss intelligence service, that ‘given his biography, this young man could pose a potential risk to Swiss domestic security’ (Confidential documents). Karwan is of Kurdish ethnicity and grew up in Turkey. When the Kurdish YPG were fighting against Daesh, he decided to travel to Syria

to support them. As a refused asylum seeker, he receives minimal financial support and has difficulty finding employment. For more than a year after his arrival, he was not allowed to leave the perimeter of the municipality he was assigned to, which further complicated his job-seeking efforts. Accused of spreading propaganda for AQ in Switzerland, Nooreddine also mentions socio-economic hardships as a consequence of his legal entanglement, but also because of his engagement more generally

> When he heard about my engagement for the Palestinian cause, he told me he would have to dismiss me unless I stopped my political activities. Or unless I made them less public at least. To me it was clear that I would not trade my engagement for the Palestinian cause against my job. Against no job, actually. […] Today, I know that nobody would employ me.
>
> (Nooreddine, Switzerland)

Nooreddine also explained that many of his bank accounts were closed after the accusations against him were made public. Similar things happened to people he knew

> They are all told by their lawyers not to talk to anyone, to keep hiding from the public, etc. And I can understand that, because there are many negative consequences. For example, your bank accounts. I have gotten used to be a man of cash, since nobody allows me to have a bank account.
>
> (Nooreddine, Switzerland)

Another example in the Swiss context is provided by my fieldnotes: During a trial on terrorism propaganda charges that I assisted in at the Federal Criminal Court, the lawyer of the defendant (not among my interviewees) asked for financial compensation for the loss of his client's employment. According to the lawyer, the employer had gotten wind of the accusations against the defendant and decided to fire him. Although no proofs were provided to sustain that hypothesis, it seems plausible considering the political climate that continues to be tense, the pressures that employers may be exposed to, and similar experiences by other interviewees.

'The ideal society': Anti-capitalism and resource misdirection

Beyond immediate or group-based economic hardships, socio-economic grievances are also present in interviewees' narratives in relation to economic systems and trends, class-based inequalities in a given society, or forms of what is considered economic exploitation more generally. The grievances related to the negative repercussions of what is perceived as excessive individualism and the ensuing lack of solidarity, as well as the lack of consideration for human costs when pursuing material interests. During the interview, there were no specific prompts regarding socio-economic grievances more generally. Hence, whenever interviewees spoke about these aspects, they should be understood as part of their narrative about

their engagement and trajectory. Although less directly tied to violent engagement like above, they are frequently part of a general critical posture and a component of interviewees' analysis of injustices that they identify. In the Canadian context, these grievances would relate to the treatment of migrants or detainees as well as factory workers. In the Lebanese context, interviewees voice particular indignation regarding the treatment of migrant workers, as well as Palestinian and Syrian refugees, the exceptionalism of Beirut and the neglect of other Lebanese regions, as well as class differences more generally. In Switzerland, frequent resentment is voiced against the Swiss illusion of perfect equality that glosses over various forms of socio-economic marginalisation, as well as the treatment of refugees and the economically disadvantaged.

One example of a transnational socio-economic grievance is related to the Palestinian cause. Palestinian interviewees, for instance, hold more general grievances beyond the immediate economic neglect of Palestinian refugees. Abdeljaleel from Nahr-el-Bared, but also Suhaib or Aqeel from Ein-el-Hilweh, or Salim and Asif in Canada, stress that the Palestinian cause has become a business, used and abused by all actors who wish to receive funding from international donors. Both the lack of attention to the plight of Palestinian refugees and displaced persons and the perceived instrumentalisation of the cause, fuel a grudge towards the international community and what is seen as the business of international development and humanitarian aid.

Similarly, general socio-economic grievances also relate to the perceived over-investment in repressive security measures in the context of the war on terror. Meriem, a practitioner in Quebec in the field of social work and psychological support, highlighted the enormous discrepancy between the funds allocated to security and crime prevention, while almost no money went to the support of refugees from the Syrian conflict. Through her work, she is strongly involved with the Muslim communities in the Quebec region of Canada and realised that this misdirection of resources was strongly perceived, alongside the growing securitisation of Islamic identity, from 2015 on.

Rashid, who was later arrested because of his participation in a designated terrorist organisation in Lebanon, explained that one of the first things that attracted him when he became more religious was the perceived equality inside the mosque he started visiting

> When I came to the mosque, what struck me most was that I found all parts of society there. The young and the old, the poor and the rich, the intellectual and the simple worker: There were no classes at the mosque, it was a welcome break from the materialistic society that I was seeing outside, in our city.
>
> (Rashid, Saida, Lebanon)

In fact, Islamic activism is frequently portrayed as pursuing a more egalitarian model of society. Thereby, the cause involves proposing an alternative to the capitalist models associated with Western countries. The general perception of

interviewees is that Arab governments have embraced capitalism over the past few decades, therefore making them accomplices of an unjust economic system. It is important to clarify, then, that across the narratives, strong Anti-American or Anti-Western sentiments are frequently at least partly the result of the perceived negative impacts of neoliberal capitalism.

This was the case, in all three countries, for non-Islamic activists as well. It should be noted that many of the interviewees adhere at least partly and to different degrees, to a Marxist worldview that focuses on the oppression of the working class by the bourgeoisie. For instance, Daniel, in Switzerland, said 'I grew up with a Marxist grandfather who explained the world to me through a Marxist lens. He would point at people and say "look, this is a rich man"'. Given his Latin American heritage and his parents' political activism, Anti-American and Anti-Imperialist sentiments were also always part of his intellectual matrix from his early years. The causes he engaged in, whether the Palestinian cause or the Kurdish cause, then, were to him never anathema to this ideological setup. Rather, his ideology facilitated his adoption of causes that pursued a more or less socialist and internationalist agenda. In his case and similar cases across the three countries, the ideological framework is mobilised for different causes, that are often unrelated to the larger context of the Arab World. Examples include the plight of the economically disadvantaged and the struggles of refugees in Switzerland and Canada or the mistreatment of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. The Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation, and resistance movements against Arab dictators and the remnants of imperialist rule largely are, however, typical cases that can be easily reconciled with the Marxist ideology.

Finally, anti-capitalism also expresses itself through other forms of protest about dysfunctionalities that are seen as the inevitable consequences of capitalism. For instance Souhail, a Palestinian activist in Switzerland, had, at the time of the interview, become increasingly engaged in the promotion of climate justice. Interestingly, it is through his description of his feelings towards this fresh and more current cause, that it was possible to access the moral emotions that were present during the initial phases of his engagement with the Palestinian cause. His tone and posture changed dramatically when he started talking about climate justice

> Extreme indignation... I mean, it's been 46 years that we have been aware of this, since the first reports were published. And the governments haven't done anything. Experts talk of an 'ecocide', a genocide against the planet, against everyone in fact. That's something that revolts me. I think I am at the same level of indignation that I was at during the first phases of my engagement for the Palestinian cause.
>
> (Souhail, Switzerland)

Links between socio-economic grievances and politico-ideological mobilisation

In sum, it can be said that although socio-economic grievances are frequently referred to, they are rarely presented as the main, let alone sole, reason for PIM

and PIV. The link, if any, between feelings of socio-economic injustice and a politico-ideological engagement for a particular cause, must be understood as an indirect one. First, the perception that low socio-economic status is the result of an intentional policy of marginalisation or simply a neglectful attitude towards a particular region, city or portion of the population, leads to grudge and frustration towards the government and state institutions. This grudge can lay the foundation for a general posture that is hostile to the state and that may be exploited by groups and leaders who promise a more egalitarian political project that defies the state. Generally speaking, the immediate experiences of socio-economic hardship tend to be, by essence, locally oriented.

Second, a general ideological layout that focuses on and reveals socio-economic marginalisation, economic exploitation and oppression of the working class provides a vocabulary and a lens that may be adapted to different causes. As a consequence, a certain cause mobility and flexibility can be identified, which, at first glance, may seem hypocritical or dishonest. However, since many causes can be, at least at an intellectual level, brought back to a few argumentative building blocks that explain various manifestations of injustice in the world, the links between seemingly opposed causes does not seem that far-fetched. These grievances tend not to relate to the individual level: Rather, they are usually vicarious, collective and globally oriented. They tend to refer to economic systems and trends perceived to be exploitative and serving a ruling elite to the detriment of ordinary citizens. These inequalities manifest themselves, according to interviewees, in the resource misdirection in the age of the war on terror, when millions of dollars are spent on developing security forces, while relatively little support is given to the domains of social services, reintegration and general prevention of social ills.

A third way in which socio-economic grievances can be tied to engagement is through a more practical manifestation of economic hardship: unemployment. Someone who has difficulty finding a stable occupation has fewer reasons not to engage for a cause when other factors make some form of engagement attractive and reasonable. This aspect is related to biographic availability that will be touched upon later.

Crucially, and especially for PIV, these different connections between grievances and engagement present themselves neither in a linear nor in a one-time fashion: Rather they are part of a vicious cycle between socio-economic hardship and usually criminalised forms of engagement. Particular importance is attributed, across the narratives, to the socio-economic marginalisation that ensues association with terrorism-related offences, whether verified or not. The repressive counterterrorism apparatus leads to structural blockages of economic reintegration into society and thereby nurtures new grievances against the state. The devastating consequences of being associated with terrorism in the age of the War on terror make it extremely difficult to reintegrate into society, find stable employment and build a meaningful and purposeful life. Interviewees in different contexts point to this difficulty and repeatedly stress that it should come to no one's surprise if, under such conditions, a person radicalises again to the point of turning against society.