

War, peace and history in Lebanon

A conversation with Ahmad Beydoun



Ahmad Beydoun holds a doctorate from the Sorbonne. He taught sociology at the Lebanese University and has authored numerous books on Lebanon historiography and political system, the civil war and the quest for Lebanese national identity.

How do contradictory visions of Lebanon's history and the civil war relate to divergent identities, memories and perceptions of the Lebanese nation?

The writing of history in Lebanon has imposed the idea that it is a new country that was founded in 1920 through contentious procedures in which some elements disagreed even on its existence as a legitimate state. A dominant group – Christians in general and Maronites in particular – saw the founding of the state of Greater Lebanon as compliant with its aspirations. The overriding narrative on Lebanon's history was determined by this majority view and was imposed on other parties.

The history of Lebanon has been written in a controversial way, far from any systematic methodology. Most historians' narratives have adopted partial and sectarian premises – although respective sectarian views have not remained stable, but have moved and changed over time.

The civil war has not been submitted to the 'labour of memory' that true reconciliation would need. Attempts at writing an educational narrative of the war that have been promoted by the state have tended to reproduce the main cleavages that characterised the war itself. Efforts to develop a 'consensual' narrative have failed.

What has been the impact of Lebanon's pluralistic education system and of government attempts to introduce a unified history textbook after the civil war?

Controversy over the history textbook is demonstrated by two opposing interpretations of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the collaboration between Christian militias and Israel between 1976 and 1982. The first is that militias were defending Lebanese national identity against the Palestinian armed presence and its ambition to make Lebanon an 'alternative homeland'. This considers militia fighters who have been killed to be martyrs. The second perspective is that militias were Israeli agents and that killed fighters cannot be labelled martyrs. It is almost impossible for each point of view to recognise the other as this would challenge the legitimacy of each perspective's self-image.

This problem is also found in other decisive events in the history of Lebanon. For example concerning the struggle against the Palestinians and the 'War of the Camps' in the mid-1980s. Some of the parties involved see themselves today as defenders of the 'resistance' and of the Palestinian cause. Their leaders and their political components are key players in Lebanon's system of power. How can you write the history of the War of the Camps while the President of the Amal Movement, who was personally responsible for the War of the Camps, is the Speaker of Parliament?

Lebanon's civil war did not end with a national narrative that combined war memories. On the contrary, obfuscation and obliteration of what happened was achieved; healing was not. Obfuscation has been the linchpin of the politics of memory in Lebanon.

It is normal to have a national programme to teach history. The state, assisted by a scientific committee, relies on such a programme to select issues to be included in the history curriculum, according to standards and rules. The state takes such standards into account to authorise the use of a diversity of history books in schools. But a unified history book is a bad and pusillanimous idea. People who promote such a way forward know that there is a real problem but refuse to address it properly, trying instead to resolve it 'instantly' through a unified book. This is why I am in favour of an integrated *curriculum*, which identifies issues and defines standards of treatment, rather than a unified textbook imposed on all.

What is the role of history in consolidating a shared national consciousness?

Lebanon is a divided society. Common national awareness of this situation implies recognition of divisions, of contradictory narratives of events and contradictory judgements about them.

Taking a position on any event in such circumstances should become a gesture of peace towards other viewpoints, recognising their existence and inviting a positive step forward in response. From here Lebanese society could move toward accepting debate, criticism and differences in interpreting key events.

The work of memory will not be complete without taking into account all narratives and confronting them with one another. This is why I am against the idea of creating a unified historical narrative for people to rely on. In Lebanese society, with its multiplicity, divisions and plurality of antagonistic narratives, the desirable role for the state is in criticising history, not in creating an alternative or a parallel version of it.

Interview by Ali Atassi