

# Dealing with Lebanon's past

## Remembering, reconciliation, art and activism

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Twenty years after the official end of the civil war, Lebanese society is constructing memories of it in ways that are not necessarily conducive to reconciliation between the country's sectarian and political groups. This problem is related to a kind of state-sponsored amnesia that coexists with the widely differing and strongly politicised narratives of the war that are central to the identity of particular political or sectarian groups. The challenge is not so much to break with amnesia, but to find a way to accommodate existing peace, reconciliation and memory initiatives – in art, culture and civil society – with the political and social powerbrokers in the country.

### Memory initiatives since the civil war

Lebanon's collective amnesia, resulting partly from the general amnesty law of 1991, has been fostered by political elites who played a role in the civil war and have refused to foster public debates that could implicate them. In protest against this, the country's intellectuals, artists and activists have since the mid-1990s campaigned for a public process of memorialisation. They point to the fact that there are very few national monuments to the war, too many sectarian commemorations, no official research centres and no political will to support critical discussions about the war.

The role of 'memory makers' has been to foster national recollection by promoting different kinds of social activism, debate and cultural production to shed light on the war years. An abundance of films, articles, books and events have been produced, and a number of well-established NGOs carry out community-based and youth-focused projects that stress a causal link between remembrance of the war and inter-confessional reconciliation. However it is an open question as to whether these have succeeded in breaking the silence on a national level – let alone in

achieving the more ambitious goal of breaking the cycle of violence that has arguably fed wars throughout Lebanese history (in 1843, 1860 and 1958).

In the past seven years, since the Syrian army left Lebanon, the country has experienced a series of dramatic events, from the killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, the ensuing 'Independence Intifada', the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, prolonged government crises, Sunni-Shiite tensions and a looming confrontation over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

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A crucial hindrance for free, public debate about the war is the fact that the vast majority of Lebanese continue to live within the confines of sectarian neighbourhoods, associations, schools and even media. Processes of sectarian segregation resulting from wartime violence have only been partly reversed in the post-war period. An attempt to create a common curriculum for Lebanese history books faltered in 2001 owing to disagreements over a commonly acceptable narrative about the civil war. Sectarian divisions and patterns of sociability, as well as the physical division of the country into neighbourhoods, areas and villages along sectarian lines, has in effect reproduced skewed historiographies of the war [see *Ahmad Beydoun article p. 19*].

In defiance of sectarian narratives about the war, civil society groups, media organisations and artists continue to promote various forms of memory work aimed at countering what they see as misinformation and distorted interpretations of the past. As a result, despite much talk about collective amnesia, there is now not just a lively public (albeit rather elitist) debate about the war, but also one about the difficulties of remembering and representing it. This debate now has a considerable past of its own: new participants in the debate perform on the basis of older argumentation in more or less conscious and critical ways. Usually this argumentation is not supported by academic studies of the war, but is largely based on particular narratives about it and about memory. Professional historians could play a central role here in furthering debates based on actual historical research. Projects aimed at involving historians would be a welcome addition to existing initiatives dominated either by youth education or art projects.

### **The legacy of wartime activism**

Civil war memorialisation began during the war. Films by Maroun Baghdadi, Jean Chamoun and Mai Masri, novels by Elias Khoury, not to mention the rich genre of wartime songs or the Lebanese press, all deal with the social and individual effects of war. After the war, other genres like experimental video, collective research projects, installations and web-based art have added to the huge body of war-related work.

Lebanese civil society witnessed a strong peace movement during the war aimed at ending violence and maintaining personal links across the infamous Green Line that divides East and West Beirut [see *Marie-Noelle AbiYaghi article, p.20*]. Many activists who have engaged in post-war reconciliation have built on their wartime experience in the non-violence movement, not least their background in anti-sectarianism, which has influenced the strongly anti-sectarian, often secularist discourse of many memory and reconciliation projects.

Today many memory activists have a keen awareness of competing discourses about the war and their political and ideological anchoring. Several generations of artists are united through influential artists' groups, most notably Ashkal Alwan (The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts). Like any cultural field, Lebanon's art and cultural scene is fraught with political and generational divisions, which mirror ideological schisms in society. Some artists have even questioned whether the dominant position of civil war themes in Lebanese art can be justified. Still, the notion that an unresolved bundle of memories surrounds the civil war and that it is the unique task of artists and intellectuals to enlighten the nation, continues to be the primary public

script for the Lebanese intelligentsia's view of their society and its history – and of themselves.

A plethora of civil society groups for reconciliation emerged in the mid-1990s. For example, the Lebanon Conflict Resolution Network (LCRN) is an association of civil society activists and volunteers interested in acquiring conflict resolution skills. LCRN undertakes small-scale training initiatives in Lebanon and in other Arab countries, familiarising participants with the basic concepts of conflict resolution and giving them tools to implement these. It has worked with school youth clubs and villages in Mount Lebanon. Similar skill-building projects have been run by The Permanent Peace Movement, a student-based NGO set up in 1986 focusing on peace-building through dialogue and training courses in Lebanese schools. Their projects have engaged thousands of Lebanese youth over the years and have helped to build a solid platform of smaller-scale reconciliation NGOs.

### **Reconciliation: experiences and recommendations**

On a local level, there are often long-standing customs and norms where the interventions of older authority figures have led to peaceful, non-violent mediation and arbitration. Particularly in rural Lebanon, a blend of civil law and tribal codes has long been an intrinsic part of the justice system. While these customs are no guarantee for just arbitration, national reconciliation projects could improve their outreach by overcoming their anti-sectarian bias and communicating with existing modes of reconciliation.

Activists acknowledge that reconciliation is a slow process based on the public acceptance of criminal responsibilities and mutual respect for conflicting war memories. Building commemorative monuments, writing national history and teaching history in schools needs positive interaction and cooperation between NGOs (confessional and civil), academics and political leaders. NGOs such as the Institute for Islamic-Christian Studies have targeted religious teachers in an attempt to combat stereotypes about other sects and religions. [see *Mohammad Sammak article, p.27*]

The most difficult challenge has been how to involve political leaders in the reconciliation process. Many memory activists have criticised the entire political class and prefer to work independently of the 'sectarian system'. More recently some have seen possibilities and openings: for example, several hearings organised by Memory for the Future, a coalition of intellectuals founded in 2002, have involved former militia fighters who speak from within the logic of violence and sectarianism, rather than outside it like most memory activists do. Such projects achieve a more realistic picture of the reasons people have for

remembering the war differently and for continuing to bear grudges against other groups and individuals.

Projects must not dodge hard questions and harsh worldviews if they are to be effective, and there is a basis for such an approach to succeed. Many people within the political establishment support national reconciliation and want to work for it. In 2004 and 2005, as part of the general political upheaval which culminated in the Independence Intifada, a large number of politicians began taking an interest in memory campaigns initiated by The Committee for Kidnapped and Disappeared (formed in 1982) and the Memory for the Future group. Likewise, Umam Documentation and Research, the biggest NGO devoted to memory work, is today partly funded by the Lebanese Ministry of Culture [see *Liliane Kfoury article, p. 18*]. Strong incentives exist to foster reconciliation through memory work. All possible avenues for creative participation between civil society and the Lebanese authorities should be explored.

Memory work needs to build on the experiences garnered from reconciliation conferences, hearings, programmes and publications since the civil war, organised and funded by a large number of Lebanese NGOs as well as a variety

of external actors, from USAID and EU programmes, to the International Center for Transitional Justice and Human Rights Watch. International actors could do more to pressure the Lebanese state to take issues of national reconciliation and historical consciousness seriously. It is imperative to create alternative monuments, rituals, spaces and public discourses that can challenge the politicised memory discourses that currently exist and that are reproduced within particular groups. This can be conducive to national reconciliation.

Creating an alternative culture for remembrance in itself is not enough. National and international projects should do more to engage their perceived opponents in the sectarian leadership and milieus, not least in order to gain a better understanding of why so many Lebanese hold widely different views on their national history. This means working directly with political parties and their interest groups.

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