Decolonising Lebanon's post-conflict sense of national identity via history education: An impossible task?

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates an important example of national identity formation in the Arab world and the role played by education and historiography. In Lebanon, like other states in the Middle East that became independent of colonial rule, a new form of national identity gradually developed following independence. Conflicting notions of national identity arose which resulted in a form of neo-traditionalism whereby political identities remained fluid and under-developed. Instead of developing a post-national decolonised identity, a debilitating and destabilising paradigm emerged, leading to the failure of decolonisation. By examining the failures of the construction of post-independence national identity, the paper will argue that these factors have led to instability and an overall crisis of legitimacy in Lebanon. By analysing these failures, recommendations are made to emphasise the importance of the role of history in education and how it may contribute to reconciliation and nation-building through civic participation.

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Introduction

"All means all!" has become the popular slogan of Lebanese nationals since mid-October 2019. From late 2019, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have challenged centuries of primordial and political control in demanding a new government free of the corruption and political partisanship that has blighted the Lebanese political and social landscape for decades. The protestors succeeded in forcing the government to resign, and ongoing protests have continued to criticise the entire political class as politically corrupt.

Whilst the credibility of traditional political leaders has been undermined, a new wave of nationalism is emerging among Lebanese demonstrators. Regardless of sect, political orientation and geographical location the majority of Lebanese have been united by disgust at an ongoing lack of basic services, poor employment and/or education opportunities, and the lack of institution building. Reports of cronyism, nepotism and political scandals continue in this new landscape where ordinary citizens are emboldened to express their views. Thus, when the slogan 'all means all' is spoken, a new type of political national identity is emerging – one that is seen in this paper as linked to a need for a de-colonised post-war Lebanese identity.

Historically, Lebanon's national political identity and culture has been shaped by three prominent and deeply entrenched realities: first, primordialism (traditional, tribal, religious, sectarian, patriarchal and parochial forms of identity); second, Arab nationalism; and third, state nationalism. These three influences have each, in turn, built upon existing variables and contributed to the formation of national identity. This overlaying of identities has produced contradictory dynamics in nation-building and inherently unstable foundations that threaten to undermine the formation of any cohesive post-colonial national identity. This article argues that post-independence national identity in many Arab countries such as Lebanon has been unsuccessful for three reasons which are closely interconnected. These are based on the many existing political-cultural identities in the Arab region, international and intra-regional interference, and legitimacy problems in Arab politics.

In turn, this highlights one of the major complexities of national identity formation in the Arab world – especially in the case of Lebanon's heterogeneous character and its approach to historiography. Like many newly independent states in the Middle East, a form of unifying national identity was invoked gradually when independence was achieved, or directly after. Conflicting notions of national identity arose which resulted in a form of neo-traditionalism whereby political identity neither discarded its primordial characteristics nor built upon them. Instead of developing a post-national decolonised identity, a debilitating and destabilising paradigm emerged, leading to the failure of decolonisation. By examining the failures in constructing post-independence national identity, the paper will argue these factors have contributed to an overall crisis of legitimacy in Lebanon and ongoing instability. The fractured and multilayered history of Lebanon as has been described by Wettig (2004, n.p.) as follows:

> Some call the Phoenicians our ancestors. Others call them the people who were previously in Lebanon. Some say the French were a mandatory power who were here at the request of the Lebanese. Others say they were colonizers.

This paper will first detail the importance of creating a cohesive national identity in post-colonial and post-conflict in Lebanon, which endured 15 years of bloodshed from 1975-1990. Creating and maintaining a cohesive national identity is fundamental to successful decolonisation and successful post-war reconciliation. The 'colonisation of political thought' has been an enduring phenomenon since Ottoman rule to the present time. The region's inhabitants have had a number of identities imposed on them ranging from: a broad Ottoman-Islamic colonial entity; then one based on European colonial constructs, followed by a pan-Arab identity; and a state national identity in some countries based on Islamic ideals. The formation of a re-framed national Lebanese identity is required for a successful move to sovereignty, independence and full participation in the international community. This assertion will be supported here by a literature review which examines relevant post-colonial theory.

Finally, this will lead to examining how the Lebanese government is going about de-colonising and re-constructing Lebanon's national identity via its education system. Highlighted here is one of the major complexities of national identity formation in the Arab world and the role education and historiography play. To understand the roots of Lebanese national identity it is crucial to highlight significant political and historical developments. It is necessary to examine the direct influence of Ottomanism on present day Lebanon, and how its subsequent disintegration and loss to the Europeans led to the formation of the state. By revisiting this historical period, it will pave the way to understanding better the nature of contemporary Lebanese national identity. The paper will explain what has occurred since the end of the Lebanese civil war (acknowledging that there is still much conflict in other forms), the creation of a new curriculum and its impact on reconciliation and nation-building. This paper draws primarily on empirical evidence but also upon interviews undertaken by the lead author. By analysing past failures, recommendations are made whereby the role of history pedagogy and practice is given greater prominence in education, especially in terms of contributing to reconciliation and nation-building.

Historical context and background

It is important, first, to provide readers with some historical context. Past political challenges have contributed to the post-war approach to the history curriculum and its application in Lebanon. It is necessary that the complex layers of Lebanon's history be re-examined in order for reconciliation to commence, a sense of closure to arise among its inhabitants and ultimately (possibly?) a sentiment of cohesive nationhood to emerge. The territory known as 'Lebanon' today has been invaded, occupied and colonised by many empires and countries, and historically was part of the Syrian Fertile Crescent or geographic Syria. The most prolonged and consequential occupation was by the Ottoman Turks that lasted almost four centuries, from the early sixteenth-century until 1918. During the Ottoman period significant autonomy was granted to the area of Mount Lebanon in particular. The end of the First World War saw the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and a secret agreement between the French and English to divide the lands of the Middle East. Lebanon in effect became a French mandate. The area was – and continues to be – ethnically and religiously diverse, more so than other parts of the Middle East. As a result of the shifting empires and foreign rule the geographic makeup of the area changed too. For example, the Christian Maronites were originally from the Valley of Orontes (beginning in modern-day Lebanon and crossing north through Syria, Turkey and turning westward encompassing parts of the Mediterranean coast).

The Ottoman occupation was marked by feudal competition and antagonism which characterised the politics of Mount Lebanon. This rivalry was both cross-sectarian and intra-confessional, a situation in marked contrast to other Ottoman provinces. Lebanon's stability (such as it then was) was based on feudal relationships and its power structure (El Khazen, 2000). The divisions were further magnified in the mid-nineteenth century with the enforcement of the *mutasarrifiyya* (administrative) political structure, which resulted from these and other socio-political and economic factors. This was a precursor to greater intervention by European powers in the Lebanon. The end result was regional political interference, European intervention, the establishment of a committee of great powers and Istanbul's determination to maintain its borders and sovereignty which helped to create conditions whereby the Maronites were compensated. This was at the cost of the Druze,[1] both politically and socio-economically, and contributed to Maronite nationalistic ideals of creating a 'Little Lebanon'.

It was thought that the *mutasarrifiyya* assisted the Maronites in establishing the foundations for an independent Christian Mount Lebanon, making them demographically, politically and economically dominant. Moreover, the Maronites considered Mount Lebanon as their homeland and saw the *mutasarrifiyya* as a means to attain their own independent state. However, the Ottomans were not willing to forego all their political power in the region and leave it to the whims of ethnic cleavages or feudal families. Rather, an Ottoman governor was appointed to oversee the

everyday running of the *mutasarrifiyya.* This in turn further assisted in developing a quasi-national consciousness amongst the *mutasarrifiyya* inhabitants.

Although sectarian disorder remained controlled until the twentieth-century, the Ottoman system of cantonisation, exclusion and subjugation of minorities remained in force against non-Sunni Muslim communities. It compromised the notion of a future 'Lebanese' nationhood emerging. This was a diverse ethnic society, albeit one which predominantly held onto narrower notions of political belonging based on primordial chauvinism. Although Western influence and colonisation provoked the sectarian and ethnic divide amongst Arabs and other inhabitants of the region, the seeds of ethnic conflict were initially sown during the Ottoman period when the *millet*[2] policy was enforced against non-Sunni inhabitants and through the implementation of other divisive policies such as the *imarah* (rank or office of the Emir) and *mutasarrifiyya* systems.

The negative ramifications of such a political system were manifold. First, the *mutasarrifiyya* system was a colonially imposed construct, imposed by the Europeans (notably the French) and enforced by the Ottomans. Second, the system forcibly divided people along confessional lines, although identification along confessional lines was not a prominent form of identification at that time. Third, it contributed to the division among Lebanese citizens in the early twentieth-century by endorsing the concept of Lebanonisation or Balkanisation as opposed to nationalism whether it was in the form of a multi-sect inclusionary Lebanon, Arabism or greater Syria. Fourth, this system in turn set the foundations for the 1926 Constitution and the 1943 National Pact, which effectively endorsed the reinforcement of traditional primordial forms of identity dressed in a cloak of modernity. All 17 ethnic and religious cleavages were recognised by the newly established political system introduced by the French in the form of consociational democracy.[3]

In 1920 the French annexed various Ottoman provinces and created a 'state of Greater Lebanon.' Since then Lebanon has endured several civil wars, the main and most destructive one being that of 1975-1990. As the conflict progressed and evolved in nature so did the reasons, but the three most enduring themes which were revisited repeatedly were those of: reforming the political system; the national identity of Lebanon; and Lebanon's sovereignty (Abul-husn, 1998). The Taif Agreement, otherwise known as the National Reconciliation Accord, or Document of National Accord, was signed on 22 October 1989. It officially terminated the civil war and gave social, political and legal experts the necessary tools to re-examine Lebanon's process of nation-building and conflict resolution. A new power-sharing formula between the prominent Lebanese communities and different militia chieftains was accepted via peaceful means. In turn, the Taif agreement 'reinforced confessionalism by reforming it' (Asmar, Kisirwani & Springborg, 1999, p. 1) and it was ratified by the Lebanese parliament on 5 November 1989.

Political challenges

The obstacles preventing a harmonious national identity in Lebanese society are multi-levelled but linked to other factors. Two equally significant and contributing factors are: the role of external (regional and international) intervention; and fundamental disagreement among its citizens over the historicity of the Lebanese nation-state. One segment of society, the political right, largely affirms the Lebanese state, while the political left disputes or denies it (Khalidi, 1983). Some conservative politicians have been major proponents of Lebanese nationalism linking this to their connections with the outside world. They aspired to implement their own exclusionary visions of Lebanon as a modern continuation of Phoenicia, Hellenised and Westernised, and a home for persecuted religious minorities, particularly a Christian safe haven in a dominant Muslim region. The political left on the other hand, regarded Lebanon's national and political development within the broader paradigm of Arab-Islamic history, whether through Arab national ideology or pan-Islamic religious ideology. These ideologies have become blurred and inconsistent at times even to their most fervent supporters.

The post-Taif period demonstrated that these diametrically opposed notions of Lebanese history have not been reconciled. For this to take place the Lebanese need to, as the historian

Kamal Salibi has persistently argued, "reach a consensus on what makes of them a nation or political community, and this can only be achieved if they manage to agree on a common vision of their past" (Salibi, 1993, pp. 17-18). Although it is accepted that culture and identity are not stagnant but continually change, a formula of a common (or at least a shared) national history is required to ensure a nation remains cohesive. The Lebanese will first have to reach a consensus on what makes them a nation or political community and this can only be achieved if they manage to agree on a shared vision of their past. It is evident that the various factions fail to agree on what official national version of Lebanese history might emerge.

Nationhood and memory

Choosing to avoid an interpretation of past events or controversial issues will only cause more problems in the country's long-term future. It is necessary to undertake an honest appraisal of Lebanon's long history. With this in mind, Gelvin argues that nations are not "natural and eternal entities merely awaiting political realisation or their 'awakening from slumber'. Rather, nations and concomitant national identities are constructed..." (1999, p. 73). Initially the construction of the Lebanese nation and its national identity were being sought by key Lebanese figures. Post-independence, however, the construction process ceased, and this contributed to state disintegration. Prior to the country becoming independent, Lebanese authorities successfully convinced their populace that independence was worthwhile. Once it was achieved, however, these same authorities did not work to overcome the deep societal divisions, or to construct a shared national Lebanese identity. Instead, the political structure of confessionalism, created by the Ottomans and endorsed by the French, was reapplied through the formal political model and institutions. Many traditional political notables retained their positions along sectarian lines, while ordinary Lebanese citizens remained influenced, and from some perspectives coerced, by their respective political/religious leaders. The ability to change this situation – that is, 'awaken them from their slumber' – arose again the early 1990s when peace returned to Lebanon and the opportunity arose to develop a reconstructed national identity.

Gelvin (1999) asserts that many scholars of the Middle East continue to accept, unchallenged, the historiography of nationalism in the region. This paper argues that by accepting the historiography of nationalism and political identity in the region, the psyche of the region's inhabitants will remain in a state of 'colonisation'. The problem is that inhabitants of a country or region are not given an opportunity to consider the multiplicity of political options or identifications available, with Tunisia being the only exception during the Arab uprisings of 2010; and here it was a return to authoritarianism that eventuated. Many are generally forced to accept political constructs and ideologies put before them, initially through colonial-imperial forced constructs and then the illegitimate rule of their respective political leaders. Consequently, no real process of decolonisation of political thought, post-nationalism or consciousness has developed over the years to truly 'liberate' Arab inhabitants. Nations such as Lebanon, through a combination of primordialism, regional and international intervention, neo-patriarchy and the legitimacy problems dominating the Middle East region, are yet to construct a unifying identity (Ahluwalia, 2001).

Liberation and political freedom do not come about with the raising of a national flag or the reciting of a national anthem. Instead, the peoples of most countries that were once colonised have yet to find – or have taken a number of decades to become – free and sovereign citizens. Many newly independent states did not realise the intensity of the impact of colonialism on their country and their citizens until long after independence. The economic, cultural, psychological and political damage inflicted by colonial occupation continues to bear its scars today, although different countries within the region have experienced various forms of colonisation and are therefore at different stages and apply assorted techniques to decolonise. Writers such as Fanon (1965; 1967), Said (1993), Memmi (1965; 2006) and others insist that the impact of colonialism and imperialism does not end once independence is achieved. Both Fanon and Said are ambivalent regarding the national elites and seek to discredit the nationalist parties in favour of a more

decentralised political rule. Believing that true liberation cannot take place without the total liberation of mind, body and soul of the colonised, they assert that it is not enough to be physically free of the colonisers. Said (1993) argues there is no need for the colonised to seek the recognition of the coloniser. Rather they must understand the historical complexities of colonisation. Upon doing so the colonised can work towards creating the 'whole man' or as Gandhi stated: 'Rather than see itself as, or in the image of, the master the slave is now urged to see itself beside the master' (Gandhi, 1998, p. 21).

The theoretical importance of Fanon and Said to Lebanon lies in their analyses of the issue of domination, notably the domination of power and knowledge, whereby the path towards true liberation can only be achieved by re-examining a nation's history and its path to salvation. This is the only way to transcend the era of colonial occupation (Ahluwalia, 2001). By attaining social consciousness, the traditionally dominated are a step closer to liberation, but without it, it is highly likely that "decolonisation merely becomes the replacement of one form of domination by another" (Ahluwalia, 2001, p. 48). By universally accepting the unification of self and other, the world is one step closer to attaining a liberated existence, where the dominant and the dominated work together (Ahluwalia, 2001).

Three components which allegedly ensure a healthy and cohesive political community have been listed by Deutsch (1953): first, the ability of its members to communicate with one another; second, the readiness to share a common political culture; and third, the need to demonstrate greater loyalty to the main political, administrative and cultural institutions than to any other political authority. In the case of Lebanon, the majority of its political and social leaders did not adopt these three components. This was especially evident during the 15-year civil war, but also has been evident, to varying degrees, since the inception of the Republic. For example, at every election that has taken place in the post-civil war period, excluding the 2017 and 2018 municipal and parliamentary elections, it was evident that the Lebanese continue to demonstrate more loyalty to their political religious leaders than to the central political institutions and democratic practices (Habib, 1995). Although more recent municipal and parliamentary elections show a similar trend, a new independent movement of non-affiliated civic candidates emerged as popular choices. Nevertheless, the numbers were marginally too small to make any real impact. Additionally, in May 2019 the Foreign Minister, Gibran Bassil, accused Sunni politicians of assuming key state posts "on the corpse of the Maronite political establishment, taking all the Christians' rights [to public posts]" (Dakroub, 2019). This highlights the hurt and loss still being felt by segments of the community and exemplifies the failure of reconciliation post-conflict.

As with nationalism, the notion of national identity is forged by knowledge and memory. In order for a sense of sameness to arise over time and space, a sustainable memory needs to develop so it can become a core component of an individual or group identity. Although neither memories nor identities are fixed, they do represent or construct reality – either subjectively or objectively – in that people are constantly revising their memories to suit their current identities (Gillis, 1994). Gillis wrote that "identities and memories are not things we think *about* but things we think w*ith*" (Gillis, 1994, p. 5). As a consequence, identities can affect one's politics, social relations and history. Such identities can be used and abused, affecting not just one person but also others through social interaction and political manipulation/influence. There is a need to understand these memories in order to discover their historical significance and how they have created and sustained national identity over the years. Generally, governments and opposition representatives throughout the world speak of protecting and enhancing national identities through the preservation of heritage and tradition, the introduction of language legislation, promotion of cultural festivals and the preservation and encouragement of the arts and sports-people who represent them globally.

It should be emphasised that this is not necessarily a smooth process. During times of national reconstruction following a devastating war or civil war, countries can experience periods which call for forgetting rather than remembering, as was the case in Germany and Japan in the immediate post Second World War period (although it should be made clear that for Germany, at least, there has been consistent remembering of atrocities committed prior to and during the Second World War in both the school curriculum and society more broadly), or more recently in

1990s war-torn Yugoslavia. Benedict Anderson delineated this as agreeing to a 'collective amnesia' (Anderson, 1983). When a country has experienced rapid and/or destabilising events and old traditions no longer offer valid answers or solutions to social and political problems, the ruling elite may resort to restructuring past memories and histories according to a current and future agenda. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Fanon and Said have observed that such periods often stimulate the creation of new cultural forms that replace the antiquated older traditions (Zerubavel, 1994).

The invention of 'new' traditions legitimises the emerging social and political elites. In some cases, their success depends largely on the ruling party's ability to reconstruct the past in a form that is acceptable to the majority of citizens. Nevertheless, there is a potential for only partial success or failure if these 'invented' traditions deviate too greatly from 'genuine' tradition, heritage and history from the point of view of the citizens. Importantly, one needs to question whether it is politically wise for a country, which is reconstructing its national identity to 'forget' its immediate history in order to successfully rebuild its shattered nation and identity. Or is it necessary for the formation of 'collective suffering' to acknowledge the past in order to move onto the future? A heritage of tragedy may well be more effective than one of triumph, as Renan wrote over a century ago, arguing that "suffering in common unified more than joy does ... Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties and require a common effort" (Renan, 1882, in Lowenthal, 1994, p.50).

Renan believed that communal identity may also require forgetting many shameful episodes, disabling tragedies and conflicting loyalties requiring a form of collective amnesia and editing each nation's past (Lowenthal, 1994, p. 50). Making some memories accessible to consciousness, while blocking others, may be necessary in order to avoid painful memories. However, blocking the memories of an upsetting past may limit understanding of that particular historical period. It is necessary that social scientists, historians and ruling parties recognise the errors made by colonial rulers and their successors. Without confronting such a period, national culture and identity may remain under-developed because it has not had an opportunity to confront and engage with its full history and deal with it appropriately.

Lebanon's education system and the effect of the civil war

Before its civil war, Lebanon enjoyed some of the highest standards of education and literacy in the Arab world (97%) with over 80% of children of school age attending schools (Library of Congress, 2012). Lebanon has a long history and its numerous religious communities were important to the establishment of diverse school systems. These include Western clerical institutions such as the Jesuit schools which began operating in Lebanon in 1625, Presbyterian missionaries in 1866, Catholic institutions and finally, Islamic schools which are funded by the Gulf countries most notably Saudi Arabia. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon did not have access to any public education until the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was established and registered all Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2005). In 1975 the educational institutions in Lebanon were well embedded which created certain sectarian divisions, partitions and obstructions contributing to the outbreak of the civil war.

The Lebanese education system is largely centralised with the same curriculum being taught in both private and public schools. Primary school education, which covers grades 1 to 8, is almost universal with an enrolment ratio of 95.4% of the population. Secondary education which involves grades 9-13, reached 81.5% in 2007 (UNESCO, 2008) while the adult literacy rate reached 88% (UNICEF, 2007). In 2009-10 there were almost 285,000 of the 1,112,111 students in the country in public schools, with the remainder in various levels of private schools. Most parents stretch their budgets to the extreme to keep their children in private schools; a practice strongly influenced by Lebanon's religious and internationalised culture, with many Lebanese families highly critical of most public schools. The Lebanese education system is controlled by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) through a licensing system. In order for students to

receive the Brevet Diploma (graduation from middle school) and the Baccalaureate Diploma (graduating after completing the final year of high school) this system enforces requirements and regulations for graduates to comply with.

For many Lebanese people, 13 April 1975 marks one of the darkest days in the country's history. An attack on a busload of Palestinians in Beirut sparked a civil war that raged for 15 years, leaving some 150,000 dead, the capital divided along sectarian lines and sections of the country in ruin. However, students in Beirut today give a range of answers about the significance of that date. For example, according to Noor El-Hoss, a student in West Beirut's Al Iman School, 'I think it was a very important occasion for Lebanon. But I don't know what happened'. A fellow student, Zeina Naous, explained, 'We are studying about ... World War Two. We are not studying about the civil war, or what happened to Lebanon' (Maktabi, 2012, n.p,). This reinforces the point that as – as commented in Beirut's newspaper *The Daily Star* by journalist and feminist blogger Hannah Wettig – "few issues in Lebanon are as contested as its national history. Every sect has its own version of the civil wars. However, the civil wars are not the only points of contention" (2004, n.p.).

According to Hajjar (2002) the three different sectors of schooling – French, British and American – have divided the community. Furthermore, history is subject to varying interpretations and it is being taught within the different sectors along sectarian lines (Euro News, 2012), despite the fact that the Ministry of Education had formulated an agreement whereby all school sectors were to use a common history textbook.

Post-civil war developments

One of the major reasons for the disruption to education was not solely due to the civil war, but also the fact that more than 150 schools were destroyed by Israelis raids, forcing many families to relocate as well as a result of the Lebanese factions fighting amongst themselves. People had lost their homes, livelihoods and had nowhere else to go and for this reason many teachers, professors and educators migrated abroad. Some schools were pressured by militias to enrol unqualified students and employ unqualified teachers. Despite being allowed to return to a designated level of education after the destruction of their schools, many students had lost their parents, their homes and access to schooling for a length of time. Indeed, many schools were used as distribution centres for humanitarian aid (Mikdadi, 1983) or as centres for the dissemination of propaganda and recruitment of young soldiers to various militias.

There was consensus that primary and secondary school standards, especially in public institutions, needed to improve (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2007-2009). Lebanese schools lack subject–oriented qualified teachers in various disciplines. Low student to teacher ratio in both primary (17:1) and secondary school levels (7:1) contribute to financial constraints and cutbacks in budgeting and resources (The World Bank Group, 2006). Similarly, the National Centre of Educational Research and Development indicates that the construction of the new school curriculum must cater to students' need for knowledge, values and attitudes as well as knowing how to complete activities and develop life skills. This approach was further developed alongside the reform of the curriculum in the 1990s and eight learning areas were introduced and planned in all schools (NECRD, 1995). This reform took place in 1996 in three stages: first, the construction of an educational ladder, second, designing an appropriate curriculum and organising appropriate textbooks; and third, the provision of associated teachers' preparations for all school sectors equally.

The Taif Agreement made specific reference to education, and the most important aspect of this was its revision of the school curricula to emphasise national unity, with a specific focus on civics and history: "Revision and development of curricula in such a manner as to strengthen national identity and social integration encourage spiritual and cultural openness .... Unification of textbooks in the two subject matter areas of history and national education (is a must)" (Bahous et al., 2013, n.p.). This same statement marked one of the goals in the Plan for Educational Revival, which was approved on 17 August 1994 by the Cabinet of Ministers as a working document. One

month later, the CERD which was responsible for school curricula, began revising the curriculum, assembling a team of nearly 350 persons serving on various committees. Despite these good intentions, a 2012 book titled *Learning and teaching history: Lessons from and for Lebanon* (Gussaini et al., 2012) highlighted the barriers to agreeing to and implementing a national curriculum. A study by Abouchedid and Blommestein (2002) contended that prototypes of political socialisation strongly influence the religious agenda in Lebanon, including in schools. Most schools' so-called hidden curriculum (Toronto & Eissa, 2007) is reflected in their ethos, teachers, community services and religious activities. Boujouade and Ghaith (2006) stated that the curriculum reform was evaluated in 2003 and several concerns about disagreements were expressed especially on the need for stronger connections between schools, colleges and universities in order to link the country's academic and social needs. Some of these issues highlighted the fact that the previous curriculum would be outdated and limited only to traditional teaching subjects. The biggest concern was based on teachers' lack of previous knowledge and exposure in their teaching preparation programmes as well as their recent training to deliver the new curriculum (Boujaoude & Ghaith, 2006). This problem lingered for a long time and especially in the public system due to the lack of funding for training teachers.

In addition to the pedagogical and human resource impediments, there were also problems with the way historiography was approached. Abouchedid and Blommestein's study (2002) exploring the teaching of history in the different school sectors, reporting that no less than seven different history textbooks were used. Each one presented an interpretation of past events acceptable to one section of the Lebanese community. Political propaganda is also prevalent in private, subsidised private and public schools which relates to the ideology of a particular party, or militia that provides them with support, protection and finance (Cervan, 2011). The Hariri-funded schools are the only institutions in which political topics cannot be discussed. Essentially, the teaching of history in Lebanon is compromised by the fact that more than two decades after the end of the country's civil war, generations of young Lebanese are growing up with little formal education about the conflict. Lebanese society contains many deep divisions, and the country's recent past is widely considered too contentious to examine in depth. In fact, to avoid inflaming old and still deeply felt hostilities, Lebanese history textbooks stop in 1943, the year the country gained independence (Maktabi, 2012). In 2012 the country's Minister of Education, Hassan Diab, blamed this situation on the politics, saying "After more than 20 years ... the teaching of history in Lebanon remains, as it has always been, subject to the interests of various political groups" (Maktabi, 2012, p. 1).

The curriculum

After the war and civil unrest, the Lebanese education system is still clearly in a state of recuperation. One of the first things that had to be done in order to restore the country was rescuing the education system, and subsequently a new 'ladder' (a term used to refer to the policy or documents devised at the time in Lebanon) as devised and approved by the Cabinet on 25 October 1995 (for the following, see Bashshur, 2005). Soon afterwards, a plan with specific curriculum targets for various school levels was completed. For example, an additional examination was required for entry to most higher education institutions where the focus is on language competency, science and mathematics (Aljarida Alrasmyya, 1997). A reformed curriculum, with a focus on social, economic and national perspectives was launched in 1998. Over 16,000 teachers were trained from public schools and 6,000 from private schools, specifying that 12 years are needed for schooling. One year was added to primary school education and one removed from the middle years' cycle. History, geography, literature and civics are all still being taught in Arabic, while the schools' educational and religious background determines the language in which all other subjects are taught using either English or French. In addition to three different foreign schooling systems, Lebanon has three types of school entities: public, privately subsidised religiously affiliated schools, and private non-subsidised schools. Private schools are preferred by most Lebanese as they believe they provide better education, discipline and values. Unfortunately,

many people could no longer afford public schooling due to their new-found poverty caused by the civil war. The government was forced to open more public schools due to the increased demand for education and consequently the demand for affordable public schools (Harrison, 2011).

Subject matter committees began working on revisions and writing new education materials; committees for all subjects were appointed and approved. However, the subject of history was singled out and delegated to a special committee, composed of people representing various religious/political groups. Rumours started circulating about disputes and conflicts among its members, and the alleged reshuffling of memberships and resignations. When a copy of the new national curriculum was submitted for government approval (8 May 1997), with a new package of material covering all subjects, history was missing altogether (Bahous et al., 2013).

According to Bahous et al. (2013), three years later in 2000 the cabinet received and approved a brief document titled, 'General Principles and Specific Goals for the Teaching of History' – approved on 10 May 2000 and submitted to the press on the same day. When it was made public it became clear that it was a very bland document, having been put together by a committee of six people who convened 50 meetings. When presented to the press on 10 May 2000, only one member out of the original six had survived the duration of its work; all the other members had either resigned or were replaced. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing what viewpoints or arguments were exchanged during the three-year period (of the history committee), and what caused changes in membership, and more significantly, what reasons prevented the original committee from adopting modifications as requested by the higher one. The most important point to make is that despite what the curriculum guidelines stated, it remained difficult to translate these guidelines into actual teaching tools – that is, textbooks.

Meanwhile, textbooks in all other subject-matter areas were issued and distributed to schools starting with the academic year 1997/98. History textbooks had to wait until 2001, when the first batch was produced. Nonetheless contentious issues continued to compromise the project, and according to Wettig (2004, n.p.), "although the Lebanese Curriculum and its Objectives (1997) were finally agreed upon, the concrete writing of textbooks proved impossible." Wettig (2004, n.p.) states that "in 2001 new history books were issued for elementary grades 2 and 3 and soon objections were voiced against including 'Arabs' among other 'foreign conquerors' that 'occupied' then eventually left Lebanon in previous times".

Bahous et al. (2013, p. 66) document how in 2000 "the General Principles and Specific Goals of the Teaching of History, i.e. the overarching aim of the school subject, was finally produced and approved by the government." Yet, there was a lack of consensus by the CERD on what constituted the social reality of Lebanon. Should schools teach that Lebanon is "a homeland for all of its people and as being 'Arab in identity'?" CERD insisted that this had to be changed to 'Lebanese identity' and 'Arab affiliation'. For Bahous et al. (2013, p. 66), "this modification shows that the Taif agreement had failed to resolve the historical tensions in Lebanon between those claiming that the country is part of the Arab world and those denying it. Terms such as 'committed to Arab culture' were removed from other paragraphs as well". Consequently, for Bahous et al. (2013, p. 66) "these debates and the changes made by CERD hence underlined that the Lebanese politicians were still not in agreement about the basic identity, history or destiny of the country." Nehme (2006, pp.47-48, cited in Bahous et al., 2013, p.67) found the following:

> The objectives for teaching history were many and both vague and precise. They included: 'raising national awareness, developing the national collective memory, recognizing the importance of the Lebanese culture and the contribution of the Lebanese in the broader Arabic civilization, recognizing the impairment that had been caused by internal disputes, identifying the role played by foreign powers, extending appreciation toward religious values (Christianity and Islam), and recognizing the treachery entailed in Zionism.

The bureaucrats in charge of the Lebanese History curriculum attempted to overcome differences of historical interpretation by appealing to historical processes, presenting the historical

documents to students without any interpretation. Wettig (2004, n.p.) reported that according to Masoud Daher, a history professor at the Lebanese University and a member of the committee commissioned to work out the new curriculum controversies about the true course of history, disputes were overcome by allowing the "documents speak for themselves in many parts of the new books."

It appears that Daher and his fellow History curriculum bureaucrats moved much of the Lebanese History Curriculum content offshore, where there was less controversy. Wettig (2004, n.p.) reported him as stating:

> We included American, European, Asian and African history ... I am sure it will be one of the best books in the Arab world... We studied books from France, the United States, Germany, Japan to see how they teach ... We didn't modernize the traditional material, but wrote a completely new book. In fact, maybe this book will be a shock for traditional historians.

Even then, there was continuing controversy. Marlin Dick (1999, n.p.) from the *Daily Star* reported how advocates for the inclusion of "the Armenian genocide of 1915 commemorated around the world every April 24 [and] often referred to by Lebanese politicians from a range of political affiliations, and is the subject of a 1997 parliamentary resolution" was struggling to be included in either the History or Civics curriculum. Dick (1999) anticipated this content would be included in the Civics curriculum. The curriculum was one hurdle but general agreement on textbooks was another, more severe obstacle.

Munir Bashshur, professor of education at the American University of Beirut, describes in his chapter *The deepening cleavage in the Lebanese Educational System* published in 2003, how the first curriculum review committee, set in place in 1995, did not only work much longer than expected on its task, but how then, when finally the first batch of textbooks was produced, a campaign broke out against these new textbooks, writing "the work of this committee and its deliberations were handled almost like a state secret" (cited in Bahous et al., 2013, p. 67). National distrust only increased. According to Bashshur, "rumours leaked out about arguments and conflicts among its members ... and when a copy of the new national curriculum was submitted for government approval (in 1997), with a new package of material covering all subjects, the subject matter of history was absent" (cited in Bahous et al., 2013, p. 67).

Bahous et al. (2013) describe how "CERD had to issue a statement that those particular pages were to be removed from all existing and future copies of the textbooks" (2013, pp. 69-70). Previously, Bashshur concluded (2003) that more than a decade after the Lebanese civil war ended and after the Taif agreement, the different Lebanese groups could still not agree on how to write their history. Efforts to unify the curricula went to no avail. A decade after Bashshur's research this is still true. There is, in other words, 'no history' after the Lebanese civil war.

In 2011 after the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies (LAES) third conference on Education Learning and Teaching History: Lessons from and for Lebanon, a teachers' guide booklet titled *Teaching History in Lebanon by Creating Learning Spaces* was developed (Lebanese Association for Educational Studies, 2012). This booklet was created so as to provide support for teachers of history in Lebanon with new teaching practices to engage their students. This booklet also aimed to promote and strengthen relationships between stakeholders in schools, government, communities and universities. Maadad (2013, p. 132) reported that according to one school principal who wished to remain anonymous, "this booklet did not travel far.":

> It brought to the surface sensitive topics to the classroom. Teachers also found it hard to apply in their classroom, as it was deeply focused on higher-order of thinking and the learning process model which often requires access to past events in order to think critically. Such events were not often accessible to all due to the variety of history in textbooks. (Maadad, 2013, p. 132)

In a separate face-to-face interview with another school principal, this one in South Lebanon in a low socio-economic school, Maadad (2013, p. 132) reported that the principal said: "bringing

history back to the classroom created a division between the students especially the year 8 and 9 groups that came from different religious backgrounds and have been informed of the truth of the Lebanese war differently. Letting go of the past is the only way to move forward."

Where to from here?

It is unrealistic to expect the 'escape' from history and societal integration of a newly independent state to take place within one generation, especially considering that it took European nations centuries to find a unifying nationalistic or civic outlook from its body politic and reflected amongst its citizens. However, the problem in Lebanon is that the attempt at integration has been riddled with primordial, as well as domestic and external political manipulation, which in turn has promoted mutual segregation rather than national integration under a pluralistic umbrella. It is within this context that a formula for national integration and cohesiveness now needs to be implemented in Lebanon in order to secure its future longevity, security and independence.

The paper has highlighted one sphere which aids nation-building: the education system. The education system, amongst other things, is a major player in socialising children and young people on community relations. In most cases it is towards a common national cause as opposed to calls for separatism and exclusiveness. Religious institutions can also play a major role in enhancing social integration and community particularly in ethnically diverse societies. The question is not of writing an alternative history alongside a traditional one; instead, it means re-evaluating national history from within, that is, questioning the assumptions and determinations upon which national historiography is founded. This is because history, like culture and identity, are ongoing processes that link the past with the present and strengthen social contracts. Such national histories are founded on enduring shared values, culture and symbols, which reinforce and perpetuate a nation's self-image. Preservation of national historiography and political continuity can only be secured through negotiation, compromise and reconciliation with the past in order to attain the formation of bonds of natural solidarity and cohesion. In sum, Lebanese history textbooks and education need to be all things to all its citizens in a post-national Lebanon. All views need to be included regardless of inconsistency.

Therefore, in order to attain the changes that have been suggested in the literature, the Lebanese community needs to develop and sustain a sense of cohesive political community by agreeing to a shared historical vision. Lebanon is in an awkward situation, as it has not had a history of solidarity, homogeneity or a unified past which makes the task all the more challenging. It is not, however, impossible – Malaysia and Singapore are good case studies to consider. The challenge is to create a historical myth which will not be historically objectionable or offensive to one or more groups and which will stabilise, unite and represent a nation at large.

Finally, this paragraph serves as a post-script. As the political, financial, and economic situation in Lebanon continued to deteriorate, 2020 unexpectedly provided a public health challenge to the globe with the COVID-19 pandemic. Lebanese and refugees alike in Lebanon have not been spared. Moreover, on 4 August 2020 Beirut was rocked by an explosion which saw 2750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate stored at the port of Beirut blow up, leaving over 190 people dead, 6000 injured and over 300 000 homeless within a matter of minutes. This led to the resignation of the Diab government and anger has poured onto the streets reigniting the October 2019 demonstrations. Accusations of corruption, and political and economic maladministration continue to run rife. Meanwhile, the currency has lost 80% of its value, more than 50% of the population live on or below the poverty line, and unemployment is over 30%. International aid has become conditional upon political and economic reform, and former colonial power France has re-entered the scene providing leadership which finds itself lacking among Lebanon's political elite who have all been accused of being complicit and responsible for the Beirut bombings. At the time of writing a new government is being negotiated. It is walking a tightrope attempting to fulfil the requests of both its nationals and the international community, yet feeling the pressure of the long serving political players (domestically and regionally) who have for decades ensured they have access to power and resources. There clearly is a disconnect between Lebanese nationals

and its long serving political elite, which might serve the purpose of overdue reform and change. Ultimately the outcome of this current calamity will determine the writing of the next chapter of Lebanon's history and its school curriculum.

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Endnotes

[1] The Druze constitute one of the 17 recognised minority groups in Lebanon. It is a monotheistic and Abrahamic religion.

[2] Millet system: was introduced by the Ottomans as an autonomous self-governing religious community – the size, power and duration of these autonomous regions varied across the Empire.

[3] Government by grand coalition or power sharing arrangement, as opposed to majoritarian democracy. Usually adopted by states with internal divisions along ethnic, religious or linguistic lines.

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